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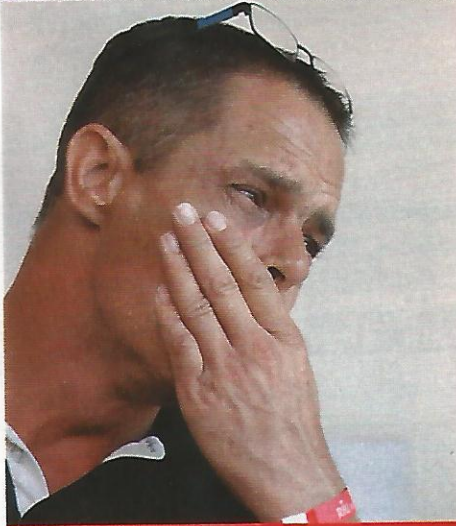
was 16 she accused me of trying to break up her relationship with her boyfriend because I wouldn't allow him to sleep over.

She started swearing at me and I slapped her. Hard. So hard her teeth rattled. I'm not proud of losing my cool – it was the only time I took a hand to either of them – but a lot of built-up anger went into that slap.

This is why Marietjie's story resonated with me. I understand why she lost control.

If there had been previous incidents, these should have been resolved with her husband before the real damage was done.

I'm a graduate and hold a respected



Mike is heartbroken after Mundolene's death, allegedly at the hand of his wife.

and responsible position where I work. I don't agree with assault and I don't have a volatile temper. I stress I always had the girls' best interests at heart.

The girls are 32 and 28 now and we all get on okay but there are scars. Yet I firmly believe the actions I took prepared my stepdaughters for the adult world and I don't doubt for a moment that I had a good influence on them.

My son, on the other hand, always got on well with my husband and they have a great relationship today.

Looking back, I shouldn't have tolerated what I considered bad or unhealthy behaviour but a lot of the time I didn't want to rock the boat or my marriage.

But I should have. Each and every instance of behaviour that caused distress to me, as their father's wife, should have been dealt with immediately. Children need to respect their parents. Both parents. Even if one is a stepparent.

HOW TO MERGE WITHOUT MAYHEM

FAMILY set-ups involving step-parents can cause much heartache and the situation needs to be handled as sensitively as possible, experts say.

"Couples can be naive about how things will work out," says Gerrie Pretorius, a counsellor with Life Counsel in Pretoria. "They have this ideal of how life will be, only to find out it's not that simple."

There's a fundamental difference between a family that includes a stepparent and one where both biological parents are present, and kids from different scenarios need to be treated differently.

"It's important to remember that children who are processing a traumatic divorce or the death of a parent are struggling with issues such as rejection, low self-esteem and aggression," Pretorius says.

"They're generally less forgiving. It's not always easy accepting a new parent and the child might need help dealing with their own pain before they're ready to accept a new person in their world."

Retha Kruger, an educational psychologist from Cape Town, says parents should bear in mind that children don't always have the necessary emotional skills to deal with these kinds of changes and need proper support.

Our experts' tips

■ Bear in mind that having a stepparent in the house calls for a major adjustment and it takes time. Don't try to pre-empt or force things – it will only make the adjustment period more difficult.

■ Speak to your partner and the children about the role of the stepparent. Usually it's better if the biological parent is in charge of maintaining discipline until the stepparent has formed a stronger bond with the kids.

■ Explain to the children that the stepparent isn't there to replace the biological parent. They have chosen to be there because they love their mom or dad and want to build a new relationship with everyone in the home.

■ Don't try to force respect – rather encourage it with love and kindness.

■ Don't be too hard on yourself if the kids don't accept you. As a stepparent you're vulnerable to the children's rejection. Try to stay strong and show the child you're willing to give them time and space. Hopefully in time love will conquer all.

■ Don't get involved in conflict between the child and the biological parent – allow them to sort the issue out themselves.

■ Don't bad-mouth the biological parent you're replacing. Stay neutral and try to be empathetic.

■ Be open with your partner about challenges and frustrations, communicate with each other and find solutions together.

■ Be consistent in how discipline is maintained in the home, and be wary of the children playing you and your partner off against one another or emotionally manipulating you.

■ Make a point of spending quality time together to establish new traditions and rituals that are unique to the family. As soon as a problem arises, talk about it.

■ Don't be afraid to get professional help if you feel you aren't coping. Family counselling sessions can help you when you can't see the wood for the trees and can help to put things in perspective.

– MARELIZE POTGIETER

