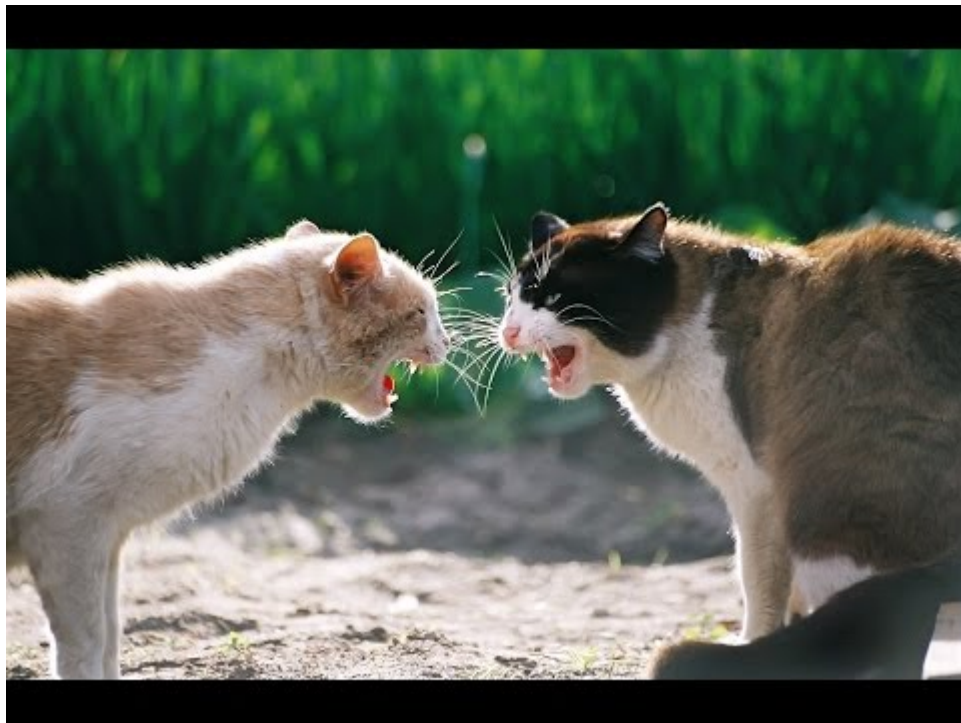


NOTE: This column won the Silver Award at the Parenting Publications of America Awards.

The ‘Other’ Woman ***Should you be friendly with the ex’s girlfriend?***

By Lynn Armitage



Houston, we have a problem. Her name is Carolyn.

Carolyn is my ex-husband’s girlfriend. They live together with her two pre-teens and most likely, they’ll marry. I’m OK with that part. You know what they say: “One woman’s junk is another woman’s treasure.”

No surprise, Carolyn and I don’t get along. We’re playing our respective roles flawlessly, just as nature intended: She loathes the ex-wife, I disdain my likely replacement. Funny thing is, we don’t even know each other.

“It’s a turf issue,” explains Michael G. Webb, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Newport Beach. “It’s easy for each to go into battle mode . . . the mother to become very protective of her children and the girlfriend to become very protective of her new partner and their lives.”

OK, I understand the dynamic. But did I mention I was thinner than her?

What’s really frustrating is that this woman, with whom I have no relationship whatsoever (we’ve spoken three words to each other in three years, and one isn’t publishable), is having a major influence on my daughters’ lives.

First off, she’s making them fat. My kids used to come home from their dad’s with bags of candy lovingly supplied by Carolyn. An obvious bribe, but it worked. Before long, I started hearing, “Carolyn makes good pancakes,” and “We baked brownies with Carolyn.” Within six months, my daughters doubled in girth. Every time I packed their bags for weekend visits, it felt like I was sending them out to pasture. My attempts at serving healthy food became fruitless -- pun intended. I’ve had to teach my daughters to just say “No” to French fries.

Then she chopped off their long, golden locks without consulting me. “She crossed a major boundary. As a mother, you were violated,” sides Webb in this turf war. But he warns, “Don’t use this situation to build up more anger and resentment. Instead, try to work with her and the ex in establishing common guidelines.”

Guidelines? OK, Carolyns of the world, listen up! Don’t be threatened by us ex-wives. We’re not your enemies. We want your relationships with our exes to work out because we don’t want them crawling back to us. All we ask is that you love our kids. Be patient, be kind. Don’t yell at them when they shuffle their feet because the noise irritates you. Understand that it’s a difficult situation for them, too. And please don’t rob us of those special moments we’re entitled to as mothers. We want to be the ones who pierce their ears, cut their hair, tell them about sex and share the heartache of a first crush. Remember, we’re their mothers, not you.

Webb claims it’s important for us to get along with these “Carolyns” because our children will benefit. “You don’t have to like her. You just have to have a working relationship and a common goal – the children’s best interests.”

Actually, I'm grateful that Carolyn professes to love my girls. Her heart seems to be in the right place.

But what's really comforting is knowing that no matter what happens between us, I'll always be prettier.

M-E-O-W!

For some reason, editor Lynn Armitage is craving a bowl of milk.

Michael G. Webb is a licensed marriage and family therapist based in Newport Beach.