

The perils of dating a child's parent

By Joyce Madelon Winslow

Much has been written about step-parenting. Too little has been written about step-dating, the condition you must pass through before you can ever hope to hear the words: "You're not my mother."

"Step-dating" is a term I've coined to denote the attempt at romance by divorced parents whose children accept the new beloved's presence as the French accept tourists.

There are 12 million single-parent households in the United States, according to the Census Bureau. Millions of these single parents date, despite at least 64 pounds and 3½ feet of determined resistance — a resistance that can begin long before divorce is even a gleam in a lawyer's eye.

In a 1995 survey of 1,023 adolescents by KidsPeace, a national, not-for-profit corporation that works with kids in crisis, fully a third of the children interviewed who were in intact families said that one of their biggest fears was divorce. They hear the dating sagas from friends whose parents have split up.

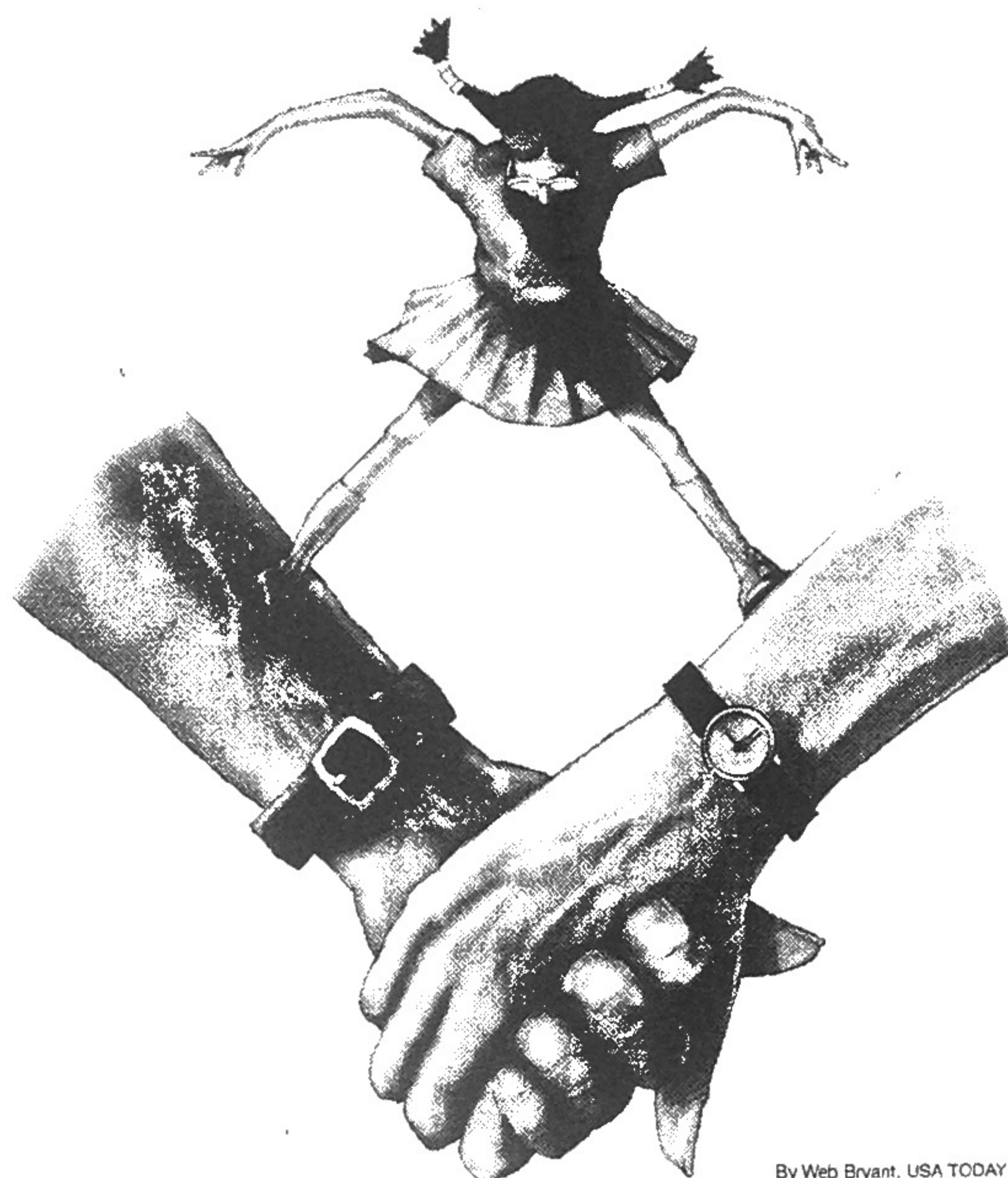
"One of the worst parts is that my mother dates," says a teenage girl. "When he's over, I won't go to bed. I stay in the living room and watch them, just stare at them."

