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

"My ten-year-old comes back from his mum's every other Sunday, slams his bag down and barely speaks to me. What do I say when he walks in?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're always like this when you get back. What went on over there?"

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Hey, welcome back. There's a snack for you. No need to talk yet."

The first hour back can be the hardest hour of the week. The instinct is to name the pattern and find out what went wrong over there. The first is a charge; the second asks a ten-year-old to report on a home he loves.

What is known, and at what age

In a study of 522 young people aged ten to eighteen, four and a half years after their parents separated, feeling caught between parents went with conflict between them, and closeness to both parents went with feeling caught less. Those who lived in both homes felt caught especially when their parents were in high conflict, and especially rarely when they cooperated. It is a study of links at one time, not proof of cause, and for eight- and nine-year-olds it is a reading, not a finding.

A study of older teens in Belgium describes what living in two homes asks of a young person: frequent moves, two places, two ways of doing things. That study was of fourteen- to twenty-one-year-olds; for a ten-year-old it is a fair description of the demand, not a finding about his age.

Pediatricians' guidance on separation is plain: never make your child the messenger, never ask them to take sides, and let them spend time with the other parent without feeling guilty.

What the words do

Take 1 is a charge ("always") and a question about the other house in the first minute. Take 2 says he is welcome, gives him something ordinary, and tells him he does not have to talk yet. No study we know of has tested a welcome-back phrase; it is everyday practice built on that guidance.

Keep one small thing the same at every changeover, and don't announce it. Then let the quiet hour be a quiet 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.