

# Teens may strongly resist parent's remarriage plans

Dear T.I.P.S.: My fiancé is 40 and I'm 46. I'm divorced without kids and she has a 14-year-old son from a prior marriage. When they moved into my home, her son became difficult. He's rejected all prior suitors, not because he wants his parents to get back together, but to be the man of the house and to control mom. He even got upset when she asked him to give her away at the wedding, since he thought he was losing her. He doesn't want her to see me and that is not going to happen. What can she do to assure him that he is important, he isn't going to lose her and that she makes the decisions concerning her life, not him. — Class Traveler, via the Internet

## Dear Class Traveler,

Under the best circumstances, remarriage with children can be challenging. When teens are involved, the issues are more complex.

Teens want a say in decisions that affect their lives and a parent's remarriage greatly affects them! When change occurs quickly or teens think they don't have a say, they may feel resentful and resistant. Your fiancé's son is experiencing several confusing and upsetting changes at once.

His rejection of prior suitors may not be an effort to control his mother as much as to protect her, since things have not worked out with others in the past. You are the "new kid on the block" in this family, so he may be testing your love and commitment before accepting you.

He may be upset about giving his mother away at the wedding because he feels ambivalent about the marriage. He's also getting mixed messages about whether he is an adult or child.

As the "man of the house," he

## TIPS



JODY JOHNSTON PAWEL

felt important, made adult decisions and negotiated rules and routines with his mom. He had an adult role. Then he was demoted to "child" when you arrived. Now he is being asked to play an adult role as the "father of the bride." He needs consistent clear boundaries and help accepting and adjusting to these changes.

Moving into your home may have been too much change too soon. In general, parents need to reduce the number and intensity of major life changes imposed on children simultaneously. Research shows cohabitation outside marriage is stressful for children. Parents should only consider it when they are committed to a long-term relationship/marriage and involve their children in the decision. Even then, it's most helpful for children to remain in their own familiar home.

With all these changes, your fiancé's son clearly has his own issues and needs to work through. Don't demand that he accept you or the marriage. Your number one goal is to establish trust through action, not words. Her son needs to see that you love his mom, are going to protect her and that you don't see him as a threat to eliminate.

Since you need to co-parent a

14-year-old with whom you have no history or bond, let me make a few suggestions:

➤ Ease yourself into the family. I'm sure her son doesn't think he needs another father — or a controller. He's proven he's responsible and trustworthy as the "man of the house."

➤ Avoid imposing new rules. Instead, openly discuss rules and get agreements.

➤ Involve him in decisions that affect him. Listen and consider his feelings, needs and opinions. Seek solutions that meet everyone's needs.

➤ If he acts revengeful, he's feeling hurt. Resolve his hurt and suggest appropriate outlets for his anger.

➤ For now, let his mother handle disciplinary issues. Be supportive, non-punitive, reasonable and respectful. Use problem solving to focus on the lesson. Ask, "What happened? What did you learn? What will you do next time? How can you make amends?"

Your fiancé needs to reassure her son that even if she loves you, she will always love him. They will always have a special bond.

Long-term research shows it takes at least two years for step-families to adjust to changes and create their own unique family. If conflicts continue and you are committed to working things out, I recommend you seek family counseling.

Jody Johnston Pawel, is president of Parents Toolshop Consulting, Ltd., P.O. Box 343, Springboro, Ohio, 45066; phone: 748-4541; fax: 748-4620; E-mail: Pawel@ParentsToolshop.com or URL: <http://www.ParentsToolshop.com>