

Parenting Together While Apart

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Parenting in Stepfamilies



One of the largest long-range studies of stepfamilies found that 80 percent of children in stepfamilies have no behavioral problems. Stepfamilies are not bad for children. Children can learn flexibility, tolerance and love. But children need permission to grieve the loss of their biological family. Some experts suggest that it will take two to four years for a new stepfamily to adjust to living together and feel linked by love, commitment and memories.

The word step in stepfamilies come from the Anglo Saxon word stoep, meaning bereavement or loss. All stepfamilies begin after bereavement, loss or change. Children and adults come into these families with previous expectations, differing experiences and values. They need time to grieve the losses they've experienced.

In France, a step-mother is called "belle mere" or beautiful mother. In America, there

are no commonly accepted names for step family members such as "my husband's children" or "the woman who is married to Daddy". Families need to decide together on names that are comfortable to them. As a starting point, Barbara Coloroso, author of Parenting with Wit and Wisdom in Times of Chaos and Loss, suggests using these positive words and descriptions:

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Positive Words

- My family, two-homes
- Marriage ended
- Parent, mom, dad
- Co-parenting/shared parenting
- Primary responsibility
- Children are with their dad
- Live with, be with, stay with
- Parenting time
- Child's mother/father
- Family of origin, nuclear family
- Contribution

Instead of the old Words

- Broken home
- Failed marriage
- Custodial/non-custodial parent
- Joint custody
- Sole custody
- Children are visiting their dad
- Custody, visitation
- Access
- Ex-wife, ex-husband
- Real family
- Child support

Children React Differently to Stepfamilies

Keep in mind normal child development stages as you parent in your stepfamily. Young children may revert to younger behaviors during times of stress, such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking. Some children may adjust sooner than others and some may show more disruptive behaviors, disorganization or laziness. Children may experience a feeling of displacement before they settle into their new roles within the stepfamily. Give them time and acknowledge their feelings. Help them to express their anger and sadness and happiness. Reassure them of your love. Some children may feel confusion in adjusting in the nonresidential home. Help

them to understand that households that are different are not bad. Some children may experience loyalty conflicts. Help them to understand that they do not have to take sides. Give children permission to develop warm relationships with stepparents. Assure your child that it is possible to love both parents and stepparents. Be flexible, and with older children, negotiate expectations, responsibilities and freedoms. Do not pamper, pity or overprotect your children. Confront misbehavior. Do not make excuses for children. Stepfamilies are about compromise. And it is OK to seek counseling to help resolve and understand feelings.

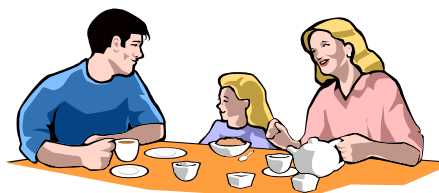
Strengthening Stepfamilies

All families, including remarried families, encounter stress. Research shows that the following resources help stepfamilies to buffer the impact of stress:

Bonding, the emotional ties and interactions of family members, is built by engaging in fun and nurturing activities and leads greater feeling of family.

Learning more about each other can be fun if you make it a special activity. List each of the following topics on a separate piece of paper or note card. Then a leader picks 5 topic cards and reads them aloud. Each person finishes the sentence for each topic. When children hear the responses of the other family member, they are learning. Do not judge, criticize or give advice. It is important to just listen. Topics may include:

- ◆ Favorite ____ (food, color, hobby, number, hero, song, book, movie, place to visit, etc.)
- ◆ If you could have three wishes
- ◆ Goals/hopes for our family to work on together
- ◆ One thing you're proud of
- ◆ One thing you do best
- ◆ One thing you recently learned
- ◆ Something you can do now that you couldn't do last year
- ◆ Something you could teach someone else to do
- ◆ Differences/similarities in the way things used to be done and the way they are done now
- ◆ The funniest/happiest/nicest thing that has ever happened to you
- ◆ Something you really appreciate
- ◆ Something you do not like. What would you do if ____ (you found a \$10.00 bill, you received a gift you didn't like, you saw a friend cheat on a test, someone didn't let you play with them, you thought one parent liked your sibling better than you.)



