

**SUBJECT**

**Children of divorced parents have a special burden placed on them**

**Q.** I'm the stepmother of two girls and mother of one child. When my stepdaughters are visiting, whether it be for the weekend or a couple of hours, one daughter becomes her father's shadow. She's now 9 years old. No matter what he does, she has to be right there. If he just gets up to go to the bathroom she has to know where he's going. If he's just going to the corner store she's got to be in the front seat. Is this behaviour alright? It's getting to the point where I'm dreading their visits.

**A.** Children of divorced parents have a special burden placed on them. They have experienced their parents "firing" each other, two people who at one time pledged their love for each other and pledged to spend the rest of their lives together. Now this pledge, the vow they made to each other, is broken.

How can a child be sure that this same fate will not happen to her? So, your stepdaughter's behavior, from this perspective is quite understandable, because she may be fearful that she might be fired as well.

However the behavior is irritating to you and likely for the father as well, and out of proportion from your point of view. It could also be seen as abnormal.

A first and important step is to show understanding, and encourage the child to believe that she will be loved no matter what, and will never be "fired". Show respect for her fears, and have faith that she will overcome these fears. "This too will pass."

### **Smart Solutions**

I believe, for you to be more effective in your role, your focus must shift from one of 'what to do', to one of 'what attitude' do you transmit to your children. The appropriate behaviour will follow.

### **The Three Cornerstones of a Positive Attitude**

There are three fundamental elements - love, respect, and faith - that are the cornerstones of a 'positive attitude'. Each contributes to your child's self-esteem.

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## 1. Unconditional Love: I am loved and loveable

**Child's Belief:** I am loved and accepted just as is. My parent's love is never in question, and is not connected to my good deeds or performance.

Many parents exhibit conditional love unknowingly when their children are not behaving well. This creates hurt and discourages closeness and harmony.

### Do the unexpected

Children expect us to love them at certain times, for example when they are behaving well, going off to school or off to sleep. When they least expect us to love them is when they are behaving badly or when they have done nothing to earn our love. These are ideal times to get across the attitude of unconditional love.

For example, when you have a potential conflict with your child you can kindly say, "I love you too much to fight!" "This isn't working for me." or "I think we need a cooling down time." Then remove yourself and deal with the conflict when you are both calm. This is very powerful. It models both responsible behaviour and your commitment to the relationship.

### The 3 Greeting Times (Jane Nelson, from Positive Discipline)

Connect closely with your child at these 3 times of the day – first thing in the morning, when you reconnect after school, and at bedtime.

In the morning, go to them and let them know how glad you are to see them and show them some affection. This disarms many kids, because they did nothing to earn it! My first born was a bit prickly in the morning, so I would quietly enter her room before she was fully awake and would rub her back and tell her how much I loved her. Warmly greet them after school, and of course express your love at bedtime (regardless of that meltdown that may have occurred during the evening).

In an atmosphere of unconditional love, a strong sense of belonging and security can develop, and the child will learn to contribute to meet the needs of the situation. Creating and sharing is its' own reward.

## 2. Respect: I am valued and worthwhile

**Child's belief:** I feel most valued when my parents respect my right to make choices and decisions for myself. I have a voice and say in this family. I am listened to.

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Respecting the rights of our children to make choices and judgements is an integral part of their learning and growth process. This doesn't mean that we will agree with the actual judgement our children make, in fact, chances are we won't always agree with their decisions.

Alfred Adler's basic premise of human nature is that we are born with the genetic endowment of "creativity". Given the chance to use this creativity in the form of judgements in their daily lives can help our children develop life skills such as independence, self-confidence, conflict resolution, problem - solving, and resourcefulness.

**Ask for their ideas and opinions- respect their voice:** Make sure your child has a say. Don't let others speak for them – including you! Share your problems with them and ask for their opinions or advice.

**Make one-on-one time-take time for the relationship:**  
Quality time means being available physically, mentally and emotionally.

**Decide what you are willing to do and express it with kindness and firmness.** Model dual respect - I respect you and I respect me. Parents have rights too! Be clear with your child about what you are willing or not willing to do. "I will read a story after teeth are brushed." "I will cook only in a clean kitchen." "I will drive only when seat belts are buckled."

**Problem – solving:** If your family is having day-to-day struggles engage them in a problem solving. Follow these 4 steps:

1. Calm time – Find a mutually acceptable time for all.
2. Focus on child's feelings – Show understanding and empathy for the child's situation. Ask them how they feel about the problem.
3. Parent's feelings – Share your feelings – keep it brief, ten words or less. "I love you too much to start our day this way."
4. Brainstorm for solutions. "What ideas do you have to solve the problem?" (This does not work unless you are truly curious about what your child has to say.) Agree on a solution and a trial period.

**Family meetings:** A powerful tool to develop an attitude of connection and value in families. Put the problem on the agenda and let the kids brainstorm for a solution.

### **3. Faith: I am capable and competent**

**Child's Belief:** I can handle what comes my way. That doesn't mean I will handle it perfectly, but I will handle it! I am capable and competent.

Embrace the positive attitude of faith toward your children, faith that they can handle the outcome of their choices, whether these are successful or not. Mistakes are no longer seen as a diminishment of the child's worth, but as an opportunity to learn. This frees children up of the fear of failure, making it comfortable for them to try something new knowing they may not get it right!

**Stop interference and overprotection:** The opposite of faith is fear, and fear gets in the way of our ability to step back and give our children the room to struggle with their own situations. So sprinkle confidence and faith around them! Model dual faith by having faith in yourself too. You can handle watching them struggle – “This too will pass.”

**Don't do for others what they can do for themselves.** (Dr. Dreikurs from Children: The Challenge) For the young child, provide limited choices: “Do you want the blue shirt or the red shirt?” “Get started and if you need help you know where you can find me.”

For the older child, let them handle as many decisions as possible. Let them struggle and make mistakes (as long as it isn't a life-threatening situation) - they will learn that they can handle it!

**Give them a job, a way to contribute.** When children are given the opportunity to contribute to the family they get the message that they are needed. Start with small jobs, and take the time to train. Show them and then do it together to ensure they have the confidence and skill.

### **Conclusion**

Your role in your stepdaughter's life is a vital one. Your visits will shift from dread to pleasure once you are able to see her behaviour in a different light and value your influence over her 'mistaken ideas' about parental love.

Best wishes.



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