

Stepfamily Life: Hope and Help for Making it Work

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About the Author

Mary Ann Aronsohn is a Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in South Pasadena, CA. She holds a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology from California State University at Northridge, and is certified in Object Relations/Self Psychology and in Hypnotherapy. She has been involved as a therapist for 17 years, and in private practice since 1989; seeing couples, individuals, families, leading groups, and teaching. She is a group leader at a local hospital with an acute care population, and instructs therapists at a counseling center. She has developed and taught classes on several subjects, mainly psychotherapy-related.

Ms. Aronsohn is a member of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and the Stepfamily Association of America.

Ms. Aronsohn's professional interest in stepfamilies initially arose from her first-hand experience as a parent and stepparent. Impressed by the complexity and difficulty of stepparenting, she was surprised by the lack of readily available information and support systems aimed at helping stepfamily members. This lack of information and support is one of her particular concerns, given demographers' predictions that stepfamilies will be the most prevalent type of family by the year 2010. The combination of her personal experience with her awareness of the great need for help for increasing numbers of stepfamilies, fostered Ms. Aronsohn's expertise as a stepfamily therapist. She has become determined to make a significant contribution in this increasingly important area.

Ms. Aronsohn writes on the subject, speaks publicly regarding stepfamily concerns, conducts a course for stepfamily couples, and includes people with stepfamily issues in her private practice.

Introduction

Did you know that demographers predict that stepfamilies will be the most common type of family in the USA by the year 2010? Yet, very little is known by the public about how this kind of family operates, how it differs from first-time families, and what is normal for stepfamilies. This booklet was written out of a desire to provide information to stepfamily members.

Because of a lack of information, stepfamilies often struggle along, isolated from support and information, or trying to fit a nuclear family model which, "Brady Bunch" notwithstanding, in most cases simply does not fit. Quite often stepfamily members feel a great deal of confusion or pain, which would be greatly alleviated by some basic information, including the opportunity to know something about the experiences of other stepfamilies. This booklet will attempt to give a framework of knowledge and some examples in order to begin the process of easing some of the difficulties of being a stepfamily member. I sincerely hope your family will benefit, because stepfamilies can provide remarkably satisfying relationships and experiences.

What is a Stepfamily, Anyway?

Stepfamilies are now being defined quite broadly to include all of the members of the extended family which results when two people have formed a serious relationship in a household together, with one or both of these people having children from a previous alliance. This means that if you are a woman with children whose ex-husband has remarried, even if you have not, you are part of a stepfamily. If your son or daughter has entered a stepfamily, you are also a part of an extended stepfamily system. If the parties are not married, they still form a stepfamily. Even if the children are grown, or never visit, it is still considered a stepfamily.

Myths and Cultural Associations Regarding the Stepfamily

The term “stepfamily” is laden with meanings that need to be examined in the light of the current day.

Both adults and children in stepfamilies generally have unrealistic expectations, particularly at the beginning. And no wonder! For most of us, from a very young age the very word "stepfamily" carries with it some serious baggage! What are the images from literature and popular culture? For stepmothers, two quite opposite ones: the wicked stepmother of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella fame, and the perfect stepmother like Julie Andrews in the "Sound of Music". Society seems to expect simultaneously that stepmothers instantly love and sacrifice all for their new stepchildren, or that they will fall far short of that goal.

Stepfathers are expected to form instant loving bonds and quickly take over the discipline of stepchildren. The first is impossible, and the second can be a serious setback if attempted too early. There is much less of a stereotype of the wicked stepfather, although the image is present (especially for older children), as in the movie "The Stepfather".

