

Stepdads: Don't Compete With the Child's Father

Orville is about to become a stepfather, and he wrote to me with a question: The 8-year-old son of his fiancée minds his father very well but wreaks havoc at home. "What should I do?" Orville writes.

These situations are always more complicated than I can do justice in a few minutes. But let me give stepdads a few ideas to start with.

First, realize that you are naturally set up in competition with the boy's father. It could be that the boy behaves better for his father because the father has fewer rules and lets the boy get away with whatever he wants. Or it could be that his father lavishes him with gifts and good times. Or it could be that they have a healthy father-child relationship and they both see you as a threat.

In any case, as the new stepfather, don't get caught up in that competition. It's a no-win situation. The child probably feels the need to defend his father—and that's normal. What you need to do is make sure you don't give him a reason to think of you as the enemy.

Say good things about his father. Honoring their relationship will only help you in your role as a stepfather. If possible, work at open communication with the father. Even if you don't see eye to eye on discipline issues, you can be advocates for each other and send the message to the child that you're cooperating in raising him.

Most of all, build your own relationship with the child. Listen; do things together; and, most of all, affirm him for who he is. That will pay off when it comes time to administer your own loving discipline.

Be united with your wife in your approach and work as a team, but make sure it's clear that the child is loved through it all. You could say, "I know your dad loves you a lot, and he has his way of doing things. But we love you a lot too, and we've decided this is the best way to handle it in this household."

And maybe that's the key: love. You can't force any child to love you, but you can love him or her first.

Dr. Ken R. Canfield is founder of the National Center for Fathering and served as its president and CEO from 1990 through 2005. He is the author of *The Heart of a Father* and numerous other books including the award-winning *7 Secrets of Effective Fathers*.

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