

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.

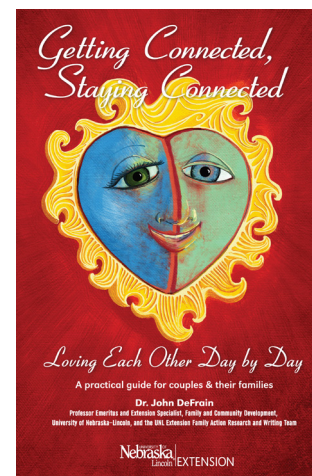
It takes time for the members of new stepfamilies to learn about each other’s histories, negotiate new traditions, and create their own family memories. Each member of the new family comes with a set of expectations of what *family* means and the roles ascribed to each person from their previous family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

Healing, time, planning, and effort. A successful stepfamily does not happen by accident and it does not happen overnight. It takes planning, intelligence, and goodwill on the part of those who are involved. According to family researchers Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, people go through three major stages in the process of creating a new family through remarriage: (1) entering a new relationship; (2) planning the new marriage and family; and (3) developing a stepfamily.



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

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

the new marriage and the formation of a stepfamily. During this period of time, it is also important to accept the fact that much time and patience are needed to adjust to the complexity and unknown habits of a new family. It is not going to be an easy process. Besides adjusting to new roles as a new spouse, new stepparent, new stepchild, and a new member of a new extended family, the family members need to make adjustments in terms of space, time, membership, and authority. They also need to deal with emotional issues, including feelings of guilt, loyalty conflicts, the desire for closeness to both the new children and the biological children, and irresolvable past hurts. One stepfather lamented that he spent so much time, money, and energy on his new spouse and her children that he was neglecting his own children from the previous marriage.

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. During 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 a parent can be a tricky job for a stepparent: “You aren’t my mother!” a child is likely to say.

Although it is usually believed that in the first two years any actual discipline needs to be delivered by the biological parent, the stepparent should be responsible on a day-to-day basis for re-enforcing and keeping the consequences of the rules established by the family group.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott call this “living on borrowed power.” This type of power is much like the power that paid caregivers have when coming into your house to care for the children. The stepparent has the authority to make rules,

reinforce rules, and discipline within the guidelines and direction agreed upon with the biological parent. It is important for the stepparent to use this borrowed power in the new family relationship to establish a consistent shared couple discipline of all children who live within the walls of the family home at any time. This eliminates an opportunity for the children to manipulate the situation until the other parent gets home.

Making Parenting Time Work

When the biological children come to share parenting time with their father or mother, the stepparent’s attention naturally shifts to her or his biological children and this may be perceived as bias by the stepchildren. The children living day-to-day in the stepfamily are likely to experience confusion and also have a feeling that they are less important in the stepparent’s life than the biological children. This often becomes a no-win situation for the stepparent as he or she tries to assure all the children that they are loved and cared for equally. It is true that a stepparent coping with a 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.

Building Quality Time

It would be ideal if all of the children would visit their other parent’s home on the same weekend, leaving the newly married couple time alone to enhance the couple relationship. It is important to find time to do this, whenever possible. In one family we know this was seen as the date weekend for the parents. They had candlelight dinners at home, slept late, and generally doted on each other while doing the laundry, cleaning the house, and running errands. As they noted, “It sounds rather boring, but gosh was it exciting to do all those things without kids underfoot.”

If only one set of children at a time visits the noncustodial parent, it gives the new stepparent time to form a bond with her or his stepchildren. This can be a great time for this family to establish a special ritual. Of course, to be fair the ritual will be repeated the next weekend with the other children in the marriage. William J. Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota-St. Paul, states in his book *The Intentional Family* that repeated rituals shared between stepchild and stepparent can slowly build a one-on-one relationship. This ritual might be a breakfast for two, a shopping trip for just the two family members, or perhaps a camping trip together.

The Strength of Communication

The stepparent learns quickly to invite children to talk about all of their parents in an atmosphere of acceptance or the child just will not engage in the conversation. Encourage the children to talk about their feelings. “I would really like to hear why you would like to move in with your dad.” “I would like to know how you feel your parent would have handled this situation.” Make sure these are quiet, calm, respectful

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

- Carter, B., & McGoldrick, M. (Eds.). (2005). *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives*. New York: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.
- Parrott, Les, & Parrott, Leslie. (2001). *Saving your second marriage before it starts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000b). Census 2000 brief: Overview of race and Hispanic origin, 2000. Website: <http://www.census.gov>

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