

Punch and Judy: Are her parents providing a good relationship model?

PUNCH AND JUDY



Dear C and Dr. B;

Are my parents insane? My dad is always telling my mom (who babbles on a lot) to shut up. She will have some snippy come back like "nice manners, fatso!" He also has a habit of holding his hand up to her when she talks, in a dismissive gesture. For some reason, she doesn't see him as rude and crude. She will get in his face and go on about how when he is dead, she will get to... She paints a rosy picture of life as his widow.

They have been married over 30 years. I don't get it. Couples today you are lucky if they make it to two years and here my parents constantly berate each other but they will probably make it to their deaths together. How can they stand each other's B.S.?

Son

Dr. B says:

I call it the Punch and Judy routine of a couple. All couples have a schtick - it's the personality of the relationship. Not all personalities are kind, but that doesn't mean they don't FIT together. They are meeting each other's expectations and might actually find each other amusing and their mutual bad humor attractive. You don't have to model this behavior in your own relationship, but if it works for your parents let it be. Haven't you ever seen the Honeymooners on TV or Fred and Wilma Flintstone in the cartoons? On both shows, couples picked on and found fault with each other. It might help to remember that your parents had Archie and Edith Bunker as role models for husband and wife.

C says:

I see a BIG problem with the Punch and Judy Show your parents are putting on - the atmosphere it creates for the family as a whole is one of constant negativity. Amusing as it may be for Mom and Dad, it is hardly nurturing for a child. I imagine that your memories of holiday dinners and family celebrations are all tainted by the back and forth volley of insults your parents kept hurling at each other. Kids don't know any better. You grew up thinking this is the way people treat each other. Among caring, considerate people, it is not.

However, as you say, your parents have kept this up for over 30 years and they don't seem to show any sign of stopping and neither one is filing for divorce. There is a reason for that. Your parents may not be

the healthiest of people, but they apparently have an agreement between the two of them and neither is in violation of whatever terms are in the contract. They may be annoying, but they are not pathological or abusive. Neither one is going to destroy the other, although you may wish they would.

It is sometimes difficult to tell what is just normal marital bickering and what is domestic abuse, but there are distinct differences. When couples go back and forth, like your parents do, each giving as well as taking, chances are they are just bickering. But if one of them constantly dominates and berates, and the other is hurt or cowed by it, this is unhealthy. If physical violence is involved, it is abuse no matter what agreement the couple has.

The biggest problem with your parents? I didn't hear you mention any signs of affection between them, and this doesn't give you much to go on if you want to develop a healthier model for yourself. It would be good to get some counseling, and read some books that give you a better idea of what a more supportive relationship should look like. If you rely on your own instincts at this point, you are likely to pick out a partner who will land you both in another perpetual puppet show, whacking each other in the head with mallets 'til death do you part.

You can visit Dr. B's blog at drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com