

Meet Your New Mommy!

Some pushy parents simply don't want to face the reality of the effect their decisions have had upon the hearts of their children. They think, "The kids will be fine" or "They're resilient and will bounce back." They want their children to be okay, not affected by the decisions made. When the children don't respond the way anticipated, the pushy parent goes into "fix-it" mode trying to get the children to accept the new adult in their lives.



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A mother and father sit their sons at the kitchen table for a discussion that will change their lives forever. The mother looks at the father and nudges him to start. The boys, 17 and 12, look at their parents, wondering what is so important that they sit together at the kitchen table on a Sunday afternoon. “Your mother and I are getting a divorce,” the father says. After a few questions from the 12-year-old about the logistics of the divorce regarding where everyone was going to live, the father goes on. He informs the boys that he is going to go and live with his girlfriend out of state. The boys are shocked to hear both pieces of news but then the father goes on about his new lover. “Oh, you'll love her and she can't wait to meet you. You've probably even seen her on TV.” In those few words, the sons find out that their parents are divorcing and dad has a girlfriend — already he is pushing his girlfriend on his sons.

While most parents may not be this aggressive in pushing a new lover into the lives of the children, it is all too common for a parent (often the leaving parent) to try to push the children into accepting the parent's new partner. The parent schedules dinners, weekends, “family trips” for their children and the new lover and possibly the new lovers' children as well. These pushy parents may try to force their children to “like” or even “love” their new dating interest. If they can't get the kids to accept or embrace the new relationship, the pushy parent may angrily settle for their kids' spending most of the time with him or her and the new lover. I have seen this happen within months or even days of the divorce announcement. While the children are still trying to cope with the pain of their family's breakup, they are forced to embrace this new person whom they may believe has been a big part of the reason their family is no longer a family.

WHY THEY DO IT

Most of the time, the pushy parent is the parent who left the marriage or wanted the divorce. Often, they have gone through months or years of thinking through and doing some of the preliminary emotional work of divorce. They may have started seeing someone while still living with the family or shortly after moving out. Either way, this parent believes he or she is ready for someone new in their lives. They have had a significant head start in the adjustment process and expect others, especially their children, to join them at this point in life. Thus, the pushy parent may push his or her new lover on the children because he or she believes the kids should accept the new reality of the relationship and “just move on.”

Second, the pushy parent may feel tremendous guilt while at the same time wanting to feel happy. He or she may feel guilty for an affair, causing pain to the children, or being the divorce initiator. He or she wants the pain to stop and mistakenly believe that if the children can quickly embrace the new lover, then all involved will be happy — and the parent can feel less guilty. This may be self-serving.

A common problem in divorce is time crunches. The pushy parent may struggle to find time for both their new lover and their children. Their new relationship feels exciting and exhilarating, but they know they need to see their children. Thus, rather than go see their children without the new lover they combine meeting times, trying to please both the children and the new partner. Seldom does this work. Often, one party — either the children or the new lover, and sometimes both — feels deeply jealous and resentful toward the other for taking away the pushy parent.

GRIEF VS. BLISS

The pushy parent who has a new lover may resist thinking about the pain they have caused others, especially their kids. The kids are most likely grieving or acting out their grief in some way that interferes with the pushy parent's moments of dating bliss. Because they don't want to deal with their children's pain, they make the effort to cover it over by having the children spend time with their parent and the new lover.

Along with this, some pushy parents simply don't want to face the reality of the affect their decisions have had upon the hearts of their children. They think, “The kids will be fine” or “They're resilient and will bounce back.” They want their children to be okay, not affected by the decisions made. When the children don't respond the way anticipated by the pushy parent,

especially with respect to the new lover, the pushy parent goes into “fix-it” mode trying to get the children to accept the new adult in their lives. In the mind of the pushy parent, if the kids can just accept the new lover, everything will be fine. If the kids accept the new lover, the pushy parent won't have to face the truth of how much they have hurt their children.

STATE OF INTOXICATION

Another reason that pushy parents do what they do is that regardless of what they may say, some don't want one-on-one time with their kids. They don't want to diaper babies or answer questions about the divorce or deal with the everyday stuff that goes along with single parenting. While what they really want is for the new relationship to work, they don't feel they can abandon their kids either. So, by pushing the new lover into their children's' lives, they don't have to deal with the daily stuff of single parenting alone. They may use the new lover as a surrogate parent.

Finally, and sadly most commonly, the pushy parent is so enmeshed with the new lover that they can't imagine being without them. This new person makes them feel alive for the first time in years (see research associated with affairs and neurochemistry). They feel like they are back in middle school or high school. The focus in life is on the new lover. Everything else takes a back seat, including work, health or the children. In their seemingly intoxicated state, the pushy parent, unable to be without the new lover, forces the kids to be with them so the pushy parent doesn't have to be without the new lover. In some cases, the new relationship functions addictively. The pushy parent thinks they are creating an easy scenario for all involved, avoiding the difficult truths that exist outside of their fantasy life.

The common result of such efforts to unite the new lover with the children is angry, resistant children who don't want to be with either the pushy parent or the new lover. In their denial, selfishness and efforts to avoid the truth, most pushy parents simply blame the other parent (the ex-spouse), accusing them of alienation, brainwashing or poisoning the children. In their intoxicated and self-righteous state, they can't imagine that anything they alone have done could create such angry responses in their children. In addition, they can't imagine that their children could feel this way without the help of the other parent. Such a position is not just an assault on the ex-spouse. It really is an assault on the intelligence and observational ability of the children. Rather than face the truth and

take responsibility for how their decisions and actions have hurt their children, the pushy parent denies, blames and accuses others for the problems they have created. While the ex-spouse suffers for this, the children suffer far worse.

