

Dual Household Families

Many children these days are part of a dual household family. It may not feel like one 'family' to you, but it does to your child. Together, the people who live in both homes make up your child's family. This can raise some contentious issues when applying the tools in this course. In fact, you may be reading this as a step-parent who is trying to understand how to traverse a complex situation. Let's look at that for a moment.

Children grow up living in two homes but with one family. There may be new step parents, step siblings, or half siblings. Children may spend extended periods with grandparents or other carers. Families have become complex, and it is challenging as we try to find balance and stability in the 'new' family dynamics.

The point is, your child is growing, learning, and developing in this complex environment.

It is the adults' responsibility to assist their children to thrive despite the complexity. Adults do this by consciously putting their children's best interests first. This is often not easy, but it is necessary.

Consistency is best for children—in both homes, where possible.

The tools provided in this course will help you to create safe and fun technology experiences in your home. Of course, it is **ideal when all of the adults find common ground and behave as consistently as possible**. This most definitely leads to the best outcomes for children.

Sadly, this is not always possible. You may have absolutely no influence over what happens in your child's 'other' home. **You can, however, create a safe, fun, and loving life in your home.**

You can provide advice, rules and boundaries, and loving support to achieve this healthy environment. In your home, you can implement the tools provided and reinforce why they are so important. Children have an amazing capacity for learning.

You may find your understanding of technology and your open communication about how (and why) it is used in your home, will influence their decisions outside of your home too.

“In our home, we do things this way because...” The aim is to provide predictable and consistent parenting, including how technology is used.

Within this tool, I will refer to homes where adults find a way to work together for the benefit of their children as a *healthy home environment*. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. There are situations where adults are not able to find that place and yet share custody of their children. I will refer to this as *poor family dynamics* for want of a better term.

Here are some specific points to consider. Perhaps they are topics of discussion with the adults involved (where possible), or maybe the situation requires that you consider these issues and how you will deal with them in your home:

1. “But Mum/Dad lets me at her/his house.”

Lack of consistency between homes leads to confusion and frustration and undermines your child’s sense of stability. It creates tension, and your child suffers.

There is always the chance that children may use any lack of consistency or perceived friction to *manipulate the situation*. It is possible they may play one parent against the other to get their preferred outcome.

Healthy family dynamics – With good communication between adults, you can have a discussion with the other party; that is, agree to the same/similar rules in both homes. Discuss suitable consequences, and agree to follow through. When your child suggests there are differences in the rules, you can confidently assure them that you will check with the other parent/carer to clarify any misunderstanding. There is little room for manipulation when all of the adults are on the same page. Your child benefits from the stability and predictability of the experience.

Poor family dynamics – All you can do is stay true to your family in your home and how you can best support the children in your home. Know that you are doing the best thing for the children in your care. Keep communication open, but be firm on your expectations about ‘this is how we do things here’.

2. “No-one in this family understands me.”

A child may feel they are missing out on what they imagine is the perfect family and may look to the Internet to fill those needs or insecurities. Be aware of this. (For example, *looking for a father or mother figure or looking for someone who understands*)

Healthy family dynamics – Let the other parent/carer know what the child is saying. Offer support in both homes. You know your child. Each one is different and will need different amounts of time, touch, reassurance, and attention. One

child might sail through the changes while the other becomes very withdrawn and unhappy. When you share your observations, you get a better picture of what's happening and can better resolve the issue. *Predators look for children who are saying things that show they are feeling isolated, ignored, or misunderstood.*

Poor family dynamics – Pay attention to each of your children. Maintain excellent communication and support. Reinforce the need to not share information online. Reinforce the idea that technology is a tool that allows people to misrepresent themselves. The person they are talking to may not be who they seem. Home is safe, and they are loved.

3. “I just want some time to myself.”

In busy shared homes, this can become a bit of an issue. Does each child have a place to go for quiet or a place that is just ‘theirs’? It can be difficult as they may be required to share a room, perhaps with someone they are not biologically related to or don't like. In this situation, *they may find solitude in technology.* Don't mistake quiet for content/happiness. Too much time on technology, technology used behind closed doors, inappropriate/ unsuitable apps and games use, or use of chat without monitoring are all detrimental to your child.

Create a space for each child to find solitude should they want it. You may have to get creative, like a pop up tent or a hammock under a tree. Encourage them to read or play there, but discourage technology behind closed doors. Monitor time on technology, and check in on the chat. You should have access to all passwords so that you can monitor what they are doing online.

4. Keep adult problems between the adults.

Adults resolve issues ‘behind closed doors’. Children only need to know the outcome, not the discussion. Nor do they need to be part of issue resolution or carry messages. This behaviour undermines your child's confidence, or conversely, it can make them feel very powerful and potentially use it to their short-term benefit. In the long term, children are harmed by poor adult behaviour. *Negotiate technology and other rules without involving your children in disputes.*

Poor family dynamics – Be the responsible one. Communicate in person and privately where possible. Communicate in writing where necessary. Provide reassurance to your children. “That's an issue for Mum and me to work out. It will be fine. No need for you to worry.” Never air your laundry with children who have no influence on the outcome and are not emotionally mature enough to know how to process it.



To summarise

- Your child will be happier and healthier and will thrive best when all adults work together.
- Your child is safest and happiest when there are consistent rules regarding technology in both homes.
- No matter what, strive for *consistency in your home*.
- Talk with your child about why the rules are in place in your home.
- Share any useful resources you find with your child's other parents/carers.
- Do not use technology as a reward or a weapon against another parent/carer. (It won't make anyone the 'good guy'; it just confuses the child and potentially puts them at risk).