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# Stuart Vyse: We stand up for this child

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By Stuart Vyse

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Body language is a powerful mode of communication. The subtlest movement or expression can convey a very clear message.

On graduation day at the college where I teach, the faculty in my department linger outside our building after the ceremony so that students can come by for a final goodbye. They often bring their families, and it is a time of happiness and sense of accomplishment when the faculty get to meet brothers and sisters and praise students in front of their parents. Pictures are taken and gifts given.

Of course, many of my students have parents who are separated or divorced. Some of these students have spent years shuttling back and forth across enemy lines, alternating between adults who remain loyal to the conflicts that drove them apart. Their children have been forced to listen to countless arguments and angry monologues and have endured a variety of more subtle indignities. At graduations and other public events, children must often choose with which parent to sit, trying not to disappoint one or the other side and become a weapon in a never-ending war.

But some families are different. Some parents are able to remember that it is about the kids—has always been about the kids. Once you make the decision to have children, they are what matters, and that does not change if the marriage fails. These kinds of parents work together to plan for birthday parties, holidays and public events. The children need not choose sides because their parents are on the same side when it comes to them. Away from the kids, there may be traditional points of conflict, but in front of the children, the adults treat each other with respect. In the best of cases, this sense of being on the same team comes so naturally that it shows in every glance and gesture.

I will always remember one young man. He was a bright and insightful student, more traveled than most, but like many of his peers, he graduated without discovering a plan for life beyond college. Nonetheless, I liked him very much, and on those rare occasions when I see him now, he greets me with a hearty hug.

On the day that this young man graduated, he brought his parents by to meet me. His mother and father were divorced, and both had remarried. As I stood under the trees outside our building, four people approached: two

men and two women. They formed a tight circle in front of me, as I stood next to their son and told them about our experiences together. No one held back; no one was left in the shadows. Their eyes were equally fixed on me, and without saying a word, these four told me more than I told them. They said: We are here for this child, this young man. What matters to us in this moment is our expression of love for him and, as part of that expression of love, to hear from you, his teacher. We are together, and we stand up for this child.

Stuart Vyse is a professor of psychology at Connecticut College.