

### **Introducing New Partner Too Fast, Too Soon**

Even though a spouse may have contemplated separation for years prior to informing their partner, to the partner, the news comes as a shock, even in view of a tumultuous relationship. For the children, the shock is often even greater.

To intensify matters befalling the children, the spouse who is emotionally further along the separation process may already have or may soon have a new “significant other”. If the relationship to that significant other developed prior to separation, the likelihood of the children taking to that person will be remarkably diminished. If the relationship comes after the separation, but before the child has an opportunity to emotionally and psychologically adjust, the likelihood of the child taking to the new person is also quite diminished.

A parent may view the separation as an event, but to the child, the separation is a process. A child’s mourning and grieving the loss of their parents’ marriage typically takes months to years. The process is similar to the adjustment of a death and include; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

The child cannot believe the change in circumstance. It confronts their belief that they lived in and would continue to live in an intact family. This is true even in cases where a child is worried about their parents’ marriage. Worry does not equal a desire for a parental separation even if they tell you so. Worry generally means they want the parents to improve and stabilize their marriage.

When it becomes increasingly apparent that the marriage will not or is not surviving, the child feels emotionally betrayed and is hurt and angry. This may be expressed directly to a parent, or indirectly through a change in behaviour. As the child sorts out their anger, he or she may next seek to improve the parental relationship with the secret view of helping them reconcile. The child’s attempts may only be in their own head by harbouring thoughts, or by action whereby they make attempts to alter parents or their very own behaviour as a strategy for reunification. As their attempts are unsuccessful, the child feels thwarted, impotent and unempowered. The gravity of the situation weighs in as well as their sense of personal futility to help their parents. The child is thus depressed. Sometime thereafter, they come to accept the change in

family status and are amenable to moving on. They complete their psychological and emotional adjustment.

Introducing a new partner prior to the child’s adjustment causes the child to recoil against the new partner. The new partner is seen as a threat to the child’s secret wish for the parents to reunite. To intensify matters, the degree to which the new partner is thrust upon the child, the greater the child’s recoil and resentment. Thus while the parent cannot understand why their child won’t accept or acts mean spiritedly to the new partner, the child is simply coping with an assault to their adjustment process. The child is not far enough along the adjustment process to tolerate the introduction of any new partner, regardless of the qualities that partner brings.

Demands for the child’s respect or obedience to the new partner only makes matters worse and runs the risk of a life-long fracture, not only between child and potential stepparent, but between the child and that parent.

To minimize the risk of these conflicts, parents are advised to wait to form new relationships until after the child has adjusted, easily over a year post-separation. If a new relationship has been formed prior to the child’s adjustment, expect the child to take at least a year to several, before the child is fully able to accept this new person. Resist early introductions to be sure the new relationship is in fact stable and ongoing. Resist cohabiting within the first year to minimize the risk of the child feeling overwhelmed and confronted by the change. The new person should also resist assuming a parental role until the child has adjusted to the parental separation.

If you have already gone too fast, too soon, you may be dealing with the fallout. Slow down and back off. Forcing a relationship likely didn’t work for your first marriage; so don’t expect it to work for your new partner and your child. Adjustment takes time.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW  
(905) 628-4847

[gary@yoursocialworker.com](mailto:gary@yoursocialworker.com)  
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.