



Stepmom's nightmare is not her problem to solve:

You are the stepmom to kids who not only don't listen, but threaten to go back to the other parent at the mere mention of expectations. When you complain to your partner - their father, he shrugs it off, not wanting to upset the apple-cart and risk losing precious time with his little angels.

These situations often involve separated parents who have poor to limited or no ability to communicate between themselves. It is likely that their relationship as a couple was a disaster and that court or the threat of court figured prominently in their settlement.

Dad is either limited in his parenting abilities or is afraid that his kids won't see him if he doesn't give way to their demands. Either way, dad tries to either be an ostrich and put his head in the sand to avoid the situation or tries to befriend the kids, thinking that the kids will like "Uncle Dad" and thus behave better.

Kids in these situations have long since learned to exploit the parental conflict to get what they want. Instead of expectations they have things - toys and gadgets. They may also have no meaningful curfews or consequences to hold them accountable.

The stepmom is at risk of being set up as the wicked witch for ratting out the kids, spoiling everyone's fun and being a pain in the butt to her partner. Truth is, she may be the most distressed and may be the only one to see the situation for what it is - a bigger train wreck waiting to happen.

Kids who are out of control and who can pit their parents against each other are at risk of school failure, early onset sexual behavior, pregnancy, drug alcohol abuse and trouble with the law. As they disrespect their stepparent and get away with murder at home, they then try out their misguided skills and beliefs outside the home at school, workplace and community.

This is actually a pretty common scenario and if there is a call for counseling, it is usually by the stepmom who is fed up with the situation and feeling unsupported by their partner with spoiled kids running roughshod over them both. Trouble is, without both bio-parents on board, the likelihood of turning things around well are limited.

In order to make a good difference in these situations and the lives of these children, both parents must learn to cooperate and support each other as parents lest the kids continue to divide and conquer. Trouble is, as the stepmom takes on the task of calling people out and seeking to improve matters, all eyes are on her as an agitator. She becomes the source of conflict and she feels like she is steering a sinking ship.

The truth of the matter is, these are not her kids and this is not her responsibility even though she becomes a victim of the family dysfunction.

Stepmom, you have two options: leave or step back and let the chips fall where they may.

Assuming you step back and let the chips fall where they may, the real trick is to redirect any issues or expectations with regards to your partner's children, to your partner. Do not take responsibility for his children because in so doing, he gets to avoid it.

When he finally gets overwhelmed and asks for your advice, don't get sucked into rescuing him!

The real trick to facilitating change here is to leave him wrestling with these problems of his own creation. Unless he truly feels there to be an issue from which he cannot escape, he will not be motivated to address it. You rescue, he is relieved and nothing changes.

Eventually he has to come to realize that counseling is a must for him and his former partner and that together they must resolve the situation.

You as stepmom continuing your involvement in their dynamic only serves to keep the heat off them and keep it upon yourself.

Want to feel better? Take a bath, read a book, go for a walk, get a manicure, do anything but take on your partner's responsibility. As you disengage from the turmoil, you leave it for your partner to engage.

If you don't have the stomach for this, then you may have to consider leaving as an option and that too may trigger a crisis to raise your partner's profile in terms of taking the situation seriously. But still, the problem with his kids is his to solve.

Tough medicine for tough situations.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert in social work, marital and family therapy, child development, parent-child relations and custody and access matters. Gary is the host of the TV reality show, Newlywed, Nearly Dead, parenting columnist for the Hamilton Spectator and author of Marriage Rescue: Overcoming the ten deadly sins in failing relationships. Gary maintains a private practice in Dundas Ontario, providing a range of services for people in distress. He speaks at conferences and workshops throughout North America.