

family matters

DANISH FAMILY THERAPIST AND AUTHOR *Jesper Juul* COUNSELS A COUPLE ABOUT HOW THEY CAN MORE EQUALLY SHARE THEIR PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

Judy and Frank are parents to Jessica, five, and Isabella, two. The family has recently moved and Frank is working hard while Judy spends most of her time looking after the girls. She feels run-down and is desperate for some time-out. But the girls only want her, so when Frank tries to get involved, the girls give him the cold shoulder. How can Frank connect with his daughters so that Judy can have a break?

THE COACHING SESSION

JESPER Welcome! What is on your mind?

JUDY We'd like to talk about what has happened since we moved house. I've been looking after our daughters while Frank has been working really hard. The plan was that anytime I needed some space he would take over. However, this hasn't worked. When Frank wants to take over, the girls don't want him so they scream and yell. It causes chaos and I never get any time-out. I feel used because I am in charge 24/7.

JESPER Has it changed since you moved?

JUDY It has been like that before... but...

FRANK It is more in our face now. I might be working all Saturday but when I try to help out in the evening, things go wrong. I simply don't know how to take over and Judy doesn't have the energy to let me know what has been happening. The girls are drawn to Judy, who is not able to take a step back before it is too late.

JESPER Judy, tell me what Frank means when he says, 'Before it is too late.'

JUDY At that stage I have had enough. So before I snap at the girls, I yell at Frank, 'You have to take over!' and I am out of there. I would like to hand over my responsibilities in a more positive way.

JESPER You are telling me that you need help. You need Frank's help. How can he help you? You are

the way you are and you have some limitation because you are not able to hand over the kids as you would like to do. Let's try to put this into perspective. How is your husband able to help you take care of yourself?

JUDY I can't always see it coming. Perhaps Frank could help me just before it is too late.

JESPER Frank, let's say you have been home for a while. Are you able to see that things are starting to go wrong?

FRANK Yes. The energy becomes very hectic.

JUDY It is difficult and a bit of a dilemma. I want him to help but I also become very frustrated when he tries to. I sometimes snap at him, 'I can do this on my own!'

JESPER I sense that once you have got the engine running it is not easy for you to stop. You are not used to working within your own limitations or looking after your wellbeing. In these situations it is important that Frank is able to sense what is happening and be brave enough to interfere. The two of you need to agree that it will be OK for Frank to interfere. Otherwise, he will get nowhere.

Frank, you have to be proactive and there must be no option for discussion. Say to Judy, 'It is all right that you are tired. Go for a walk, lie down or go and do something else.' Not like a commando but in a way that removes Judy from the stage. Right now, the girls feel like hot potatoes being passed around. It's not that they don't like you, Frank. It is just that they don't like the roles they are being given. The real reason why they hold onto you, Judy, is because they are trying to say: 'Please, Mum, don't be so stressed!'

FRANK I notice Judy's stress before she does. When she is in the middle of something, she will stop at nothing. It is difficult for her to be told to go for a walk – especially if she hasn't noticed the stress.

JESPER Sure, but if Judy is to become less active you must become proactive. Stop asking. Say, 'Judy, you are exhausted. Stop!' Then Judy and you will have to work out if she just needs a deep breath or to go for a walk or lie down. You have to accept that Judy might bite when you say it. Try to be loving and to give her the time to realise that you are right... because you are right!

If you say, 'Ahem... Judy, don't you think...?' then you will be a disruption to her and you will get your head chopped off. This is about caring for Judy, because she isn't able to care for herself. It is hard for you to see this, as she comes across as highly competent. I actually think Judy really needs care more than she needs relief.

FRANK This will also mean a better transition for the children.

JESPER They will no longer feel like they are being thrown from one to the other. You will instead put up a sign that says *Under new management* and then take over the reins. They will probably say, 'I want Mummy!' You need to reply, 'That might be so, but it's not possible.'

Children demand their parents' presence all the time and they can become rather cruel if they see you as a substitute. That is not good enough for you, because you are their father – it is not good enough for anyone.

I am not trying to turn you, Frank, into the one who has the main responsibility for all of this, but the situation needs someone who will actively step in and say, firstly, to Judy, 'Take a break and relax!' and then to the children, 'Right, your dad is here!' You need to get Judy's bad vibrations out of the room so you can take some leadership.

FRANK I have previously asked Judy if she felt like going for a run. I won't say that again, instead I'm going to say, 'Darling, go for a run!'





THE RESULT

JUDY We have agreed on a couple of family rules. When Frank comes and looks sternly at me, I know it's time for me to leave. We would previously have had marathon discussions. Now we save a lot of time and energy, and we both keep our dignity intact.

The girls made a contract with us and we have agreed that they can let us know if they feel the atmosphere is uncomfortable. A couple of times Jessica has noticed this and asked if we were about to divorce. We told her that it isn't like that. We spend a lot of time together as a family and inevitably we run into problems. It is part of being a family and we deal with those issues when they arise. However, we have decided to seek marriage counselling. Hopefully, we will be able to sort out some of the fundamental issues and work out what both of us want from our relationship. We believe it will be very constructive for our family. •

Text by Pernille Lauritsen and Hayes van der Meer. Names have been changed for privacy reasons. For more information on Jesper Juul and FamilyLab International visit familylab.com.au.

Playing favourites

When your child has a preference for one parent over the other, give these worthwhile tips a go:

- 1 The one who feels rejected might need to take a look at how attentive they have been lately. When one parent is physically or mentally absent, the children will tend to turn their attention to the other parent.
- 2 Parenting works best when there is some kind of teamwork.
- 3 If you have a tendency to feel responsible for just about everything or feel you are pushed beyond what you think is reasonable, it might be time for you to work on your personal boundaries: define your limits, values and needs, and take responsibility for these.
- 4 It is best to deal with these conflicts and discuss new strategies when there is peace and calm, and when there is a positive connection between you and your partner.
- 5 You might be able to draw up a family contract where you agree on how to solve the challenges you are facing.

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