



## Different Houses – One Child

### – Situation –

*When Tara comes back from visiting her dad she turns up her nose at our dinner salads. At her dad's house she gets French fries, pizza, and potato chips whenever she wants them. Here we eat at mealtimes and offer carrots or fruit for snacks. It is always a struggle to get things back in balance. Her dad refuses to respect the dietary choices we want for Tara.*

*I signed my son Tony up for the soccer team at our church. He loves playing on the team but when games or practices fall on dates he is with his mom, she won't take him because she objects to some of the beliefs held by my church. I've told her the sports program has nothing to do with my church's theology but she doesn't believe me. I think she is undermining the lesson of responsibility that I want Tony to learn by being on a sports team.*

*My ex-spouse has begun taking away the privilege of playing with friends on the weekend if our son Elijah brings home a bad report from school that week. I think this is too harsh a punishment and I am furious about it. Elijah only sees his dad on alternate weekends but I dread them more and more.*

Centers are granted permission to photocopy and distribute this column to parents.

### – Solution –

Tara, Tony, and Elijah's parents are forgetting one important detail — they aren't still married to their child's other parent! If that other parent hadn't done so many things they disliked — they might still be a couple! The problem is that although the marriage ended, the relationship didn't.

Children tether the lives of their parents, stepparents, and extended families to one another. When warring parents continue to battle over what or how or when the other parent does things — children begin to feel as if that connection is a bungee cord jerking them back and forth between those they love.

#### Aiming Blame

It is tempting to blame a child's misbehavior on the other parent's too lax, too strict, or inappropriate parenting. But in fact, some of what we see as tantrums, talking back, or obstinacy could be expressions of frustration, anger, or sadness that a child cannot articulate.

Blame aims our own frustrations at a new target; and when that target is an ex-spouse, it is one we cannot hit without everyone suffering.

#### Let Go

One cannot control an ex-spouse's choices. Accept that. French fries at dad's, and salads at mom's are the way it is — and the way it will continue to be. What is likely to cause more indigestion for a child is to feel that her loyalties are being measured in lettuce leaves or ketchup packets.

#### Respect

If children see *respect* they learn it. Tara's parents make different food choices. *Respect* means accepting rather than criticizing those differences (even when the differences are hard to swallow!).

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

At some point Tony will be able to explain to his mom the commitment he feels to his sports team. Missing some games early in life won't make learning responsibility to a team impossible. What is more important for Tony is not feeling that he is scoring points for either parent by his choices.

Elijah's mother's concern over his dad taking away privileges relates to discipline. Discipline needs to be considered using two criteria:

- Is this person physically or emotionally abusive?
- Is this person a danger to a child's health and well-being?

If either answer is truly 'yes,' then seek legal protection for the child. If there is real danger — *actions*, not words, are needed.

Elijah's father's discipline may be distasteful; but if it does not pose a threat to Elijah's safety, his mother needs to refrain from undermining it.

## Anticipate

Anticipate the need to readjust when moving from one household to another. Keep activities on the day a child arrives or returns slow-paced and familiar. Find time to be alone with your child and make time to listen to him. Each of you needs this time to reconnect.

If your child *acts out*, be clear about your rules and expectations and stay kind. It is possible to be both.

"You seem angry tonight, but it is still not okay for you to yell at me. We can talk when you are ready to speak in a quieter voice."

"I know that you are allowed to watch television later at your mother's, but here bedtime is 8:00. Even though it is disappointing, our rule stands."

## Two Homes

Imagine going to visit friends or family members in another town and discovering that you forgot to pack your toothbrush, left behind a treasured necklace, or your suitcase got lost. One father understood this experience better as it applied to his daughter Magda's weekly visits, after using an activity from the *Parent Report Card* (by Roslyn Duffy and Elizabeth Crary, Parenting Press, 1998). Item #5: *Provides me with my own space in our home*, received a failing mark from Magda, providing a real eye-opener for her dad.

Since her parent's divorce Magda had been carrying her clothes back and forth in a grocery bag when she came to her dad's new apartment. She slept on the sofa, had to remember to bring over her storybooks, and had no place to store her things.

In neither parent's home should a child feel like a visitor, no matter how short their time there is. They need to have their own space, clothes, and toys at both houses. Magda's dad set about doing just that by getting a used set of drawers, taking Magda shopping for clothes and toiletries, and sectioning off a corner of his apartment for her use.

Children make such journeys every few days, once a week or for a week, or months at a time. Adjusting can be tough. If both places feel like *home* the transition between each residence will be smoother.

## Many Ways

Children learn that it is fine to talk and make noise while watching a video in the family room at home but not acceptable to do so at the movie theater. They learn to sit at a desk during math class and run around the field at recess. They know that Grandma allows them to chew gum and mom doesn't (and most

are smart enough not to point this out to either Grandma or mom!). In the same way, children will come to understand that mom's house and dad's house have different rules.

## Bundled Together

There is an African word *Ubuntu* that Jason Carter explains in his book, *Power Lines* (National Geographic, 2002). *Ubuntu* translates as being "bound up with others in the bundle of life, for a person is only a person through other persons."

This concept of *Ubuntu* can help us to step back and see each child as a person who is becoming who and what she is through her relationships with *all* the people in her life including the ex-spouse, new stepparents, and extended family members.

When we can accept both the limits and permanence of the relationship with our child's other parent, children no longer need to feel disloyal for loving both. Children thrive *because* of the adults who love them — not in spite of them.

*Ubuntu* is universal.

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Elizabeth Crary of *The Parent's Report Card* (Parenting Press) and co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* and *Positive Discipline: the First Three Years* (Prima Press). Roslyn, a 17-year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children and one grandbaby. Visit [www.RoslynDuffy.com](http://www.RoslynDuffy.com).