

Parent Care: Making a combined family work

by *Marsha_Kay_Seff*

When Betty and Jack Johnstone reach a ripe old age, they'll have plenty of family to look out for them. So far, they have five children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

The couple met in 1970 at a Parents Without Partners meeting in Buffalo, N.Y., then joined the group for dancing. Both had been widowed the previous year. She had three young children and he had two. Each had a 2-year-old, with the oldest child only 10.

The day after they met - he had been dancing with someone else - Jack and Betty took their three youngest to the park. The couple's first official date was that weekend for dinner in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

"I'm sure toilet training was mentioned," Betty says.

Now 67, she says she only attended the PWP meeting at her cousin's insistence.

"I wasn't looking for a man," she says. "I was just coping with the situation."

On the contrary admits Jack, now 71, "I wanted to marry again. I was looking for a widow with no ex-husband complications. I wanted a mother for my kids and a soul-mate."

"Before we married," Betty says, "he'd changed more diapers than my (first) husband changed in nine years. I was very impressed. You look for different things when you have little kids."

Though many of their dates involved the children, the couple managed some time of their own. Jack was living with his parents, who would baby-sit.

Three months after they met, the couple married and headed for San Diego, where Jack, a math teacher, had a job waiting. Betty would have preferred to give the relationship a little more time before taking off with him, but she decided not to let him get away.

"He was too good a catch," she says.

The couple says the families meshed right away; they thought of themselves as a real-life Brady Bunch. Betty believes the situation worked, in part, because there weren't any other parents involved.

Sure, beginning married life with a ready-built family wasn't always smooth sailing. But, the Johnstones admit, they had fewer problems than most.

Betty had once wondered if they were marrying just for the children. But, she says, laughing, she discovered that wasn't an issue.

"We liked each other after the kids were gone."

The funny thing about the spouses is that neither of them ever wanted a big family. Even so, they weren't disappointed.

"We were all just one family," Betty says. "We're still close."

In addition to teaching, Jack coached Little League and soccer. A jock himself, he helped a friend put on the world's first modern triathlon in 1974.

Betty, a team mother and scorekeeper, was also involved in PTA and Girl Scouts. When the kids were all in school, she worked as a secretary.

Today, when the Johnstones aren't enjoying their extended family, Jack delivers for Meals-on-Wheels, and Betty is on their condo board of directors. She also delivers church bouquets to shut-ins.

The unusual family was a success, Betty says, because Jack is so easy-going. He thinks they're both easy-going.

"We pick our battles, and I don't have to win," Betty adds. We both hate arguing."

Though they've had a good run, Betty says, she wouldn't recommend marrying after just three months. Then again, "We've had friends who knew each other forever and they didn't make it."

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