

“When Your Metamour is Bad for your Kids & The Parental Veto”



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Introduction

If there's something that strikes terror into the heart of any parent, it's a threat to their kids' wellbeing. And even worse, being powerless to protect them from that threat. But for a polyamorous parent, one of most difficult challenges might come in the form of a metamour (your co-parent's partner), whom you believe is bad for your children. You might also feel powerless--and if you don't, you might at least feel very confused about how the tenets of your particular brand of non-monogamy works alongside with parental rights and duties--since according to modern polyamorous guidebooks, 'vetoing' other people's relationships is unethical, right?

Apart from that it isn't always, when one considers the relationships of adults with minors. A parental veto might be desirable, where a non-parent's interaction with your kids is harmful. Even then, it must be exercised with caution. This is how I'll define it for the following discussion:

A parental veto, is the non-binary option to limit your children's interactions with non-parents who are harmful to the children's healthy development. Options include, but are not limited to, deferring interaction until later, creating safe circumstances for interaction, minimising the quantity of interactions as well as eradicating contact entirely (perhaps with the help of the legal system).

A parental veto, is something which could be seen as independent of relationship style, yet in reality the various options are not exercisable when the relationship, communication and trust between co-parents has irretrievably broken down. Take for instance the interaction of children with an ex's partner. Most parents have little ability to influence their children's interaction with their ex's current partner and even less to veto it, unless there is admissible proof of

harm to the children as a direct consequence of the ex's partner's action (or lack of action).

A parental veto on a non-parent's interaction with your kids, when it concerns a metamour, is not the same thing as exercising a veto on your partner's relationship with your metamour, and should be considered separately; even if it might mean that your partner has less time in practice to dedicate to their relationship, depending on how much time they choose then to allocate with the children. Tread cautiously, resentment has the potential to flourish in such situations. A parental veto could be perceived as tantamount to accusing your metamour of inappropriate/unhealthy behaviours, of your partner's taste in partner, and of your co-parent's ability to parent well (ouch)!

The ability to exercise a 'poly' parental veto, will be highly dependent on the quality of the relationship of the co-parents, their communication skills with one another and how aligned their beliefs are. Because what constitutes 'healthy development' or 'harm' is a hotly debated point, even between parents. And using parental veto in a polyamorous relationship might cover up an internal couple/existing relationship privilege: the assumption that the existing relationship (in this case that of the co-parents) will always come first over any other--normally newer--relationship.

So why would you consider not giving special partner privileges to parents?

Many parents live by the axiom that the children should come first. Whether or not you adhere to this belief, it does not necessarily follow that in an egalitarian polyamorous relationship, the relationship of the parents to each other must come before all other adult and/or romantic relationships; only the parents' relationship to each other as regards their children justifies special

consideration and this only in the course of their responsibility to maintain and protect them.

The truth is that a significant proportion of polyamorous parents have at least a type of de facto--a priori--parental veto built right into their methodology of creating relationships with new partners. 'Let's not introduce new partners to the children until we're serious about them' is a way to 'defer interaction' and build trust about the type of person who might be influencing the children. Because exercising parental veto after a relationship has already become serious, is more challenging.

Whilst it is possible to clarify theoretically between exercising parental veto and protecting the existing relationship, it is also extremely difficult. Why? Because of how the exchange of romantic affection is often perceived to cement the parental relationship, co-parent's differing belief systems of what is truly good for their children, how this intersects with their vision of the healthiest family unit and our primal urges to protect that against anything we perceive as bad. Especially because sometimes, what is bad for the parental relationship, will also potentially have a detrimental effect on the children.

So when considering a parental veto, the questions you might consider asking yourself are these:

- Do you want to use a parental veto as a way to shift your own emotional risk?
- Might your children benefit from this interaction even if you do not? In ways you cannot perceive?
- Are you trying to control their world view?

- Or is the veto truly to protect your children?

In order to reach the heart of the matter, you need to assume responsibility for your own attitudes and emotions trying your best not to project your issues onto your children.

Ideally the circumstances where a parental veto might be appropriate could have been discussed and agreed upon with your co-parent(s) beforehand. Forewarned is forearmed.

What is good and bad for children?

In the grander scheme of life, we know that many of our best lessons come from our most painful experiences. Having this theoretical knowledge though, is hardly helpful when it comes to seeing your child in pain. We would do almost anything to stop it. So let's be clear about what behaviours we can immediately delineate as those which might warrant a parental veto.

