

Ex's, Wavering Wives & Unwelcome Pets



Dear Couples Company:

Prior to our marriage 4 years ago, my and I both agreed to no pets. Now we have a problem. Her sons received a puppy for Christmas from their biological father.

I am their stepfather and I do not want dog in house nor the responsibility that comes with one. Now my wife is having change of heart towards new pet and this has me feeling betrayed by her. I feel like the bad guy in this situation. This is a second marriage for both of us and in my first marriage we had too many dogs and I don't want the same problems again. I am so angry at my wife and her ex-husband about this. How can I handle this situation without looking like the villain to the boys?

Additional facts: The boys are 14 and 16 years old; the biological parents have a joint custody agreement.

AL, M (42)

Corpus Christi, TX

Married 4 years; 2 children 14 & 16

Dear AL.:

You're in a difficult situation because the children will see the removal of the pet as punishment to them, regardless of the previous agreement you had with your wife. It is also not the dog's fault so please resist the temptation to take out your anger on the pet.

Though the children are old enough to understand, they are teenagers and teens look and exploit anything that can cause a rift. Don't give them the ammunition. This may come back to haunt you so you'll need to be diplomatic but firm.

Dealing with the Ex-husband

The truth is their father acted irresponsibly by giving the dog without consulting you first. You have every right to be angry with him. Explain the inappropriateness of his behavior to the children so they can learn from this situation. Make them a part of the solution. Ask the boys how they would handle it (they're old enough to help in the problem solving and will appreciate being consulted). Then, address their father both in person and in writing, (let the boys read the letter you give him so there are no misunderstandings).

About the dog:

To solve this issue you will have to set the boundaries. You have two options that will allow the boys to keep the dog and honor your desires.

#1) As the father and mother have joint custody, insist the dog live with the parent who gave the dog. This will allow the boys to keep their pet at their father's house until the oldest turns 18 and has a place of his own. It also puts the responsibility back on the parent that initiated this issue.

#2) Keep the dog, but insist it live outside and the boys take full responsibility for it (including walks, clean up and playing). When the oldest boy turns 18 and moves out, the dog goes with him.

Now the other issue, your wife:

You have every right to feel betrayed and angry with your wife and you will need to address this with her. The best way to do this is through an assertive statement. This is how you do that.

State the problem:

"When you allowed the boys' father to give them a dog for Christmas after we explicitly agreed to no pets prior to marriage..."

**Tell her how it makes you feel,
(and use the word "feel" not "think")**

"When you ignore our agreements, I feel betrayed and marginalized. It shows a lack of respect from you toward my feelings and the foundations we've built this marriage on. I resent the fact that you decided to allow the boys' father to give a dog without consulting me, especially since you are aware of the problems I've had with this in the past. This puts me in the position of being the bad guy with the kids and that's not fair to me. It really is not fair."

**Tell her how you would prefer she handle this
or any other similar situation next time.**

"I don't want to punish the boys over this, but we need to find a solution now. I also want to make sure this doesn't happen again. The next time the boys' father wants to do something for the boys that will require our home, can we speak to him together and decide together if what he wants to do is appropriate?"

Get her agreement on a plan of action and together carry it out.

