

Through What Lens Does a Child See You?

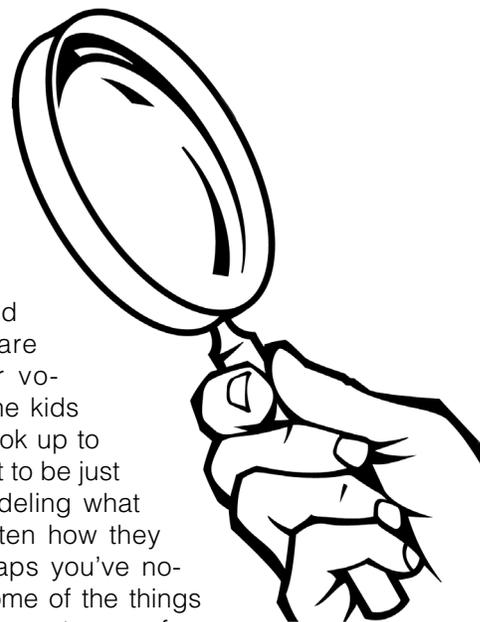
A teacher overheard children talking on the playground. She was shocked by the words a child was using to put down one of his friends and spoke to the child about this incident. "Why on earth would you talk to your friends like this?" she asked. The child looked at her with a puzzled look and said, "I didn't do anything wrong. My parents talk like that all the time." The teacher sat wondering how best to make this situation right.

Kids are smart and listen very well to what the adults in their lives say. This may be surprising given how many times you may have to repeat yourself when asking them to do something. Kids listen when they want to. They naturally respond to their parents' voices but also respond instinctively to those whom they know well, like teachers or day-care providers. Even before birth, children become familiar with their parents' voices. So any time you speak their bodies signal to them that you are talking, even in a room full of people.

It's great that you know they actually might listen. Now that you know this, though, do you wonder what things have come out of your mouth that they may have overheard? Could it be that you've had a dispute with another adult when the kids are around? Maybe in the car they hear you complain about bad drivers. Perhaps they heard you on the phone putting down someone.

There are numerous situations when we find ourselves not thinking before we speak. The more often

we do this, the more often our children learn new phrases and words that are now in their vocabulary. The kids in your life look up to you and want to be just like you. Modeling what you do is often how they learn. Perhaps you've noticed how some of the things you now do have traces of one of your parents or other adults in them.



It can be difficult to think about the times we have messed up and our children might have overheard things they shouldn't. It's especially hard to keep your children in mind at the boiling points, when emotions run high, and things are said or done that a child might not understand. Talking to your child about the emotions that lead you and them to those breaking points is important.

Apologizing for inappropriate behaviors or words is equally valuable. Children will pick up on the fact that if you apologize, you are admitting you should have done differently. This can help forge closer communication and help them learn how to deal with difficult situations.

Parents and other adult caretakers are the most valuable part of a child's learning what kind of person to be. So consider how important you are in your child's eyes and what view you would like for them to have.

Shannon Dial
OSU Graduate Student Assistant

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Family Mealtime Makes a Difference

Recent research reports that family meals make a big difference to children and youth. In particular, studies have shown that teens are healthier and are less likely to become involved in risky behaviors if they regularly dine with their families.

The more often teens have dinner with their parents, the less likely they are to smoke, drink, or use drugs. Those who have dinner together five or more nights a week are almost 50% less likely to try alcohol compared to teens that have dinner with their families two nights or less per week. In addition, teens whose families regularly eat together show less depression, are less likely to have sex at young ages, and get into fights or are suspended from school less often. They also have higher grades, develop healthier eating habits, and tend to be less stressed and bored.

These findings suggest that eating meals frequently as a family enhances the health and well-being of youth. Family dinners seem to become even more important in later teenage years, although that is often the time when eating together significantly decreases. Mealtime can help foster and encourage communication between parents and children. It is a time when parents can provide a healthy, positive influence for their children. It also lets parents monitor their child's activities, friends and school progress, and better understand the challenges that their children face. In return, children are more likely to talk to parents about their problems. This may reduce the risk of more serious problems down the line.

Eat together regularly as a family.

- Start the pattern when children are young and keep the tradition through the teenage years.
- Every week, schedule several meals together and attempt to stick with it.
- During dinner, turn off the TV and take the phone off the hook.
- Involve the entire family in planning, cooking, and serving the meal. Assign roles and rotate responsibilities.
- If your schedule makes it impossible to eat dinner together, try having breakfast together or engaging in another family activity such as playing a board game or having a late night snack together.
- Keep conversations positive and make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

Sources:

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Debbie Richardson

*Assistant Extension Specialist,
Child Development*



Helping Your Child Survive Divorce

If you're a parent going through divorce, how can you protect your child from the effects of your divorce?

Most children survive divorce and live full, healthy lives as adults. However, research shows that divorce does have a serious, negative impact on about 20-25% of children. For example, they are more likely to have physical and emotional health problems, not graduate from high school, get in trouble with the law, take part in risky sexual behavior, and experience divorce in their own marriages.

