

QUIT PUTTING ME IN THE MIDDLE

IF YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE BEING PULLED BETWEEN YOUR PARENTS

Zoe: Lots of times when parents get divorced, the kid gets stuck in the middle. The kid might end up being a “messenger” between the parents. This is wrong. It should stop. This is a parent problem and shouldn't be a kid problem. It makes kids feel used.

Evan: I don't know a lot about this because my parents don't do this. But I think kids should just say no if their parents put them in the middle. It's a mess, because you worry about the consequences since you don't necessarily know if you're going to do the right thing. Depending on how responsible the kid is, they could either forget or not give the other parent the message, so it really isn't fair.

Zoe: Here's something else that's not fair: parents also put kids in the middle by saying mean things about the other parent. This is really awful. Parents shouldn't bash the other parent in front of the kid, because it may get back to the other parent, which is probably why they're saying it in the first place. You want to defend your parent, but you don't want to get in trouble. What are you supposed to say? You love both your parents, so you don't want to hear bad things about them.

Evan: No kidding! Getting put in this position makes kids feel like they're the one who's the problem, especially if the parents are

fighting about something involving the kid. It's best to stay out of it, but if you feel like one parent is right, it's okay to say you agree with them. But try not to take sides, because it's bad ethics to choose one parent over the other. If you have siblings, how would you feel if your parents picked one kid over the other?

Zoe: That's a no-win situation. When your parents fight in front of you, it makes you feel bad and in the wrong place—you just want to leave, but where's a kid to go? It's scary because you wonder if your parents are defective. If they're still fighting, then it's not just that they were unhappy together—maybe there's something seriously wrong with them. They should be mature enough to get along. I get along with both of them, so why can't they get along with each other?

Evan: One good thing about this is that it helps you realize why your parents got divorced. But it's best to just stay out of the middle.

Zoe: I know divorced parents have conflicts they have to work out, but getting put in the middle of their problems makes you worry about things you shouldn't have to worry about. Parents should communicate with each other, not through their children. Some things are not for kids' ears.

Dear Zoe,

My mom keeps asking me whether my dad is dating anybody.

Obviously, she wants me to tell her, but it makes me feel uncomfortable because I know she isn't going to like the answer.

I've met my dad's new girlfriend and I don't want to lie to my mother, but I don't want to be the one to tell her in case it causes more problems between my parents. What should I do?

Matt, age 13

Dear Matt,

This is a hard call to make if you're a kid. You sort of can't win either way. You shouldn't have to deal with this, but if it continues you could tell your dad that your mom's been asking if he has a girlfriend and suggest that he tell her so that you don't have to. If you're uncomfortable being the one to tell your mom, then don't do it. If she has questions, tell her to talk to your dad instead of talking to you.

Regards,

Zoe

EVAN'S QUICK TIPS

1. **Tell your parents that you don't want to take sides.**
2. **Try to stay in a neutral zone but don't lie to them.**
3. **If your parents fight in front of you, go to your room and put on loud music or call one of your friends. And remember, they're not fighting about you.**
4. **Force your parents to deal with each other by flatly refusing to get involved.**
5. **Suggest they go to counseling and work it out.**

TEN YEARS LATER, (EVAN) * *

Boundaries separate the things your parents should say and do around you and the things that they shouldn't. Sometimes, after divorce, parents can overstep boundaries because they are going through a difficult time and experiencing something new. Putting you in the middle is a common mistake, and it isn't fun. As you get older you realize more and

more that your parents aren't perfect, and that no one is too grown up to make mistakes. But because crossing these boundaries is a parent problem, we are never responsible when it happens. You can help your parents by letting them know when something they say or do makes you uncomfortable—this takes maturity, and is one of the ways that divorce helps you to grow up. If it's not so easy to explain how you feel, removing yourself from uncomfortable situations is the next best move.

What Their Mom Has to Say

Do your parents ever ask you to relay messages, report back on what's going on with your other parent, or say nasty things that you'd rather not hear? The reason parents do this is because they don't know how to communicate with each other, but you should never have to defend one of your parents to the other or worry about whether you're going to get in trouble by saying the wrong thing. Hopefully, your parents will learn how to deal directly with each other instead of putting you in this awkward position.

In the meantime, Evan suggests, "If one parent calls and tells you to tell your other parent something, just hand them the phone."

Zoe suggests, "Write your parent a letter or e-mail explaining how bad it makes you feel when you're put in the middle."

Here's what I suggest: just say, "No! This is between you and Dad/Mom, not between you and me."

YOUR TURN * *

- Do you ever feel as if your parents are putting you in the middle?
- If so, how do you feel when this happens?
- How can you protect yourself so you don't end up in this position?

I know my boundaries and I can keep myself safe.