

Fearlessly Navigating Father's Day in Your Blended Family

"My husband never even gets a call or a card from his kids on Father's Day," the stepmom shared. "He tries to pretend it doesn't matter, but I know it hurts him. I get so angry with them, but there isn't much I can do about it."

I wish I could say this is a rare situation, but unfortunately, it's not.

Although my husband always hears from his kids on Father's Day, I have watched him suffer from guilt as his sons grew up in a divorced family, something he never wanted for them. He was deeply distressed that his kids grew up in two homes. He still wonders if he did enough for them when they were children. Father's Day can be very hard for him. 

This is a complicated topic, because I'm bound to offend someone. So let me clarify: Every situation is different. I'm *not* saying all fathers or stepmothers fit into each category.

I am sharing tips, based on my own journey as a child in a stepfamily, with a dad who remarried twice. And then as a stepmom who has experienced the Father's Day holiday 33 times to a man with kids.

He is close to his sons now, but that hasn't always been the case.

Learn From My Journey, Including My Mistakes

Consider if any of these fit your situation, and then consider if it's possible you can change something that will help. Stepfamily living isn't easy; it's a process. My goal in

sharing is to help you consider things that might build a bridge.

Here are a few suggestions to consider:

- If intentional parental alienation (PAS) from the mom is the reason the kids don't call or connect, keep in mind that as the kids grow older, they often figure it out. Knowing this doesn't bring immediate relief, but it is the prayer to recite and hope for the future.
- If PAS has occurred, it is wise for dad to continue doing what he can to show his kids he loves them. Many men give up, viewing it as a hopeless situation. And sometimes the stepmom is good with that. But in the long run, what this communicates to the child's mind is, "Mom was right, he doesn't care. He loves his new family more than he does me."

Stepmoms, please understand that although it's hard to be married to a man who has a child with another woman, (I truly get it), this is *his child*. His flesh and blood. It's his baby no matter the age. His heart is aching.

- Don't automatically assume mom is alienating (PAS) the kids. It may be their own pain, anger or something occurring in your home that is driving them to a distance. I see many couples automatically blame the mom when it's the child's own feelings keeping them away.

Are you willing to discover what that might be?

- Dad should still do the things he is able to do. This includes showing up at ball games, sending texts, notes, emails and so on just to say, "I love you" and "I care." Even if the child doesn't respond, keep doing it. No lectures. No bad-mouthing Mom. No criticism. Just "I love you and I miss you." If Mom won't allow these messages, check to see if another family member, who doesn't agree with her PAS, to allow them.

- Legal advice. I tell many people they shouldn't even consider a remarriage unless they have the finances to take mom back to court should she choose to withhold the kids afterwards. It's very common for the relationship with the child's mom to change after dad remarries. And if stepmom is overly involved with the stepkids, this exacerbates the possibility. It sends mom into orbit, and her unhealthy response is often to withhold the kids, while telling them, "Your father has a new family now. He doesn't love you."

- Often dad or stepmoms ask me, "Why do I/we have to do all the work; shouldn't the kids be responsible?" The difficult answer to hear is *no*, not unless, or until, they have become adults. Then they must take responsibility for their choices and choose to heal. But before that occurs, they are kids.

- Seek to view the situation through a child's eyes, instead of from your adult perspective. Often dad and stepmom get nasty towards the child when he/she behaves badly or neglectfully. The child is merely reacting to the situation in which they have no say. Divorce causes anger, resentment, fear and a whole host of other emotions that many adults view as something the child, "should be over by now." They aren't. It has created a paralyzing effect to their brain, development and normal growth patterns.

- Look in the mirror. OK, this one is going to sting. Have you ignored what most stepfamily experts teach or warn about stepfamily living? Did you expect the kids to embrace a stepmom, stepsiblings and adding more children easily? Is your remarriage what caused the distance between you and your kids? I realize this one is hard and painful. We didn't realize it at the time, but when my husband and I got married, his kids (11 and 13) felt they were suddenly abandoned. 

I know stepmoms will get mad at me for asking this question. But the truth is *many* kids back away from Dad because they don't *feel* as close to him as they did before his remarriage.

This is particularly true if Dad moved away from them.

That doesn't mean the relationship is doomed, it does mean you may need to work much harder at repairing what is broken.

- Dad, did you cause the divorce? I know I'm just digging myself in deeper, but I must speak the truth. Dad, if you are the reason the marriage to Mom failed, it is much more likely that the kids will resent you. Again, I'm not implying there is no hope. However, if you have never apologized for the part you played in the breakdown of your child's original family, there is no time like the present.

Humbly owning your mistakes goes a long way with children.

They may not immediately forgive you, but they will remember  your honest attempt.

- Don't give up. My oldest stepson didn't have much of a relationship with his dad until he became a married adult with a stepdaughter and a son of his own. As he and his brother got older, they recognized that many of the things their mom told them weren't true.

My husband has apologized to his sons numerous times for the things he should have done differently.

This included how poorly he handled the dating, engagement and marriage to me. His admission, tears and respectful attitude about their feelings has helped to mend the fences. Humble hindsight is typically 20/20.

- Accept what you can't control. If the kids won't allow Dad in their lives no matter how many times he tries or confesses his mistakes, then all you can do is faithfully remain at the line of reconciliation. It may take more time. If you have kids together in the remarriage, this can obviously lessen the pain. However, be careful when posting happy family pictures of the three of you on social media if his kids can see it.

Again, this confirms in their minds, "Dad has a new family. He doesn't want us anymore."

Is it fair to ask this of a stepmom? No. But in stepfamily living, fairness isn't the goal. Unification, to the best of what I can control, should be the goal. *this is why I teach that being a stepmom has taught me more about living like Christ than any other circumstance in my life.*

It's *all* about sacrifice, for people who may never appreciate it.

- Prayer. Steve and I prayed for the hearts and minds of his kids more times than I can count or remember. I know God heard those cries. And although it didn't happen in our time frame, God has restored those years as He promises. "And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten," Joel 2:25a, KJV). But it required Steve taking the first step.

I used to get very angry at my stepsons for not honoring their dad more often, especially on Father's Day.

Then I realized that the reason it angered me was because my husband did things for his kids that I wished my dad had done for me. I felt they should be grateful. But that emotion was coming from my own daddy-wounded place. I love my dad, but when he remarried, I didn't see him as often. My stepsons were just kids, reacting the way kids of divorce respond. It wasn't their fault that I had hurts that hadn't been healed—yet!

I know that now, but I didn't then. My blood boiled, and I was annoyed with their behavior. Sometimes that anger came out in actions and attitude towards them, for which I am deeply sorry.

As Maya Angelou said, "Do

the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

Is there anything you might need to do differently this Father's Day?

Are you asking God to restore the relationships in your home?

Stepmom, how can you be an encouragement to your husband this year?

Here are some words from Philippians 4:5-9 that make a wonderful prayer for your home, spouse and extended family:

Let everyone come to know your gentleness. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with gratitude, make your requests known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will protect your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue, and if there is any praise, think on these things. Do those things which you have both learned and received, and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:4-9).

Amen. {eo}

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