

**"Ask Ila,"**

**I always tell a party to a couple who is divorced to try to remember some of the traits of their former spouse that they once fell in love with and that they should always keep in mind that this now "dreadful" person once had their heart and will always be the other parent to their child(ren). If they can acknowledge their past feelings they may be able to bring some of that forward into their current demeanor.**

**I'm remarried. I have shared custody of my children. How can I get my ex-wife to stop saying nasty things to my children about my wife?**

You can't. I don't mean to be blunt, but the fact is we can't make anyone do anything. Of course, you can try to appeal to your children's mother that she act with some integrity and fair play. She may be holding on to the pain of the failure of the marriage, the resulting divorce, and resentment that you have moved on through your remarriage. Your wife may have become the target of her anger, and she may feel more comfortable or justified speaking disrespectfully of her than of you. This may especially be true if you developed a relationship with your current wife while you were still married to her. In that circumstance, often the "other woman" is resented more than the husband. Your ex-wife is allowed to be angry. She ought to have friends, family, or a therapist to whom she can appropriately vent her feelings. Children should almost never be privy to the adult issues that gave rise to the divorce or become aware of feelings of animosity between their parents. The old adage, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all," should hold true in these matters.

Children are almost always hurt by a divorce. The impact on children often varies depending on their ages, how you and your ex-wife carried out your separation and divorce, and how cooperative the two of you are now around issues of their visits, financial support, and decision-making about their lives. Children of all ages need to know that they are safe, loved, and will be cared for. Any negative information shared by a parent to their child is usually self-serving, selfish, and damaging to a child's emotional health and well-being. Adults should vent to other adults not their children.

You can say some or all of the following, assuming that the statements are true, "I know you have been hurt and are angry. It's okay to be angry with my wife and me. We can handle the fact of your anger. Please don't show your anger to our children. You and I are still their parents and nothing will ever change that. We can still partner around issues of raising our children. I do not speak badly about you nor does my wife. My wife is not trying to be their mother, and she will never take your place in their hearts or lives. When you say hurtful things about her, it puts the children in conflict and makes a difficult situation even more difficult."

Keep in mind that you and your wife have to respect these same parameters. If either of you indulge yourselves in badmouthing your children's mother, you are as guilty as she and have little credibility in asking her to refer to your wife with some respect or not refer to her at all.

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Having said all that, the focus now turns to what you can do if your effort at reasoning fail and your ex-wife continues her negative verbal campaign against your wife.

The responsibility is on you to try to mitigate the harm done to your children. You can show by example how to manage a divorce with dignity and integrity. You are their role model for this as you are with many other issues they will face as adults. The statistics regarding the rate of divorce puts the odds that at least one of your children will go through at least one divorce of their own. Just as they are learning from you how to be a partner to someone, how to run a household, how to put in an honest day's work, how to be a good parent, etc., you must now add to that list some lessons on how to act with their children (your grandchildren someday!) should they go through a divorce.

Never speak of their mother with anything but respect. Steadfastly refuse to criticize or devalue her or her choices. If your children bring you further news of her negative critiquing of your wife, you can simply say, “I’m sorry you had to hear that, but you can make up your own mind about (your wife’s name).” Do not try to influence them against their mother. Do not judge her remarks about your wife, nor do you have to defend your wife to your children. Explain to your wife that you are trying to manage yourself in a way that will benefit your children and that you cannot manage your ex-wife’s words or behavior. Sometimes children will try to force dissention in order to stir things up. Be the bigger person, take the high road, and do not rise to the bait. If you do, you will be setting a bad example for your children to imitate someday. Let there be only one parent acting badly, not two. In the long run, the children are the losers on these battlegrounds.