

# Parents Ask!

By Dennis O'Brien, MA, LCSW

## Parents Ask: How can we meet the challenges of parenting a gifted child after divorce?

**Single parents and parents in blended families face some unique challenges that parents in a traditional family may not face.**

No mistake about it. Parenting after divorce is always a challenge. Lines of authority need to be reestablished, emotions dealt with, and new routines established. Parenting a gifted child adds some additional challenges.

- **Begin by taking stock of the situation.** Determine what emotional baggage you, your child or your new spouse carry because of the divorce or remarriage. Then commit to dealing with it yourself—and to helping your child deal with her issues. There's no shame in feeling wounded, and no justification for not dealing with it.
- **Assess the emotional stress on your child.** Is she feeling loss, sadness, anger or confusion? How does it show itself in her behaviors? Identify these behaviors, express your concern, and ask her to talk about her feelings. Refrain from offering reassurances at this stage. That may shut her down. Instead, paraphrase what she says, focusing especially on her feelings. Repeat this listening process regularly. Your child needs to express her emotions frequently in order to gradually deal with them. Should your concerns about her persist, consult a therapist who could coach you on additional parenting tactics or assess whether your child would benefit from some personal therapy or conjoint family counseling with you.
- **Take an honest look at yourself.** Assess the pain you felt, how you dealt with it initially, and how you are dealing with it now. Are things better, or are they still festering? Do feelings of loss, bitterness, anger or fear about your responsibilities dog you? Hobble your parenting? How effective is the way you are dealing with it? Would therapy help? What prevents you from getting it? Taking care of your own emotional health is essential if you are to parent as effectively as you would like and your child needs.
- **Next, assess how your feelings affect your behavior as a single parent.** Do you, for example, too often look to your child for advice, companionship or emotional support? This occurs frequently—not only because suddenly single parents are often searching for support—but because gifted children are so verbally precocious. Sometimes they seem more like little adults than the children they are.

If this has occurred, if your child has become your emotional partner, you need to pull back and find other ways to meet your needs. Are you doing enough things with your friends? Who could you spend more time socializing or doing things with? What barriers prevent you from doing so? How can you overcome these barriers to better emotional health, especially those that negatively impact your parenting? You owe it to your child—as well as to yourself and your new spouse—to do so.

- **Exercise your parental authority.** Divorced parents often allow a precocious child too much power to make decisions that they, as parents, should be making. Although parents of intact families also make this mistake with a gifted child, it's even easier to slip up and do so when divorce makes it more difficult to identify and set appropriate boundaries. Ask yourself some tough questions and be honest with yourself. Is your child the one who decides what he wants to do, when he wants to do it, and with whom? Does he call the shots? Make decisions affecting family life? Does family life orbit around his preferences? Would you let any other 10-year-old have this much power? Talk to you this way? Give you orders? Did you have such power as a child?

Having too much power increases a child's anxiety level. Much as a child might relish the power, having to make adult decisions is a stressor that causes psychological damage. Children handle this stress in different ways. Some stop trying because fear of making mistakes shuts them down. Others conceal their anxiety by becoming pushy. Some seek refuge in self-destructive rituals to give them a feeling of control, such as anorexia or cutting behaviors.

If you have allowed your child to assume inappropriate decision-making power, take back the parenting power you have ceded to her. Resume making the adult decisions yourself. Sure, consult your child if a decision affects her. But if it's an adult decision to make, you must be the one to make it. Not your child.

- **Practice conjoint parenting.** This is key to integrating a gifted child—or any child—into a blended family. Parents—including non-biological parents in a blended family—who confer together and work together can effectively create an environment where all the children thrive. It's important to do this intentionally, because often it doesn't automatically happen. Scheduling a regular time to talk privately about it is a very useful way to ensure that conjoint parenting occurs.

- **Address practical issues.** Are the rules alarmingly different at your ex-spouse's house than yours? Some differences in scheduling and activities are inevitable and harmless. Some, though, may be creating emotional conflict for your child. For example, Dad may be overly impressed by his brilliant little girl who instinctively manipulates him to get privileges at his house that are simply inappropriate, such as staying up later than is healthy or having unlimited access to the Internet. Mom, thinking Dad may be lax, may overcompensate because she knows her child needs discipline. Nobody wins, and your child suffers in the chaos that could have been avoided.

**Start with the assumption that your ex is well-intentioned and, like you, wants what's best for your child.**

If you identify a parenting decision you believe to be unhealthy or causing serious confusion for your child, schedule a private meeting with your ex so you can discuss the issue and try to resolve it. Despite the tensions or conflict stirred up by the divorce, it's best to start with the assumption that your ex is well-intentioned and, just like you, wants what's best for your child. If you are unable to resolve the issue by yourselves, consider meeting with an experienced counselor who can mediate your discussion and provide some objectivity.

- **Strategize ways to integrate children into a blended family.** Parenting a gifted child in a blended family presents special challenges, especially if there are other children of a comparable age. A gifted child may expect to have more privileges because he is accustomed to using his verbal skills to manipulate and push the limits. In this case it is important for the mental health and self-esteem of all the children in the family to make sure that the rules and responsibilities are consistent for everyone. Caucus about this with your new spouse and agree on the family norms and how to enforce them.

Another challenge in a blended family may be trying to help a gifted child socialize appropriately with new siblings. Gifted children often ignore peers and strive for adult approval. They crave approval from adults and often focus so intently on gaining it that they fail to develop the ability to socialize with their peers, and parents who are overly impressed by their child's intellectual ability may be the last to notice. This, of course, can be especially damaging for children in a blended family.

One way to head this off is to structure opportunities that promote healthy interactions among these newly blended siblings. For example, you might assign chores that need to be done together and schedule family outings that promote interaction. Another useful strategy is to make the family dinner a focal point of the day and use it to spend time talking about what went on in everyone's day.

- **Review these tips periodically.** Parenting a gifted child is never easy, and parenting after divorce is especially challenging. Periodically evaluating your effectiveness and adjusting your efforts will help you help your child survive the emotional traumas of divorce and learn to thrive in new situations.



**Dennis O'Brien, MA, LCSW**, is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist. He has led five nonprofits, including Logos School which he founded. He has written educational materials used by Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry, weekly newspaper columns (St. Louis Suburban Journals/Post-Dispatch) on parenting and numerous articles for a variety of magazines and newsletters, including [Gifted Resource Council](#). He was honored by the Missouri Dept. of Mental Health for outstanding writing about suicide in 2010. He consults, write grants for nonprofits and is bringing an online video [ethics program for students](#) developed by the Better Business Bureau to the St. Louis area. As a volunteer, he has played leadership roles in various groups serving nonprofits and is currently active with the [Better Business Bureau](#), the [Children's Services Coalition](#), [CHARACTERplus](#) and [Community Service Public Relations Council](#).