

The Stepfamily: Meeting the Challenge of Creating Relationships

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Although the number of stepfamilies in this country is huge – very few people grasp the many ways in which blended families differ from traditional, biological and nuclear families. This lack of knowledge contributes to the high divorce rate for remarrieds – 60% for 2nd marriages, 75% for 3rd marriages – by minimizing the differing expectations and behaviors by which a stepfamily should be judged. Accepting that a stepfamily is a different type of family is important in helping your family develop more realistic expectations and consequently feeling more satisfaction.

Structural Characteristics of Stepfamilies Which Differ from Biological Families

1. All members have suffered important losses including relationships and dreams of what their family would be like.
2. All individuals in the family come together with previous family histories.
3. Parent/child relationships predate the new couple relationship.
4. There is a biological parent elsewhere in actuality or in memory with power and influence over family members.
5. Children are members of two households if they have contact with both biological parents.
6. Little, if any, legal relationship exists between stepparents and stepchildren.

It takes time to develop solid, harmonious stepfamily relationships. Those who enter a blended family expecting instant love and acceptance will be disappointed. Building a blended family takes commitment and caring. The adults will be challenged to become more patient and forgiving than they ever thought possible.

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The following description of stepfamily development phases may help to identify the tasks your stepfamily has completed and those that are still in process. This chart should not be taken as a literal map, but rather as a guide which shows the general direction to be taken.

Stepfamily Phases of Development

I. Getting Acquainted:

- Recover from loss and finish mourning previous marital relationship. Parents need to help children talk about feelings of loss, guilt and jealousy.

II. Planning the New Partnership:

- Discuss issues from previous marriage, fears, mistakes and insecurities
- Identify ways in which you have changed your attitudes and behaviors
- Conceptualize the new relationship. It is important to drop continued psychological attachments to ex-spouse.
- Redefine the parent/child relationship

III. Getting the Picture

- Children and their parents must accept stepparent's right to function in the area of nurturing and discipline
- Decide on household rules
- Parents need to rebuild generational boundaries, differentiate the couple relationship from the parenting relationship
- Develop a workable pattern of relating with ex-spouses and extended family
- Develop and re-define realistic expectations and lifestyle habits for the family, accept a different model of family with permeable boundaries
- Develop a family communicating style that allows the expression of complaints or criticism without threatening family unity

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- The blending of a family creates new relationships not only for the children and the stepparent but also between the children and their natural parent. Single parents often become friends and confidants with their children rather than acting as a parent
- The parent/child role must be reestablished in order for the natural parent to provide security and structure. Eventually, an adequate relationship may be built between the stepparent and the stepchild to allow for a parenting relationship. The more a stepparent tries to be a parent prematurely, the more problems he/she will have.
- By giving the children a clear and consistent picture of both their natural and their stepparent's new role in their lives, anxiety about the ongoing relationship with the natural parent is reduced.
- Stepparents are typically an additional parent rather than a replacement. Accepting the role of stepparent is crucial to the success of the new relationship. Stepparents must not assume that they will be a substitute for the biological parent. Allowing open communication between the children and the ex-spouse reduces loyalty conflicts and resentment which may encourage the stepchild to feel torn between his biological parent and his stepparent.
- The expectation of "instant love" between stepparents and stepchildren can lead to many disappointments and difficulties. If the individuals focus on the process of developing as a family unit and can learn to respect and accept each other as the new family forms, then the worry and dissatisfaction is minimized. Two years of living together seems to be the minimum amount of time necessary to develop a consistent sense of family. During this time the stepparent is new and unfamiliar, and often perceived by the children as taking their parent away. Therefore, it is helpful for the children and their natural parent to spend time together in addition to stepfamily activities. This helps to remind the children that their parent's love for them has not changed because of the remarriage. It helps them to realize that adult love is different from parent/child love and may reduce jealousy and competition for attention.

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- Maintaining loving relationships with your new mate while being attentive to your children can be difficult. Unlike the “cocoon” period first-time newlyweds enjoy before their first child, there is usually no protected time for the remarried couple to nurture their relationship. Stepfamily adults tend to feel overwhelmed by the demands of a stepfamily and to weaken their relationship in order to meet the needs of the children. They must make their marital relationship primary by spending nurturing time together alone.
- Don't blame all family problems on the fact that yours is a stepfamily. All families experience stressful times. Most children tend to show little appreciation for their parents and at times become angry and rejecting.
- Feelings of jealousy, rejection, guilt and anger can be more intense in stepfamilies than in first families. However, blended families can work through these difficulties toward positive relationships wherein family members' needs are being met. The following points deal with the rewards of living in a stepfamily.

Positive Aspects of Living in a Stepfamily

1. Children have male and female adult role models in the household
2. The stepparent may have a more objective view of the stepchildren and may be able to initiate change or provide insights into the children's behavior
3. Stepparents can provide friendship, nurturing and emotional support for children
4. The new couple provides a positive adult model for children to see that two adults can care for each other and live compatibly together
5. Children can learn from stepparents and stepsiblings how to get along with others
6. Children can observe and learn from different family lifestyles and value systems
7. Children's adaptability and flexibility can be increased by living in a stepfamily
8. A special bond of closeness is created by working together and negotiating