

ILONA BONIWELL ON FAMILY

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 Boniwell

“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 eldest son Jason's suit for his son's first job interview.

So how did this rather wonderful situation come to be? Is it simply luck? Not in the slightest. My husband's divorce was like any other – full of pain and tears after 17 years together. At first, Sophie refused to meet me at all, dropping off and picking up the kids outside the garden gate, until, one day, her own cheeky daughter set up an 'accidental' meeting between the two of us, in the most well-meaning way. So we were forced to just stand there facing each other, unprepared and emotionally naked, not knowing what to do, finally opting for a coffee to break the silence. And that's what my husband found on his return home from work that day: the two women in his life drinking coffee and laughing nervously together. So he opened a bottle of champagne.

When I think about this meeting, I realise that the very fact that we were so unprepared helped us to see and connect

with each other as human beings, outside of the imposed labels (the New, the Ex). Yet, there is another important factor underlying the friendship between us all – Sophie feels that the maintenance my husband pays her is fair and sufficient, so there are no financial hang-ups. This one was not at all easy for me – given that we have his children 50 per cent of the time, legally, he is not obliged to pay anything at all, yet he does, and above the going rate. And this actually puts our new family under a certain amount of strain. So, to my shame, I did not escape the usual 'new wife' thing to begin with – complaining about the size of child support.

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



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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 for yourself in the current situation. For example, OK, my ex doesn't see his children, but at least I don't need to see him either.
- Positive psychology advocates forgiveness as the key to moving on, leading to multiple psychological and health

benefits. Yet, let's face it, letting go of grudges when you've been hurt in the past is much 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 benefit, and can help you in the process of letting go.

- 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.

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