

When Visitation Goes Awry

By JONATHAN W. GOULD & NICKI B. FISHER

When your child's parenting time with the other parent does not go well, what do you do? Time and time again, parents are quick to point a finger at the other parent. They assume that the child's unpleasant experience must have been the result of something the other parent did or did not do or something unsettling at the other parent's home.

Such finger-waggers often demand that their attorneys file a motion to reduce the child's time with the other parent. Then they comfortably settle back, reassured that the child has been protected from exposure to an insensitive or unfit parent or distressing environment.

Instead, we invite parents to listen, but not jump to conclusions immediately. When visitation goes badly, we hope that you will reach for your Inspector Clouseau hat and formulate rival, alternative ideas that may explain your child's experience before pointing a finger. Thomas Kuhn, noted American physicist, historian, and philosopher of science, gently reminds us that what we see often depends upon where we look. To determine how your child's visit with the other parent may have gone south, take a look from several perspectives before concluding that something bad happened.

Don't assume

Everyone views the world through a set of assumptions. We develop ideas about how the world works and about the intentions and motivations of others. Often, these assumptions about other people's intentions and motives guide us toward predictable ways of interpreting events, especially when we're trying to figure out how our ex-spouse may have yet again done something wrong. Keep your anger and hurt under control; push yourself to be open-minded.

Remember the old saying, "when you hear hoofbeats,



think horses and not zebras." We all tend to make presumptions about other people and their actions, based upon what is most familiar to us. In a high-conflict postdivorce relationship, parents often presume that the other parent is a less competent or less responsible parent, a poor decision-maker, and either too permissive or too rigid.

STEP 1

When your child comes home and describes a "visitation gone bad," your first step should be to check your assumptions. One common assumption is based on the notion of blame: "My child had a bad experience with the other parent because of something that happened at that other parent's home... because of something the other parent did or didn't do like he should." The blame model begets blame. Be careful; this notion couples very easily with the old adage, "what goes around, comes around." If you do not want to get stuck in the blame game, learn to think differently about behavior.

An alternative to the blame game is to think in terms of a systems model. A systems model is based on the idea that what you do affects your child, what the other parent does affects your child, and that understanding how different forces may affect a child's behavior may provide the best understanding of how things went south.

STEP 2

The second step is to think about alternative reasons for your child's discomfort. Of course, one idea is that your child really did have a bad time with the other parent. However, other potential factors may contribute to your child's report that he or she had a bad time with the other parent.

Here are eight alternative ideas to consider before concluding that your child's visit with the other parent was harmful. First, think about whether it is possible that your child had a good time with the other parent but was homesick for you. Second, your child may have been emotionally challenged to enjoy himself with the other parent because he or she was uncomfortable leaving you alone and was worried about you.

A third idea is that you intentionally or unintentionally communicated to you child your discomfort about this visit with the other parent and fears that your child could be unsafe, in danger, or not likely to have a good time. A fourth idea is that the level of conflict between you and the other parent is so intense that your child feels the need to take sides, choosing to align with you and your distrust of the other parent. The child knows not to show any signs of enjoyment with the other parent because such displays could be viewed as disloyal to you.

Fifth, you may support the child's relationship with the other parent, but the other parent places your child in the middle of your conflict by pumping her for information or by making disparaging comments about you. A sixth idea is that the other parent engaged your child in activities that were of no interest to the child or were inappropriate for his or her age.

A seventh idea is that the child was bored because the other parent spent the weekend on the computer or engaged in adult activities, leaving the child to kill time watching television, playing video games, or isolated from opportunities to engage or play with others. An eighth idea is that the other parent's parenting is so rigid and structured that the child is frustrated by a lack of freedom, choice, or opportunities to enjoy activities of his or her choosing.

These ideas are not a complete list of potentially problematic experiences that your child may have, but will, hopefully, motivate you to think beyond the notion that your child came home distressed because the other parent is a bad parent. Do not automatically retaliate in response to your suspicions. Monitor your own behavior. Remember, many other possible explanations exist for a visit "gone bad."

STEP 3

The third step is to gather systematically all available information about what happened during the visit. As hard as it may be, tell the other parent that your child came home upset and that you want to hear directly from him or her what happened before you reach any conclusions about the visit. Try to talk openly about your concerns.

Then talk with your child. Do not pump the child for information. Ask open-ended questions like, "tell me about your weekend," followed by other open-ended questions, such as "tell me more about that," "what did you do" and "how did you feel?"

Do not ask suggestive or directive questions, such as "tell me what your father did to upset you?" Give your child every possible opportunity to explain the experience in his or her own words. Listen and remain nonjudgmental and supportive. Direct your child to tell you everything that happened during the visit so that you are not left to fill in the gaps of your understanding. Once you have heard everything, you can help your child to better understand what might have lead to the distressing experience.

