

Co-parenting Relationships: I'm Supposed to Hate Her, Right?

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One of the things that I admire and love about my husband, is the way he treats his ex-wife. That's not to say they haven't had their share disagreements, but I've always been impressed with the way he respects her role as their children's mother and regardless of the conflicts that came up now and again, that trumped everything. Yet, even with the minimal conflict, there seems to be this unwritten rule somewhere that you're not supposed to like your husband's ex-wife. Maybe "not liking her" is strong...but you definitely aren't supposed to like or care about her. You just feel neutral. They are more like business partners that you work with, as little as possible, to manage the kids' schedule and details that are necessary to communicate. Nothing more, nothing less.

A few years ago, my adorable stepdaughter was absolutely delighted when her mom announced that she was not only pregnant, but pregnant with a sweet baby girl. She was going to FINALLY be a big sister and talked about all the sister things she was going to be able to do, like this elite club she had longed to be a part of. Her

mom's due date got closer and with that the excitement grew as well.

But Life Tends to Favor Those Curve Balls...



A few days after the delivery, my husband's ex-wife called and asked if we would bring the kids down to the hospital to meet their new baby sister and asked if my husband and I would be willing to set aside some time to talk with her alone as well. I remember wondering what in the world she'd possibly need to talk "alone" with us for... and not just him, BOTH of us. Truth be told, I was a little uneasy and unnerved that she even asked. We agreed and drove down, waited on a park bench, and watched as the kids played. His ex-wife walked up, looking dazed and broken, sat down beside me on the bench, and proceeded to tell us that the baby, my step daughter's little sister, was born with a fatal genetic disorder and wasn't expected to live. She broke down and sobbed. In an instant, she was no longer "my husband's ex-wife"she was a grieving mother and I saw her. I reached out and we both held her while she cried.

A Change in the Weather...

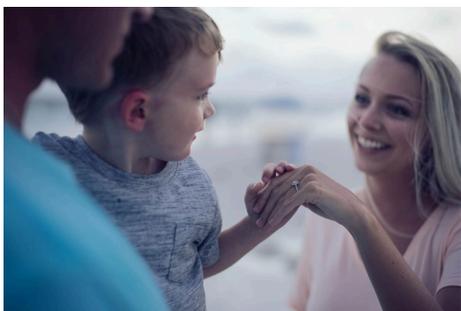
I can't wrap my head around what that would be like. I can't imagine the heartache, the unknown, and the roller coaster of emotions that would accompany it all. That moment changed our dynamic and my mindset. I couldn't help but check up on her every few days. I drove down to her home, something I never thought I would ever do, sat on her living room couch and held this sweet baby girl. I marveled at her little hands, her ridiculously long eyelashes, and just sat in my husband's ex wife's home, completely comfortable and at ease, and held her.

The doctors didn't offer a lot of hope with the baby's condition, most infants born with her disorder typically pass away during birth or shortly after. However, this baby girl had different plans. She not only continued living but she smiles, giggles, and has the most dazzling brown eyes I think I have ever seen. About a year later, the doctors sat them down, and told them that their baby was defying

the odds. They took her off hospice and while they didn't know what the end of her story would look like or when she would eventually pass away....at that moment, she was living and they needed to plan their lives around that. My husband's ex-wife asked us how we felt about them moving closer to us, (at the time we were living about an hour apart), we both agreed that we loved the idea and I ended up finding them a house about a mile from our home.

Around Halloween, a few months after moving in to their new home, my husband came home from work and announced that he had found a used infant wheelchair for the baby. He said he had noticed how hard it must be on J's back to carry a disabled toddler to and from the soccer fields to watch our middle schooler play and found this used chair for her. Together with the kids, they worked to restore it. Replaced the upholstery, washed the wheels, and made it look like new. I loved watching the kids work on it for their mom. I loved seeing my kind husband reach out and think of her and their family's needs. I loved watching their mom's face when the kids showed up at her door "trick or treating" to give it to her. Mostly....I loved the perspective it taught me and all the ways that sweet baby girl shifted my mind set and healed so many relationships. I love that we go to sporting events together, sit beside each other, and watch the kids play together, usually do combined birthday parties together, and I can honestly say, she is no longer just my "husband's ex wife." She is my friend.

Divorce is Hard!



Divorce is hard.

Let's just call it what it is. With so many charged emotions between the parental dyads, it takes a lot of effort to achieve the goal of having mutual respect and being "amicable". It's not hard to focus so much on issues within the co-parents that you forget the innocent victims who suffer on the sidelines.

