

Chameleon Kids

by Honorable Anne Kass. Ann Kass is a District Judge in the Second Judicial District State of New Mexico.

Sharp-tongued parents turn child into chameleon

Chameleon kids are an all too frequent product of divorce. These are children who behave, think and feel one way at dad's house and an altogether different way at mom's house.

Chameleon kids often tell each of their parents different stories to keep them both happy. Telling each parent, "I want to live with you." is a common example. Complaining about or criticizing one parent to the other parent is another.

Chameleon kids go far beyond that, however. Sometimes they change the way they dress, their interests, and virtually all aspects of their lives as they go back and forth between their parents' homes.

In one case a teenage girl rode horses at her mom's house and talked about rodeos. At dad's house, she wore preppie clothes and talked about school proms.

The most extreme case I can remember involved a young girl whose parents called her by different first names. At mom's house, she took ballet lessons. At dad's house, she was an outdoor-loving youngster who went camping and hiking. At mom's house, she behaved like a very little girl, often sitting in her mother's lap like a two-year-old. At dad's house, she was assertive and self-reliant.

Everyone needs to learn how to adapt to different situations. It is essential to know that behavior should be different at church than at a football game. But children who exhibit complete changes of behavior and interests from one parent's home to the other's are in trouble. They become over-adaptive. They are extremely vulnerable to peer pressure because their primary fears are rejection and abandonment. If they happen to be in the company of thugs, they act as thugs act. If they associate with a cult, they become true believers. If their peers use drugs or alcohol or join gangs, so will they. They do not develop a sense of self or an internal set of values.

Divorced parents need to pay special attention to the hopes and expectations they convey to their children. Warning signs from a chameleon-child-in-the-making include talking negatively about one parent to the other or agreeing with a parent who is criticizing the other parent. A child mimicking a parent's behavior

or interests could be another warning sign.

The best remedy for chameleon behavior is for parents to stop their fight. Parents who stop talking negatively about each other and who interact courteously give children the message that it is acceptable for people to be different and that people can disagree without absolutely rejecting one another.

Parents need to give their children permission to be individuals. Divorced parents need to love their children more than they hate each other in order to prevent the chameleon effect.