

FREE MATERIAL · FOR FAMILIES

In the middle of it

Protecting your child through a difficult separation or custody dispute.

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Na Rota do Afeto
capacitando e interagindo pelo mundo

About this booklet

This guide does not take sides. It was written for the child.

Custody disputes involve two accounts, and whoever is reading this is inside one of them. It would not be honest to write material that favours one side without knowing the case.

What is possible is to gather what is known about **what harms a child caught in the middle**, regardless of who is right about the substance. That is what this booklet covers.

What this booklet is and is not

It offers guidance on care and communication. It is not legal advice, does not describe the laws of any particular country, and is not a document for use in proceedings. Seek legal assistance where you are.

What hurts the child most

These appear on both sides of almost every separation, and they almost always come from love rather than ill will.

- ✗ **Using the child as a messenger.** "Tell your father that...", "Ask your mother if...". She becomes responsible for a conflict that is not hers.
- ✗ **Questioning her when she comes back** from the other home. Who was there, what they did, what they said about you. She learns that coming home means being debriefed.
- ✗ **Speaking badly about the other parent in front of her**, or allowing others to. Half of her identity comes from that person.
- ✗ **Recording the child** talking about the other household.
- ✗ **Making her choose a side**, even indirectly — through sighs, silences, visible hurt.
- ✗ **Involving her in money matters** or in the details of proceedings.
- ✗ **Taking her to repeated assessments** with different professionals in search of a favourable opinion.

A difficult but important point

A child who does not want to see the other parent may be under influence, may be reacting to something real, or may simply be worn out by the transitions.

Refusal on its own proves none of the three. Jumping to conclusions — in any direction — usually makes things worse for her.

What to do instead

- ✓ **Communicate with the other parent directly**, in writing where possible, about everything concerning the child. Never through her.
- ✓ **Keep the routine**. Schedules, school, therapies, activities. Predictability is what holds a child steady when everything else is unstable.
- ✓ **Tell the truth in a child's language**, without the details: "the grown-ups are sorting some things out, it is not your fault, and we both still take care of you".
- ✓ **Let her love both**. Say explicitly that she is allowed to enjoy the other home.
- ✓ **Receive whatever she feels** without turning it into evidence — including complaints about the other household.
- ✓ **Keep your agreements** on time and contact, even when the other side does not. Their breach does not justify yours.
- ✓ **Record facts, not interpretations**, if you need to document: dates, times, what was agreed, what happened.
- ✓ **Get therapy for yourself**. It is the most effective way of not discharging the process onto the child.

If you suspect violence

Here the guidance changes, and it needs to be said clearly.

If you suspect your child is being harmed, **seeking help is protection, not strategy**. But the route matters:

- **Do not investigate on your own.** Do not question the child, do not ask her to repeat, do not record. Besides hurting her, it can undermine the credibility of whatever she says later — weakening exactly the protection you are trying to secure.
- If she tells you something spontaneously, listen to the end, say you believe her, and afterwards write down the date and her **exact words**.
- Contact the child protection service or authority where you are, and inform whoever is assisting you legally.

Humanised listening

The Greenspan Floortime Approach® contributes a question that is rarely asked: **can this child, right now, produce an account?** Narrative telling requires symbolic capacities that not every child has reached, regardless of age. Before hearing her, regulation, connection and an environment matched to her sensory profile have to be in place — without them, what she says will not represent what she lived.

What a therapist can and cannot do

This is a frequent source of frustration, and it is worth understanding in advance.

The therapist who sees your child **is not an expert witness**. He or she does not assess who is right, does not certify that a child has been alienated, and does not certify that abuse occurred. This is not reluctance or cowardice: it is a limit of professional competence, and a clinician who crosses it produces a fragile document that can be dismantled — harming precisely the person it was meant to help.

What the therapist can do:

- Record what was observed and what the child said, dated and in her own words.
- Report on the course of treatment when properly requested.

- Alert the competent authorities to a suspicion of violence — a duty in most places, and not a taking of sides.
- Hold a space where the child does not have to defend anyone.

Formal assessment, where required, is ordered by the court and carried out by a professional qualified for it.

This booklet offers guidance on care and communication. It is not legal advice and does not describe the laws or services of any particular country. Procedures for reporting and for hearing a child differ between countries — always check what applies where you are.

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Local contacts

Fill this page in with the services available where you are.

Every country organises child protection differently. Before you need them, find out which of these exist near you and write them down here.

Emergency number

Child protection authority

Police / specialised unit

Health service

Free legal assistance

School contact

Other notes