Here's an example of what can happen when a parent jumps to the wrong conclusion based on partial or misinformation: Robbie was six years old. He spent the entire weekend playing with his father at the pool and going out for wonderful meals. They went to a movie and then to Robbie's favorite burger joint. When Robbie came back from his weekend with Dad, he exclaimed, "I hate my father! He is so unfair!" and stormed off to his room. Megan followed him and calmly began to ask him to describe the weekend. As his story unfolded, she learned that Robbie was upset because his dad allowed another family to step ahead of them in line and that child ordered the last ice cream sundae before the ice cream ran out. Robbie was furious with his father for letting the other family go first. His anger had nothing to do with the otherwise wonderful time he spent with his father.

Remember, children, especially young children, do not use language the same way we adults use language. They may unknowingly convey an inaccurate impression of their visit. Children may take longer to explain an event or they may explain an event using words that do not accurately describe the experience. Give your child the time he or she needs to talk about the experiences with little, if any, specific directions from you. A few carefully used phrases like "tell me more about...what you did" or "...what he said" or "...what you saw" can

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elicit more helpful, objective information.

Unfortunately, sometimes visits really do go bad because of parental behaviors that place a child at risk. Use of drugs and alcohol, for example, may place children in an unsafe situation if they are dependent upon a parent who is intoxicated or high. If you truly believe that your child is stuck in an unsafe environment, act immediately. A few minutes' reflection, however, could prevent long-term problems with the other parent and possibly your children. Is there a friend or family member you could ask to check on the children before you involve the police?

Avoid confronting the other parent about placing your child in harm's way when he or she is intoxicated or high. Such accusations will likely lead to a significant increase in tensions without resolving the safety concerns.

All responsible parents naturally seek to protect their children from any potential harm or threat to their safety. Many of us have a gut reaction to unsafe situations and want to place ourselves physically between the threat and our children. Yet, physical confrontations become the basis for intense conflict and, at times, even physical aggression. In high-conflict postdivorce families, it is rarely (if ever) appropriate to physically challenge the other parent over safety issues.

Think in terms of disengagement, which may take various forms. One form is physical disengagement. Walk away from the potential conflict so that you are physically distant from your former partner. Find a way to cool down and then think through what you wish to say about the source of your concern. Consider writing notes or a rough script to guide your conversation, a conversation best had over the phone or via e-mail, rather than face to face.

Another form of disengagement that may be helpful is emotional disengagement. As soon as you recognize that you are becoming too upset to stay focused on your concerns about your child's safety, end the phone call. Explain that you are too upset to continue and may be hearing trouble that is not there. You need to take a break and will call back once you can refocus on your child-related concerns.

You must, however, finish the conversation in as timely a manner as possible. Some people say they will call back and finish the discussion, but they do not. Your follow-through is critical in this situation, not only to protect your child (and confirm your commitment to do whatever is necessary to resolve the issue), but also to inform the other parent of those issues of concern.

Clearly your first step should be to ensure your child's

safety. Mere differences in parenting styles should not be used to "prove" that your child is in danger during visits with the other parent. You must be able to distinguish between risk and parenting style or have the good sense to ask friends, family, or your lawyer to help you discern the difference between safety and distasteful parenting choices.

Sometimes your child may be exposed to parenting behavior that you view as objectionable, which leads you to consider ending your child's time with the other parent. You must learn to distinguish dangerous or incompetent parenting from *different* parenting. Typically in a family, when it comes to setting rules for the child to follow, one parent tends to be more permissive than the other, whereas the other parent might be more rigid. What was viewed during the marriage as a lovely balance between one parent's permissiveness and the other parent's rigidity is now seen in a postdivorce family as an example of deficient parenting (permissiveness) versus incompetent parenting (rigidness).

It is difficult to distinguish differences when tensions are high. You may find it helpful to consult a mental health professional to discuss these differences. You must clearly understand the difference between parenting that is different from your parenting as opposed to parenting that presents a genuine risk to your child.

If no one else can check on your children's well-being during a visit, consider asking the police to conduct a "wellness" check. Be very careful about resorting to this option. Many domestic attorneys and judges consider a wellness check as something an alienating parent does. Use this option only if you have tried unsuccessfully for an extended time to reach the other parent or in some other extraordinary situation.

A wellness check is not designed to prove that the other parent lets the kids stay up too late or fails to allow your child to make or return your nightly telephone call or feeds your children junk food. In some jurisdictions, a wellness check also involves a social services investigation. Involving social services can be the family law equivalent to throwing gasoline on a fire. Only use this option as a last resort.

Remember, different parenting styles do not automatically portend tragedy for your children. Even children of divorced parents can benefit from significant differences between their parents—the question may well be when and how will they be presented that opportunity. A visit that has gone badly can provide very important learning opportunities. Be vigilant and open with the other parent and, when necessary, seek professional guidance. **FA**



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