

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My ex-husband is constantly setting up “special” events for our nine-year-old son, Michael (we have joint custody) but he never lets me know until the last minute. I get angry and find myself in the position of having to scramble to rearrange my schedule or saying “no” to Michael because we’ve already made plans for that evening (I have two children with my present husband and we do lots of things as a family). When I say “no,” Michael gets angry with me. What can I do about this?

-- A frustrated mother

Dear Frustrated,

This has to stop. Your ex-husband – whether consciously or unconsciously – is attempting to control you and your relationship with Michael. It’s time for a heart-to-heart conversation.

Studies investigating joint custody and shared parenting have consistently shown that it holds significant benefits for children’s adjustment to divorce. But – and this is an important point – the critical factor in realizing these important benefits is a lack of conflict between parents.

When parents cooperate and minimize conflict, kids do better. They’re emotionally more secure, have fewer problems with delinquency, and perform better in school. Less parental conflict equals healthier, happier children. It’s as simple as that.

Joint custody requires a passionate commitment on the part of both parents to what is best for the child – the child’s interests must always come first -- and a level of maturity that reduces conflict. Communication must be clear and both parents must be willing to compromise.

Begin by setting a time to talk with your ex-husband. I suggest making this arrangement when you are NOT angry with him.

Do you believe that he is a good father to Michael? If you feel this to be true, tell him that. People like to hear that they’re doing a good job.

Let him know that Michael is fortunate to have a dad who loves him and wants to do things with him. Make it clear that you give your full support to their relationship. Make it equally clear that you are frustrated when he makes plans with Michael at the last minute.

Describe the position it puts you in. You have to either say “no,” or change everyone else’s plans.

Give him some idea as to how far in advance you need to know about these special plans. As for me, I’d want to know as soon as the plans are made (e.g., if your ex-husband buys tickets for the circus then he knows the date they’ll be going). At that time, you too should have this information so you can make your family plans around it.

Assure him that you’ll not be rigid. After all, spontaneous opportunities do come up in life. If your ex-husband receives two free tickets on the day of a baseball game and your family was only planning to hang out and watch TV, by all means, let Michael go with his father and with your blessing.

This example is really a “special” situation.

The one who will benefit most from a smooth relationship with your ex-husband is, of course, Michael.

The situation now is one that is ripe for “triangulation.” That’s a family systems word that describes a dynamic that allows kids to play parents against each other. (Think of the Bermuda Triangle here and you’ll get the idea that this is dangerous territory for families – sinks lots of ships).

The present dynamic is not healthy for Michael. He should know that you both love him, but can work together as parents, and are aligned in your rules and expectations.

I would try these suggestions and see what happens. This may solve the problem and I hope it does. But, if your ex-husband doesn’t change anything – continues to put you in this situation – then a deeper level talk might be necessary.

In that conversation, should it be necessary, you can let him know that you see his behavior as controlling and that he’s going to have to stop. Was he a controlling type of personality during your marriage? I would be very surprised if you said that he was not.

I don’t think you should change your plans if your ex-husband continues to want Michael to do something at the last minute (except for the occasional truly “special” situation with unexpected free tickets to an event or something like that).

For Michael’s sake, I hope that the two of you can work this out. He’ll be better off when you do.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

*Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D. is a writer, personal coach, motivational speaker, clinical psychologist and producer/host of “HeartWaves” radio program (WVOD-FM, 99.1 at 12:40 weekdays). www.fullpotentialliving.com and www.heartwavesradio.com.
(©2002 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.)*