

What Do Your Words Really Say?*

By Isolina Ricci, Ph.D.

Question: I'm engaged to a wonderful man who loves me and my children. But, my fiancé says I often talk like I'm still married to my first husband and it upsets him. I don't want anything to threaten our relationship. What can I do?

Answer:

It's not unusual for partners to worry about this issue and it needs to be addressed whether or not you are co-parenting. Here are two things you can do that may help. One is something you can do now and the second will require teamwork between you and your fiancé.

First, examine the actual words you use when you talk about the children's other parent, not just with your fiancé, but with others. Words have power beyond our intent. Often, we aren't aware of the words we use or the impression they leave with others. You might ask your fiancé or a good friend if they hear you mention the children's father often by name or say "my husband", "my ex", or other phrases that sound like you are still connected emotionally. Whenever people use the terms "husband", "wife" (or even "ex-husband" or "ex-wife") to describe a former spouse, it can leave the impression that they are still clinging to the past (even if it is not the case.) If the situation was reversed, how would you feel if your fiancé kept referring to his child's mother as "his wife"?

Perhaps you don't use "husband" or "wife" but you do use the other parent's name or "my ex". Using first names or my ex are better than saying "husband" or "wife" but they are not as effective for retraining thought patterns and setting expectations and personal boundaries. If you aren't already doing so, try saying, "the children's father." Feel the difference between saying, "My husband (or my ex) will be picking up the children this Friday", in contrast to "The children's father will be picking up the children this Friday." The first statement reminds others (and yourself) that you were married to him while the latter excludes the past marriage and it emphasizes today's relationship as parents.

Using the term "children's father" or "children's mother" can serve other purposes. It can say to your fiancé, your children, as well as the other parent that you acknowledge the other parent's status as a parent but it also sends a message that you have defined clear boundaries between the past and the present. The same principles apply to your fiancé as he refers to his child's mother.

People who use "children's father" or "children's mother" often say that staying with these terms brings about a quiet "click" in their perspective as it shifts away from their old relationship as marital partners to a present-day focus limited to parenting. Using the new terms gives our thought processes a foundation for building that "parenting only" role and often helps defuse the emotional triggers of one's marital past. It can be remarkable how much difference the substitution of a few words can make.

Second, try to have a heart-to-heart talk with your fiancé and ask him to tell you more about his doubts. It may be hard to resist defending yourself, but it's important that you hear him out and understand his point of view without interruption. Perhaps he thinks you use phrases and terms about the children's father that sound too "wife-like", or he is weary of hearing you mention the other parent's name so much, or he perceives a tone in your voice or a look in your eyes. Your goal is to understand and appreciate his point of view and to play back what you have heard so he can correct your interpretation if needed. You don't have to agree with him, but he must be satisfied that you have understood him. Then, ask him to listen to you just as attentively. He must listen and understand your views as thoroughly as you have understood his. This process can provide a safe place for an intimate, often sacred, exchange of feelings and fears as long as you can make this time free of blame and shame. You may find that solutions naturally arise. However, if either one of you is not satisfied with the process or the outcome, then see a counselor together. Clear the air before this issue grows any larger and seriously injures your relationship.