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Helpful Strategies to Deal with Ex-partners in Remarriages

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The process of building and maintaining a strong remarriage is complicated by many factors. One of the most complex factors is the relationship with the biological parent of your child(ren). Interactions with past partners have the potential to be very positive; however, too often they become negative and even destructive (Buunk & Matsuers, 1999). On-going “ex-partner” issues not only influence child outcomes but can also spill over into the new marital relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). As you co-parent across households and simultaneously work on building a new marriage, there are various things you can do to increase the chances that you, your new spouse, and your children will be happy.

Co-Parenting

Avoiding negative interactions and putting aside differences with your ex-partner is in the best interest of your children. If you are not able to keep a civil, child-centered relationship with your ex-partner you may want to consider enlisting the assistance of a mediator or family counselor. Because children and adults adjust best to remarriage in positive, nurturing, and loving environments, consider the following tips when co-parenting your children:

- ***Avoid putting down your ex-partner in front of your children.*** Negative comments about the other parent, even those that are true, put children in the difficult role of having to pick which parent to believe. Pay particular attention to what is said over the phone and to friends or relatives. Children often overhear what their parents say to others. A put-down comment

- about an ex-partner could be taken personally if the child identifies with their other parent.
- ***Be mature and control your anger if your ex-partner says negative things about you to your child.*** It may seem unfair, but trying to defend yourself has the same effect as when you put the other parent down in that your child becomes stuck in the middle. If the attack is personal, simply respond that you are sorry that your ex-partner feels that way.
- ***Be aware of unintentionally putting your child in the middle.*** Asking your child about who the other parent is dating, how the money is spent, or other personal choices can make children feel like they are being asked to spy.
- ***Try to keep the child’s best interest in mind when carrying out visitation and other important matters.*** Enforcing your visitation privileges when your child has a special athletic or social event can make it harder to maintain good feelings.
- ***Encourage your child to have a healthy relationship with the other parent, if possible.*** Research suggests that children do better after a divorce if they have positive and healthy relationships with both parents (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In cases where the other parent has a history of violence, drug, or alcohol abuse, it may not be in the child’s best interest to continue contact. However, you should still be careful how you talk about the other parent.
- ***Be aware that children may play ex-partners against each other.*** This can take the form of “Mom is more fun,” “Dad wouldn’t make me do this” or “I get to stay up later at Mom’s house.”

Parenting is not a popularity contest and it is very appropriate to tell your children that they still have to follow your rules in your home.

New Relationships

Despite the love and excitement of a new relationship, the process of building a strong remarriage can be disrupted by the ex-partner (Knox & Zusman, 2001). This can happen when the ex-partner does not want to let go and is overly intrusive. It also happens when people openly compare their new spouse to their old partners in unflattering or critical ways. Jealousy can also creep into the new relationship when ex-partners are perceived as spending too much time together or being too friendly. To prevent ex-partners from overly influencing your new marriage consider the following:

- **Establish formal ways of interacting with your ex-partner** (see Weston & Macklin, 1990). Specified times and ways of communicating with your ex-partner will let your new spouse know when and why you are having contact. It can also be very helpful to put agreements regarding interactions into writing so that all parties have the same understanding.
- **Review with your new spouse the quality and quantity of your interactions with your ex-partner.** It takes time and hard work to establish effective ways of communicating and resolving problems across two different households. Your new spouse will understandably have opinions about your on-going relationship with your ex-partner and may have good suggestions for you to consider. Regularly reviewing your interactions across households can be a reminder of the positive things that are happening and can raise awareness of issues that need to be addressed before they become big crises.
- **Learn from the past.** When people have been hurt, they sometimes try to cut all ties to their past. Frank discussions with your new spouse about what you both have learned from previous relationships will allow you to learn from your mistakes and be proactive so they are not repeated.

It takes patience, commitment, and hard work to build a new marital relationship, especially when an ex-partner is still in the picture. Not surprisingly, the nature of the relationship with your ex-partner impacts the relationships you have with your children and new spouse. Happy family life is enhanced when negativity and criticism are limited, children are kept out of on-going conflicts, and new spouses communicate about what is and is not working. Establishing and following positive, clearly-established, and agreed-upon ways of interacting with your ex-partner will help build trust and

confidence in your new marriage. It will also help create the positive home environment that is needed for children to adjust to changes and develop successfully.

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