

SUCCESSFUL STEPPARENTING

For children, the blending of two families may not be an easy process. There is no “instant” love. Adjusting to the new relationships takes time and patience. Although the adults have fallen in love and have decided to live together, the children may not desire the step family situation. Children often need a lot more time to adapt to the idea of blending families. Parents need realistic expectations concerning their children’s periods of adjustment.

FAMILY CHANGES

Merging families bring together many differences. A teenager may now be followed around by a five-year-old stepbrother. The celebration of holidays will change as the new family integrates customs and begins new ones. With the changes taking place in the new household, children need some things to remain the same. Keeping the daily schedule the same can help add continuity to a changing family structure. If your child is actively involved in a particular sport, for example, keep him or her involved. Do not make unnecessary changes.

Each family has resources in addition to money. They include both time and affection. How you share or distribute these resources can create arguments, hurt feelings, or jealousy. Be aware of the possible effects as you work within your new family.

LOYALTIES

Children have loyalties to parents. A child may feel that showing affection toward a stepparent is betraying the biological parent. The child who has lived in a single-parent household may have difficulty sharing that parent. Adults may also experience loyalty conflicts. Parents may feel guilty over not living with biological children. The stepparent may have difficulty accepting live-in stepchildren.

The new step family creates new relationships. Family members may be unclear as to what their roles and expectations are within the family. Are the stepparents comfortable disciplining the children and enforcing the limits? Are the stepparents fair with discipline? Do the children know what roles the new family members play? Do they know that their stepfather can assign chores to be done? How should they refer to the stepparent’s parents? Are they also grandparents? These issues will need to be discussed and worked out.

TEN TIPS FOR STEPPARENTS

Provide neutral territory. If your budget allows, consider moving into a new home.

Don’t try to fit a preconceived role. Be yourself.

Set limits and enforce them. The parent and stepparent need to work out disciplinary actions in advance, then support each other.

Allow an outlet for children’s feelings about the natural parent. The children will maintain affection for their natural parent. Do not take this personally.

Expect ambivalence. Feelings of love and hate by the stepchild may change every few hours or days.

Avoid mealtime misery. Mealtime can be laden with emotions of “how it used to be.” Try to make this time as peaceful as possible.

Do not expect instant love. Do expect and insist on RESPECT.

Be an adult. The children have some responsibility, but you must act like the adult in tense situations. The children are looking for leadership from you.

Be patient. The first few months, or years, may have difficult periods. Expect, at the least, one year and up to five years for everyone to adjust.

Maintain the privacy of the marital relationship. A solid step family relationship is based on a strong marital relationship.

References: 1.) Quick, Donna S. And Botkin, Darla R., “Helping Children in Stepfamilies: Suggestions for Teachers and Child Care Professionals,” *Kaleidoscope*, III, 13-17, 1987. 2.) Tumbull, Sharon K. And Tunbull, James M., “To Dream the Impossible Dream: An Agenda for Discussion with Stepfamilies.” *Family Relations*, 227-229, April 1983.

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One Big Happy Family

Have you ever secretly wished your family could be like the Brady Bunch where everyone got along like one big happy family? Chances are this isn't going to happen. Even families that aren't stepfamilies rarely solve problems so quickly and go back to being warm and pleasant all the time.

It takes more than time for stepfamilies to develop and cohere. It also takes education and sometimes counseling to help stepfamilies work together. The thing to remember is that stepfamilies don't have the same histories the way biological families do. Instead, they need to develop a working team and do it quickly. The couple has to decide (and usually with several children with different backgrounds and ideas), how to handle money, discipline, responsibilities, and other aspects of life.

It's up to you as a couple to set family guidelines and decide what you will and won't allow in your household. When you create rules and enforce them, you also develop couple strength. It's not only important for your marriage, but to the success of the stability of your stepfamily. Undoubtedly you'll find that many of your decisions will be unpopular, but as long as you act together as a couple, you can weather the storm.

If you have problems in your new family, the first thing you'll need to do is recognize and acknowledge them. Most of the problems in stepfamilies come from the fact that family members don't want to believe that this new family can have many of the same problems as their other family did.

Stepfamilies often blame themselves and each other for the feelings and difficulties that are inherent to the step situation. Stepchildren are often blamed for family problems, but this only disguises the true source of the problems. It's true that children make relationships more difficult and complex, but only adults have the responsibility for the success or failure of the new family. Parents establish guidelines and guide the children in becoming part of the relationship.

Dealing with Kid's Anger

Discipline may be the number one issue blended families must deal with, but anger is what's usually causing most of the discipline problems. You can almost bet that every blended family has someone

who is mad. Kids are mad because they feel their families have been ripped apart and often they want to hurt back.

If stepchildren are giving you a hard time, they are probably discouraged. Things didn't work out in their original family and now there is a new family to which mom or dad is paying so much more attention. Life is not working out at all for them and they just want to get back at everyone for making their lives miserable.

In so many families, anger comes from the actions of the parents and their ex-spouses. They play "war games" and the children are right in the middle of the battle. All this does is cause more resentment in the children. Children already have enough things to cope with as they change families, houses, and parents. Don't make it more difficult for them by using them as go-betweens or stirring up trouble. Children have the right to love both parents. Help them deal with their anger, not increase it.

Tips For Building a Strong Marriage

A strong marriage is important in a stepfamily. Make your marriage a priority in your life. With today's busy lifestyles and families being pulled in all directions, it is easy to put other priorities before your marriage. Take the time you need to ensure that your marriage will be successful. A strong marriage requires commitment, time, and effort. Here are some tips couples have shared about building a strong marriage.

- ! Plan a romantic evening with your spouse.
- ! Do something you enjoy with your spouse away from home once a week.
- ! Arrange 20 minutes of relaxed time alone each day.
- ! Talk together. Talk about your marriage, your dreams, your needs, your feelings, the daily activities of the household, and anything else that is on your mind.
- ! Make new friends as a couple. Enjoy sharing activities with your new friends.

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