Overall, "step" terms are widely used to denote derogatory meanings. Stepfamilies have been considered even by well-meaning people as less valid than nuclear families, or perhaps to be pitied. (The word "step" comes from the Old English word "steop", which meant "bereaved"; a stepchild then was understood to be an orphan. Perhaps some of the current bias comes from that historical perspective.) Because of this bias, some stepfamilies try to masquerade as nuclear families. However, this pretense denies the realities of the new family structure and can add pressure to the individual members. Rather than accepting the sense of stepfamily life as being somehow “second best”, stepfamily members can actually feel proud of their status because, in fact, their family has come together out of choice and not by chance. Stepfamily adults have chosen to begin this new life, willingly taking on the children, choosing them as special and wanting to shape a new, inclusive group.

In spite of the difficulties that step terms have presented in the past, there are no other known and accepted terms to use. Therefore, we must rely on education to change the general impressions people carry about the validity of stepfamilies.

What Causes Stepfamilies to be Different from First -Time Families?

Stepfamilies are quite different in a myriad of ways, which is why the nuclear family model is inappropriate as a guide or template for stepfamily members to follow. Presented here are several of the main differences.

Stepfamilies come together out of at least one major loss, and after several big changes.

These might be a divorce or death of one parent, changing homes, changing schools and friends, and usually a shift away from status as at least one single-parent household. For the children, the new relationship which their biological parent has entered into represents yet another major change and more possibility for loss. Often, the one stable element which the children may have had during a tumultuous period is the parent who has now formed a new relationship. The new relationship which this parent is now a party to is often experienced by the children as being very threatening. The joining adults may be pleased and relieved to find a new partner and may not understand how this change may feel to their involved child(ren).

The parent-child relationship(s) predate the new couple relationship.

This means that each of the two sides which are joining have histories that the other side has not shared. The couple does not get the chance to become fully accustomed to one another before they take on the duties of parenting. (Instead, the couple sometimes looks forward to retirement as the time for leisurely talks, freer sexuality, and knowing one another more fully; in other words, the honeymoon comes at the end!)

The new stepparent has a sudden relationship with the child(ren) instead of anticipating and planning for that child.

This means that there is no slow loving bond built out of meeting a child's needs repeatedly before there is any need to consider such difficult issues as discipline.

The stepfamily members will be at disparate developmental stages in their lives from one another.

For example, the two adults forming a new relationship would truly enjoy a honeymoon together alone. However, they have children; and for the stepparent, instant children, who need a great deal of care. In the case of older teens in particular, the developmental task is to grow away from the family and form a more separate, independent life at the same time as this new family is forming.

The two sides have to work and struggle to come to agreement over different, and foreign, ways of doing most everything. . .

from significant things such as who gets which room and how to celebrate holidays, to daily issues over who gets the TV remote control and how eggs should be fried.

There are ex-spouses, either in memory or in real life, and other kin, such as parents and siblings of ex-spouses, to deal with.

This is one of the reasons stepfamilies are more complex than first-time families. Stepfamilies have difficult decisions to make with regard to contact with these people, and have the challenge of co-parenting to face in many cases.

Society provides no reasonable expectations for stepfamilies, not even legally defined relationships for the stepparent and stepchild.

Stepparents find themselves learning as they proceed, since there are no guides for stepparenting. Also there are problematic and potentially painful legal issues to consider regarding custody, support, wills, etc.

Children often shift back and forth between two households, requiring continual adjustment by all members.

Not only does this provide complexity and confusion, but is a monetary issue as well, since most often the child needs two of everything.

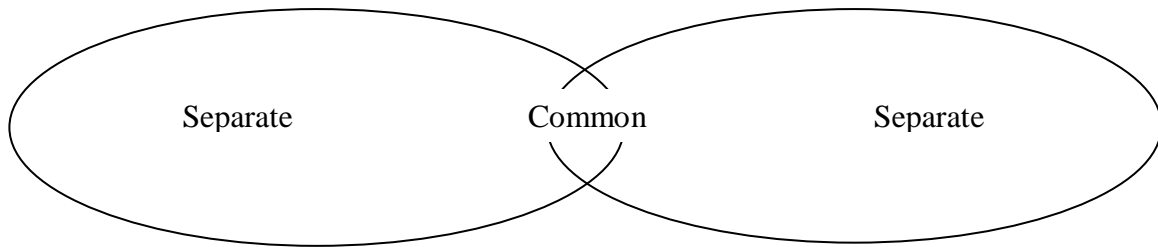


Figure A
An early-stage stepfamily.

