

# Skill-Building Opportunities

## Divorced Parents with Different Rules

**Question:** When my daughter goes to her dad's house, he has different rules. When she comes home, she thinks she can do whatever she wants. I am tired of the battle. How can I help her adjust between the different house rules?

Yes, it's complicated. Managing the different rules, expectations and personalities involved are challenging for the entire family. This can be a highly emotional situation, and there's likely to be some conflict as you figure out what works best for you, your child and her father. By promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking, you can help your child understand and respect the different expectations of each parent without battles, while still enjoying the time she spends with both of you.

**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves learning what others think and feel, and forms the basis for children's understanding of the intentions of parents, teachers and friends. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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### Perspective Taking starts with YOU.

Know that learning to deal with differences in the way parents care for them is an important life lesson for all children. Whether in homes where parents are together or in homes where they are separated or divorced, no two adults actually "parent" in exactly the same way. Learning to respond to these differences helps children develop the ability to respond to other differences in people throughout their lives.

**Think about your own perspective and how you are responding to this situation.** If you—understandably—feel angry or stressed, it's likely your child will feel this way, too. Your words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language all communicate how you really feel.

**Try to take the perspective of your child's father.** For example, he—like other divorced fathers—may be trying to make up for the divorce by letting her do whatever she wants so there is little conflict while they are together, or by buying gifts to compensate for the loss. If you understand your child's father's motives, it may make this situation easier.

Whether or not you and your child's father can work on this together, the task for you is to help your child—as you put it—"adjust between the different house rules."

2

### Talk with your child about her feelings in switching between two sets of rules.

- **Ask your child questions** that encourage a back and forth conversation, not just a yes or no answer. Ask things like: "How does it feel to have different rules at your dad's and my house?" The more your child talks about her own feelings, the better she can understand and respond to other people's points of view.
- **Set boundaries about the rules.** Although your child may like one set of rules better than the other, it's best to be direct about the fact that the rules are different, and it is her responsibility to follow both sets of rules.

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### Set your child up for success.

The American Academy of Pediatrics acknowledges the major stress that accompanies

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any significant family change, like parental separation and divorce. They suggest that for children of all ages, the goal after such an event is to create a new life that is secure and predictable with ensured or reestablished close ties to loved ones.

- **Consistency and Follow Through.** Keep your rules consistent, and follow through with the consequences you have decided on. Your child depends on you to stay reliable even if things feel unstable.
- **Focus on Positive.** If you find yourself focusing on the negative or getting into battles, try reinforcing positive actions by commenting on them like: “It was so helpful that you threw the trash into the wastebasket!”
- **Assess Yourself.** If you are feeling upset about your child’s not following your rules, ask yourself what you are expecting of her and of yourself. Step back and look at your own perspective. Are your expectations realistic? For example, maybe it isn’t possible for your child to get all of her homework done at her father’s house. See if you can reach a compromise that works for all of you.

## 4

## Make a plan together.

This is the most important strategy to use. When you and your child engage in a problem-solving process together, you help her learn to gain Executive Function skills.

Executive Functions are the skills we use to manage our thoughts, our feelings and behavior to achieve goals. Studies have found that when children develop Executive Function skills, they are more likely to thrive now and in the future.

Determine the problem. Explain to her that you often get into battles with each other, and you want to come up with better ways of managing.

- **Talk with her** about what’s hardest for her in making the transition from one home to another and from one set of rules to another. Write down the issues she faces, without any judgment.

Encourage her to think of ways she might solve these problems.

- **Brainstorm** as many ways as you each can come up with to solve these problems. Again, write them down without judgment.

Evaluate the solutions. Here, you are asking your child to take her own and others’ perspectives.

- **Ask** your daughter what will work and what won’t work for each of the suggested solutions. Have her keep in mind whether it can work for her, for you and for her father.

Create with a strategy to try out to make things better.

- **Decide** together which strategy or strategies you will experiment with. Set a time period to get back together to discuss how it’s working.

Evaluate how the solution or solutions are working after some time has passed.

- When you get together to talk about what is working and what isn’t, make sure that you consider each solution from the perspectives of all involved.

When your child takes some responsibility for solving the problems she faces, she is more likely to follow through on the solutions than if she’s simply told what to do. In effect, you are giving her a skill for life!