Physical abuse. Neglect. Sexual abuse. Psychological/Emotional Abuse.

There's no question in my mind that if a metamour exhibits any of these characteristics, it is imperative that you feel at least able to discuss the implementation of a parental veto. As polyamorous parents, it's advisable to discuss which extreme behaviour you both believe are grounds for such a parental veto. Overwhelming, modern parents tend to agree on neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse at a bare minimum. Still the lines aren't clear for many. Indeed, what is abuse? Does it have to be intentional and conscious? For some, slapping and spanking is not abuse. For some, the mere potential that children walk in on a couple having sex is a form of sexual abuse. Talk about your beliefs and the reasons why you hold them. Explore potential scenarios. And if your partner continues to date someone who does exhibit those agreed upon behaviours, this will shine a light on a whole other can of worms.

The Grey Area of Emotional Abuse

Coercion, rejection, isolating, humiliating, gaslighting, ... these are areas which are easily identified on paper, less so in real life because they are extremely pervasive, usually obvious only after cumulated effect, and even ingrained in our everyday language (I'm English. I'm a pass master at hilarious yet demeaning sarcasm... restraining my deadpan daily commentary is a constant effort). I also entrust my kids' care 6-7 hours a day with teachers and other adults, none of whom I've been able to get to know at a deep, and intimate level, but whom might negatively influence my children in untold ways.

Whilst emotional abuse is an important issue, when it comes from a metamour (even a metamour who acts as a step-parent), it is likely, according to step parenting studies¹, to be far less impactful than if it comes from or is sanctioned by, you or your co-parent. You are the bedrock of your children's self-esteem which can be blown apart by your direct or indirect emotional abuse. Be mindful of this responsibility. Are you both aware of what emotional abuse is? How it can manifest itself? What constitutes sanctioning it? Make it your business to educate yourself independently as part of your parenting and you'll most likely identify plenty of danger areas in your own behaviour, let alone the transient influence of others. The better able you are to call it out in yourselves, the more confident you will be when identifying it in others who are close to you and/or them... and the more compassionately you will be able to call it out.

Let's consider a less formidable scenario. If through differing needs and strategies to meet those needs, your relationship with your metamour is prone to

¹ <http://www.smartstepfamilies.com/view/attachment-difference>

generating drama--for which you are both responsible--then it might be advisable, at least in the early years of parenting, to exercise your right to limited interaction (which may also result in their limited interaction with your small children since you might be with them a lot of the time). Again, ask yourself whether you are using this as a control mechanism, or as a procrastinating technique to avoid working on your own stuff. Dive deeper.

The New Influence of Metamours

Parents are often seen as a single unit; indeed many of the parenting books advise presenting a united front so that the children don't play one off against the other. But in the words of *More Than Two*,

The people in a relationship are more important than the relationship.

Even co-parent relationships. You are co-parents and you therefore have an important relationship, but you are also two individuals with different attitudes, needs and desires. You have a joint child-rearing project. Yet whatever you agreed at the beginning of your parenting project is not binding because we all change all the time (especially when exposed to new relationship mirrors). You cannot force or expect your co-parent to be the type of parent you want them to be, nor even that they might have once promised to be. We all do change, and we can also change our mind when it comes to how to bring up children. Some of those changes and attitudes will come from discussions with other parents, from reading and processing new information, observing how your children grow and--for polyamorous parents--from important new relationships.

Listening to why your partner has now changed their opinion on an key area of child rearing, upon which you had previously agreed, as a result of a discussion with a metamour can feel like a threat to your children, to your parental relationship and your romantic relationship.

These three components are better off regarded, as much as possible, as separate from one another. Regarding them as separate, means that already in your own mind, each one can be tackled separately. You remove the

'exponentiality' of the perceived threat. Moreover each of them doesn't have to be a threat, unless you treat them as one. They can be simply an opportunity for more communication, more reading, more learning about raising your children, about you, about your co-parent and about your metamour and what new dynamics they bring (good and bad).

It's also important not to shut the door on new ideas out of fear of change, even if parental responsibility and therefore decision making is ultimately up to the designated parents--however many you are--at least until explicitly stated and/or otherwise formalised. As parents you are totally responsible for the decisions you make regarding your children. You won't always agree with one another. But in my experience (and my clients' experience) there is little harm to be had from trialling different parenting approaches. Be curious. See what works. Maybe you'll be surprised. And you can always change your approach again.

