

8. Keep Your Parents and Children Out of Your Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Keep your parents and your children out of your marriage. Once they are in there, it's hard to get them out. When you are in conflict with your spouse, it is really tempting to use whoever is handy to vent to, regarding your marriage. And often the people available most available to us are our children and parents. They are typically most often in our presence, and if we don't see them throughout the day, they are often the people we speak to on the phone most often. Although, perhaps the people most available to us, and even perhaps the people most supportive of us, they are not the most appropriate people to complain to about your marriage or problems or your spouse.

Children, regardless of their age, would be put in an untenable position of trying to decide where their loyalties lie. They may have compassion for you and not want to hurt your feelings, but they love your spouse as well. They can feel guilty trying to decide how to handle the responsibility for those feelings that you just dumped on them. Either way they go, they could end up "betraying" one of their parents. It is a "no-win" situation. It is not fair to be put in that situation.

Parents, of course, tend to take your side. When someone hurts their "child" they will be angry with that person. They tend to take to heart all your complaints and often come to view your spouse as the "bad" or "wrong" person you have presented him/her to be. When you get over being mad, resolve the conflict, make up, and forgive him/her, your parents may not be so quick to do so. That can create strained relationships between your spouse and your parents for years or decades. As you try to deal with the difficulties created, if you fail at resolving the new conflicts created, it can damage your relationship with your spouse or with your parents.

When you need someone to talk to about the conflicts in your marriage or your hurt feelings, talk to your trustworthy best friend, your clergy person, or a counselor. It helps to have a confidante to work through feelings. In talking about what happened, you get a better understanding of the event and your feelings. You may even come to understand your partner's perceptions. If you have no confidante, there are some other things you can do.

Write out how you feel. Write your spouse a letter. You can collect your thoughts and identify how you really feel. If you then feel safe, talk to your spouse about what you have written in your letter. If you don't believe that your spouse will hear you, write him/her a second letter taking out the blaming and acting out of feelings, but leaving in the important information and feelings. Give them the letter. Let him/her read it alone. If you believe that you can never tell your spouse how you feel about what has happened, seek help immediately. It won't get better. You can stuff your feelings, but they will leak out around the edges in passive aggressive or other expressions of anger and hurt.

There are always exceptions. When there is abuse involved in the conflict between you and your spouse, you must tell someone-even your parents-in order to receive help in

removing yourself and your children from danger and damage. Much of the danger and damage of being in an abusive environment is not just the black eyes and broken bones, it is the fear, stress, and broken spirit that comes from being the "victim" or an observer of the violence. In violent families it may also be too dangerous to tell the violent spouse how you feel.

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