When you marry again after divorce, how can you create a harmonious ‘blended’ family – and even make peace with a former partner? It is possible, says Ilona Bonwell

Can you really forgive your ex?

People are often astonished when they visit our home for a family celebration, to find Sophie, my husband’s ex-wife and mother of his children, helping me set the dinner table. It takes visitors a while to figure out that (a) there is no tension in the air, (b) this is not a diplomatic encounter and (c) we are not practising polygamy. Sophie is simply a close friend of both my husband and I, loved not only by her own children but also mine, and is simply part of our extended family. She is also in a happy relationship, and we all get on really well with her boyfriend, Fred, who has two children of his own. In fact, Fred called a couple of weeks ago to borrow my husband’s ex-wife and mother of his children, his own cheeky daughter set up an ‘accidental’ meeting between people are often astonished when they visit our home for a family celebration, to find Sophie, my husband’s ex-wife and mother of his children, helping me set the dinner table. It takes visitors a while to figure out that (a) there is no tension in the air, (b) this is not a diplomatic encounter and (c) we are not practising polygamy. Sophie is simply a close friend of both my husband and I, loved not only by her own children but also mine, and is simply part of our extended family. She is also in a happy relationship, and we all get on really well with her boyfriend, Fred, who has two children of his own. In fact, Fred called a couple of weeks ago to borrow my husband’s ex-wife and mother of his children, his own cheeky daughter set up an ‘accidental’ meeting between

Positive parenting

Well, I was wrong, and my husband was right in putting a good relationship before the money. And I must admit that the sense of unfairness following my own divorce underlies the resentment I feel for my ex-husband, with whom I am not quite ready to make full peace yet after 12 years apart. According to a divorced couples classification*, my husband’s relationship with Sophie can be classified as ‘cooperative, mutually supportive and non-confrontational co-parenting’, which is enjoyed by about one quarter of divorced parents, while my own relationship with my ex can be described as parallel co-parenting, with a relatively low level of conflict only because of disengagement (he emigrated to Australia). It is easy to guess which one is better for children long-term. Even if we all know the theory, there is no magic bullet that can help us cope with the bitterness of the past (and sometimes the present as well), when the other party just doesn’t do the right thing. For example, I feel that my own ex pays a lot less in maintenance than he is supposed to, and sees his children once a year at most. And as much as I would like to forgive him, I am not there yet. So what can we do?

Some helpful ideas

● A ‘fair world theory’ is a strong cognitive bias, and should be treated as such. So when we keep thinking that things are not fair, it may be useful at some point to just accept that fact.
● Taking acceptance as a starting point, ask yourself: Given that situation as it is… (fill in the gap), what do I hope for myself, if relevant, and my children?
● As ridiculous as it sounds, you can also try to find some benefits. Yet, it’s easier to let go of grudges when you’ve been hurt in the past than easier said than done. What worked well for me is ‘half-forgiveness’ – writing a letter expressing everything I can forgive and leaving everything out I cannot forgive. Don’t send the letter; it is just for your
● Finally, as far as your ex’s new partner, or your current partner’s ex is concerned, try to view this person as they simply are, from a ‘clean slate’ perspective, without putting them into any mould. This person is not your story, so let them make their own story, even if it happens, or happened, to be with someone you love.

MORE INSPIRATION:

Read The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Falls Apart by Constance Ahrons (Bloomsbury Publishing, £12.99)

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