Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Stepfamilies: Can Different Family Cultures Be Blended Together?

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Blending two families into a stepfamily takes work. A successful stepfamily must be based on the couple relationship. This is No. 18 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

To succeed as a stepfamily, the couple must find ways to keep their relationship as the No. 1 priority in the family, the foundation for everything else. The first two years of this new marriage have proven to be critical for the couple in many cases. Without this strong relationship in place, stress from raising children, former spouses, job demands, health issues, and finances can all combine, causing the partnership and the stepfamily to fail.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2006, 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce.

It takes time for the members of new stepfamilies to learn about each other’s histories, negotiate new traditions, and create their own family memories. Each member of the new family comes with a set of expectations of what family means and the roles ascribed to each person from their previous family culture.

Birth Order in Stepfamilies

The birth order of the children in a stepfamily may change by the simple exchange of their parents’ wedding vows. For example, if I was the oldest child in my original family and had the responsibilities and privileges of an oldest child, do I lose my rank if a new stepsibling is older? Do I suddenly and automatically become the babysitter if I now have younger stepsiblings? Who is responsible for me and to whom am I responsible? These are big changes in the life of a child, and change for people of any age is confusing and stressful.

Entering A New Relationship

Before beginning the first stage, entering a new relationship, divorced or widowed individuals should feel that they have recovered from the loss of their first marriage. If they have not done this, they risk “marrying on the rebound.” But to be successful in the new relationship, one must be divorced or recovered emotionally as well as legally from the first partner. This process of recovery and resolution of the first marriage can take a long time.

Planning the New Marriage

During the second stage in the formation of a stepfamily, planning the new marriage and family, both spouses-to-be and their children must learn to accept their own fears about
Developing a Stepfamily

During the third stage, developing a stepfamily, the newly married partners need to strengthen their couple relationship so that they can function effectively as co-parents. This phase of developing a genuine family, room has to be made in the new family for stepchildren, half-siblings, new sets of grandparents, and extended kin. It is also important to make room for relationships among all the children and their biological (noncustodial) parents, grandparents, and other extended family members.

When you marry, you do not marry an individual. You marry a whole family that comes with this individual. Similarly, when you remarry and form a stepfamily, you are connecting two already-formed and complex families. Again, this is a challenging task because the number of relationships between family members multiplies as the number of family members increases.

Unrealistic expectations. Human beings often expect too much too soon. Unrealistic expectations of family members can create conflict in any family, but in the stepfamily, these can be especially detrimental to the formation of a strong family unit. Instant love is often desired and expected by some members of the new family unit, but it is unrealistic to think this will happen. All relationships take time to develop, and the relationships in the stepfamily have to deal with two separate family units overlapping through the children.

Discipline

Building a shared parenting role for discipline is one of the most important couple activities to develop early in the new family unit. It is hard to raise children in any family, but taking the role of a spouse without the real authority of the headstrong nonbiological child or with a teenager who refuses to cooperate may seem like a nightmare. Stepparents who take the time for consistent nurturing and open communication will increase the chances of a strong stepparent-stepchild relationship.
conversations about what is making them feel this way. It is important to set the stage for family communication. Because communication is the major part of any relationship, stepfamilies can benefit by learning how to discuss matters without sounding like they are blaming or scolding each other. By removing the word You from the start of the discussion and using the word I, many conflicts can be avoided and messages can be accurately understood.

How to Communicate Without Scolding and Blaming

I Messages are used to express the feelings of the speaker in a nonthreatening way, without blame. If you start scolding or blaming a child, you’re likely to get into a hopeless battle.

An easy way to think about I Messages is F.B.I. (Feelings + Behavior + Intention).

Here are several examples of F.B.I. I Messages:

I feel confused about why you are so angry with me that you want to go live with your dad/mom. Can we talk about your thoughts?

I feel so proud of you for sharing your room with the other kids when they come for the weekend. Do you have some ideas about how to make this easier for you and them?

I feel very happy that you invited me to go to your basketball game. Do you think we could get something to eat and talk about all of the great plays you made?

I feel confused that you told your dad/mom that I yell at you. Next time you feel that I am yelling at you, please tell me how you feel.

Conclusion

Stepfamilies have an important role in the socialization of children and of relationships for future generations. Blending family cultures can be difficult but can provide great personal richness to the individuals and a stable environment for the family.

To make the stepfamily successful, the couple relationship must be the strong foundation upon which all other interactions emerge. Expectations, discipline, working with parenting time schedules communication, and quality time for the couple, the stepparent’s, children, and the biological child/parent are all on the “to do list” to build a successful stepfamily.

1. Make the couple relationship the center of your family.
2. Spend time every day, if possible, but at least once a week alone together. Just you and your biological child.
3. Start a new family tradition by spending special time with each of the stepchildren daily or at least once each week to build trust and friendship.
4. Find opportunities to build new traditions and activities while respecting old ones.
5. Have family meals together at least once a day with rich discussion.
6. Set boundaries on topics that you won’t discuss with the children, such as the other parent or the stepparent.
7. Create and post family rules with input from each member of the new family.
8. Be sure that every child has a personal space, even if it is a basket in the closet for her/his things.
9. Work successfully at blending yours and mine before having a baby.
10. Make a plan for visiting extended family members.
11. When the children are old enough to understand, work together as a family to make a family budget that everyone can understand.
12. Allow children to talk about the invisible parent.
13. Let each child grieve the loss of a parent in her or his own way and time. However, if a child’s well-being is affected, don’t hesitate to get professional help.

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day written by John DeFrain and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

Resources


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