

Ask Miriam...

Individuals and families in the community are faced with challenging issues and concerns regarding their social, emotional and psychological health. Through the cooperation of **The Jewish World**, Jewish Family Services will offer responses.

Q. Dear Miriam,

I am divorced and have one son. Primary custody is with his mother who has remarried. I see my son frequently. I have become concerned that his stepfather is taking over the role of father. My son has mentioned being disciplined by his stepfather.

I don't want to put my son in the middle and create problems for him, but I feel that this man is overstepping boundaries.

How can I handle this?

Divorced Dad

A. Dear Divorced Dad,

Your situation is one that many divorced parents deal with. The reality for many families is that the primary household of the child(ren) has to play out more of the roles of daily living. Stepparents should not take on certain roles when a biological parent is in the picture. As much as possible, the custodial parent in the household should be the one to deal with disciplinary matters with the support of the stepparent.

You need to approach your ex-wife in the spirit of mutual concern and caring for your son. Find a way to have a regular communication to help your son deal with two fathers in his life with the goal of developing a positive relationship with both.

However, his stepfather has a right to expect certain behaviors from your son and the right to act as any responsible adult.

As you can tell by my answer to you, this is not a simple question. There are many related issues around it.

One very important point is the one that you mentioned. Do not put your son in the middle.

You should also not let your son manipulate the situation, by trying to get you involved because he doesn't like what his stepfather did.

Be clear with your son about the boundaries and how you will respond.

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Q. Dear Miriam,

Our daughter and son-in-law have been increasing their level of Jewish observances. They have three children. We have been able to solve some issues such as that of kashruth. Although our home is kosher, we respect their level of observance and compromise with paper plates, packaged food, etc.

Our concern is that our grandchildren will start to be critical of our Jewish observances and/or distance themselves from us.

They are still young, but some of their questions even now about the differences give us concern for the future. How can we deal with this before it becomes divisive and/or uncomfortable for us to have a positive and loving relationship?

Concerned Grandparents

A. Concerned Grandparents,

It sounds as if you are already utilizing a creative and flexible approach to this issue. These qualities of yours are the very ones that allowed your daughter to feel supported as she and her husband moved into a more observant place in their lives. I think that you will be able to continue to be flexible to meet the religious requirements.

What is equally important is that you communicate with your daughter and son in law about the importance of your role as purveyors of values and the channel for family continuity.

They need to understand that they are the key to helping their children learn to appreciate you for who you are and what you stand for and not be judgmental about your level of religious observance.

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Miriam Adler, A.C.S.W., C.S.W., is assistant director of J.F.S. She answers most frequently asked questions. Please send questions to "Ask Miriam," c/o Jewish Family Services of NENY, 877 Madison Ave., Albany, NY 12208 or e-mail madler@jfsnyny.org or call 518-482-8856.