

Beyond the Bitter Breakup

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

At a recent wedding I watched two friends begin a new life together, their vows joining not only them, but also their children from previous relationships.

The two little girls dancing around the bride and groom resembled dainty dabs of whipped cream — the groom's daughter, her blonde hair held high in a ponytail and the bride's daughter, with a mass of springy curls contained by flowered bows. Then, the couple reached down and joined hands with the two girls, drawing together this newly formed family.

But another standout part of this day was watching the bride's parents, whose long-ago divorce had been so bitter.

As the rhythms of the music increased, the bride's parents joined hands with the other guests to form a large circle of pounding feet, dancing around the room in celebration of their daughter's wedding day.

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– Solution –

Intentional Living

As those dancers swirled across the polished wooden floorboards, I remembered previous, more painful times. Accusations of infidelity, single parenting struggles and the suffering endured during those break-up years. Yet today, as they danced at her wedding, these parents had been able to put aside being enemy-exes, to be first and foremost — loving parents.

So much about divorce is exemplified in both parts of this story: the moving on and letting go of old relationships represented by the wedding itself; the coming together of children when parents remarry; and the patina of perspective that the actions of the bride's parents give us.

The horrible 'ex'

Relationships seldom end without pain and hurt. Accusations fly — “he’s a jerk” or “she is a controlling b - - - ch”, depending on which one is talking. The other person is awful, at fault, or barely human. But most relationships require the faults of both for proper disintegration.

And yet, somewhere along the line, two people got along well enough to produce a child — a child who was listening to those accusations, even when they were hissed behind closed doors. The same child who had to be told that mom or dad was moving out or had gone away.

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“But I love them both . . .”

One of the hardest things for children to manage when their parents part ways, is to feel that it is okay to love them both. Is it okay to love dad, a child worries, when she sees mom sobbing after dad’s phone call?

Do the hurtful names dad calls mom mean that mom is bad and I should be mad at her, too? Will it hurt mom if I love dad?

And of course, in her child’s mind, she wonders: if only I had picked up my toys or fed the dog — maybe this wouldn’t be happening.

If dad says the man mom has begun dating is a ‘bad person’; or mom says that dad’s girlfriend is responsible for ‘tearing our family apart’ — what should a child do? Yell at mom? Hate dad? Shun dad’s girlfriend? Fear mom’s boyfriend? The list can go on and on, providing enough guilt to fill a semi-truck. But what children need most, and is hardest to provide when swamped by our own pain, is an atmosphere that allows them to love both parents — without restraint.

Children first

The simplest guideline for making decisions is: what best serves my child’s needs? This doesn’t include whether your son gets candy or carrots, what time your daughter goes to bed at night, or what toys the twins will get for their birthday. Those are important decisions, but not mutual ones. (A big lesson of divorce is that neither parent has control over the choices the other parent makes.) What it does mean is: how does it feel to be this child? When discussions center on a child’s perspective, choices are on solid ground.

Instead of focusing on a parenting plan breach (an adult issue) because your ex-partner failed to provide early notice for a trip he wants to take your son on that weekend (your scheduled weekend), try to place your son foremost in the picture. The trip is to go camping with his best friend, whose family moved to New Mexico. What is best for your son: staying home and going to the zoo with you (something that can be rescheduled) or setting up a tent, sleeping under the stars, and roasting marshmallows with his friend? Can you be gracious and agree to these last-minute plans? It is still important to restate your agreement: out-of-state trips require at least a month’s advance notice, but you can also acknowledge that your son will enjoy this trip and agree to an exception.

What if infractions continue? There will need to be further discussion, but only between the adults. Raising a child is not a competition, even though the divorce or a custody battle may have felt like one.

The key is to keep the annoyance and anger with your ex-spouse separate from your child’s best interests.

New partners

When you hear that your son or daughter will be spending the weekend skiing with your ex-partner and a new boyfriend, will you be able to refrain from grilling your child about this new person? Would it help to keep those questions silent if you knew that your daughter had sulked all weekend for fear that having fun might be a betrayal to you?

Would it encourage your silence to know that your son enforces his own misery around this new person, in the

hope of getting you and his mom back together again?

If you understood that your daughter’s tantrums at dad’s house or bad behavior at school were her way of demonstrating loyalty to you, would it be any easier to bite back those bitter words?

Life looks different when we view it through a child’s eyes. As awful as that ex-partner is and as offensive as any new partner may be (or seem to be), what if that person ends up as a permanent part of your child’s life? Won’t you want this person to like your child; to be kind to her; and your child to feel happy around him or her? (The truthful answer is “No,” actually you would prefer that this person have really bad breath, weigh more than a draft horse, and have a terminal illness — but you know those thoughts are best kept to yourself!) The bottom-line is that you do want your child to be happy, wherever she is — even (hateful as it may feel) around that awful new person.

More love — not less

After a divorce, both partners have lost this family, as well as the hopes and dreams that started it. Your child has lost those things, too. It is natural to fear losing a child’s love, but your child will always love you — and she can love a stepparent, too. For your child’s loss to transform into gain, she needs to feel enfolded in loving relationships — all of the time, with whomever or wherever she is. And that means being parents first — and ex-partners second.

Life goes on

There will be soccer games, volleyball championships, and parent conferences in the years ahead. There will be grandparents’ funerals, high school graduations, or maybe arrests for

underage drinking. There will be ex-partners and stepfamilies and lonely nights; hospital visits, driving lessons, and grandchildren. And if your children are as lucky as that bride and groom, their children and those dancing grandparents — you will find the grace to move beyond this bitter breakup; to be imperfect human beings second — and parents, first and forever.

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word “snapshot” of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues.

To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.

Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.