

Becoming A Step Family

OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify the typical challenges that occur when marriage between partners includes children and co-parents from previous relationships.
2. Describe issues to discuss when forming a stepfamily.

HANDOUTS:

1. *Rules To Guide Stepfamilies*
2. *Becoming A Stepfamily*
3. *Take Home Message for This Session*

ITEMS NEEDED FOR THIS EDUCATIONAL SESSION:

- Handout materials for participant workbooks
- Scrapbooking materials
- Flipchart and markers
- Pens and pencils

GETTING STARTED

At our last session, you considered your options for marrying your child's other parent or current partner. What additional thoughts did you have about this option since we last met?

Maybe you have decided it is time to get married. Or maybe you hope to marry someone in the future. When you get married you will be forming a new family. This family includes your own children plus any children your new spouse has. Experts have called this new family a "step family" or "blended family." In this session, we will use the term "stepfamily" to describe the kind of family that is created when people who marry or live together bring together children from other relationships. Whatever you call this new family, there are some things you will want to know and consider as you form your new family.

ACTIVITY: Mini-Lecture on Stepfamilies

Prepare a PowerPoint or flipchart with the ten rules of stepfamilies.

Experts estimate that one in five children under the age of 18 is a stepchild. In the year 2000, stepfamilies outnumbered all other kinds of families.

The relationships in stepfamilies tend to be very complicated. You are bringing children into your new families as well as co-parents, or your ex-spouses or partners. You still need to consider their needs and interests.

While the relationships in stepfamilies can be very complicated, there are also benefits of a stepfamily to you and your children. Think about the positive things your new spouse brings to your life and to your children's lives. A successful stepfamily can provide a loving environment for children.

What can you expect in your new stepfamily? Building a successful stepfamily requires a great deal of energy and commitment. You and your new spouse will want to talk about your

expectations before and after you get married. The Stepfamily Association of America has proposed ten rules for stepfamilies. These rules can help guide us to have realistic expectations for a new stepfamily. They are:

- 1 Recognize that the stepfamily will not and cannot function like a natural family. It has its own special state of dynamics and behaviors. Once learned, these behaviors can become predictable and positive. Do not try to overlay the expectations and dynamics of the intact or natural family onto the stepfamily.
- 2 Recognize the hard fact that the children are not yours and they never will be. We are stepparents, not replacement parents. Mother and father (no matter how AWFUL the natural parents) are sacred words and feelings. We are stepparents, a step removed, yet in this position can still play a significant role in the development of the child.
- 3 Super stepparenting doesn't work. Go slow. Don't come on too strong.
- 4 You need to sort out your discipline style together as a couple. The couple needs to work out what the children's duties and responsibilities are. What is acceptable behavior and what are the consequences when children misbehave? Generally, in the beginning, we suggest that the biological parent does the disciplining as much as possible. The couple together specifically works out jobs, expected behaviors, and family etiquette.
- 5 Establish clear job descriptions between the parent, stepparent, and respective children. What specifically is the job of each one of us in this household?
- 6 Know that unrealistic expectations lead to rejections and resentments. There

is no model for the step relationship except for the wicked stepchild and invariably cruel stepmother of fairy tales. Note the absence of myth around the stepfather. It is vital for the survival of the stepfather to be able to see and delineate expectations for each member of the family, especially the primary issues of upset: e.g., money, discipline, the ex-spouse, parenting time, authority, emotional support, territory and custody.

- 7 There are no ex-parents . . . only ex-spouses. Begin to get information on how to best handle the ex-partner or ex-spouse.
- 8 Be prepared for conflicting pulls of sexual and biological energies within the step relationship. In the intact family, the couple comes together to have a child. The child is part of both parents, generally pulling the parents' energy together for the well-being of the child. In step, blood and sexual ties can polarize a family in opposite energies and directions.
- 9 The conflict of loyalties must be recognized right from the beginning. The conflict is full of confused emotions. Often, just as the child begins to have warm feelings toward the stepparent, the child will pull away and negatively act out. He/she feels something like this: "If I love you, that means I do not love my real parent." The feelings are normal and must be dealt with. The pulls of "Who am I loyal to first?" go all the way around in the stepfamily.
- 10 Guard your sense of humor and use it. The step situation is filled with the unexpected. Sometimes we don't know whether to laugh or to cry. Try humor.