Does romance have a chance against such guerrilla tactics? "Only if handled properly," says James Feldman, national director of public education at KidsPeace.

Step-dating, he says, "has a quiet but profound impact on millions of people, both adults and children. A child's resistance to parents' dating is one of the most difficult scenarios faced by divorced, dating parents."

As many dating parents will tell you, that resistance can sabotage or torpedo a new relationship. You are the stranger in the child's land. When the child refuses to make eye contact with you for months and almost never speaks to you despite home-baked chocolate chip cookies, Sunday hikes and trips to a pumpkin patch at Halloween, and when, in a desperate act of rebellion, the child flat-out refuses to come to the father's home if you are there, well, you say through your tears of frustration, Madeleine Albright probably is having a worse day.

That's when you and the child's father think about how to translate trade sanctions, embargoes and the Maginot line into terms a child might understand. You belong to a



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generation that reasons with children and offers them choices: "You can unlock your door and come downstairs and have pizza with Daddy and his friend, or you can stay in your room by yourself and be miserable."

That ploy might work better if kids these days did not have their own laptops and Internet passwords, not to mention cell phones programmed to speed-dial Mommy, known to you as "the ex."

Make no mistake: When you step-date, you take on not only the beloved and child, but also the ghost of the beloved's past, who, to begin with, is not dead. You and the ex have not met each other. You dwell on her lack of support. She wonders if you could be a floozy. Or a fortune-hunter. Worse yet, you could be wonderful. In short: competition.

It is hard for any of us to accept graciously that life goes on for the miserable, rotten, undeserving ex. Some part of the heart remains loyal,

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al, demands loyalty, long after anger rusts the blood. It is a test of grace to contain smoldering feelings toward the former spouse and not visit them upon the children, a test few of us pass magna cum laude.

So yes, a small part of you empathizes with the beloved's ex-spouse, being one yourself. The larger part has no fun listening from the kitchen while the father negotiates with the crying child in the living room.

You hear the child say: "Mom says you can see her all week when I'm not here. Why does she have to be here now?" The father speaks softly to the child, runs into the kitchen to give you a quick kiss, his face a study in angst, runs out again to the living room.

"When kids are used as a weapon in the ongoing struggle between warring ex-spouses, they are put in a chronic situation of having to choose which parent gets their loyalty," Feldman says. "Then kids find themselves in a no-win situation, so they

say and do things that will get them what they need from the parent who seems to offer the most. That's usually the custodial parent. Meanwhile, the parent who has visitation rights, usually the father, may feel compromised by his limited contact with his child. He may be afraid of jeopardizing the relationship in any way."

A non-custodial father, he says, "can create a trap for himself. He doesn't discipline the child as he ought, or consistently. The father construes discipline as negative. In fact, discipline is a positive aspect of child rearing, and so is having an adult relationship with another adult. Kids need to learn that and to hear from both spouses that it's not disloyal to make room for the third significant person."

Minus that bi-spousal support, you feel more like a third wheel. When step-dating, love is forced to proceed like a damsel in high heels crossing a deep brook, seeking safe stepping-stones in the roiling emotions of a child's tolerance. One child psychologist tells you to stand firm, the child will have to adapt. After a year, he hasn't. A second child psychologist tells you to take it very slowly, that it may be several more years until the child is old enough to be able to understand and accept.

You throw your trousseau lingerie back into its box and adjust your hopes, because the child, the light of your beloved's life, is perched on a precarious fulcrum.

You ask, "What more can I do?" "I really don't know," he says, genuinely frustrated.

It's rule 101 of step-dating that you can't tell him to follow his own heart and guide the child to respect it, so you gently quote Feldman, who says: "It's not kids who wreck a romance. Parents do it."

This pushes his anxiety button, which pushes yours, and the two of you turn away from each other as if you were young lovers who could afford to be profligate with time. The taut resiliency of your step-dating relationship snaps like a worn rubber band.

You drive home and stride to the bookcase that holds his picture — a beautifully framed photo of him with his hands on his son's shoulders. A child you want so much to love, a child who, you imagine, now smiles in triumph as you pace the room.

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