

I want my stepson to live with us but my partner isn't sure



**My 13-year-old stepson has always been very insecure, unlike his 11-year-old sister. About four years ago, their mother met a man and they all went to live abroad. The boy did not want to go and would have preferred to stay with his dad, my partner. More recently, he told his mum that he has thoughts of self-harming. He also said a few months ago that he hated his mother and feared his dad could die suddenly.**

**Both kids adore their father, who is devoted to them (he calls regularly and visits twice a year). My partner is a very stable, calm, generous and loving feature in their lives and we have lived together for seven years. In contrast, the mother had a string of short-term relationships after she decided to terminate their marriage. For this man who she then barely knew, she left her stable job and removed the kids from their familiar environment.**

**My partner pays for all bills related to the children. She does not contribute at all towards these expenses. My partner and I find that he's been taken advantage of but he feels powerless as he fears she may prevent him from seeing his kids if he does not comply with her financial demands. She once threatened to take him to court. In any case, there is no jurisdiction outside the UK for that, and the terms of their divorce state that both should contribute equally towards the children. Yet he keeps conceding to all her demands.**

**I resented immensely losing contact with them (I am childless, aged 53). I suppose deep down I wanted them to be mine.**

**I am encouraging my partner to have a word with his son and assess the situation, asking if he would like to live in the UK. I fear that if we accept the status quo, later on, once given the choice, the boy will come and live with us anyway but he could be more emotionally damaged. My partner, however, fears separating the siblings, who have always been very close.**

**Where do we go from here?**

Your original letter was very long and very loaded against the children's mother. What I'm confused about is that you really only seem to want one of the children to come over and then, only by a certain age. It sounds as if the boy is already emotionally in turmoil and would be further damaged by being removed from his sister. What then? I think you have become so fixated with the status quo and what you don't like about it, that you've not given due thought to what would happen if one or both children actually came over.

It is so easy to look at other people's children and think you could do things in a better way, but remember that, however imperfect, your partner's ex is the children's mother and nothing in your letter led me to think she was abusing them in any way (obviously my advice would be different if she were).

I contacted Alison O'Mahony, a therapeutic practitioner ([aft.org.uk](http://aft.org.uk)) who specialises in stepfamilies and has vast experience in this field. "These divorces when the children are quite young are always difficult," she says. "To have these 'anti-ex' campaigns is never helpful. It's more about working with what is rather than having a go."

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The pressure the children are being put under – to in effect choose – is not helpful

O'Mahony thinks that your partner "probably knows his ex better than anyone. He probably knows that if he goes head to head with her, he'll end up with less."

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I would try very hard not to judge your ex-partner for this. It's part of why you love him – he is putting the children first. Perhaps not in the way you think he should, however. Whatever arrangement they came to, your ex would have agreed to it (you didn't mention a court order so I presume he did). The only way to bring one or both children here now would be with the agreement of the mother or via a court order in the country of residence.

O'Mahony feels that the pressure the children are being put under – to in effect choose – is not helpful: "A lot of research says that an acrimonious divorce is more damaging. What the children want is to be free to love both parents."

Could you help facilitate that? We think that's the way forward.

O'Mahony recommends: "Not speaking ill of the other parent – they are 50% their mother/father, so it knocks the self-esteem of the child. Try to take a step back and let go of the anger, which isn't helping. Do you have another outlet for your outbursts? Sport/friends? If you can really try to understand your partner's point of view, you have more chance of meeting him in the middle. What the children need most is a role model of a successful relationship."

One of the most useful things you can do for children of divorce, O'Mahony says, "is to teach them critical thinking, eg, to analyse a situation, to think for themselves and look at what is true and where information (facts) comes from." I think this is fantastic advice, but lots of adults don't like children to think for themselves: it's exposing.

Work backwards. What do you want to achieve? You say children should come first – brilliant. If you want to help in building these children up into multi-faceted, thinking-for-themselves adults you are in a great position to do so. Put your energies into that, and your relationship; not in making a case for them to leave their mother.

## **Your problems solved**

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- This article was amended on 26 February 2016. An earlier version referred to the stepmother rather than the mother in Annalisa's answer.