

# CHILD CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

**For Our Children and Families - practical public-use support for moments when families need calmer next steps. Not legal advice. Start with safety first.**

## Public-use parent guide

Use this when a child is starting to feel responsible for adult conflict, protect one adult from the other, carry messages, or go quiet because the week feels unsafe or emotionally crowded.

This guide is not here to diagnose every strained relationship as one thing.

It is here to help reduce child exposure to harmful conflict, lower loyalty pressure, and protect safe stable relationships around the child.

## WHAT THIS OFTEN LOOKS LIKE

- The child is asked what the other adult said, did, or felt.
- The child is expected to report back.
- The child seems careful, guarded, or overly responsible around adult conversations.
- The child feels they have to choose, reassure, or protect one adult.
- The child starts hiding ordinary positive contact with a safe person.
- The child becomes distressed before calls, exchanges, pickups, or updates.
- The child starts carrying adult language that feels too old, too final, or too loaded.

## WHAT TO DO FIRST

1. Stop using the child as a bridge.

Do not ask the child to carry messages, explain adult conflict, or prove what happened.

2. Lower the message temperature.

Use short factual notes about the child, the plan, and the next practical step.

3. Protect ordinary safe ties.

Keep school, providers, grandparents, helpers, and safe contact patterns from shrinking casually.

4. Keep routines visible.

Sleep, meals, transportation, school, medication, activities, therapy, and handoff predictability matter.

5. Notice the child's age.

Young children may become clingy, dysregulated, or sleep worse.

School-age children may somaticize, worry, or try to fix things.

Older children may withdraw, side strongly with one adult, or act more final than settled.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What is the child being asked to carry that belongs to adults?
- Which safe relationship feels at risk right now?
- What routine is being disturbed because conflict is spilling over?
- What is the next calmer update that should go to school, a provider, or a helper?
- Who is one safe adult outside the conflict who can help steady the week?

## WHAT NOT TO DO

- Do not ask the child to choose.
- Do not make the child the evidence source.
- Do not use school, providers, belongings, medication, or records as leverage.
- Do not assume every strained relationship has the same cause.
- Do not use conflict-reduction language if the real issue is abuse, coercion, stalking, or fear.

## BEST NEXT TOOLS

- Child support message starters
- Handoff / exchange notes pad
- Child support circle sheet
- Child school and care team sheet
- Child week reset sheet
- Family communication system chooser

## SAFETY NOTE

If one adult is afraid, controlled, threatened, stalked, or harmed, move to the safety lane first.

Use Crisis + Keep Safe and official support doors instead of treating the issue as ordinary co-parent conflict.

Public-information tool only. Not legal advice.