Likewise, a difference in belief systems can be a dealbreaker, or it can be an opportunity to educate your children on how beliefs can co-exist in one family; even diametrically opposed beliefs.

But what if the influence comes not from suggestion but as a direct interaction?

Real-Life Example

My metamour had been with us for 6 months, and she was eager to gain affection from our son who had until then mostly ignored her. He came up to the dinner table for a banana, and she said 'I'll give you this banana in exchange for a kiss. No kiss, no banana.' My son who really wanted the banana, gave her a kiss before I could say anything. Our mutual boyfriend laughed and my heart skipped a beat. Until then, we'd been very clear on not misusing power to coerce affection, but whilst the brief interaction hit me like a ton of bricks due to my own childhood triggers, my boyfriend didn't appear to see the ramifications.

(Case study used from a client, with permission)

Any reaction needs to be in proportion to what has happened, not what you see as a future scenario spun out of what-ifs or the triggers from childhood trauma. Forming unhealthy behaviours takes practice, and it's unlikely that the impact of 'one kiss for a banana' will pave the way to a lifelong habit of emotional manipulation (even if discussion around this is important - because, you know, ever heard of grooming?). But creating drama in the moment about 'one kiss for a banana', will most likely lead to a bigger, more stressful impact for the child. Do address your childhood trigger as soon as you are able. And bring this issue up for deeper discussion with your partners.

Starting with the pronoun 'I'.

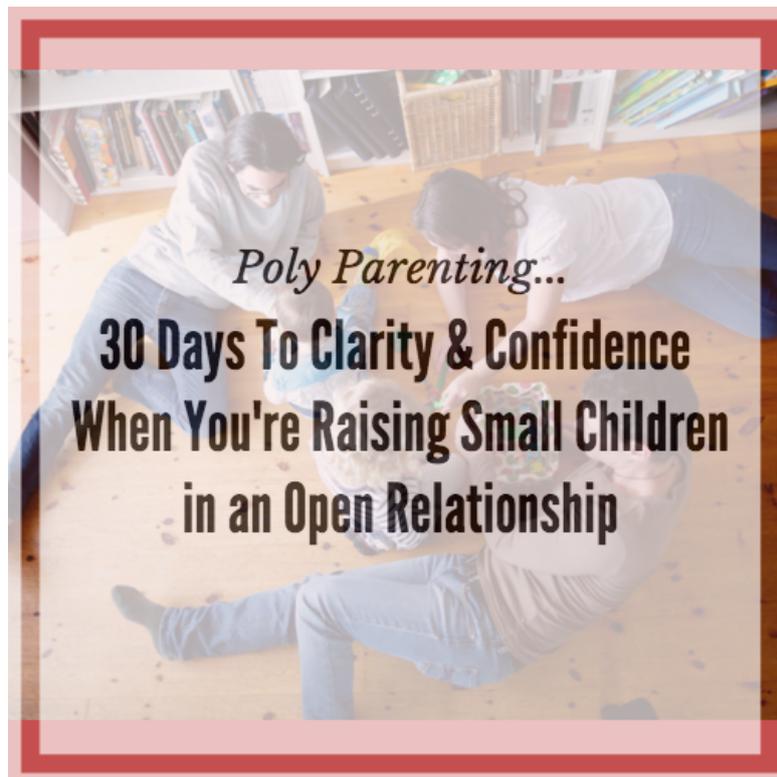
For if you start the conversation with the pronoun 'we'..as in 'we' feel that misusing power to coerce affection is wrong, then the conversation won't, most likely, lead to anything productive. You'll assume your co-parent's present beliefs (due to their past non-binding agreements), position you and your co-

parent against your metamour and start inculcating the us-vs.-you drama triangle.

Your discussion can include an exploration of what consent means, how to teach kids consent - and how not to, as well as why affection shouldn't be used as any kind of currency. These are pretty important topics.

Does the parenting relationship come before other adult relationships?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It's the same as asking, does your relationship with yourself come before your relationship with your kids? Sometimes you need to attend to your needs before you can attend to anyone else's. Sometimes you need to drop what you're doing and stop them from sticking their fingers in the electricity sockets or comfort them *right now* when they're screaming, because the worst has happened; that manky old doll's head they never play with, was inadvertently *touched* by their best friend.



About the Author

Louisa lives in an open relationship with her partners and two children in Sweden. She's the author of The Husband Swap & Lessons in Life & Love To My Younger Self published by Thorntree Press. She's also a contributor to Huffington Post, Salon, Nerve, Jezebel and the Guardian.