

Taylor Family

Martin and Jane Taylor, both age 33, have been separated for 2 years. They have three children – Anna, age 11, Jeremy, age 8, and Susan, age 3.

The parents had one separation and reconciliation shortly before Susan was born. The children were exposed to numerous arguments between the parents which frequently included demeaning and impulsive comments, particularly from Martin toward Jane, and periods when Jane would retreat to her bedroom crying or stop speaking to Martin. Both Anna and Jeremy also report that he has said very hurtful things to them. The marriage ended after Jane discovered that Martin was having an extramarital affair. On two occasions, toward the end of the marriage, Martin and Jane pushed one another. On the last night he was in the home, Martin punched a hole in the bedroom door. He immediately left the house and divorce proceedings started shortly thereafter. A child protection investigation was completed and did not find either parent to be a danger to the children, although various services were recommended. Martin, who said he was surprised and distressed by the incident, immediately enrolled in counseling.

Prior to the separation Martin worked full time and Jane worked part time. Although Martin was involved in activities such as the coaching of Anna's swim team, the parents are in dispute about his level of involvement in daily parenting. Jane viewed him as incompetent and unorganized and would frequently "take over" making arrangements with other parents, taking the family's turn to car pool, etc. Since the separation she has been working full time and frequently appears overwhelmed and exhausted.

Both parents report spanking the children when they were younger and now primarily use privilege restrictions. They have had particular struggles with Jeremy who has demonstrated both academic and behavioral difficulties at school and acts impulsively. His behavior has begun to remind Jane of Martin, which has increased her punitive responses toward him. The school has suggested that he be assessed for the possibility of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Martin has opposed such an assessment and says that Jeremy acts better with him, although Jeremy continues to miss homework assignments after time at each home. Martin says he had similar problems as a child and turned out fine.

Anna is extremely protective of Jane and is "outraged" at Martin's betrayal and treatment of Jane. She believes that both Martin and Jeremy cause excessive stress to Jane and this has led to intense conflict between Anna and Jeremy as Anna has attempted to "help" her mother. Conversely she frequently retreats into engaging only with her cell phone and is often openly dismissive and defiant toward her father. She states that she was "traumatized" by the event with the door.

For the first 18 months after the separation, the children spent Wednesdays overnight and every other weekend with their father. Six months ago he began requesting more parenting time, expressing concerns that Jane was undermining his relationship with the children and becoming increasingly angry at Jeremy. Anna directly confronted her father about this, leading to an argument that led to Martin attempting to restrict Anna's use of her cell phone. At some point during this argument Anna's phone landed on the floor and was broken. Anna says that Martin twisted her arm in an attempt to physically take the phone from her; Martin states that Anna simply dropped it and then blamed her father. He believes that this incident was "set up" at Jane's behest. Jane called child protective services a second time to report Martin for child abuse. After six supervised visits the investigation was closed with no finding of abuse, but with a recommendation that both parents complete parenting and coparenting classes and that family counseling be undertaken. Anna has begun to refuse transitions to her father's home, stating that she sees no reason to forgive him for what he did and anyway she would rather be at her mother's home so that she can keep track of her homework and better prepare for swim meets. Although she describes a chronic level of stress and conflict for which she blames Jeremy, she is fiercely protective of her mother and won't acknowledge any difficulties in that home.

Susan has always been a quiet child and eager to please both parents. She tended to retreat to her room whenever there was conflict among other members of the family. Despite his tendency to be authoritarian with the older children, Martin has always been gentle with Susan. He recently found Susan hiding under a table with her fingers in her years in response to what he observed to be a fairly routine argument between Jeremy and Anna. Both parents report that while Susan had previously been toilet trained, she is now wetting her bed and exhibiting tearfulness and clinginess at parenting transitions. Each parent blames the other for this behavior, often in the children's presence.

Martin states he was shaken by the incident with Anna and promptly took both parenting classes and an anger management course. He believes that the situation in Jane's home is out of control and that he needs to take a more active role in parenting the children. He is seeking equal parenting time with the children. He believes he has learned better parenting techniques and has attempted to have a family counseling session to apologize to Anna but she refuses to participate and Jane refuses to require that Anna do so – Jane's position is that Anna should not have to engage with her father "until she is ready to." Anna regularly turns her back on her father and walks away when he attends her swim competitions.

Jane is angry that she has been asked to take parenting and coparenting classes. She states that she isn't the violent one and that if Martin hadn't opposed the ADHD assessment for Jeremy, she wouldn't be having such difficulty with him now. She believes Martin opposes the ADHD assessment because everyone knows that children with ADHD should have only one household during the week. Martin has now offered to agree to the assessment as long as someone other than Jane controls it so that he can have equal access to teachers and doctors.

So what to do?