



The Difficult Former Spouse: Establishing Strategies, Extinguishing the Problem

by Nancy Hafkin

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Are you dealing with The Intruder, The Chaos Creator, The Absentee Parent, or The Abuser? These problems can begin to seep into stepfamily life. But with the proper strategy, the problems can be improved before too much damage is done.

It is no aberration that the emotional strains of the stepfamily seem unlike those of any other group. They are. That's the norm.

Unfortunately, one part of the "norm" requires almost constant ingenuity to overcome and to learn to live with productively --- an undermining, constantly difficult former spouse.

Unfortunately, no other group can be so negatively affected by someone who is "not in the group" as is the stepfamily by the former spouse.

And more unfortunately, the stepfamily does not always pull together in an effort to repel this force, as biological families might when threatened by a negative "outsider."

Instead, the difficult former spouse often has a profoundly negative effect on the entire stepfamily.

Studies indicate that about half of all spouses in a subsequent marriage have a relationship with their former spouse that is strained, openly hostile or nearly impossible. This painful and unproductive relationship, however, affects not only the two people who are primarily involved --- that is, the two original spouses --- it affects current spouses, the children, and may even produce toxins that seep into the extended families of the stepfamily.

For some, coping with life after divorce and remarriage is a state of siege. There are angry phone calls, interference with visitation, a barrage of lawsuits and even physical threats. On a good day, the former spouse merely intrudes into the stepfamily with scapegoating, undermining values and favoritism. On the whole, it's a miserable situation where neither the passage of time nor the actual delivery of the divorce decree results in resolution. The former spouse continues to feel abandoned, furious, and powerless when attempting to cope with moving on. Worse, the former spouse acts upon these feelings.

The Four Types of Difficulty

Unfortunately, there are former spouses who seemingly refuse every attempt for peace. However, "once difficult, always difficult" is as much a myth about former spouses as is the notion that "If we can't make a good marriage, we'll manage a good divorce." Where the difficult former spouse is concerned, there are varying degrees of difficulty:

1. Type I Difficulty results from too much contact and is intrusive. Of the four types, this is usually the easiest to manage. Its hallmark is that it is situational, or only occurs under certain circumstances.
2. Type II Difficulty is founded in the creation of chaos intermittently over a period of time. It is pervasive escalation of the Type I Difficulty.
3. Type III Difficulty results from too little contact, and usually sends destructive messages to the child, altering his self-esteem and confidence.
4. Type IV Difficulty involves alcohol and drug problems, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and other illegal activities. These are situations that require rehabilitation and intervention of the police, the courts and rehabilitation professionals.

Although it is possible for tough situations to mature and to change in a positive direction, it requires strategy, commitment and consistent implementation of a plan.

The good news is that it can be done.

TYPE I: The INTRUDER

This type of difficult former spouse is characterized by his or her intrusion into the stepfamily. Devious behavior and manipulation are the means used to gain control and power. Value differences between the former spouses is pointed out to the children by the former spouse. Money often becomes a major issue. Favoritism of one child over another is a possibility, and distortion of the facts could be part of the scenario, as well as open resentment and scapegoating of the stepparent. This refusal on the part of the former spouse to communicate directly, precipitates negatively on the stepfamily. Loyalty becomes a major issue as the stepparent seeks acknowledgement of his or her role in raising the

children, while the children feel that they are in the middle of this never-ending battle between mom and dad.

SITUATION: When Betty and Bob divorced, Betty was given custody of their only child, Steve, although Bob was given liberal visitation. Bob often took Steve out to dinner or to a movie. Betty began to look upon this extra time as her due. Betty's career began to take off just as Bob remarried and Betty was determined that her career and her lifestyle were not going to be interrupted by Bob's happiness. On the frequent evenings when Betty didn't want to leave her desk, she often phoned Bob or his wife Margaret to say that Steve was going to be alone and would welcome this opportunity to have dinner with them. This escalated into an on-call babysitting service to accommodate Betty's travel and dating plans, as well. Soon Steve could sense his Mother's motives as well as his stepmother's resentment of his continual impromptu visits. Yet Bob felt that he wanted to be with his son as much as possible. Margaret would seethe at the thought of Steve's arrival and began to see the youngster as an unwelcome visitor, instead of seeing the situation for what it was --- Betty's manipulation of events. The breaking point came when Bob wanted to cancel a rare weekend out of town with Margaret because Steve's mother had to be away and "the boy has nowhere else to go."

