What to say when your child comes back from the other home grumpy

"Every Sunday my six-year-old comes back from her dad's and is cross with me for an hour. What do I say when she walks in?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"What happened over there? Why are you being like this?"

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Welcome back. There's a snack for you."

The first hour back can be the hardest hour of the week. The instinct is to find out what went wrong over there. That question asks her to report on a home she loves.

What is known, and at what age

Guidance for parents of young children says it is often the switch itself, rather than the destination, that is stressful. It describes crying at a handover as a typical reaction to change. That guidance was written for the youngest children; for five- to seven-year-olds it is a reasonable reading, not a finding about this age.

Pediatricians' guidance on separation is plainer still: never make your child the messenger, never ask them to take sides, and let them spend time with the other parent without feeling guilty. School-age children, it says, may worry about divided loyalty.

No study we know of has tested a welcome-back phrase. Take 2 is everyday practice built on that guidance.

What the words do

Take 1 is two questions about the other house and a charge against your child, in the first minute. Take 2 says she is welcome, and gives her something ordinary to do. It asks nothing about the other home.

Pick one small thing that happens at every changeover, whichever way it goes: the same snack in the car, the same words at the door. Do it, and don't announce it. Then let the grumpy hour be a grumpy hour.

This page assumes both homes are safe. If you have reason to think one is not, read the section headed "If you live in two homes" below first.

If you live in two homes

If you have reason to think the other home is not safe, the usual welcome-back advice does not fit, because it assumes no one is being hurt. Accept whatever your child feels, including missing the other parent, and say they won't be in trouble for any of it. Don't talk the other home up or down, and don't ask your child to report on it. Say only what you will do: "I'll always listen, and I'll help keep you safe." A domestic violence advocate can help you plan for safety: in the US, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-7233 (24/7), or text START to 88788. If you think your child has been hurt, get medical help if needed and contact local police or child protective services; Childhelp is 1-800-422-4453. If anyone is in danger now, call 911 (999 in the UK).

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children. For everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential; in Scotland, Children First, 08000 28 22 33. Worried about a child's safety: NSPCC, 0808 800 5000 (weekdays 10am–4pm). Domestic abuse, free and open 24 hours: in England, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, 0808 2000 247; in Wales, Live Fear Free, 0808 80 10 800. In Scotland, the Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline is 0800 027 1234; across the UK, the Men's Advice Line is 0808 801 0327. If anyone is in danger, call 999. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.