Divorce provides many possible sources of stress for children: parental conflict, the trauma of the initial separation, less effective parenting, loss of important relationships, fewer economic resources, and the re-marriage (or re-partnering) of their parents. One thing parents can do to protect their children is to change the way they manage conflict with the other parent.

It's almost impossible to avoid conflict when you go through divorce. However, conflict can be handled in ways that reduce stress on children. By following the guidelines below, parents can avoid making their problems with each other become problems for their children.

Do what's good for your child.

Parents can get so wrapped up in their own painful emotions that they don't realize what their children are going through. Sometimes parents must decide they will put aside their own feelings and needs to do what is best for their children.

Keep your children out of the middle.

Parents often unintentionally create stress for their children by putting them in the middle of conflict between their parents. Here are some common problems to avoid:

- *Don't make your child a messenger.* If you don't like the way the other parent is doing something, tell them yourself. Don't ask your child to make changes in visitation schedules, ask for more money, or take care of other issues you don't want to deal with.
- *Don't make your child a spy.* You may want to know what's going on in the personal life of the other parent, but don't quiz your child to find out.
- *Don't fight in front of your child.* If you can't keep from threatening, yelling, or cursing at your former spouse, keep your arguments to a time and place when your child won't see and hear fighting.
- *Don't make your child choose sides.* It's important for your child to love and be loved by both parents. Usually they do best when parents fully share custody. Also, they don't need to hear statements like, "I don't want to hear his/her name mentioned in this house."

- *Don't criticize the other parent in front of your child.* When you put down your child's other parent, the child takes the criticism personally, feels defensive, and is likely to resent you for attacks on your former spouse. After all, your child shares the other parent's genes.

Focus on solutions.

Besides all the "don'ts" to remember, there also are some positive things you can do to help your child. One of the most important is to focus on solutions rather than problems.

Divorce ends a marriage, but it does not end parenthood. Like it or not, your former spouse always will be your child's other parent.

Try to re-define your relationship with your former spouse as a partnership in the business of rearing your child. In other words, you can try to think of the other person as your child's other parent—or "co-parent"—rather than as your "ex."

Conflicts are almost sure to happen between partners in any relationship, including co-parenting. How you handle those conflicts will have a lot to do with how your divorce affects your child.

Here are some tips for making conflict less traumatic:

- *Listen.* Concentrate on hearing what the other person is saying rather than on getting your own point across.
- *Be assertive, not aggressive.* Attack the problem, not the person. Complain about behavior, not character. A helpful model is the *XYZ Formula*: "When you do X in situation Y, I feel Z." For example, you can say, "When you let Sally watch television when she is supposed to be doing her homework, I worry about her grades."
- *Problem solve.* Once each of you has expressed your concerns and wishes, work together to find a solution that works best for your child. Brainstorm to think of all possible solutions. Negotiate and compromise to find a possible solution you both are willing to try. Make concrete plans for how you'll implement your solution. Have a set time when you will evaluate what you're doing to see if it works.

Divorce is hard for everyone involved, especially children. However, parents can protect their children from unnecessary pain and problems by handling conflict in a healthy way.

Joe D. Wilmoth

*Assistant Extension Specialist,
Personal and Family Relationships*

Devote Daily Discussions with Children

When children are young they really depend on their parents and other adults to help them with their thoughts and questions about life. They likely have new thoughts or questions every day. Do you talk to your children often about what they are thinking? Or, maybe you realize you haven't talked about anything important in a long time, such as asking them about their day or about their worries.

One of the hardest things about communicating with our children is finding time to do it. Usually making time to talk is the last thing on the list. When you have more than one child, it becomes even more complicated.

It is very important to make time. Changes in the daily schedule may be needed to spend some time talking to your child. Sometimes we feel interrupted or put off by our child's need for our attention. Planning time in your day when you can talk closely with a child may actually reduce everyone's frustration

If this time can be consistent, you will see how much your child loves the time you share. Kids often beg for attention in ways we don't recognize. Offering them the attention without prompting can make a huge difference in their lives and yours!

Shannon Dial
OSU Graduate Student Assistant

These tips may help:

1. Set a time in the day, preferably the same every day. Your child needs to be able to count on that time with you.
2. Keep your word about that time each day. If you absolutely cannot meet at that time, explain this to the child and pick a better time.
3. Make sure others know the scheduled time is just for the two of you to talk, so they are less likely to interrupt.
4. Ask your child what he or she would like to talk about. If unsure, think of a topic and ask a couple of questions, read a book, and discuss together.
5. Use listening skills during this time. Try to focus your mind on your child.
6. End the session with some physical touch or an uplifting comment to your child. Tell them something they have been doing really well!

Edited by:

Debbie Richardson

Debbie Richardson, Assistant Child Development Specialist, Human Development & Family Science Department, College of Human Environmental Sciences. If you need larger print or other accommodations, please contact 405-744-6231, debbie.richardson@okstate.edu

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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service
139 Ag Hall
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078