

Blended-Family Problems? 10 Godly Steps to Take When Your Spouse Dislikes Your Child

“Laura, my husband hates my son,” stepmom Megan lamented.

“I’m not exaggerating. It’s so obvious that even our friends and family notice,” she continued. “My spouse denies it and says I’m too easy on him and that I’m raising a ‘mama’s boy.’ But the tension and anger are real.

“My child becomes so nervous and fearful when my husband enters the room that it’s palpable. My husband blames him when the kids fight. He views my son as the culprit of every situation, even when the evidence reveals it’s his kids.

“The saddest part is my son knows my husband can’t stand him. What do I do?”

This is a very serious stepfamily situation that requires immediate attention. No child should be raised in a home where an adult is obviously and repeatedly antagonistic toward the child.

Whether it’s a stepdad or a stepmom who has unloving responses, as the child’s parent, it is your job—your duty—to protect your child from harmful behavior in the home.

Stepparents often see their stepchild through a different lens than the parent. It can be a good thing, because it gives a fresh, objective perspective on a situation. It also can be a bad thing because they might not have the same bond and/or compassion that a parent has with the child.

Regardless of the reasons, it’s crucial for the situation to be addressed immediately.

Here is a progression of steps that I recommend.

1. Speak calmly in a composed manner to your spouse. If you address this in a confrontational manner, it will only cause tension and an argument.

2. Address facts, not emotions. People, especially men, do much better in understanding a situation when they have concrete illustrations as opposed to random comments. "John, when you looked at Justin's report card and said, 'You should have gotten an A in that class,' he was devastated. And last week when he couldn't assemble the toy correctly, you snapped at him.

"He wants you to be proud of him. I don't think you realize how often you criticize his performance." Speaking this way as opposed to, "John, you are so critical and condescending to my child," will get to the root of the matter.

3. Listen to your spouse. Defending your child is a natural and automatic response when you feel they are being attacked. However, a wise parent admits they might be ignoring things that need to be addressed. Ask yourself: Am I willing to discuss my child's behavior in an objective manner?

4. Evaluate your single-parenting life. Were you good at disciplining your kids before you got remarried? Be honest. Is it possible that you were either too tired or too stressed to set healthy boundaries and consequences? Did you parent out of guilt? And if so, are you still doing it?

5. Obtain an unbiased perspective. When it comes to stepfamilies and resolving conflict, a third party is often the wisest step forward. A person who doesn't have an emotional attachment to the situation, and can see it objectively, is the best choice. That's why family members typically aren't the best choice for this role.

6. Make certain the adviser understands the unique dynamics of

a stepfamily. I've lost count of the number of couples who received destructive instruction from well-intentioned friends, mentors, pastors and counselors. Their advice would have worked great in a first marriage, but it caused further injury to the second marriage. The dynamics are radically different in a blended family.

7. Take action. If after doing the previous steps, your spouse continues to harm your child, you must stop it from continuing. Based on the severity, each circumstance will be different. There is no cookie-cutter answer on what to do next. But the first step is to clearly and calmly explain to your spouse that you will not tolerate it. And then explain what consequence will follow if your spouse chooses to continue.

Hear this clearly: The child's other parent has every right to remove the child from your home if you do not protect the child.

8. Communicate clearly. Getting expert advice from a professional regarding which boundaries are the most effective in your situation is an excellent step.

Let's use Megan's situation as an example. If, after Megan has followed the steps mentioned, her husband continues to treat her son in a hurtful manner, she needs to say, "I can no longer allow my child to be treated this way. Are you willing to admit we need help? Do you recognize that you blame my son for every sibling fight without even knowing the details? Are you willing to strengthen our marriage by getting professional help?"

If he says yes, then getting couples counseling, then perhaps adding the child, is next. If John digs in his heels and says no, he won't get help, then Megan has big decisions to make.

9. Find the appropriate boundary. Setting healthy boundaries is not about punishment, anger or revenge. The goal is to

improve the situation by not remaining in the destructive dance that perpetuates more harm. Typically, people will not change toxic behavior unless they experience an undesirable consequence.

Megan may need to say, "I love you and I want to be married to you. However, until you are willing to work together and get help for this problem, I have no other option than to remove my son from this house. On the days he is with me and isn't with his dad, he and I will stay at my mom's. When he is with his father, I'll be here in this house. This breaks my heart because I love you and I want our marriage to work. I can't do that alone. I'm eager to work on our family and to learn what I am doing wrong. However, it is wrong for me to allow this to continue. I'm praying you will change your mind and work alongside me to create a healthy family."

10. Do everything possible to avoid divorce. Some people will automatically assume I'm suggesting a divorce. Nothing could be further from the truth. I would suggest doing everything possible to avoid a divorce. John's choice over getting help is the pivotal point that will dictate a result—good or bad. When we choose the behavior, we also choose the consequences.

As I mentioned earlier, there are no easy answers on how to implement the necessary boundaries if your spouse refuses to take any responsibility for his/her actions.

A wise therapist, life coach or counselor who specializes in stepfamily dynamics will likely be required to help someone in Megan's situation. The outcome in situations like this is determined by how Megan (the parent) proceeds, and if the husband (stepparent) honors his vows, marriage and wife enough to get help.

Megan cannot *make* her husband do the wise thing. She can only change her behavior if she discovers she is coddling her child. And she can learn how to stop enabling her husband when

he makes destructive choices.

If either spouse would rather be right than married, it could end the relationship. {eoa}

Laura Petherbridge is an international speaker and published author of five books who has appeared in numerous publications, TV shows and radio productions. A featured expert on the “DivorceCare” DVD series, she has been married to Steve for 35 years and has two stepsons who gifted her with two grandchildren. Join with other stepmoms at Laura’s next retreat, , and learn more at .

This article originally appeared at .