

Three Children Reject Their Father and Stepmother With Special Needs Terminally Ill Child

Q.

My husband's three children no longer want to talk to their father. We fear it is the influence of their mother, who is very angry and resentful about their divorce.

A few months ago his youngest son visited us and said he would come back the following month, but cancelled. To make a long story short, after a lot of viciousness had been going on for over 10 years, my husband e-mailed his former wife and requested no more phone calls or e-mails to our home.

I have a special needs child who has been given less than 6 months to live. I personally didn't need the games of P.A.S. along with my son's situation plus I have two daughters, as well.

After some long hard thinking we have decided to try and establish contact again with the boys and are wondering what would be the best way to try and accomplish this? They are now 14 and 12 years old. Both are on medication for deep-rooted anger and behavior problems.

Your ideas would be greatly appreciated.

A.

In general, when children have been taught by one parent to hate the other parent, postponing contact between the rejected parent and the children is ineffective. In such case absence does not make the heart grow fonder, it make alienation more profound. For several reasons "cooling off" periods run a high risk of becoming more lasting.

- The children become accustomed to the lack of contact.
- They become more dependent on the parent who is dispensing the divorce poison and thus more identified with their negative attitudes.
- They have no opportunity to directly experience that the other parent is not the ogre they have been led to believe.
- They have no chance to enjoy the company of the rejected parent to offset the negative view they have formed.

There are situations, though, where it makes sense to back off from contact. Yours may be one of them. It may not benefit the children if they use the contact merely to exploit the parent for financial gain, and offer no affection, appreciation, or genuine interaction. But we should not overlook the possibility that the children really do desire contact, but realize that their mother will only allow it if it appears to be motivated solely by material gain.

What makes your situation much more complicated is your son's terminal condition. Coping with that must take priority over managing the problems with your stepsons. Even if the two boys were not alienated and they wanted to spend more time with you and their father, given their behavior problems and the tension they introduce into the atmosphere of the home, this might be a time when you and your husband would want to reduce contact.

Your time is precious and you will not have all the emotional resources needed to give the boys the attention and structure they need.

If the boys could become meaningfully involved with the family at this time, it may help soften their attitudes by evoking their sympathy for your tragic situation. Given that you have decided to try to establish contact, here are some thoughts about how best to accomplish that. I would let the boys know that you would love to see them if they want to come and are willing to behave appropriately. Naturally you are preoccupied with your impending loss and do not have the frame of mind to tolerate mistreatment. If they do not want to be a support at this time and cannot find it in their hearts to have sympathy for your situation, you will need to postpone attempts to heal the relationship for the time being. But you do not intend this to be a permanent disruption of contact. It is a response to your current crisis. You hope they would like to be part of the family at this difficult time. It can help everyone draw closer together. But if they are not able to do so, now is not the best time to undergo the difficult task of repairing the damaged relationships.

If the boys want to communicate with their father, and want to spend time in your home, I suggest accepting this. If their difficult behavior intensifies the longer their stay with you, you might consider more frequent, briefer contacts.

Please understand that the general advice I am giving might well be different if I had more specific information about the situation and the people involved.

Finally, allow me to express my deep sympathy for the tragic situation with your son. I hope you will find a way to make the precious time you have with him as meaningful as possible.