Boyfriend has a child [1]

Dear Alice

By the time you respond to this, I probably will have made the decision... but I have to have someone else's point of view. I fell in love with this man about a year ago. We have known each other for five years but we didn't start "messing around" until last year. Last summer things started to get somewhat serious between us and he told me he was soon to be a father. At the time I told him that I was not willing to deal with that and that I didn't want to get serious.

Well, to make a long story short, before I knew it I was head over heels for him. The only problem we have ever had was dealing with his fatherhood. He is afraid to tell the mother of his child about me and it is eating me apart. I love him dearly but that coupled with the fact that I feel like such an outsider when it comes to the relationship that he has with her. I don't know if I am being immature or not, but I am hurt that he can't or won't tell her. HELP me please.

Signed, Not the mother

Answer

Dear Not the mother,

Trying to figure out how to move forward in a new relationship isn't at all immature? especially when you?re also juggling the complicated dynamics of a creating a family with children from previous relationships (often called a blended family)! The decision on whether or not to stay with your partner [2] is completely up to you, but you may find it helpful to reflect on this situation? both on your own, as well as with your partner. It might help to consider how this situation makes you feel and what you both need and want to have a happy, fulfilling, and healthy relationship [3]. Since this may be a difficult process for many people, you might also consider speaking with a trusted family member, friend, or mental health professional to further work through your concerns and help you make a decision on how to move forward.

First, it may be most useful to take a step back and try to figure out what it is you desire in a relationship. To guide your train of thought, you might make a list of your relationship deal makers (what you must have) and deal breakers (what you can't tolerate). Afterwards, think about how your current relationship matches up to that list, as well as if there are deal breakers you two might work through, or more deal makers you wish to secure for yourself. From your question, it appears that you initially thought your partner?s child was a deal
breaker as you weren’t able to ?deal with that,? and didn’t want to get serious. So now it?s worth exploring: has that changed, or could you see that changing in the foreseeable future? Are you interested in being in a relationship with a person who has a child with someone else?

As you reconsider your feelings on that, it’s worth mentioning that your initial concerns or reluctance may not have been completely unwarranted. Managing family dynamics, especially for a blended family, may be challenging; however, it’s possible to be a part of a blended family and to find much joy and reward as a result. Though your partner’s existing relationship with the child’s mother may make you feel uneasy, it’s crucial to remember that they’re likely to maintain some semblance of a relationship given their responsibilities to their child. Also keep in mind that being a part of a blended family may take a new level of investment from you towards your partner and the child. If you two get serious, chances are you’ll begin to have a role in their child’s life, and you and your partner may need to explore what that may look like in the future.

You also mentioned that your partner is afraid to tell his child’s mother about you and that you’re feeling particularly hurt by that. It’s possible that your partner isn’t hiding you to hurt you or because he’s ashamed of the relationship. It may be that co-parenting is entirely new territory for them to navigate, and they’re struggling to figure out the best way to do so. It may also be that his relationship with the child’s mother is currently delicate or rocky, and they need to strengthen that further before he tells her about you, since you could potentially have a big role in their child’s life (a concept which may feel nerve-wracking for her). Since it’s unclear what your partner’s thoughts are on this specific issue, you may find more answers and peace of mind from having a direct, open, and honest conversation with him.

If and when you feel ready to talk further, ensuring that that all parties feel they’re respected, given an opportunity to share their thoughts and be heard, and that the other person is keeping an open-mind will hopefully set the stage for a respectful and productive discussion. You may want to avoid trying to hash it out immediately after an unpleasant incident or during a heated argument because it’s often easier and more productive to have serious conversations when neither person is angry. If you do choose to talk to your partner about the situation, you may want to pick a mutually agreeable time for you two to talk. That way, both of you have the opportunity to think about the issues before you actually talk about them. And once you two sit down together, you might share your concerns regarding him being a father, the relationship with his child’s mother, and his secrecy about your relationship. At the end of it all, maybe you two may find compromises that ultimately strengthen your relationship with one another.

In complex situations such as this, working with a mental health professional individually or professional couples counseling might help you and your boyfriend decide how to move forward. They may be able to act as an impartial listener and help facilitate your conversation. If after working through your feelings and having these discussions you decide to stay in the relationship, you’ll hopefully have more clarity in regards to the direction of your relationship and the role you play in it. On the other hand, if you decide (with or without counseling or discussion) to end the relationship, that’s okay. Ending a relationship doesn’t mean that you don’t love your partner, or that the relationship isn’t valuable to you. It could just mean that it’s currently not what you want for your future.

Here’s to hoping you soon find some peace of mind and the answers you’re looking for. Best of luck,
Related questions

Why aren't we 'In a Relationship' online? [7]
We love each other, but we fight all the time... [8]
History lesson: How do I ask about my partner's past? [9]
Told him my true feelings and now it's truly awkward [10]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [12]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [13]

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