IMPACT ON THE KIDS

While some children, including adult children, appear compliant and accepting of the new lover (usually to keep the peace), most children feel some measure of both anger and resistance. They feel angry with the pushy parent; often that anger shows up in some form of resistance.

First, many kids (adult children included) feel abandoned by the pushy parent. The pushy parent does not understand this, saying "I haven't abandoned you. I live just a few miles away." But to the child of divorce with a pushy parent, the abandonment isn't a geographical one: It's a matter of time, energy and focus. One of the most common complaints from kids of all ages is this: "I never have any time just with my dad/mom anymore. Every time I see him/her they (the new lover and possibly their kids) are with them. My mom/dad gives all their attention to their new lover and it's as if I don't even exist anymore."

With this statement comes the anger involved in feeling rejected and unimportant. The child wants individual, private time with their parent. With a new love interest around constantly, the child, even the adult child, can feel unimportant, unloved and rejected. Pushy parents may hear the words of their child but refuse to make changes to strengthen the parent-child relationship. Some hostile and extremely self-centered pushy parents can turn this request for one-on-one time around on the child, accusing him or her of being selfish and insensitive to the newly-found "happiness" of the pushy parent. In one instance a parent went so far as to tell their child, "This is my life and I love her (the new lover). You either take both of us or neither of us." This father couldn't understand his child's request for time with him without his new girlfriend. He turned the child's desire for one-on-one time with a parent into something bad. The truth is that the more self-centered the pushy parent is, the more they demand that the child accept the new lover, and the more they refuse to see the child's perspective, blaming the child and/or the ex-spouse for being the problem.

A LOSS OF RESPECT

When a child sees their parent so dependent on a new lover, so self-absorbed, so seemingly addicted to the

new lover and disinterested in their life, the child loses respect for the parent. The angry contempt of a teenager may appear different than that of a 30-year-old, but the loss of respect is the same, and it hurts. Now, instead of being able to look up to their parent, the child describes their pushy parent as "sickening, pathetic and weak." At this point the relationship is damaged and in need of help. Sadly, most pushy parents in their blinded and blaming state turn their wrath on the child, blaming them for "ruining something good" or for "trying to wreck my happiness." Often the children become compliant, appearing to accept the new lover all while feeling negatively towards them. There have been times when I have encouraged these kids to talk to their parents about what they think and feel and observe, but the disenchanted or even depressed child says, "Why try, they won't listen anyway. Nothing will change. They say they care about me but they really don't. All they care about is their new lover." These children have lost respect and hope. Finally, the child's anger is not simply directed at the pushy parent; it can also be aimed at the new lover. The envious resentment of a child toward the new lover is wrought with problems. Not only will children feel angry with their parent, they may direct some of their jealousy, hate and punishing feelings at the new lover as well. The child's deep anger at the pushy parent and the new lover is a setup for conflict. A child who feels hurt, misunderstood, abandoned and blamed for all that's supposedly wrong in this new "family" usually doesn't sit by and quietly comply. While some withdraw into a depression, others take action.

WAR OF RESISTANCE

This leads to one of kids' most often used tactics. Children who don't want to be in this kind of environment wage a covert and, sometimes, overt war of resistance. Resistance can be seen in refusal to spend the night at the pushy parent's home; be with the parent if the new lover is present; eat, bathe, sleep on their bed; or talk with the parent on the phone. In addition, there can be extreme efforts such as teenagers sabotaging a weekend with the parent and new lover by running away, doing drugs or attempting suicide. Some kids in divorce will do anything to ruin the weekend for their parent and the new lover.

All too often, the pushy parent asks: "Just how long do I have to wait to introduce my child to my new lover?" instead of asking "What does my child need from me in light of the circumstances?" Again, that question exposes the self-interest of the parent

rather than an effort to understand the child. At the same time, the question does have merit. Many family counselors and even post-divorce parenting class teachers recommend that parents don't introduce a child to a new lover until at least a year has lapsed from the final decree. While that may be an average, I recognize that some kids may be ready earlier and some may need much more time than a year before being introduced to the new adult in their parent's life.

The question about introduction must be answered using a two-fold test. First, has the child made the emotional and practical adjustments to the divorce before having to make new adjustments associated with a parents' new boyfriend or girlfriend? Second, is the child secure in the love of their parent due to quality time spent in fun, communication and daily tasks done in a consistent fashion? In other words, has the parent allowed the child the necessary time to adjust to the divorce and has worked hard to create a relationally secure environment for the child? When these steps have occurred, the parent should sit down with the child and explain the possibility of starting to date or that the parent has started to date. I would not recommend that the parent introduce the child to the new lover at this point. Let the child accept the reality of the parent as a dating person before actually meeting a new lover. One change at a time is enough. Generally, this needs to be on the kids' schedule and not the schedule of the pushy parent.

HAVE HOPE

While all this is time consuming and requires a great deal of care and communication, the results are worth it as seen in a child that is more accepting, less threatened and more engaged in the new relationship. Oh and one more thing — the 12-year-old in the opening vignette was me. I'll never forget the day when I was told my parents were divorcing and my dad had a girlfriend, all at one time. I was overwhelmed. While my relationship with my now-stepmother (the new lover) was strenuous at best for many years, in time healing and forgiveness took place. We became friends and, after my father's death, I went to Florida and spent several good days with her. We continue to stay in touch after all these years.

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