1. Don't Say Bad Things About My Other Parent
This rule comes up every time we've done the exercise and almost always in the top five. It also seeps into many other exercises, from one where kids express their feelings artistically on postcards (see example below) to one where kids role play an advice-giving radio talk show. They really want to know how to stop the "bad-mouthing," especially those kids who have actually asked their parents to stop only to be told "you need to know what kind of person your ____ is" or "it's not bad-mouthing if it's true."

The kids want you to know that they "don't care if it's true;" they just "want it to stop" because "hearing bad things about someone I love hurts my heart."

The above rule is so pervasive that even after isolating it, it haunts our next rule:

2. Keep Us Out Of Adult Stuff
Bad mouthing the parent doesn't have to be an outright proclamation. It can be the subtle or not so subtle release of information beyond the child's years of comprehension and/or need to know. There is no educational or emotional value in telling a child, "there will be no ____ because your other parent is behind on child support," or "your ____ left us because they're boinking a co-worker".

3. Don't Make Me Feel Bad For Loving The Other Parent
At 11, Aaron (the inspiration for my work in this area), was the only child of three still willing to endure his mother's wrath in order to continue seeing his dad. He braved being called "stupid just like your dad," constant questioning -- "why do you want to be with the person who broke up our family?" -- and having his bags packed by the front door after being told, "if you like him so much, just go live with him."

By 14 he had given in, but only after the entire other side of the family sat him down and told him he was being a "traitor to his real family" for continuing to see his dad against his moms wishes and that he had to choose "us or him."

What I really want parents to understand is that while they may think their actions are only punishing their ex, they are also (and often even more so) punishing their child.

I'm pretty sure every parent reading this can imagine how sad and deprived their child would be without their special love. Can being deprived of the other parents' love be any less sad? With that knowledge, would you still do something that makes your child any degree of sad, just to punish your ex?

4. Learn To Get Along For Big Events
Kids want and deserve to have both parents at their game/play/graduation. You don't have to stand next to each other, but don't "hide the date" from the other parent.
5. Don't Make Me Choose Sides
They want you to know this is "the worst thing you could ever make a kid to do."

6. No Fighting In Front Of Us
As a prelude to one of our coping exercises, the kids have to pick a common situation that makes them so uncomfortable that they have to "get out of there." Seeing or hearing their parents fight is the one that comes up the most.

7. Don't Make Me A Messenger Or Put Me In The Middle
Even sending simple messages through your child is a burden. It's not their job to remember to pass the message along, get the message right, get an answer and then deliver the response back to you. They want you to "find a way to communicate."

8. Don't Share Or Take Your Anger Out On Me
This one probably has the most variety in how it's written: "Don't share your anger with me," "shelter me from your anger," "don't take your anger at them out on me." But my favorite is "let me still be a happy kid."

9. Don't Ask Me To Spy
Our November group had a girl who was actually given a notebook to write her observations in. It's heartbreaking to understand that her sharing of this deed was really more of a confession. She knew it was wrong, but wanted to be an obedient daughter.

10. Give Me One-On-One Time With Both Parents
This rule and "give me equal time with both parents" would actually be higher on the list if we didn't separate them from their kin. But because there are powers (courts) that may keep this rule from becoming a reality, we often suggest that the kids try to steer away from the "equal" wording. That works about half the time. But not at all when we have one of those rare kids who gets to stay in their home while their parents rotate in and out. Then the request becomes downright insistent: "we stay home, you switch houses every week!".

KARA BISHOP

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Kara lives in Tucson, AZ where she works with Divorce Recovery, Inc., a local non-profit dedicated to helping children (and adults) cope with the challenges of divorce and the multitude of changes it presents to families.