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Divorce: Focus on what is best for your teen, not on what is convenient for you

By STEVE DEBENEDETTI-EMANUEL / Valley Community Newspapers columnist

I recently received a call from the mother of a 15-year-old I'll call "John." She told me that she was concerned about and confused by his behavior.



Steve DeBenedetti-Emanuel

Some of the time, John did fabulously, earning "As" and getting along well with most everybody. Other times, he was defiant, mean to his sisters and refused to do his homework.

When I met John I, too, was confused...for about five minutes. After chatting pleasantly, he broke down and told me about his parents' divorce. They'd split when he was seven, but it felt like yesterday. Until recently he'd handled his feelings well enough, but he'd reached

the point that he felt angry and upset whenever he felt the tension increase between them. His parents were both surprised to hear this, as they felt that they'd done well hiding the conflict from him. They both admitted that right after the divorce it was really hard, and they'd struggled keeping their feelings of anger and resentment private. But they'd gotten to the point that they were cordial when around him and kept negative feelings confined to email.

John laughed when he heard this and told me that he didn't need to read their emails to know how much they dislike each other. He then proceeded to list the ways they show their feelings.

Even though they didn't argue in front of him, they still expressed their frustrations out loud. Sometimes they did it subtly by mumbling their frustrations under their breath and sighing when talking on the phone. Other times they expressed themselves much more clearly by telling him things like, "Your father is being difficult;" and "Sorry, you can't go. Your mother is mad at me."

When you're frustrated with your teen's other parent, take steps to keep your feelings private. When you need to vent, call a friend and keep your teen out of it. If your teen knows how you're feeling, it puts him/her in the middle and feeling like he/she has to choose one of you over the other.

I saw John on Monday nights, and every-other week he'd bring all his gear, as his mom dropped him off and his father picked him up. Each time, he'd complain about how difficult it was and how he wished the custody agreement was less complicated.

When you come up with visitation schedules, keep you child's best interests in mind by making it as simple as possible. If you can keep your teen from having to change homes in the middle of the week, do so. Or perhaps you could simplify things by having two sets of clothes, books, sports equipment, etc., so you can limit the carting back and forth.

Regardless, make decisions based on what's best and easiest for you teen, not on what's convenient for you.

John also told me that he felt his parents took their hostility out on the other by being inflexible with exceptions to the schedule. Not long ago, his dad's parents came into town at the last minute, but his mother wouldn't let him see them because it was "her weekend." She gave John a rational explanation, but he didn't buy it.

Make decisions based on your teen's best interest, not on sticking it to your ex. If your ex asks you to adjust the schedule, do it unless it's thoroughly impractical. Don't penalize you child in order to get back at him/her. Although it might inconvenience you, your teen will

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appreciate it, and your ex will be more likely to accommodate your future requests.

After hearing John's concerns, his parents made significant changes in the way they communicated and treated each other. Their relationship isn't perfect and they still argue, but John is left out of the middle of things. He's less stressed and angry, and his relationships with both of them have also improved.

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