

**Between Teacher & Parent: Helping the Child Who Is Struggling with a Parent's New Marriage**

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“I Don't Want a New Family!”

How to help the child who is struggling with a parent's new marriage

**The Teacher's Story**

“C'mon, Kyle. Let's make a spaceship,” his classmates coaxed; but Kyle just shook his head and nestled deeper into my lap. What a change! A few weeks ago, he would have been leading the group to the block corner. But lately Kyle is too sad to have fun with his friends. Why would a confident, almost 5-year-old suddenly begin clinging to his teacher? If I briefly leave the room, Kyle drifts into daydreaming. When I am around, he guards me jealously. This morning he kicked Louis for sitting down next to me. I can't understand what is troubling this child. Maybe the mystery will be solved when his dad comes in to talk. Kyle's father phoned just as I was considering which of his parents to contact. Although they are divorced, both are very involved with our program. I'm sure that their interest in Kyle has helped him to do well in school, until now. What can I do to bring back Kyle's independent spirit and good feelings about school?

**The Parent's Story**

My marriage to Kyle's mother broke up before Kyle turned 3. It was a tough time for all of us. Kyle cried easily and had many tantrums. For a while, he forgot what he'd learned about toilet training. In the first weeks after the separation, Kyle was clingy and constantly asked questions he already knew the answers to. Most of them began with the word *why*. My ex-wife and I agreed on how to protect our son from our problems. We never fought in front of him, and we let him know he could talk to either of us on the phone at any time. I see Kyle almost every day—and we've been careful not to change other things in his life. His mother still has the same part-time job and Kyle has the same after-school babysitter.

At first, it was painful watching Kyle play games in which mommies and daddies would make up and go home together. I didn't involve him in my social life until I met Maggie: I included him when I spent time with her and her 5-year-old son, Neil. Several weeks ago, I explained to Kyle that Maggie and I were getting married and that Neil would be living with us. As I explained how nothing would change in how often Kyle would see me and that he would still have his own room at our house, his eyes glazed over. That afternoon he punched Neil and began to cry about a toy he couldn't find. Maggie and I

are married now, and when Kyle comes to visit, he is either whiny or aggressive toward Neil and ignores Maggie if he can. He told his grandma that his daddy got a new wife and a new boy. I don't know how to persuade my son that no one will ever take his place in my heart. Maybe his teacher can offer suggestions.

### **Dr. Brodtkin's Assessment**

Kyle's parents have done everything possible to spare their son the grief experienced by some young children of divorce. Since there was an absence of bickering and a genuinely amicable arrangement, this child adapted at home and was fine at school. Maintaining close contact with both parents eased his fear of abandonment until his dad married another little boy's mother. Most preschool children wrestle with thoughts about where they belong in the family. Having to share dad with another family is an added challenge. But with such caring parents, Kyle should ultimately do well.

### **What the Teacher Can Do**

In her conference with Kyle's dad, the teacher should praise him for his loving care. She might encourage him to set a regular day to pick up Kyle or to bring him to school. Having dad actively involved in Kyle's life is very important right now. As a neutral person who can support each parent's good efforts, the teacher should offer to chat with Kyle's mother, too. The teacher's acceptance of Kyle's feelings expressed through play would be very helpful to him. She might also read books to the class about different kinds of families, all of who have lots of love to give. At the right moment, she could gently suggest that Kyle share his artwork and school experiences with each of his families. Some things are different, but Kyle can be guided to see that his dad's devotion is absolutely unchanged.

### **What the Parents Can Do**

Right now Kyle needs extra time, patience, and understanding from all the adults in his life. He and his dad should have time alone together. A trip to the zoo, a quiet breakfast at a local coffee shop, and a regular, private playtime at which Kyle can express his worries would help him see that he has not lost his dad after all. Extra time alone with mom would also reassure him, especially if she can overcome any of her own mixed feelings about the remarriage. Neither parent should become impatient. Kyle's acceptance of this change may take some time. Remember, Kyle was recently entertaining fantasies, expressed through play, of his parents' reunion.

### **When to Wonder**

1. If Kyle's clinginess increases in the coming months, keeping him from enjoying much of anything, including being with his friends
2. If Kyle's changed behavior leads to chronic bickering between his parents
3. If Kyle's irritability grows instead of lessens, and his chronic anger leaves him feeling more alone than ever

### **Resources**

1. Anne O'Connor, *The Truth About Stepfamilies*, Marlowe & Company, 2003

2. Emily B. Visher, Ph.D., and John S. Visher, M.D., *How to Win as a Step Family*, Brunner Mazel
3. Sonja Goldstein, L.L.B and Albert J. Solnit, M. D., *Divorce & Your Child*, Yale University Press, 1984