

## PATRICIA'S "SCRIPTS TO GET BY ON"

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### **The “Loyalty Bind Talk”: Actively loosening children’s loyalty binds**

Conflict between divorced parents creates painful *loyalty binds* that require children to choose between the people they love. A large body of research establishes that parental conflict has profoundly negative effects on children in first-time families as well as post-divorce. Stepparent relationships seem to create almost genetically coded loyalty binds for children: If I care for my stepparent, I have betrayed my other parent of the same sex. Adults can deepen these binds unbearably when an ex-spouse badmouths a stepparent, or when remarried parents insist that children love a stepparent. Even in cooperative divorces, children seem to need active assistance to loosen their loyalty binds with stepparents. The good news is that adults can help. Parents, stepparents and ex-spouses need to have “loyalty bind talks” to reassure children, in age-appropriate language, that they do not have to choose among the adults in their lives. Jack might say to his daughter Anya:

*“Having a stepmom and a mom can be confusing to a lot of kids. I want you to know that your mom’s place in your heart, and your place in her heart, is permanent. Like the earth. Like the mountains. Your mom will always be your mom. Susan is your stepmother. That’s different from a mom. Susan might or might not have a place in your heart sometime. If she does, it will be a different place from your mom’s place in your heart. Meanwhile, you do not have to love Susan. You just have to be civil, like you would be with any other adult.”* For a teen, the parent may begin, *“You probably already know this. But I want you to know that I know that....”*

Like conversations about sex, loyalty bind talks often need repeating at different developmental stages, and at major transitions in the family (when the adults move in together, remarriage, etc). Ex-spouses who are anxious about stepparents replacing them are much more likely to sabotage the new relationship. I coach stepcouples to reassure ex-spouses by sharing the content of the loyalty bind talk: *“Just so you know, we want to reassure you that this is what we believe and what we are saying to the children about having a mom and a stepmom.”*

### **Talking with Children about a Toxic Ex-Spouse: Keep the focus on the child, not the ex-spouse.**

One of the most painful and confusing moments for a divorced parent occurs when an ex-spouse does or says something awful to the child. What to do? Coach parents to validate unacceptable behavior in a calm, neutral tone. Simply and briefly state the facts: *“Your mom says very bad things about me sometimes.” “Your dad does get drunk.” “Mom does lose her temper.”*

Then immediately shift the focus to the *child’s dilemma*: *“That must be very confusing when she says those things.” “That puts you in a bind—do you believe mom or dad. That must feel pretty bad.” “What’s that like inside you when he starts drinking/when she says those things?”* Then listen. Keeping the focus on the *child’s dilemma* avoids tightening the loyalty bind. If safety is an issue, make an action plan. Ranting and raving about the offending absent parent only tightens children’s loyalty binds. It meets the ranting parent’s need but makes a bad situation even more unbearable for children.

## Exploring Old “Bruises”: Shifting the focus to psychodynamic work.

Susan, a stepmother, reports feeling painfully jealous and rejected during visitation weeks. Prematurely focusing on individual dynamics (“WHY does it hurt so much?”) is humiliating to stepfamily members. It is disrespectful of the immense power of stepfamily architecture to drive the sanest of us feel crazy. The therapist begins by providing psychoeducation and on improving the couple’s interpersonal process. Often work on these two levels resolves the problem: The therapist normalizes the intense feelings created by stuck insider/outsider positions. The therapist helps Susan to express her pain with less blame and helps Jack, Susan’s husband, to understand his wife’s outsider position and express his compassion and support for her. This interpersonal work helps stepcouples create an “insider” connection with each other in the face of the polarizing forces of “stepfamily architecture.” The therapist also helps the couple to find small “insider” moves that Jack can make toward Susan (and Susan can request) during the children’s visitation: Make eye contact several times a day, offer/ask for a private hug at least once a day, play footsie under the table, establish a “date night” the night before children arrive. Susan, who has been encouraged to pursue her friendships (where she can be an “insider”) and to find activities outside the house during large parts of every visitation, joins a volleyball team that plays on Wednesdays, the mid-week visitation night.

Despite these changes, Susan continues to report feeling overwhelmed with feelings of rejection and jealousy during visitations. NOW, it is time to shift to exploring old bruises. The therapist first, always, begins by again acknowledging the power of stepfamily architecture: *“Susan, we all know, your stepmother position places you in an outsider position that makes for intense feelings that are nobody’s favorites. It is so hard to be the stuck outsider in any group. Nobody would like this. And, it seems like there is something about this outsider position that is especially painful for you. I am wondering....who were the insiders and the outsiders in the family you cam from?* Susan reveals that her younger brother was her mother’s favorite. Father was an absent alcoholic. “Well no wonder this is so painful for you. It’s like kicking you in an old bruise.”

The therapist now encourages connection within the couple: “Would it be OK to tell Jack a little bit about what that was like for you?” Susan shares some of her pain with Jack. “Jack, how do you feel inside listening to Susan’s story?” “Would you tell her?” Sometimes exploring these bruises in the couple, and creating an empathic connection around them in the couple therapy, can resolve the issue. Often individual work is necessary, either with me or with another therapist. If unresolved bruises continue to make the arousal level too high, couples work is no longer therapeutic. Individual therapy will be necessary before couples work can proceed.

**Note: Any compassionate individual therapist is vulnerable to uniting with their own patient against “offending” absent stepfamily members, further polarizing an already fragile system. Train yourself to hold on to your compassion for the other members of the system. For the same reason, maintaining good communication between the individual and the couples therapists is critical to therapeutic success with people in stepfamilies.**