



Co-Parenting through Separation and Divorce

Games Adults Play

It is very common for adults to play “games” with former partners after a separation or divorce, but the kinds of games we are considering here are destructive.

Many of them involve the children, trying to divide their loyalties or establishing parent-child alliances against one or the other parent. There are no winners in these games: both adults lose, in respect for each other and in self-respect. And the children stand to lose the most.

Look at the following examples of games that adults might play in these circumstances. In small groups, answer the following questions about one or more of these games.

- What is the adult trying to accomplish by playing this game?
- What effect will this game have on the child involved?
- What is a better way of handling this situation?

Game 1

Two hours before their father comes to pick up the children for a planned ski trip, the mother calls to say that the children can't go because she's decided they're **too young to be away from home**.

Game 2

Just before his mother comes to pick him up for an overnight visit, dad asks Jamie to tell his mother that her **support check is late again**, and that if this keeps up, she'll be hearing from the lawyer.

Game 3

Tonya's father sends her a postcard from Florida, which says "Miss you! Wish you were here. Lots of kisses, Dad." Tonya's mother hands her the card, saying, "That lying rat. He **didn't care whether you were dead or alive before the divorce**. Now he's Mr. Hugs and Kisses."

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Game 4

Dad is driving the kids to their soccer games when he overhears his son say, "I hope Grandma and Grandpa show up." He tells the kids not to get their hopes up: "Remember, they're just like your mother. **Working and making money are the only things they care about.**"

Game 5

Mom calls the two older children together and tells them that their father and his girlfriend, Sheila, want to take the two younger children overnight: "You know what a flake Sheila is. She can barely take care of herself, let alone your little brother and sister. Your father already knows my thoughts on this subject. I want you two to tell him it's a bad idea. **Maybe if he hears the same message from you,** he'll give up this ridiculous idea."

Game 6

Money is tight, but Sam's mother manages to find some inexpensive but special Chanukah presents for her son. She feels happy that their first holiday alone has been so successful. Two weeks later, Sam spends Christmas with his father and his family, receiving **lots of expensive clothes, games and toys.** When he shows her these gifts, Sam says, "Christmas is much better than Chanukah, Mom. Next year can we just celebrate Christmas?"

Game 7

Andy's parents are fighting bitterly over **visitation and the division of property.** As Andy's mother is leaving a meeting on this topic, she turns to her lawyer and says, "You had better explain to him how easy it is for a father to lose visitation rights." Then she turns to her former husband and says, "Either I get the house and car or you can kiss your child goodbye."

Game 8

Every time Kerri's father picks her up from visiting her mom, he starts asking her **questions about her mother:** "What's her new job like? Is she making more money now? What's she doing with all the money that she's earning? Is she dating anyone yet?"

Game 9

Bert, a 13-year-old boy, sees his mother looking depressed and asks what's wrong. She replies, "I'm feeling sad, Bert. **Why don't you stay home tonight** instead of sleeping over at your dad's house? You can go there another time. Tonight, we can get some videos, pop some corn, and have a good time, just the two of us. What do you say, buddy?"

Game 10

"Jane, you know that your mother and I are having problems deciding which of us you should live with. Your mom thinks that you'd be better off living with her, and I think you'd be better off living with me. So, to be fair, **we've decided that you should make your own decision.** You're old enough to know what's best for you. Think about it for a while, and then let us know what you want to do. OK?"

Reference:

Mulroy, M., Malley, C., Sabatelli, R., & Waldron, R. (1995). Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting. University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System and School of Family Studies. Excerpts used with permission of authors.

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