SOLUTION: Like most victims, Margaret needed to set some limits. She began by saying that although she understood Bob's desire to be with his son as much as possible, she needed some advance notice about his arrival. Things went along well for awhile, but Betty had a great need to escalate. The almost canceled weekend described above was the turning point. Margaret and Bob were advised to continue with their weekend plans, arrange for the boy to have a babysitter, and to deduct the amount of the sitter from the child support that Bob sent to Betty. This brought about some thought on Betty's part before she "dumped" Steve again, and it de-escalated the intrusion into the lives of Margaret and Bob.

Intruders delight at upsetting the new family. This is where they get their energy. They may be a source of continuing agitation, as was Caroline, who voiced her objections to how her children were being raised in the new stepfamily by writing them down in large script on even larger postcards and sending them off on Sunday nights, sure to arrive during the week when the children picked up the mail.

The best way to handle The Intruder is for the new couple to work together. Once the source of the problem is agreed upon, the solution follows.

In the case of Bob and Margaret, it was necessary for them to see Betty, and not Bob's son, as The Intruder. Once they both recognized Betty as causing the problem, they started fixing the problem. This eased Bob's guilt over his son's visits and provided Margaret with

the proper focus for her resentment. Acknowledging each other's feelings put the situation in perspective, and two very healthy events occurred: 1) Bob and Margaret began to focus on a solution; and 2) Bob and Margaret set their relationship as a priority. This latter step was vital to preserving the stepfamily as well as the new couple. In some instances, psychotherapy is also needed to clarify the situation, focus on the new couple's relationship and help them anticipate situations and appropriate responses, set limits and perhaps enable them to communicate openly with The Intruder.

TYPE II: THE CHAOS CREATOR

The Chaos Creator is actually an escalation of The Intruder. Instead of dealing with intrusion, differences in values and competition, the Chaos Creator is characterized by threats, character assassinations and repeated lawsuits. Often the Chaos Creator interferes with the former spouse's visitation, which has a negative effect on the relationship with the children.

The Chaos Creator is beset with bitterness and rage, and in those emotions, they find their "justification."

SITUATION: When Karen and Jack married, she was childless and he had four children from his former marriage who were being cared for by him and a housekeeper in the family home. The children's mother, Claudia, bitter at the dissolution of her marriage, had run away to her mother in a neighboring state. During the first trip to court after Jack remarried, Claudia sued for the children the house, and an increase in alimony. She won only the alimony. During the next eight years, Claudia took Jack back to court five times. She targeted Karen, a professional woman with little patience for emotion, as the scapegoat for her ire. The children were constantly in the middle --- urged to carry angry messages, subjected to the character assassination of their stepmother, and threatened by the loss of their mother's love.

Claudia frequently called with demands, insisting on dealing only with her former husband. Holidays were used by Claudia as an opportunity to cause problems by being inflexible, intrusive and competitive and by distorting the facts.

Claudia, a beautiful and talented woman, did not remarry or take a job, but remained nearby Karen and Jack for eight long years --- years in which she derived her chief (albeit empty) satisfaction from being a Chaos Creator.

Two weeks after the youngest child entered college, Claudia married a man she had known briefly and moved away. In her wake, she left a scarred second marriage for her

former husband and his wife, emotional wounds for her children, and a very disillusioned stepmother for her children.

STRATEGY: Chaos creators are former partners who cannot bury the hatchet. The anger continues year after year, and there is evidence that a strong emotional attachment still exists. This is what I call the “lack of an emotional divorce.”

