

Making Healthy Stepfamilies

"So complex is the process whereby the remarried family system stabilizes and regains its' forward developmental thrust that we have come to think of it as adding another whole phase to the family life cycle for those involved." ¹

----- McGoldrick, MSW and Betty Carter, MSW

Experts estimate that by the year 2000 there will be more stepfamilies than any other kind of family in the U.S. Half of Americans have been or will be in a stepfamily constellation at some point in their lifetime.² About half of remarried spouses procreate a mutual child in addition to children from one or both former marriages, while the remaining 50 percent of stepfamilies fall into the categories of stepfather families, stepmother families or complex families in which both spouses bring children from another marriage into their new union.

If the joining of two individuals in marriage is comparable to blending two different cultures, as many a family therapist has suggested, then the joining of two individuals with histories of past marriages, divorce and children must be the joining of two different galaxies!

Previous loyalties and relationship loss which predates the new marriage can play major havoc on well meant intentions in stepfamilies, along with other stressors. It is illuminating knowledge to couples at the helm of these family, that family researchers have identified the best predictor of stepfamily happiness to be the quality of the relationship that develops between the stepparent and children.³ Like any transition, timing can be one of the most important factors in favor of healthy adjustment. The next most important factor in stepfamily adjustment, as in any families the strength and quality of the couples' bond. These two very important variables are obviously related, as any natural parent will attest, who feels "torn" between his/her children and spouse. And any stepparent can relate the awkwardness of finding his/her place as a family member and as a parent in a maze of relationships and shared history established prior to his/her arrival.

So, the task itself is fraught with paradoxes. It is often painful and difficult for the stepparent to find a place in an already established system that grieves the loss of a person you may have never met, including being the person who children "test" to see if you are "good" enough to earn membership. It is also important to

remember that one of the developmental tasks of a family is to raise and nurture its' young to adulthood in the best way possible. It is important to remember that as a stepparent, you had a choice in the situation while the children did not. As the adult your responsibility must encompass an understanding that you will be expected to be concerned and involved in caring for these children and ensuring their sense of security in traveling through this transition of adding you to their family! If the job is too big -- Don't sign up for it! Remember you are the adult and you made the choice to marry a spouse who came with children. Very often stepparents suffer from unrealistic expectations regarding the transition of blending families, resulting in feelings of helplessness and victimization.

And very often natural parents share fantasies of the perfect family union, pressuring spouses to love children they do not even really know yet, or expecting a stepparent to discipline a child before an appropriate affection has grown between the two. Natural parents can play an important role in supporting the stepparent appropriately, including being understanding of the frustration this role can hold, particularly in the first two years of the new marriage. Pacing the role that a stepparent takes on in the family to match realistically with the development of the relationship between stepparent and child will go along way towards developing a positive relationship.

Because more than 50 percent of remarriages end in divorce, we can assume that information about the very complex process of blending families is not well known. Being able to identify common pitfalls, predictable feelings and characteristics of successful remarried families will elucidate a more viable and realistic vision.

In order to better understand this transition, let's take a look at what the characteristics of successful remarriage are according to family research.

No instant love

Relationships take time. Time to grow, time to mourn the past family unit. Realistic expectations between stepparents and children must include a gradual period of getting to know one another. There is no such thing as instant intimacy. One of the most common pitfalls that stepfamilies can fall into is the expectation that "we are one big happy family." This kind of idealization is often the result of unresolved past loss and a set up for failure and disappointment. Respect one another and take the time to become acquainted. Let the relationship build

security and caring on its own merit, without pressure to fill the fantasy of loving one another before a solid "like" has been established. On the average, two to three years is the time period for developing these [bonds](#) and stabilizing the new family.

Losses can be mourned

By the time of a second marriage, it is often a child's third family unit. The first being the biological parents' marriage, the second being a separate or single family unit and the third being the new relationship which involves a stepparent. Children need parental permission and understanding to grieve these losses, before embracing the new family system. Failure to accept mourning as a natural feeling may result in angry outbursts and potential alienation. One way to build relationships at this transitional time, is to allow stepparent-child relationships to be initially more distant. Eventually, if given the space to express themselves and resolve past loss, children do show genuine interest or liking for this new person who has been brought into their home. Children will eventually respond to the health and love present in the couples' relationship over time, as they do want their parents to be happy.

Parents also suffer loss, particularly if their own biological children are not living with them. Loyalty to previous members who used to live under one roof can make it a difficult process to bond to new members, but given time and respect for each others' feelings and boundaries, these bonds do grow. Relationships become what they are meant to be. A small child will tend towards accepting the stepparent in a parental role differently than a teenager. Coming into a teenager's life may involve more of a friendship, depending on the individuals and needs involved, while coming into a family with a one-year-old will usually require parental nurturance and attachment similar to that of a primary parent.

Strong couples' relationship

Even though taking on certain responsibilities, particularly discipline, may take some time for a stepparent, the key to any healthy family system is the mutual love, caring and respect that the spouses share. Working through the predictable stresses of becoming a stepfamily secures your relationship. Taking time to be together is also important, as in this situation the honeymoon phase of the relationship has no doubt been curtailed. Take time to be alone and develop your

bond independent of the children and parenting roles in the family. This is not a step that can be skipped! The couple relationship needs some breathing space of its' own to grow. Getting away for a weekend may be difficult with all that is going on, but it is essential to the health of your marriage.

