

Shayla: How do I deal with a sexually curious child in a blended family?

Extended question:

A father has 50% custody of his 7 year old daughter with his ex-wife. The father is currently engaged to another woman.

The fiancée found the 7 year old with her pants down along with her 6 year old cousin. The fiancée is insisting that the 7 year old get counseling and is struggling on how to treat her step daughter.

The father questioned his daughter and found that she learned this from her 20 year old sister. The older sister had had a boyfriend over and, thinking the little girl was sleeping, inadvertently exposed her to sexual activity.

The ex-wife says she is opposed to any counseling and will take them to court if they do.

The fiancée is insisting on counseling.

The father simply wants to do what is right for his daughter.

Please let me know how to handle each person and above all the 7 year old as this event will shape the rest of her little life.

Please help.

Response:

First, let's clear the field a little shall we?

- a. Though she obviously has an emotional investment, the fiancée has no legal say on the matter.
- b. The ex-wife cannot go to court insisting that her daughter NOT get help. She'll be laughed out of court.
- c. Though the matter is serious, it will NOT necessarily "shape the rest of her life" unless the adults make it so.

So, since they clearly are allowed their opinions yet neither the ex-wife nor the fiancée have legal recourse on the matter, let's settle down to the only question of true value in this situation, "What is best for this little girl?"

Heightened sexual curiosity is normal among children, particularly when they've been exposed to sexual activity, pictures or concepts. Children are by nature imitators. They see adults using utensils and they start imitating them. They see adults "wrestling" in bed, and they start trying to imitate that. The fact that she acted upon what she saw does not make her perverted or damaged. It means she's normal.

Children also take twisted delight in shocking adults. They will gleefully fart, burp or pick their noses in public just to get a reaction. One of the best initial ways of dealing with such infantile behavior is to not give them the reaction they seek. If all the adults run around yelling and screaming or doting on her she is actually far more likely to do it again simply because it left such a big impression. So at this point I would suggest that while she should be rebuked, the scolding should be mild. On the other hand her older sister should be taken out behind the wood shed! I would consider threatening her with expulsion from the home if she continues her fornication.

Notice that I said "initial way of dealing." It is only if the behavior continues that we actually have a problem but "don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."¹

She needs to be taught about appropriate boundaries and behavior. Just as you would not make a huge emotional deal out of her behavior if she were picking her nose, but would instead matter-of-factly say, "Stop! That's nasty" and smack their hand away (and make them

¹ Matthew 6:34

wash it), so the matter at hand should be treated. She should simply be informed that her behavior is unacceptable, and that as a consequence she may not play with that particular cousin for a period of time.

She needs to be assured that if she is curious about sexual behavior she can confidently ask her parents and they will always be honest with her. They may choose to what degree of detail to delve, but whatever they tell her will be the absolute, unequivocal truth.

However, while she is free to ask questions, she should not touch others, just as others should not be allowed to touch her. Perhaps this could be illustrated by saying something, "You may be curious about driving too. While you may ask questions about driving, a little girl should not be actually doing something dangerous like driving the car on her own should she?"

In regards to whether or not she should receive counseling, I can only say "it depends on who's doing the counseling." The lips of the righteous feed many; they produce wisdom; they know what is appropriate.² Deciding to go to some ungodly, humanistic counselor may actually exacerbate the situation. If the father decides the situation warrants counsel for his daughter that is absolutely his call. After all, "without guidance, people fall."³ "A fool's way is right in his own eyes, but whoever listens to counsel is wise."⁴ However, he needs to very carefully choose in whose hands he is putting his daughter's soul and spirit.

How should he decide? As the Master said,

- **Matthew 7:16-20 HCSB You'll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? (17) In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. (18) A good tree can't produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. (19) Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) So you'll recognize them by their fruit.**

Look carefully at the potential counselor's track record. If they have clients that they've counseled for years with little to no effect, they are worthless. If they have clients go in and out as if through a revolving door but with little to no effect, they are worthless. You want someone who is able to identify the problem, establish a plan of attack and help the family implement it and as quickly as possible get them standing on their own, strong, healthy and independent once again.

My advice would be that if anyone needs counseling it is the adults! They have allowed the child to be exposed to sexual behavior, and are apparently reacting poorly to it and are allowing their own emotions to override their ability to do the right thing by this child. The family is weak and unhealthy. Provide the proper family environment and most (not all) of these kinds of situations either resolve themselves or do not crop up in the first place.

Derashot:

1. Her older sister should be taken out behind the wood shed!
2. At this point she should be rebuked but the scolding should be mild.
3. Only if she continues acting out should the consequences be stepped up.
4. The adults shouldn't borrow more trouble than they actually have.
5. She should be taught about appropriate boundaries and behavior.
6. She should lose the privilege of playing with that cousin for a while.
7. She should be assured her sexual questions will be answered honestly but that she may not act on her curiosity.

² Proverbs 10:21, 31-32

³ Proverbs 11:14

⁴ Proverbs 12:15

8. I would tend to agree with the ex-wife that the child does not need professional counseling at this point.
9. However, if the circumstances dictate that she does need counseling, very carefully choose a godly, wise counselor by observing their track record.
10. Begin parenting classes for the adults.
11. Begin pre-marital counseling for the new couple.
12. Consider offering whichever ex-spouse is a believer my brief article "How to deal with the ex."