It is important for the person or the couple on whom the Chaos Creator preys to realize that they are only half of the problem. An emotional divorce needs to occur in both halves. This might be achieved either through mediation or therapy, which is now being ordered more often by the more savvy family court judges when they see a repeat of court cases instigated by one spouse.

The new spouses must be very careful to make sure that the rejection anxiety of the former spouse isn't being fed by the children or the new spouse, and that competitiveness is downplayed. Sometimes it is necessary to “play hardball” in order to take power away from the former spouse. But it must be realized that Chaos Creators will continue with their creativity until that first step --- the emotional divorce --- occurs.

TYPE III: THE ABSENTEE PARENT

Considering the problems caused by The Intruder and The Chaos Creator, The Absentee Parent seems almost like a blessing. The Absentee Parent is the one who is “no problem” --- or so it seems. The monthly support check arrives on time, or there is no need of one. They rarely, if ever, call; they never meddle or second guess. Chances are they don't even live in the same town as the former spouse and the children. If the Absentee Parent is emotionally ill, the parent and stepparent isolate the child from the Absentee Parent in an effort to protect them.

The Absentee Parent, however, sends a particularly damaging message to the child --- “You are unlovable.” A parent who cuts off a child, who is too ill or emotionally self-absorbed to maintain a relationship with his or her own child, every day, tells the child, “I don't care about you.” The child receives the message that he is not worthy of being cared about. A parent who comes and goes, who makes promises and does not fulfill them, sends the message, “Don't count on me.” The child hears that she is not acceptable and cannot expect people to meet her needs.

In addition to these messages, which are difficult for a young child and devastating for an adolescent, The Absentee Parent has the sinister ability to reach beyond the child and portend complicated problems for the stepfamily. If the stepparent is so inclined, he or she can more easily pretend to be the biological parent, thus fueling the myth that the family

being created is a nuclear one. The parent and the stepparent can get away with this for awhile, but it puts the newly created family in a vulnerable position. A pretend biological family runs the risk of being toppled by the return of the Absentee Parent in some form or another: He or she moves back to the area; The emotionally ill parent is finally able to cope and reopens lines of communications with the children; Grandparents move nearby and want to become more involved in their grandchild's life; Even the birth of the new baby into the stepfamily subtly points out to an older child who his real parents are.

Anyone or anything that shows this gerryrigged nuclear family for what it is --- pretend --- is a threat. In that way, Absentee Parents have the potential for packing a double punch: When they leave, and, in some way, when they return.

SITUATION: Irv and Sue married very quickly on the heels of Sue's very rocky marriage to Peter, an erratic man. With two preschoolers (one with learning disabilities) and a messy divorce, Sue welcomed Peter's abruptly leaving town. Peter, in crisis because of loss of his family, job and home, seldom contacted Sue and the children. This made it possible for the stepfamily and their relatives to buy into the idea that Irv, Sue and the two children were the right kind of family at last. Irv took over more and more of the fathering role --- financial, educational and disciplinary. When the oldest child reached adolescence, a new baby was born into the stepfamily. Coincidentally, Peter's emotional health had stabilized after therapy and a remarriage. He wanted to get involved with his children again. This seemingly logical turn of events caused a great disruption in the stepfamily.

Children desperately need their absent parents, especially during adolescence, as they go about the child's important business of defining themselves. Because of this, the children in the pretend family had to painfully reclaim their biological father. The entire stepfamily had to accept the fact that a lot of the dynamics being dealt with were stepfamily dynamics, heretofore masked by pretending. And somehow, the new baby, who was quickly growing into a child, had to be allowed a place in the family permitting him to belong to both the biological mother and children subset and the new little nuclear family. The members of the pretend family found it necessary to define themselves as a real stepfamily. Getting there was painful and threatened the very existence of the stepfamily. The children had to begin relating to their stepfather as a stepfather and reclaim their biological father.

STRATEGY: The first order of business in dealing with the Absentee Parent is to realize that even though it appears to be the child's problem, it carries hidden volatility for the whole stepfamily, especially the parents.

