

Stability, not marital longevity, what kids need

Dear Carolyn: My husband and I are on the brink of divorcing. We have a 4-year-old, and I'm sick with the thought of messing up his life with something he didn't ask for. Is there any hope for him to grow up into a well-adjusted adult with none of the "issues" from a divorce? — **Maryland**

Dear Maryland: Not only is it possible, but there are also millions of children of divorce out there who won't appreciate hearing that they're hopelessly burdened with issues.

That population, as it happens, has a message for you: Keep it civil, and keep it stable. No kid wants to be your referee, messenger or lead negotiator; no kid wants to be your pawn,



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HAX**

bargaining chip or weapon of choice; no kid wants to meet a steady stream of Mommy's or Daddy's new squeezes — and, wow, no kid ever wants to watch from the sidelines as each new squeeze takes priority over him.

Home, safe home. That's your new mandate.

Keep this in mind, too: Intact families are considered best for

kids because they *tend* to produce stable households. Not all intact marriages produce stable households. Not all stable households are the product of intact marriages.

Presumably you're divorcing because the love is gone or just unhealthy, and you've made the calculation that divorcing is your kid's best chance at growing up in a loving home — right?

So, continue to apply that high standard of a loving home as consistently as your circumstances allow, in everything from your divorce and custody proceedings to building your new life and accepting your ex's new life.

Ultimately, your best chance

at raising a well-adjusted child is for *you* to be well-adjusted. That means breaking down any residual marital anger — get a therapist's help if needed — and putting it on the curb.

Dear Carolyn: How should I handle my new boyfriend's ANGRY ex? She is using their children to try to control him and break us up. — **Anonymous**

Dear Anonymous: "Maryland," are you still here? Please note the timely example of how not to conduct your divorce.

As for you, Anonymous: The way *not* to handle this angry ex is by casting the ex as the villain, your boyfriend as victim and yourself as superhero. That

common trap yields nothing but victims — the kids, of course, along with every adult who's involved.

Very few people, when you see them up close, fall neatly into categories. The selfish can show compassion, poets can be heartless, warriors can be gentle, the wise can make stupid mistakes, charmers can be sincere, heroes can save the world only to succumb to emotional stage fright at home — or vice versa, and so on.

When you see people only through the eyes of others, your impressions get flattened into caricatures. Understandably, since flat people are easier to file away, dismiss, blame for

everything.

But even if this "ANGRY ex" is in fact throwing an extended tantrum, she's no caricature. She's the woman your boyfriend once loved, the mother of his kids. Those kids need you — all the adults involved — to override your basest instincts. The ex's behavior is beyond your control, but you can stay calm, weigh *all* sides, and set the bar for your boyfriend to do the same.

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