

Before You Marry or Cohabitate

This list of discussion topics is based on problems that we see over and over in our online community. Sometimes we avoid talking about these things out of fear of upsetting our partner. We highly recommend pre-marital counseling. Find a qualified therapist who has experience with stepfamilies. Take the list with you and discuss it in your sessions. If that is not an option for you, then discuss them anyway. Before you start, set some groundrules about what you will do if the feelings get too intense. The discussion may become heated but remember, you are better off understanding the issues now rather than after you move in.

The Biological Mother.

- What is his relationship with the BioMom?
- How much contact is there and what kinds of things are discussed?
- How are school and religious events handled? Family celebrations? Sporting events and banquets. How will it be handled if BioMom is rude or uncooperative. Is it assumed that you will help out with driving?
- How stable is she?
- Is there a reason that you could end up with custody? Remember that the circumstances can change and what seems impossible right now may become reality in later years. **ANY TIME YOU MARRY A MAN WITH CHILDREN THERE IS A POSSIBILITY THAT YOU MAY ALL LIVE UNDER THE SAME ROOF, NO MATTER HOW UNLIKELY THIS SEEMS ON YOUR WEDDING DAY.** Visitation.
- What is the visitation arrangement? Is it specified in a court order?
- Is there any pending legal activity?
- What will your role be in the visitation? How much Dad and child alone time will there be? If you get overwhelmed how will it be handled?
- Who will fix meals, do their laundry, clean them up and cart them around while they are with you?
- If Dad has to work or wants to do something else, will you be expected to babysit?
- What are the children's responsibilities around the house? What are the rules at Dad's house? How are they enforced? When children are disrespectful or disobey you how will that be handled?
- If the children are older or adults, what are the rules about them coming and going? Do they have keys? Does Bio Mom?
- What level of contact is there between the children and Bio Mom during visits?
- Will there be any alone time for the two of you together without the kids during visits? Vacation.
- Will the children go on vacation with you?
- Who will supervise them?
- Who will make vacation arrangements?
- Who will pay for what? Living Arrangements.
- Where will you live? We suggest a new 'us' home, leaving ghosts behind. Children may feel territorial even about their father's bachelor housing. It's been their's too and they may not like someone else moving into it.
- Family Planning.
- Will you have your own children? When and how many? **LISTEN TO WHAT HE SAYS.** Many women think that even if he says he doesn't want any more they will convince him to change his mind later. Chances are you won't. Go read some of the heart-breaking posts in our online community about this issue. If you are thinking about vasectomy reversal, do you know the cost, the success rates.

Money.

- How much child support does he pay? Is it up to date?
- What other things does he pay for?
- How much does BioMom pay?
- How will it be handled if she wants more, there are unanticipated expenses or either parent loses their job?
- What are the expectations for college expenses?
- How much of this is specified in a court order?
- What will you be expected to contribute?
- What does he spend on gifts for the children? Don't back off if he says that you'll keep your money separate and won't need to worry about this. If he is court-ordered to pay and can't carry his share of expenses, you **WILL** be affected.
- - How much debt is there? You have a right to a full financial disclosure that **INCLUDES** a full disclosure of his indebtedness.
- - Become familiar with the law and the IRS rulings so that you can take advantage of any protections you are eligible for.

Listen, but also remember to validate the words with the behavior. Sometimes we listen to what we are being told and it all sounds good. However, the execution is different. If your partner's behavior does not match their words, call it to their attention. If they listen, and attempt to correct it then good for you. If the behavior consistently does not match the words, it is a warning sign.