

Real life

Marriages may end but families are forever

Our marriage was falling apart and we completely hated each other. Our child's world was crumbling, too. It was at this exact time when we needed to work constructively as parents. By Malti Bhojwani.

I have been divorced for over 5 years now and have a beautiful 11-year-old daughter. My ex-husband has remarried and the couple now has a baby girl. I get along very well with my ex-husband and his wife. There are many reasons for this alliance.

On the rocks

The most important thing for me has been to sustain a happy family life for my daughter. Deciding to have a child was a separate commitment from the one we made to marry each other. So from day one, we established that we needed to have utter respect for each other, if not as life partners then just as co-parents.

Trust is one of the most important ingredients in any relationship. Both parents need to feel that the other will do what he or she says they will.

This was easier said than done. We were both malicious. He hid our daughter's passport and often threatened to take her away from me and go where I would never be able to find them. I threatened to get a restraining order that would keep him from coming within a certain radius. There was name-calling that lasted for months. Friends and family had to mediate. We competed for our daughter's love and affection and each thought one was "better" than the other. We put each other down in front of friends and family. We both swore we were doing all this for the benefit of our daughter!

Seeing the light

Luckily, we both grew up. We owned up to our respective childishness. We also came to accept that we both loved our daughter very much and wanted the divorce to work. My ex-husband and I genuinely started to cooperate.

I realized that no one, apart from my ex, had our daughter's best interest at heart as much as me. When he was about to remarry, I also realized that I didn't want my daughter to have to be with a fairy tale wicked stepmother. With these things in mind, I decided to make being friends with my ex-husband a priority. I worked on nurturing a healthy friendship with his wife,

respecting her role as my ex-husband's partner and my daughter's stepmother, often seeking her support and opinion. I was careful never to cross the boundaries or to take advantage of the fact that I, too, was once married to her husband.

I appreciate her influence in my daughter's life. Sometimes she sees things that I miss. For example, she has instilled some good habits in my daughter and given her beauty, nutrition and hygiene tips that I had overlooked. I discovered that people generally have so much to contribute to others, if we would only let them.

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Other things I have learned along the way: Never refer to you and your ex-spouse as "we" in front of your or your ex's current partner. Never make references to your intimacy and life together in their presence. Try not to bring up or reminisce about your life together. This may only make your current partner insecure and possibly resent you and, therefore, your child. I knew I had to show my ex-husband and his wife respect and honor their marriage if I wanted to sustain the pleasant co-parenting we had achieved by then.

Be 'selfish'

You may think that this is about sacrificing and giving in but really it's about being selfish. This is an approach advocated by Ron Wilkinson, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in Dallas with 23 years of clinical experience working with families. Dr. Wilkinson has been co-parent to his two sons, now 21 and 24, with his ex-wife for the last 13 years. He and his wife remain good friends.

"I encourage parents to be goal-oriented and selfish," Wilkinson told me in one of our discussions. "In our culture, 'selfish' tends to be [interpreted as a negative] word. In a more pure sense, however, a selfish person is someone who gets what he or she wants." When parents see that there is something in it for them, to have a friendship with the ex-husband or to appear like the good guy, for example, it makes the whole task easier to do.

Family functioning has been the major emphasis of Wilkinson's study and training at both the master's and doctoral level. He has treated many families struggling with this issue, and has found time and again that nothing is more important to a child's life after the divorce than the relationship between the parents. His 1992 doctoral dissertation confirmed this fact.

If you want your children to think well of you, now and when they grow up; if you want your former spouse to be more cooperative, if you want to have a say in your child's life, be selfish and go for what you want, Wilkinson tells his patients. When they grow up, children always value a parent who stayed in their lives; they are resentful and angry when a parent leaves them or continually causes difficulty. A child is not concerned with who is right and

who is wrong; he or she is concerned with having a relationship with both parents-regardless of the child's age.

Respond rather than react

I learned slowly that this is not a goal for the faint-hearted. It requires a lot of restraint, strength and focus. In my training and experience as a Life Coach and a parent, I have learned to respond rather than react.

A reaction is automatic, not thought through consequentially, whereas a response is chosen. Between an action and its reaction there is a space, and in that space is the opportunity to choose. Responding is using that space to make that choice and to do or say what will get you closer to your goal. In your dealings with your ex-spouse, always remember that your goal is having a working and pleasant relationship. It is your goal because of what it's going to bring your child and YOU.

I did my share of reacting and the result was more reactions from him and, in no time, we were threatening and abusing each other, ending up with a very frightened and confused little girl crying her eyes out and begging us to stop. Since then, we have developed the habit of carefully choosing our responses instead of impulsively reacting to each other.

Keep your promises

Trust is one of the most important ingredients in any relationship. Both parents need to feel that the other will do what he or she says they will. If you say you are going to drive your child to a birthday party and arrange for the present, pay for your child's dental treatment or call your child at 7 p.m., do so.

Be polite. Say "please" and "thank you." Remember: "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." In human relationships, such as marriage and co-parenting, either both partners win or one wins at the expense of the other. And when this happens, the one who really loses is the child. Adopt a WIN-WIN approach in everything that you do.

The factors that enable married parents to work harmoniously are the same as those that help divorced parents work together, says Rick Hanson Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and the first author of *Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships* (Penguin, 2002). He and his wife, Jan, have a 15-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter.

These factors include personal well-being, emotional openness, civility, empathy, goodwill, clarity about the values and principles that guide parenting practices and skill at negotiating practical arrangements. Separate your feelings about the divorce from the business of co-parenting, working out the details of finances, custody, vacations and grandparents, and integrating new

friends/lovers/mates, Hanson adds.

Maintaining a working alliance with our child's other parent will give your child a sense of family and belonging. When parents make a decision to have a child, it is a lifetime commitment.

Forgiveness is crucial

Perhaps it was a little easier for me because my ex-husband did not leave me for his wife. If such were the case, feelings of insecurity, resentment, jealousy and bitterness would have definitely cropped up between my ex's partner and me.

For people who have been hurt or had to give up so much in going through a divorce, revenge or "making the other person suffer" may often be the aim. This is when it is crucial to stay focused on your child and your fulfillment as a parent and as a human being. You can't turn back the clock, and being nasty to your ex's partner or teaching your child to do so will only make it harder for them to accept and love your child. To "for-give" is to free yourself to give-"for-giving!"

It's okay to love them

When was the last time you thanked your ex or your child's stepparent for their support in your child's upbringing? Acknowledgement is a beautiful way of reinforcing and encouraging positive behavior.

While researching for this article, I realized all the things that I was thankful for. I wrote a letter to my ex-husband and his wife, thanking and acknowledging them. The letter was received graciously and we shared an emotional and touching moment as a result. My ex asked if I would mind if he showed the letter to our daughter, to let her know that I liked her father and stepmother and that it was OK for her to like and love them, too.

Often, children feel torn between their parents. It was important for my daughter to see that I was not jealous or hurt that she also loved her stepmom and her half-sister. We have pictures of her little half-sister all over our place.

Legal aspects

Two things: First, if you and your ex-spouse don't come to a mutual agreement regarding child support, custody and visitation, you're only leaving it up to the government to decide on the matter. You end up giving up your

choice. Second, ensure that power as well as responsibility is shared between both parents.

Lifetime commitment

There is nothing easy about this. But it's all worth it. We all want fulfilment, pride and the knowledge that we did our best as parents. Maintaining a working alliance with our child's other parent will give your child a sense of family and belonging. When parents make a decision to have a child, it is a lifetime commitment.