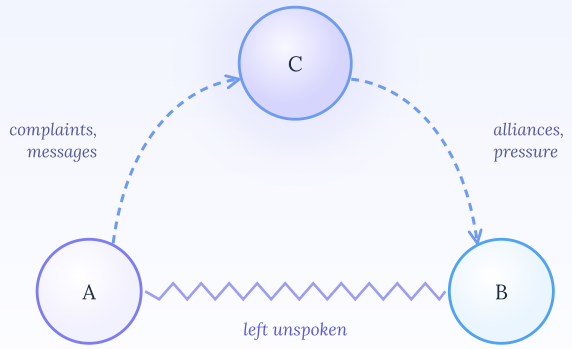
Triangulation

FAMILIES · RELATIONSHIPS · CONFLICT

When tension between two people feels hard to manage, it can be drawn through a third person instead of being worked out directly. Family therapist Murray Bowen called this a triangle (Bowen, 1978). It is common, often happens without anyone intending it, and can ease things for a while while leaving the original issue unresolved.

THE DETOUR

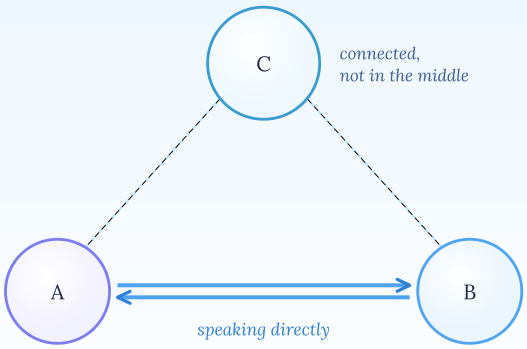
Tension travels through a third person



It may bring relief for a while, but the issue between A and B stays unresolved.

THE DIRECT ROUTE

The two people talk to each other



The third person can still care about both, without carrying what belongs between them.

01 How triangles can look

Passing messages
Carrying information, requests or complaints between two people who are not speaking directly.

Talking about, not to
Two people discuss a third person's behaviour, rather than raising it with them.

Recruiting an ally
Drawing someone in to agree, take sides or stand against another person.

A child in the middle
A child becomes a messenger, confidant or comfort in conflict between adults.

02 Roles we may find ourselves in

1. **The go-between** — carrying messages and smoothing things over
2. **The ally** — recruited to agree, or to stand against someone
3. **The focus** — becoming the "problem" others worry about instead
4. **The one who draws others in** — turning to a third person rather than speaking directly

Most of us have played each of these at some point. Roles can shift between relationships and over time.

03 Why it happens

It brings short-term relief
Sharing the tension with a third person can lower anxiety for a while.

Direct talk can feel risky
Raising something face to face may feel likely to cause conflict or hurt.

It can be learned
Bowen theory suggests these patterns are often learned in families and repeated across generations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

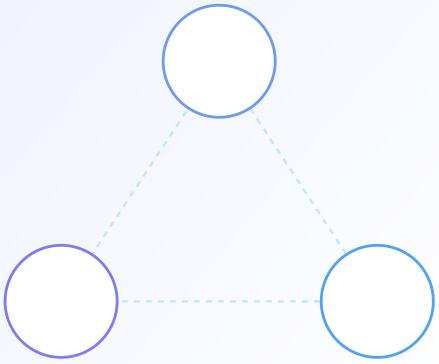
Bowen saw the triangle as a basic pattern in how families manage anxiety (Bowen, 1978). In a study of families after divorce, adolescents who often felt caught between their parents reported more depressed mood (Buchanan et al., 1991). Being drawn into parents' conflict appears to be one way that conflict between adults can affect children's wellbeing (Fosco & Grych, 2008).

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04 Signs I might be in a triangle

- [ ] I often pass messages between two people
- [ ] Two people talk to me about each other, not to each other
- [ ] I feel pressure to take a side
- [ ] I feel responsible for keeping the peace
- [ ] I hear about the same conflict secondhand, again and again
- [ ] I find myself complaining about someone rather than to them
- [ ] I feel guilty or disloyal for staying neutral
- [ ] The same issue never quite gets resolved

05 Mapping one of my triangles



write a name or initial in each circle

The tension between the other two seems to be about...

My role in it tends to be

○ go-between ○ ally ○ the focus ○ drawing others in ○ not sure

What it costs me, or them

One small step toward more direct communication

06 Stepping out of the triangle

IF I'M THE GO-BETWEEN

Hand it back

I think that's something to tell them yourself. I care about you both, and I'd rather not be in the middle.

IF I'M ASKED TO TAKE SIDES

Support without siding

I can hear how upset you are. What would you want to say to them directly?

IF I'M DRAWING OTHERS IN

Go to the source

Can we talk about what happened earlier? With children, keep them out of adult conflict and reassure them it isn't their job to fix it.

07 Saying it directly

What I would like to say directly, and to whom

One small step I could take this week

A note of care. Speaking directly isn't always safe. If a relationship involves fear, threats or control, your safety comes first. If you need support, please reach out to someone you trust or a health professional.

SOURCES

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Buchanan, C. M., Maccoby, E. E., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). Caught between parents: Adolescents' experience in divorced homes. *Child Development, 62*(5), 1008–1029.

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