

## **Becoming a Stepfamily: 10 Things that Work**

### 1. Develop realistic expectations

Join the Stepfamily Association of America or support group, attend step parenting classes, read, talk to members of other stepfamilies, seek counseling.

Learn as much as you can about: insider/outsider relationships, biological vs. step relationships, children's loyalty binds, and children's needs for secure attachment to both parents.

To Form a Healthy New Family Structure:

2. Compartmentalize Spend time in one-to-one relationships: adult couple, bp-bc; sp-sc; sc-sc. Time spent as a whole family will accentuate insider-outsider dynamics.

### 3. Shift don't blend

Choose family activities that bring outsiders together and that shift insiders out.

Examples:

If mom and daughter are great skiers and step dad is a klutz, skiing will be a family activity that accentuates step dad's outsider position, and leaves mom feeling torn. Ski trips are best kept as a special mom-daughter time until the family is much more solid. If step dad and stepchild both ice-skate and mom is a klutz, step dad and stepchild can whiz off together while mom clutches the side of the rink. Ice-Skating, therefore, will be a better family activity as it brings the outsiders together and shifts mom out of the middle.

### 4. Something new, something old, something blue

Be creative about new rules and rituals. Leave in place something that is familiar for each person in the new family. Make some changes that are new to everybody. Find some rules or rituals that combine a bit from each person or previous family's history.

Find "Virgin territory"— find holidays neither family has any ritual for and make something brand new. Or make up a new holiday. This is much easier than fighting over already established territory. Major holidays, where both families have firmly established traditions, may need to be celebrated separately for a while.

To Develop a Stepparent Role

### 5. Stepparents function as Adult Friend rather than New Parent

Practice "monitoring" rather than bossing children (James Bray). Monitoring means expressing interest in the child rather than telling him/her what to do: "How was that

test?" "How is soccer going?" "How was the concert?" "How's the geometry homework tonight?"

Stepparent enforces "the rules of the house"

Biological parent remains primary disciplinarian in early stages.

When both biological and stepparent are present, discipline is best administered by the biological parent, until the child is ready to accept stepparent as a disciplinarian. Again, different children, even in the same family, may move at different rates. Some may be ready right away, and another child may not be ready for years. Meanwhile, stepparent can "monitor" (see above). When biological parent is not present, stepparent operates much like a babysitter, or a visiting aunt or uncle. You are an adult in charge – but not a parent. You enforce the rules of the house. This is the rule of the house. Homework is done before television. You can respond to, "You're not my parent," with, "Yes. You are right. You have a mom and a dad and I'm not going to replace either one of them. You and I are going to get to know each other a bit at a time. Meanwhile, though I'm the adult in charge here tonight, and the rule is no TV until homework is done."

As children get more comfortable, stepparent can become more primary disciplinarian. Follow the child's lead – do not force parental status.

7. Stepparent acts as sounding board, not savior

Stepparents often feel pulled to step in as "savior," taking over to provide order and discipline. Because children are often not ready for stepparent in a disciplinarian role, this is usually doomed to failure.

Stepparent can act as sounding board for biological parent, outside of children's hearing. Rather than saying to the stepchild, "Don't talk back to your mother", the stepparent can approach the biological parent later with "I was concerned that Brad talked back to you. Was that an issue for you? Are you willing to hear what I think?"

Biological parents need to take time to hear and understand stepparent's input, which may represent a very different (usually more disciplinarian) point of view. Stepparents need to take a more gentle, non-judgmental stance, and to hear the bio-parent's point of view, which will generally be more feeling-oriented. Stepparents will say, "She's whining and she's manipulating you." Bio-parent will say, "She's having a hard time." Together, the bio-parent and stepparent probably have the whole picture.

A helpful model is that the stepparent gives input into how things go, but the bio-parent retains the final say until children are ready. Again, some children in the same family may be ready quite early, while others may never be ready for the stepparent to take a primary parenting role.

To Help Children Adjust:

## 8. Actively assist children with their loyalty binds

Do not badmouth the other parent.

Do not ask children for their support in your conflict with your ex-spouse. Never ever quiz kids about the other parent's activities.

If the other parent behaves badly, validate the behavior in a neutral tone.

"Your dad does get drunk." "Your mom does say bad things about me sometimes." Then shift your attention immediately to the child – "That must be really tough for you when he starts drinking. How can we make a safe plan for you." or "That must be really confusing for you when she says those things. Most kids would find that hard."

Do not rant about the other parent's failings.

"I can't believe he did that." "He's such as...She always...He never..." Ranting about your ex meets your needs, not your child's needs.

Talk in a neutral tone about differences:

"In your dad's house you can watch as much TV as you want, but you can't eat in the family room. In your mom's house your TV is limited, but you are allowed to have snacks in other rooms if you clean up afterwards.

" Provide language that helps children sort out loyalty binds:

"You will always love your daddy, and he will always be your daddy, no matter who else you love or like. John is brand new to you. You'll get to know each other a step at a time. And over time I hope maybe you'll come to like each other. Meanwhile, you do have to be civil."

## 9. A step at a time saves time

When possible, move a step or two at a time.

Introduce kids and give them a chance to get to know a new stepparent before announcing marriage plans. You may be thrilled but don't expect kids to be thrilled.

Choose two or three changes in rules and norms, keep the rest the same. Introducing a whole new set of rules requires too much change of children. In a double family make sure that new rules require about the same amount of change from each family – one family may adjust more in one spot, the other in a different spot. A double family may need to have parallel, slightly different sets of rules for awhile.

Expect most step relationships to move slowly. Remember that some children in the same family may be more open to a new stepparent than others. Remember that you can require civility but not love, between stepparents and step children and between stepsiblings.

Last But Not Least:

#### 10. Empathize

Stepfamily living confronts family members with many differences from seemingly small ("What do you mean you don't sort the small forks from the large ones!") to major ("I can't stand being with your daughter!") When dealing with these differences:

Spend as much energy trying to understand other stepfamily members as you do trying to get them to hear you. When your partner or a child tells you something threatening ("I'm jealous."), take a deep breath. Calm yourself. Then:

Tell them what you do understand first before you respond with your point of view. This is not the same as agreeing. It is simply letting the other person know you hear them. It is then easier for them to hear what you have to say. Try to imagine yourselves in each other's position.

Source: Adler, F. (1999). Stepfamily Association of America Training Institute.