

Step-parent Conflict: Put the Kids First

Thirty seven percent of families in the United States are blended families. Sixty percent of second marriages end in divorce. A biological parent has his hands full, but as most step-parents will tell you, their job is even more complicated.

Following a divorce, it is not uncommon for a new step-parent to become the target of unprovoked spite or anger. In many cases, the previous-spouse harbors unfounded fears that their child will look to a new step-parent as a mother or father replacement figure. This can engender resentment to what may already be an uncomfortable situation between parties. Regretfully, these issues often escalate very quickly. Such resentments place the children squarely in the middle of a bitter fight between the people they love the most and are not healthy for anyone involved. The pain of conflicting loyalties to each parent and a child's feeling of being "caught in the middle" of such disputes exacts an enormous emotional toll on a child. When a parent is in a rage, it is not uncommon for a child to withdraw. The child's behavior towards the non-primary parent may abruptly change. This change in behavior may have more to do with keeping the primary parent happy than it does with how they really feel about the non-primary parent or step-parent. It is essential that you make it clear to your child that you love them and will always be there for them, regardless of the emotional or less than rosy current circumstances.

It is crucial to a child's self-esteem and emotional growth that parents avoid putting children in the middle of such disputes. This can be incredibly difficult, however, when a selfish or manipulative parent does not think twice about wrongfully placing his or her child in the middle of conflict. Children are very perceptive and as they grow older they will ultimately realize when a parent has lied to them and used them for their own emotional or financial gain. Though they may temporarily identify with the aggressors, in time they will deeply resent the parent who has manipulated them.

Regardless of the circumstances, it is critical that biological parents avoid arguments or conflicts in the presence of the children. Such conduct is conducive to parental alienation goals of the misguided previous spouse. If the child sees that you maintain a calm and collected demeanor, it gives them reason to pause and feel safe.

If a previous spouse is making statements to the child regarding issues that should only be discussed between adults, tell the child that such discussions are inappropriate and you will take them up with the other parent at another time.

It is ok to tell your child "I am sorry," if they are upset, even if you are not the parent upsetting them. This validates that they are hurting and relieves any false guilt they may have over things that are being said and done when you are not present. It is sometimes helpful to use everyday situations to explain conflict to your child. As an example, when dealing with conflict explain that "brothers and sisters fight, but they still love each other. Families have to work through conflict in order to stay together. I would not leave you if you made a mistake, I would not want you to leave me." Such statements reinforces that reasonable conflict is ok and assures the child that you will remain a constant force in their life regardless of the situation.

If you feel that the conflict has escalated to a point of becoming emotionally abusive and/or destructive to the child, consult an attorney. It may be in the best interest of the child that he or she be removed from the primary parent and placed with the non-primary parent so that he or she is allowed to love all parental figures, parents and step-parents alike, unconditionally.