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In divorce, parents need to act like adults

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Question: My husband's ex-wife does not want to see me, hear my voice or otherwise have anything to do with me. Their two sons visit every other weekend and one weeknight. How can I get her to cooperate with me?

A Stepmother in Buffalo, N.Y.

Answer: Butt out, several ex-wives say. The boys' father needs to handle schedules and pickups, not subcontract the job. What about when Dad doesn't want to hear his ex-wife's voice? One mother of two teens and her ex-husband only communicate by registered mail.

As children across the country prepare to divide their winter breaks between two homes, many of their schedules are timed to the hour. The back and forth isn't what's tough; it's the emotional baggage they drag along.

Do you badmouth your ex in front of your kids? Compete over gifts? Send your kids on guilt trips? How well children adjust after a divorce depends on how their parents behave, research shows.

"Living in two homes is not as bad as adults think," says Richard

PARENT TO PARENT



BETSY FLAGLER

A. Warshak, Ph.D., a clinical professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, who has studied the impact of divorce on children for more than 25 years.

The average child can adjust to shuttling between two houses, says Dr. Warshak, author of *Divorce Poison* (Regan Books). What is burdensome: tension between parents and a nasty attitude toward one household.

"For the children's sake, it would be best if the mother would shield the boys from her own hostility," says Dr. Warshak. If the situation is tense, "The father needs to act as a buffer, not because the mother is justified, but to spare the children unnecessary stress."

Anger and hurt over divorce can often blind parents to the impact their behavior has on their children, says Dr. Warshak. Setting kids up to choose between two homes can be gut-wrenching. Ease the way by preparing your kids for each transition, having them ready on time, and saving tears and gripes until they're gone.

It's unrealistic for a mother to declare she will never see or hear her children's stepmother, Dr. Warshak says, but she can set boundaries: No intrusion on medical care or haircuts, for example.

A reader from Desoto has advised her daughter, who has stepchildren: "Keep taking the high road, and never badmouth the mother to the kids. It hasn't been easy, but my daughter's relationship with her stepkids has gotten better and better."

Ann Scott of Peachtree City, Ga., suggests the new wife should defer to the parents if there's a conflict. However, she needs to be part of the team, or she'll have no authority over the boys.

Scott, the custodial parent of a 15-year-old girl and a 12-year-old

boy, has been divorced for three years. What will benefit everyone the most is for the stepmother to help her husband cooperate with the mother to parent their children. "Encourage him to take an active part in their lives ... to let his children know that he cares, and he loves them," Scott says.

"As the ex-wife learns that the new wife wants what's best for the children, and is trying to help, not interfere or take her place as the mother, I'm sure their relationship will improve," Scott says.

Other viewpoints:

"It is out of your hands whether the ex-wife cooperates with you. Try family counseling to help the boys deal with what must be a stressful atmosphere." *A Stepmother near Buffalo, N.Y.*

"It's not your job, it's your husband's job to get the ex-wife to cooperate. Take yourself out of this schoolyard triangle. The three of you need to meet and tell the ex-wife you will help with the schedules. I did the same thing within a few months of my marriage years ago. We have been happy since." *A Stepmother in Dallas.*

"The new wife can work out with her husband if he wants her to do the grunt work of parenting (chauffeur the children, washing clothes, fixing meals) but the parenting decisions need to be made by the children's parents," says Nancy Oates of Raleigh, N.C.

CAN YOU HELP?

Question: My 14-year-old daughter is used to making nearly all A's, but she recently made a C on a math exam. She didn't want to talk about it, much less have me talk to the teacher. I'm worried that she's so upset about her grade that she can't talk about it — but doesn't want any help to see if there's something she's missing.

A Father in Riverside, Calif.

Journalist Betsy Flagler, of Davidson, N.C., is the mother of a teenage son. If you have tips or a question, please call her toll-free hotline any time at 1-800-827-1092; write to Parent to Parent, P.O. Box 4270, Davidson, NC 28036; or e-mail her.

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