

## A 5-year-old is ambivalent towards her step-father

### Dear Barbara

How can I help my 5 year old adjust to a new step-father? She has known my boyfriend for two years and likes him. We are going to be moving in together shortly and will be married next year. She loves her own father and is in close contact with him.

### Dear Parent

One problem children face with a step-parent is worrying how their natural parent feels about the new situation. Surprisingly, the better the relationship with the step-parent, often the more worried the child feels.

After a most enjoyable day with the new step-father, a child might realize that not once during the day did she even think of her natural father. This realization can make her afraid that she is forgetting her real dad while having fun with her step-dad. Sometimes children cannot picture the loved, but absent parent, in their minds. Enjoying the step-father leaves them guilty and worried.

Because of these worries, children can be extremely inconsistent with the step-parent

— sometimes very affectionate and friendly, and at other times, cold and rejecting. And to confuse parents totally, sometimes the rejection comes during or after a most pleasant experience, because the worries increase when the new relationship strengthens. A child might provoke her step-father to cause a difficulty between the two of them. She may feel she has to destroy the good feelings she has for her step-father so as not to hurt her real father.

You can help your daughter by explaining that sometimes children like their new step-fathers, and sometimes they feel very angry with them — even when their new fathers haven't done anything wrong. Explain that children often feel left out when their mommies start to love a new man and worried that their real daddies will be upset.

Encourage your daughter to tell you if she feels left out and assure her that you will try to help her with those feelings if and when they come. Mention that when her daddy and you decided that you did not want to be married any more, you agreed that you would both try to find a way to be happy without each other.

If her father can tell her that he

hopes that she comes to like her new step-father very much, it gives her permission to develop a positive relationship with less fear of hurting him.

This may be difficult for natural fathers to truly wish their child happiness with a new step-father. However, this approach actually strengthens a father's relationship with his child. When the child sees her father encouraging her to be happy with her new step-parent, the child's understands that her father can still love her, even though she might like her new step-father. This effort by the father to help his daughter adjust makes her feel loved and close to her father who cares about her problems. ✿



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Photo by Murray Pellowe

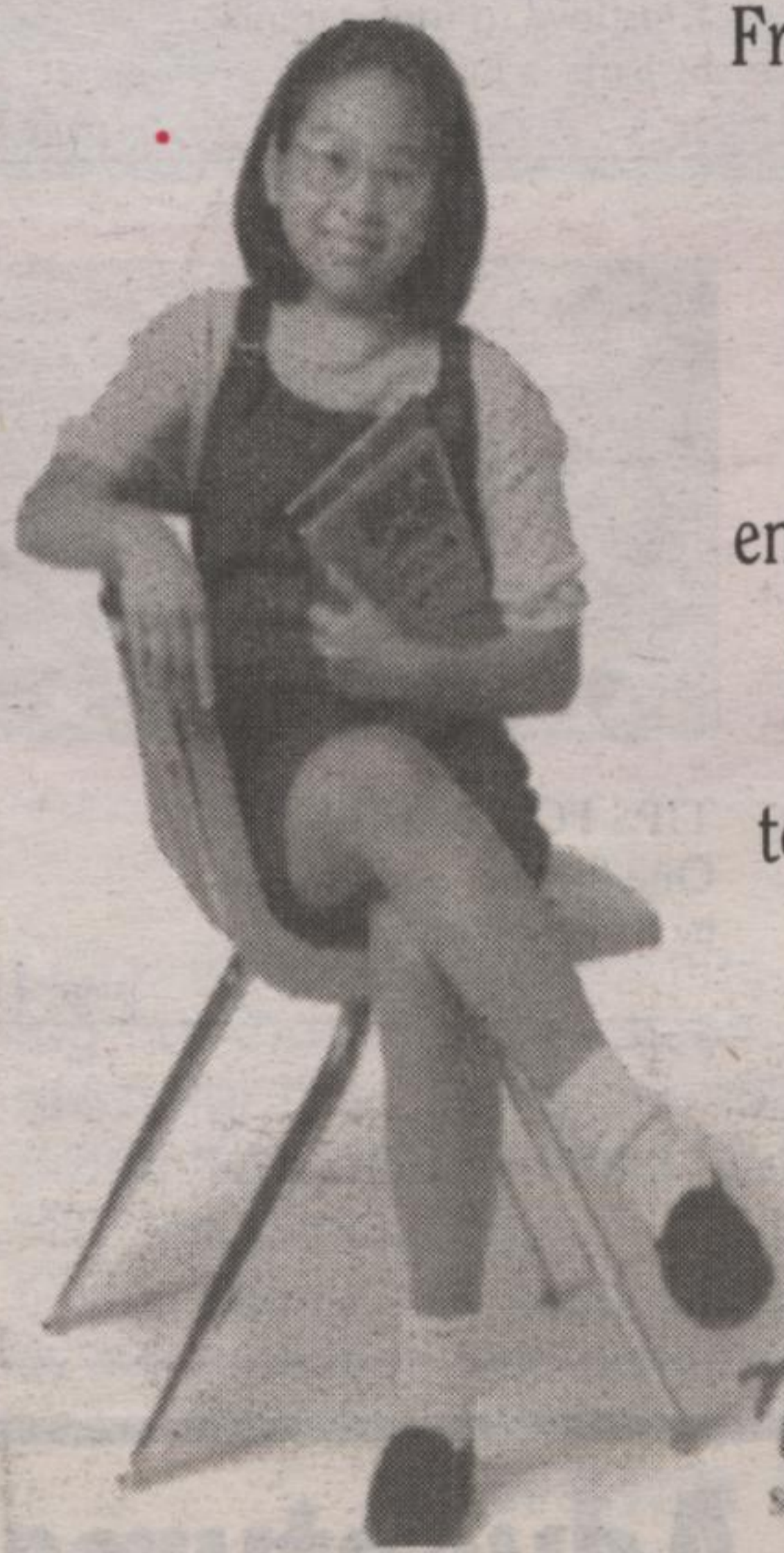


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