



WHEN PARENTS LIVE APART

CONNECTION WITHOUT MAKING A CHILD RESPONSIBLE FOR ADULT WELLBEING

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CHILDREN ARE NOT EMOTIONAL CAREGIVERS

- A child can love a parent deeply without being responsible for that parent's emotional stability.
- Separation, divorce, recovery, loneliness, or grief can be painful for adults. Children still need permission to be children.
- Adult feelings deserve adult supports.



HEALTHY CONNECTION

- Warm affection, predictable contact, shared traditions, age-appropriate contribution, and reassurance can support connection.
- Tell the child: "I love being with you. I take care of myself when we are apart."
- Let children enjoy both homes and relationships without having to prove loyalty.



TOO MUCH EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Avoid asking a child to manage loneliness, repeatedly reassure you, choose sides, carry messages, keep adult secrets, monitor the other home, or become your main confidant.
- "You are all I have" can place an adult-sized emotional burden on a child.



REGULATION SUPPORTS SAFE PARENTING

- When a parent feels overwhelmed, focus on observable caregiving: safe supervision, sobriety, routines, emotional steadiness, medical/safety needs, and getting adult help when needed.
- If another caregiver has safety concerns, respond with regulation, transparency, and concrete caregiving behavior rather than asking the child to resolve the conflict.



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WORDS THAT REDUCE BURDEN

- Instead of “I need you,” try “You are important to me, and I also have adults I can turn to.”
- Instead of asking what the other parent said, try “You do not have to carry messages or report on the other home.”
- Instead of sharing adult conflict details: “The grown-ups are handling the grown-up problems.”

CULTURE AND FAMILY CONTEXT

- Interdependence, multigenerational family life, and children contributing to family routines can be healthy and culturally meaningful.
- The key questions are whether responsibilities are age-appropriate, supported, reciprocal, and compatible with the child's safety and development.
- Do not label closeness or cultural family practices as unhealthy simply because they differ from one family model.

MY ADULT SUPPORT PLAN

- What feelings come up when my child is away?
- Which trusted adult, therapist, peer, faith/spiritual community, cultural community, recovery support, or other resource can help hold those feelings?
- What helps me regulate before I call, text, or interact with my child?

KEEP THE CHILD OUT OF THE MIDDLE

- Do not use a child as a messenger, investigator, ally, therapist, or witness in adult conflict.
- Support the child's identity, relationships, culture, religion or non-religion, and safe connections across households.
- When legal or safety issues exist, use appropriate adult channels rather than recruiting the child into the dispute.