As in any crisis, there is opportunity. This is where the stepfamily can be a unique and beneficial influence on the life of a child. Working on their own or with a psychotherapist,

the stepparent and parent can convince the child of his worth, his lovability and his right to be able to depend on others. It is also necessary to help the child see and compassionately accept the Absentee Parent as the person with problems, rather than as we usually view our parents as paragons of what is right. This will also remove the pressure from the stepparent to be the perfect pretend parent. Allowing the child his anger will also help him to recognize his own worth and the relative place of the Absentee Parent in his life. Finally, the parent and stepparent must be prepared to accept the Absentee Parent back into the larger relationship if --- and this is a big if --- the Absentee Parent is genuinely able to give something to the child.

TYPE IV: THE ABUSER

Although we all think of the destructive behavior of our ex-spouses as abusive at one time or another, much of this is an exaggeration. The true Abuser is alcohol or drug dependent, sexually or physically abusive or is involved in other illegal activities. The fact that this is a case for intervention by the police, the courts or other rehabilitation professionals does not rationalize away the need for action on the part of the non-abusive parent and stepparent. The precaution here is that it must be determined that the Abuser's actions are really criminal and not just a label.

SITUATION: Zelda and Jeff divorced after fifteen years of marriage and they retained joint custody of their two daughters, aged 12 and 14. Although Jeff and Zelda both liked to gamble, it had not caused a problem in their marriage, nor was it responsible for its disintegration.

Each remarried within the year following their divorce. Jeff married Carolyn, one of his co-workers at the printing company. Zelda married Bart, a man whose principal source of income came from his bookie business.

The problem arose when Zelda and Bart took the girls to the racetrack and helped them place a few bets with their allowances. The lure of easy money encouraged the adolescents to view their mother and stepfather as benevolent. Of course, the girls were too young to recognize their mother's emotional instability and the encouraging of minors to bet was abusive.

However, Jeff and Carolyn saw the situation for what it was. Instead of letting their anger take the form of punitive action toward the girls and forbidding them to see their mother, Jeff and Carolyn first tried to work things out with Zelda and Bart. Jeff and Carolyn said that they would be happy to look after the girls if Zelda and Bart preferred going to the track when it was "their time" to have the girls.

Zelda and Bart continued to take the girls to the racetrack. Jeff and Carolyn consulted their attorney and found, to their surprise, that the law would find them equally liable for the girls' well being if they allowed them to continue to accompany Zelda and Bart. In other words, Jeff and Carolyn could be prosecuted for child abuse, as well as Zelda and Bart. Jeff and Carolyn had no choice but to withhold visitation in an attempt to impress Zelda and Bart with the seriousness of their action.

STRATEGY: It is best to know the rights and obligations of all concerned --- the parents, stepparents and children. This is a point where the advice of an attorney is necessary.

In the event that withholding visitation does produce the attention-getting results, then both couples could sign an agreement that they would do nothing that is illegal. This will diffuse the tension by making everyone responsible while blaming no one. A social worker or divorce mediator could serve as the non-partisan go-between in this situation.

When abuse has already occurred, there is usually massive damage to the child's self-esteem and to the parent-child relationship. Psychotherapy and counseling can help youngsters regain their feelings of self-worth and help the parent and stepparent take an active role in that regeneration that puts the stepfamily on a firmer foundation.

TRYING SELF-HELP GROUPS

The concepts of parenting, stepparenting and re-parenting cover a wide range. When a disruptive former spouse compounds these situations, the parenting jobs require a greater degree of cooperation among all members of the stepfamily in order to minimize the negative effects.

It is most important to view the situation for what it is --- an attempt to undermine the solidarity of the stepfamily by someone who has some emotional claim on the stepfamily through the children. These people usually have problems of their own. Once that is recognized, the degree of its impact can be assessed and dealt with accordingly.

Self-help groups and peer groups that support the individual and the stepfamily can be immensely helpful in dealing with this stress. In some cases where the problem persists or is escalating, one-to-one help from a psychologist is often the most direct route to finding the best strategy.