Flexibility and creativity allow for changes in rules, roles and the changing needs of family members.

Routines and Celebrations provide stability, identify you as a family, and help family members to feel they belong. Establish regular family patterns, rituals, and traditions to build loyalty and create a shared history. Think of it as an investment in the family.

Create a scrapbook or record of the things you do. Each family member can contribute something, whether it is a school related project, a review of a book you read together, favorite recipes, the family calendar, photos, or art work.

Effective Communication is a key resource for strengthening remarried families. Schedule regular family meetings to talk about the good things that have happened during the week, make plans for the next week or month, discuss and set rules, and problem solve in a safe environment. Playing "Telephone" is a fun way to practice communication skills. One person whispers a word or phrase to the person next to him and he whispers it to the next person and when it reaches the last person, he repeats the message aloud. Share the following "Rules for Successful Communication" with your family:

1. Always tell the truth
2. Take 100 percent of the responsibility
3. Attend to all agreements
4. Never gossip
5. Never be a go-between (and don't expect others to be either)
6. Set aside daily think time
7. Keep to-do lists
8. Go to the source
9. Appreciate differences in others

Strengthening the Marriage Relationship

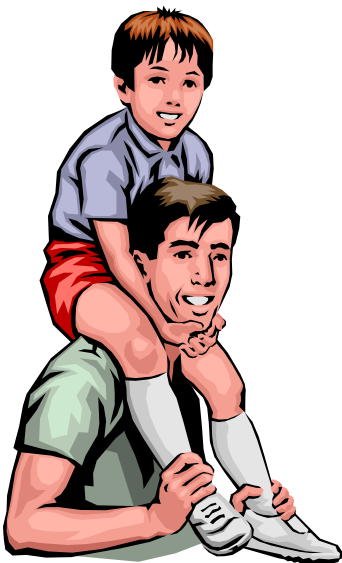
A strong marriage creates a stable home environment for children in stepfamilies. Remarried families are about change. Invent ways to deal with the every day life dilemmas, allow for flexibility and negotiation.

- ◆ Take time to develop realistic expectations for yourself and your partner, they're the basis for a positive outlook. Talk about the dreams and expectations you have for your new family. If you write them down, you're more likely to remember them and achieve them.
- ◆ Clarify roles for the stepparent in parenting.
- ◆ Listen with empathy and a clear mind. Try not to think about what you'll say next. Respond only after you've had a chance to calm down and think clearly.
- ◆ Communicate your feelings honestly. Practice using I-messages to state how you feel. "I feel ___ when ___". Ignoring or downplaying a situation will only increase the tension. Avoid whining, making excuses, bring up the past, saying "Yes, but..." Work together to find a solution.

- ◆ Get curious about things. When something happens to upset you, take a step back, take time to cool down before you speak. Then ask, "Is there a reason the ___ (dirty dishes are not rinsed?)"
- ◆ Curb negative thinking. Positive thoughts are more likely to lead to positive outcomes.
- ◆ Protect your time together. Take time to be alone with your partner, don't take him/her for granted.
- ◆ Use humor, but use it carefully so as not to offend.
- ◆ Take time for yourself. It's a chance to re-charge your battery and your relationship.
- ◆ Respect each other. Be kind, always.
- ◆ Be thankful, show your appreciation. "Thanks for helping me clean the house today."



Strengthening the Parent-Child Relationship



In stepfamilies, it is important to have realistic and positive expectations. The following guidelines may help to strengthen relationships within the stepfamily:

1. Provide time to mourn losses.
2. Decide on terms or names to use to describe your stepfamily.
3. Build relationships in cooperation rather than in competition with each other.
4. Take pride in the differences in each others' background and keep an optimistic outlook about how those differences can enrich your lives in the future.
5. Accept and respect each other. Accept the complexity of relationships.
6. Set limits and negotiate rules.
7. Establish rituals, routines and traditions.
8. Stepfamilies are neither better or worse - they are just different. Enjoy the process of building this special family together.

GREEN COUNTY FAMILY LIVING PROGRAM

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