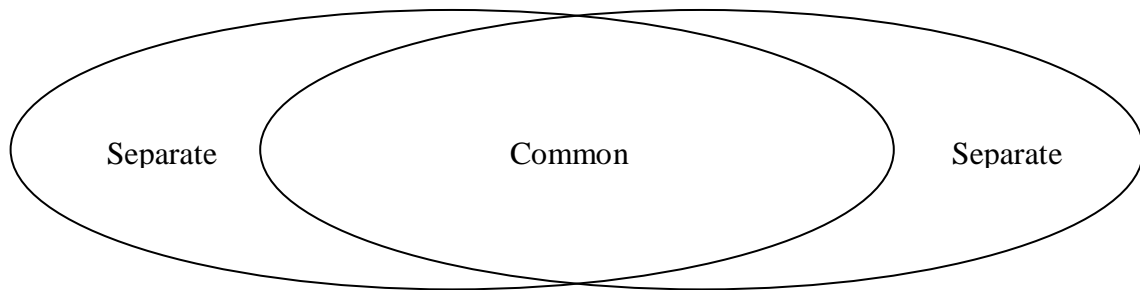


Figure B
A later-stage stepfamily.

Figures A and B illustrate the successful gradual merging of two separate families over time. While it is probably not realistic to expect complete integration, the areas considered to be separate gradually shrink, while the common aspect of the stepfamily grows.

Stages of Stepfamily Development

One of the main reasons stepfamilies suffer is because of a lack of normative information; that is, they do not know what experiences are normal for stepfamilies. Stepfamily development is different from that of other types of families, and for good reasons. The people who enter new partnerships with some realistic sense of what to expect will have a much easier time negotiating the difficult spots, of which there will probably be many. Here is a basic map of the terrain.

There are three main stages of stepfamily development. During these stages, the goal is for the family to progress through the change from two separate family systems, with little in common, to one family system, with more in common. The increase in commonality illustrated in Figures A and B correspond with the process of "integration", which essentially means "feeling like a real family".

It should be stated that the inevitability of integration is another fantasy. Each stepfamily has a different capacity and perhaps even a different desired outcome with regard to integration. The goals can vary from wanting, or being able, eventually, to experience stepfamily life as one big happy family, to remaining two essentially separate families living under one roof. Again, it is very important to keep expectations as realistic as possible. A useful way of thinking about the goal is to determine to make of this family whatever is mutually desired, satisfactory and possible given the circumstances.

Stage 1: Initiation

Characteristics:

- **Fantasy (Unrealistic expectations)**
- **Reality sets in**

In the initiation stage we usually see both a fantasy portion and a "reality sets in", or "coming back to earth, hard" portion.

The fantasy part is very much like an extension of the honeymoon stage at the beginning of most love affairs. All the members, but especially the adults, tend to be excited and pleased about this new opportunity. Stepfamily members may think things like these: "Now I'll finally have a partner who will love my children as much as I do, and who can give them everything that my ex couldn't", "We'll all settle down into family life rather quickly", and "I'll finally have the little brother I always wanted". To use the diagrams, this phase feels to members as though all areas are common areas, as opposed to what follows, which is quite the opposite.

A bit later comes the onset of reality, which can be a dose of bitter medicine. The child who wanted a little brother is now furious at having to share her parent with the little brat, the parent who wanted a partner to love his children as much as he does thinks she takes sides against them, and the partner who expected quick adjustment finds difficult feelings of jealousy, anger, or loneliness beginning to surface. Completely unexpected situations pop up, and can threaten the new alliance much more easily if there has been no preparation. Although uncomfortable feelings are being experienced, stepfamily members in this stage usually don't yet know why they are uncomfortable, but only have a sense that things are not progressing as planned. There is a growing awareness of how little they all really know one another after all. Adults typically feel confused and wonder what might be wrong with them or their partner, or think that they may have made a very big mistake. The only situation in which members actually feel comfortable is within their "minifamily", meaning in each separate biological group (for stepparents without their own kids, this means a lot of loneliness), and hopefully within the couple relationship.