Since improving our co-parenting relationships, instead of having two separate families, our kids have one big

family. We support and love each other. We communicate and when possible, we have similar rules at both homes and communicate discipline issues in an effort to remain a consistent and united front. I obviously know and understand that there are varying levels of relationship dynamics and it may take time to work towards a more amicable relationship, but it is something to work toward. If you are struggling in a toxic co-parenting relationship and unsure of where to start, may I suggest:

1. Counseling for you individually and as co-parents

There are lots of mental health professionals who are equipped to help you and your ex-spouse transition your relationship from an intimate couple to a co-parenting team. They are trained with tools to work through unresolved issues that could be stemming from your marriage. Your focus cannot and should not be unresolved hurt, anger, or regret. If the marriage is no longer savable, your focus should be on the kids you share.

2. Create a safe space

Allow your children to talk about the wonderful aspects of the other parents. Whether a biological parent or a stepparent, that role within the child's life is important and has meaning and merit. I cannot imagine my life without either of my stepparents who shaped my life for the better. I am grateful to my biological parents who put their insecurity and jealousy aside enough to allow me to build a relationship with all of my parents. Support and encourage a relationship with the other parental dyads.

Evaluate your dialogue about the other parent and if it's not respectful, change it. Give your children space to love them. Acknowledging the value each parent has in the child's life and respect that role.

3. Focus on the good, don't dwell on the bad



There are probably things you dislike about either your ex-spouse or their spouse, do not focus on those. Look for the good and acknowledge them. Work on reframing the situation for your kids. Instead of pointing out that they have to have two houses, point out that they get to have two houses! That's twice the stuff! Twice the birthday parties and Christmases! MORE grandparents! Regardless of your circumstances, focus on the good! Your children will take their cues from you and your perspective will become their perspective, so have a positive one.

4. Above all, keep trying

None of this is to say that we don't have issues that arise that cause us to disagree. Co-parenting can be hard, just keep trying. If there is an issue that tempts my frustration and anger to take over, I remember the mom that sat beside me on that bench and I see her, not my "husband's ex-wife". In that light, I hear her better. I understand her intent and that makes all the difference. If setbacks happen, and they more than likely will, just pick up the pieces, resolve the hurt feelings, and move back into a place where you parent together as a team.

There are resources available to you, if you're needing help, please reach out:

Stepfamily Related Links

- **AFCC (Association of Family Conciliation Courts)** – AFCC is an organization of lawyers, judges and mental health people who promote, and learn together about, best practices for kids and families in the courts.
- **American Family Therapy Academy** – AFTA is a non-profit organization of leading family therapy teachers, clinicians, program developers, researchers and social scientists, dedicated to advancing systemic thinking and practices for families in their ecological context.
- **The Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment** – Building Better Marriages. The mission of ACME is to promote marriages by providing enrichment opportunities that strengthen couple relationships and enhance personal growth, mutual fulfillment, and family wellness.
- **Bonus Families** – A non-profit organization dedicated to peaceful coexistence between separated or divorced parents and their new families.
- **Designing Dynamics Stepfamilies** – Bringing the pieces to peace.
- **Family, friendly, fun** – Offers a wide variety of family fun, family life and family health topics including adoption, baby care, celebration and parties, children and teens, disabilities, and special needs for babies to grandparents.
- **Family Medallion** – Celebrating and strengthening family ties. Help children feel included in the wedding plans and a tangible symbol of being embraced by the new family.
- **Parenting With Dignity** – A resource where parents learn new, essential parenting skills and gives them the tools necessary to create an encouraging, and loving home for their children.
- **SelfGrowth.com** – Provides a central resource for information on Self Improvement, Self Help and Personal Growth on the Internet.
- **ShareKids.com** – A co-parenting system designed to assist individuals in managing child sharing between homes.
- **Step and Blended Family Institute** – An organization that exists to support stepfamilies and the individuals in them, to succeed at the enormous task of building and nurturing their new families.
- **StepCarefully for Stepparents** – An organization created by stepparents, for stepparents We offer on-line support, as well as a to-the-point series of resources for step-parenting needs, and a newsletter designed to help stepfamilies not only survive but succeed.

- **Stepfamilies Australia** – A self-help, non-profit organization offering support, education, and resources to stepfamilies in Australia.
- **Stepfamily information** – This nonprofit, research-based, educational site is for prospective and current stepfamily members and their supporters. It suggests 12 ongoing projects that co-parents can work at together to overcome five re/divorce hazards, and build a high-nurturance stepfamily. Browse over 450 Web pages on understanding and resolving typical stepfamily problems.
- **Stepfamily Living** – Stepfamily information and resources from veteran stepfamily educator and therapist Elizabeth Einstein.
- **Stepping Stones Counseling Center** – Created with the goal of improving and enriching the quality of stepfamily life. “We not only work with stepfamily issues, we face them every day in our personal lives.”
- **SmartStepfamilies** – Christian resources for Church and Home. This site offers articles, resources, and conferences for stepfamilies and ministry leaders. It also offers couples an opportunity to take the online Couple Checkup to understand and enhance their relationship.
- Amato, Paul. R., Kane, Jennifer B., James, Spencer (2011, December). Reconsidering the "good divorce". Retrieved from US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3223936/>