



You're Not My Dad

Teenage Transitioning Into a Blended Family

If looks could kill, the glare in Jennifer's eye would certainly have put my husband six feet under. The new teen club in town mimicked an adult atmosphere, and we were firm in forbidding our daughter from hanging out there. Even though alcohol wasn't being served, we felt the club encouraged behavior and attitudes we were discouraging in our family.

Of course, Jennifer knew I wouldn't let her go. But every time we said no, even though Harvey and I were in total agreement, he was always seen as the bad guy because he was the stepparent.

If we heard the phrase, "You're not my dad!" or "You're not my mom!" once, we heard it a thousand times. Harvey and I had six children between us when we married, and the challenges of adolescence hit us right between the eyes.

All of our teens displayed the normal adolescent resistance to authority, but as children of divorce, their attitudes were compounded by insecurities and feelings of anger and rejection. Not surprisingly, a review published by the American

Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) stated that children of divorce had the deepest feelings of anger, fear, and rejection of any childhood group.¹

Those feelings stemming from divorce or the death of a parent are set even more deeply when their parents remarry. A new stepparent is often seen as a threat. As a result, there are three major problem areas for teens in a blended family:

1. Losing relationship with the natural parent
2. Adjusting to changes in the "new" family
3. Acknowledging or respecting a stepparent's authority



Listen closely and you will hear the frustration in these typical teen comments:

- "I was fine when it was just mom and us kids, then my stepdad came along and everything changed."
- "I don't know how to be a big brother, so I just stay in my room."
- "I feel like I'm betraying my real mom whenever I do things with my stepmom."
- "I resent him telling me and my sisters what to do?he's not our dad, he's just the guy who married mom."
- "Mom and I used to have fun together, now everything has to include his kids."

The first problem area that deserves attention is the sense of loss of relationship when we remarry. Many times, as newlyweds, we are so focused on our own joy over a new love relationship that we overlook our teen's insecurities.

Teens tend to hide their feelings because they want to be treated as adults, but they have suffered loss, whether by death or divorce. The sense of loss is magnified when Mom or Dad turn their attention toward a new spouse and a new family. In reality our kids are still kids; and they need to know their mom or dad is still there for them.

The second problem area is the adjustment to changes in the new family. Relationships take time to develop. Expecting everyone to come together as an instant family is unfair and unrealistic, especially where there are stepsiblings involved.

Probably the most difficult problem is the relationship between stepparent and stepchild. A stepparent has to grow into an authoritative role. Like sewing a new patch of cloth into an old garment, if it is not properly prepared, it could cause a worse tear.



While blending a family is a challenge, it can also be rewarding. By taking some practical steps toward addressing these difficult issues, we can make the adjustment easier for our teens and the whole family.

Teens need to feel respected. You can show respect by simply looking directly at your children while they are talking to you. Providing some alone time with your child also helps during the blending process. Because your child is going through a lot of changes, it's never wise to assume he is secure in your love. A few hugs, special talks, and stolen parent/child moments together go a long way in affirming love.

Divorce can bring the worst behavior out of the nicest people. Avoid negative comments about your ex-spouse. As difficult as they might be, they are still your child's parent and the kids still love them. Show respect by applying the old saying, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all."

Transitioning from the rules of one household to another can trigger bad attitudes. Allow a time of adjustment when they return from visiting their mom or dad.

At times, issues like baby-sitting or having a younger stepsibling tag along on an outing can create wedges of resentment. Obviously, there will be times where this is unavoidable, but it's important to acknowledge and respect your teen's feelings during this transition by minimizing these situations whenever possible so they don't feel like they are being "used."

Stepparents should allow the biological parent to handle discipline and permission during the first year of blending. Harvey and I were always in unity on our decisions because we discussed everything behind closed doors ahead of time.

But discipline or rewards are met with less resistance when it comes from a child's own mom or dad.

As the blending progresses, a stepparent's authority will increase naturally.

With emotional storms raging, it is easy to lose sight of a house's foundation. In the parable of the two builders, Jesus said the one who obeyed God was like the man who dug deep and built



his house on the rock. Obedience is the hard, sweaty work; and there are no backhoes to make it easier.

We can't just dig until we "hit" the rock. As Christian parents, we have to get our hands dirty and blistered in the digging, until enough rock is uncovered to build a solid family. This requires patience, consistency, respect, and unity through communication and prayer. Satan wants to destroy families, but God has equipped us to build a solid home for our children.

Today, Jennifer and Harvey share many quiet moments out on the deck discussing work, friendships, finances, and family. The "teen club" incident is just a fading memory. All the old, "You're not my dad!" phrases have been replaced by, "Harvey, I need your advice."

1. The information is from AACCC (American Association of Christian Counselors).
Their Web site is: *www.aacc.net*.