

# Inaugural Family Law System Conference

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### Speaking Notes

My message is encapsulated in the case study of ten-and-half-year-old Jason whose Mum and Dad often have fighting screaming matches when one of them comes to collect him. Jason says they have these “episodes about fifty percent of the time when bags are handed over”. He has an “Episode Plan” – watches TV loudly or goes and talks to someone (usually Matt, Mum’s flatmate). To provide an example of an “episode”, Jason talked about one that happened at a before-school pick-up. It went on so long that Jason didn’t get to school till one o’clock. Jason actually built and glued a shack made of wood he collected while the episode was going on, and on. He said he did this deliberately to show his parents how long it had been. What he did not say was that it also showed how he was ignored for the whole time his parents were focused on fighting with each other.

#### Messages to parents

To Mum: *love mum and enjoy going to work with you. I like that you are a nurse and help people.*

To Dad: *love Dad and really like learning about cabling and stuff.*

To both parents: *You need to work out the parenting stuff. It’s not my problem. I want you to work it out here (at Interrelate’s FRC), not in Court ‘cos the we won’t have a say and someone (judge) will tell us what to do and I don’t want that to happen.*

[While not asking children to decide these things, sometimes it can be good to obtain the child’s view of a parenting plan which Jason was very clear about.]

Jason’s own parenting plan (as told to Child Consultant):

- *Half time with Mum, half time with Dad – keep the changeover to Wednesday*
- *Share my birthday with both Mum and Dad (on the actual day)*
- *Dad’s birthday with Dad and Mum’s birthday with Mum, no matter whose week it is*
- *One Christmas and on Easter with Mum and the next with Dad – would like this to be worked out my cousins (Dad’s sister’s kids) so I can spend time with them, and not get fussed over whose turn it is!*

#### Message to all separated parents and those who support them

Intelligent and articulate, ten-and-half-year-old Jason did not feel he could relax and be a child, but when asked if he wanted to say anything to his parents about their fights, his answer was clear and unequivocal: *That’s their problem not mine.*

**A fight between parents should *never* become their child's problem.**

Points about child focus

It can be simple – just needs all of us who work with parents to be constantly and consistently aware of the child/ren in the midst of the conflict.

Do we call our clients 'parties' – why not call them parents? Refer to them as mum and dad....these are simple ways to keep focussed on the child.

It is more than intellectual rhetoric – it needs to come from within (our gut).

We need to remember what it was like when we were a child (or a child we know) – this helps us stay relevant and practical and gives us a measure (r reality) of the parenting arrangements we are setting in place.

My experience is that what children want/need is similar (and inexpensive!) ie 'I want time with/fun with mum/dad', 'I just want mum to say she loves me', I want dad to tuck me in at night'.

We will have 'made it' when we no longer need to put a subject like 'child focus' on the agenda.

Parents are not merely adults who need assistance with their conflict....they are PARENTS and as such need to be shown ways in which to remain focused on the needs of their child/ren....after all that is the reason they came to us for help.

If we can work together with a common focus....that is with the needs and interests of children at the centre of all we do, then we can and will make a difference and become less adversarial.

**Remember four-and three-quarter-year-old Linton**

When the child consultant asked him to tell her about Mum and Dad, he said:

*Sometimes happy sometimes bad. When they are bad they fight and then I feel sad and my tummy is funny.*