ACTIVITY: **Talking about Becoming a Stepfamily**

In your workbook, we have placed a handout that will help you and your new spouse talk about becoming a stepfamily. When you look at the questions, do you see areas that you and your new spouse have already discussed? Do you see areas that you have not discussed? What are your expectations about discussing these issues with your new spouse? Which areas are most important to you to resolve?

Go through these questions with your new spouse. Identify together areas that are important to tackle first. Answer those first, and finally complete the full handout.

ACTIVITY: **Scrapbook and Homework**

Participants will create a page for their workbook that shows the strengths of their choice to remarry, and the positive impact it will have on their children.

Give participant the take-home message for this session and have them write down their action steps on the take-home message. Remind them to place the take-home message in the magnetic frame.

CLOSING:

Today we discussed the role of stepfamilies in our lives and the lives of our children. We learned that stepfamily relationships are complicated and need a lot of careful thought and attention. We also learned that successful stepfamilies can be positive environments for our children. Your action steps after this session are critical to ensure your stepfamily is successful.

REFERENCE:

Ten Steps for Steps, by Jeannette Lofas. URL: <http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Bliss/Bliss.html>



Rules To Guide Stepfamilies

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- 2 Recognize the hard fact that the children are not yours and they never will be. We are stepparents, not replacement parents. Mother and father (no matter how AWFUL the natural parents) are sacred words and feelings. We are stepparents, a step removed, yet in this position can still play a significant role in the development of the child.
- 3 Don't be a super stepparent—it doesn't work. Go slow. Don't come on too strong.
- 4 Sort out your discipline style together as a couple. The couple needs to work out what the children's duties and responsibilities are. What is acceptable behavior and what are the consequences when children misbehave? Generally, in the beginning, we suggest that the biological parent does the disciplining as much as possible. The couple together specifically works out jobs, expected behaviors, and family etiquette.
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- 7 Remember that there are no ex-parents ... only ex-spouses. Begin to get information on how to best handle the ex-partner or ex-spouse.
- 8 Be prepared for conflicting pulls of sexual and biological energies within the step relationship. In the intact family, the couple comes together to have a child. The child is part of both parents, generally pulling the parents' energy together for the well-being of the child. In step, blood and sexual ties can polarize a family in opposite energies and directions.
- 9 Know that children will feel loyal to their own parent. Often, just as the child begins to have warm feelings toward the stepparent, the child will pull away and negatively act out. He/she feels something like this: "If I love you, that means I do not love my real parent." The feelings are normal and must be dealt with. The pulls of "Who am I loyal to first?" go all the way around in the stepfamily.
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Becoming A Stepfamily

Questions To Discuss

1. Who will live with us in our home? What are their relationships to each of you and their ages?

NAME:.....RELATIONSHIP:.....AGE:.....

NAME:.....RELATIONSHIP:.....AGE:.....

NAME:.....RELATIONSHIP:.....AGE:.....

2. Who will be visiting our home on a regular basis, especially children who have parenting time?

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3. How will we handle discipline of children?

a. Who will discipline whom?

.....

b. What are the rules in our home?

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c. What will happen when children break the rules?

.....

d. How will we support each especially when our children resist changes and try to pit us against each other?

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Becoming A Stepfamily

Questions To Discuss

4. How are we going to handle family finances?
 - a. How much does each of us make?
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 - b. What financial responsibilities does each of us have to other family members?
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 - c. How should money be given to children?
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5. How do each of you presently communicate with your former spouse(s)?
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.....
6. How much contact do your children have with their other parent?
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7. What steps can we take to make sure that we attend to our couple relationships?
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Becoming A Stepfamily

Questions To Discuss

8. What new family traditions do we want to begin in our stepfamily?

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9. What are activities that we can enjoy together as a stepfamily?

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10. How we will devote one-on-one time to our own children?

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Take Home Message for This Session

Directions: Think of one step you will take before the next session and write it down in the space provided. In addition, write down the time, date, and location of the next session.

**The first rule
of stepfamilies
is to be realistic!**

My Action Steps:

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.....

The Next Session:

.....
DATE
.....
TIME
.....
LOCATION