Resolving difficult parenting issues through honest sharing and understanding will build intimacy. Just remember to be patient with the desire for change. And seek the help of a counselor to help you resolve and understand the very tumultuous feelings you will be having in building your new family system.

Satisfactory step relations develop gradually and authority must be predicated on genuine affection

Too often a stepparent expects or is expected to fill in as a full-blown parent including discipline. This may happen after children and stepparent have developed a bond of trust and caring. It also might not ever happen, particularly if the children are teenagers when the stepparent arrives on the scene. Adjust to the situation according to its' natural evolution. It is unrealistic to assume your authority will develop the same with a teenager as a young child. Respect boundaries and what has come before as well as being open to a different form of relating than your idealized interpretation of what family "should" be.

Establish satisfying rituals

Every family develops its' own culture. This gives members a sense of belonging to an intimate group. Holiday rituals can be developed that are unique to the present constellation. For example, a mother of two children marries a Jewish man. Chanuka celebrations might be added to Christmas, and the children learn new rituals and philosophies for living. Other elements, like specific kinds of jokes or well-intentioned humor can also go a long way in weaving a family together. Be open to the unique characteristics and pleasures that develop naturally and spontaneously between family members. Humor is a powerfully bonding experience. Finding ways to laugh together will go along way towards establishing a sense of belonging. Humor can be a form of intimacy, as sharing fun builds relationships in which people tend to seek each other out.

Separate but cooperative households which involve ex-spouses/biological parents

Supporting children's relationship to their biological parent who does not live in

the stepfamily is important to healthy development. Keeping these situations separate will decrease chances for conflict with children being caught in the crossfire.

There are situations that are not ideal but can be carefully managed to bring out cooperation and there are situations that experts recommend against for co-custody which may not allow for cooperation. In these more extreme cases (mental imbalance, parental dysfunction, or severe child rearing conflict) family researchers recommend decreased contact and no joint custody. However in the ideal, often with professional help, parents are able to get over past hurts and work in the agreed best interest of the children.

WHAT DO STEPPARENTS SAY?

Perhaps the best advice comes from the parents and stepparents who have made it work! In a study by Duhl⁵ families that have succeeded in creating a healthy remarriage and developing strong bonds with children gave the following advice to people embarking on this journey of family-making:

1. Go slow. Take time. Settle your old marriage (divorce) before you start a new one. Accept the need for continual involvement of parts of the old family with the new. Help children maintain relationships with biological parents.
2. Stepparents should try for mutual courtesy, but not expect a child's love. Respect the special bond between biological parent and child.
3. Communicate, negotiate compromise, and accept what cannot be changed.

In the end, fathering and mothering are a result of the time and effort we put into it. It is true that anyone can be a biological parent. But we all know of far too many cases where there are natural parents but no true parenting. Stepparenting is always a conscious choice, whereby biological parenthood may be accidental. Wherever there is a choice to bring forth life, or be involved in intimate relationship to developing children, we must remember that it is not the children who have asked to be born or to "become married."

Our children deserve our superior effort at understanding what is in their best interest, especially when feelings and struggles are intense, as they often are in the transition to a remarried family constellation. And it is a parents' job to be able to consider the needs of the child and expect to put them first when

appropriate. This is the nature of parenthood. Whether you come by it biologically or through marriage, parenthood requires maturity.

As with anything in life that involves soulful effort and an amount of personal sacrifice, the rewards are reaped by those who sow. One 17-year-old who had lived in a remarried family since she was 13 summed up her feelings for her stepfather this way, "He's my Dad. Anyone can be a father, but he's been there for me. I have a father, too. But he's my Dad!" Remember, too, that children fare better the more adults they have who are committed to their growth and well-being. There can be room for two Dads or two Moms, if each relationship is respected for what it is and supported in its' uniqueness. There has always been considerable controversy surrounding the less than ideal emergence of the nuclear family since its' recent inception. Perhaps the newly constellated stepfamily network at its' best holds promise for a return to a kind of extended family system. In any case, with support and knowledge for the natural feelings and challenges of this kind of system, perhaps we will be able to recognize the unique opportunity for conscious love, caring and commitment that a stepfamily holds. Learning the value of nurturing is afterall the core of healthy relationships of all kinds

Footnotes

1. McGoldrick and Carter **Forming a Remarried Family** in "[The Changing Family Life Cycle](#)", edited by McGoldrick and Carter, 2nd ed. Gardner Press, N.Y. 1988
2. Glick,Paul, 1991, from the 1987 National Survey of [Families](#) and Households presented at Address to Annual Conference, Stepfamily Associates of America, Lincoln, Nebraska, Oct. 1991.
3. Visher and Visher, chapter 8 in "[Normal Family Processes](#)", edited by Froma Walsh, Guilford Press, N.Y. 1993 2nd edition
4. Visher and Visher, chapter 8 in "[Normal Family Processes](#)" edited by Froma Walsh, Guilford Press, N.Y. 1993 2nd edition
5. McGoldrick and Carter **Forming a Remarried Family** in "[The Changing Family Life Cycle](#)", edited by McGoldrick and Carter, 2nd ed. Gardner Press, N.Y. 1988