Stage 2: The Working Stage

Characteristics:

- **New awareness**
- **Conflict and negotiation**
- **Painful feelings and learning to express them**
- **New traditions and building history**
- **Structural change**

The second stage consists of the "working" or "building" phase of development. Throughout this phase there will be a great deal of focus on all of the stepfamily issues. The two families are undergoing a major remodeling, the outcome of which cannot be predicted. The goals of the remodel must be flexible enough to encompass all the disparate members who might want different things from the stepfamily, and may have to be redirected from time to time. It becomes clear at the beginning of the working stage, as in Diagram A, that the area of commonality in the stepfamily is quite small. The "work" of this stage consists of gaining awareness, negotiating differences, building new traditions, and developing steprelationships, while supporting and solidifying the couple relationship. This is by far the most difficult stage in the stepfamily's life cycle.

At the end of the initiation stage, the members are feeling the discomfort of their unfulfilled fantasies. Now, the task of "awareness" requires stepfamilies to sort out specifically what the disappointments are for each, and to learn to validate and respond to one another. It is recommended that the couple works together to recognize their own struggles and to support one another, as well as working with each child in whatever manner is most successful with that child. The stepchildren need to not be in the position of hearing much about the adults' hurts, in order to avoid role reversals. However, it helps a great deal if there are some household rules about manners, so that at least a certain civility can be counted on in the face of turmoil. Occasionally, stepchildren need to hear such statements as "You know, when you refuse to eat the food that Sally buys or cooks, that feels bad to her. Do you suppose you could tell me, or us, what's bothering you instead of acting it out like that?" Kids need to know at least some of the impact they have on others, and the option of being more direct with their feelings. (Additional guidance on the areas of increasing awareness and dealing with painful feelings, as well as on new traditions and building history, may be found in the "Helpful actions" section.)

At the beginning of the working stage, conflict in the stepfamily often takes the form of one minifamily lining up against the other, and parents needing to step in to translate or intercede for their children. Indeed, the growing sense of awareness of each other brings up many ways in which the two sides seem to be at odds with one another, so there may be a great deal of conflict. By the end of this stage, most of the ways of doing things will have been ironed out, so there will be less conflict. And the conflict can look quite different, if the adults implement such traditions as the family meeting and model such behaviors as reflective listening. These tools build a sense of trust and history together, which pave the way for the structural changes shown in the diagram. Steprelationships begin to strengthen as biological ones stretch and open up, so that the area of commonality expands. It would be more likely that stepsiblings might stick up for one another, or a stepparent might side with a stepchild over some issue with the parent, rather than the automatic division along biological lines.

At the beginning of this stage there are two separate family histories, each little known to the other. By the end, each minifamily has a clearer image of each other's history, and a new group of

memories and traditions has helped form a new history. There is now a body of experience and routine to describe and define this new family.

The couple relationship will have undergone some changes as well. In the beginning stage they will have either been in fantasy or wondering whether they have made a huge mistake. At the beginning of the working stage they are becoming aware of a whole array of perplexing problems as well. By the end of the working stage, they are able to consistently nourish their own relationship, support one another's relationships with the children, and work as a solid team to meet the family challenges.

By the end of the working stage, the area of commonality, as in Diagram B, has grown considerably. By now the stepfamily feels more settled and more comfortable.

Stage 3: Maintenance

Characteristics:

- **Solidity, predictability, greater comfort**
- **Less conscious effort**
- **More direct relationships**
- **Generic family concerns**

The maintenance stage marks the time in which purely stepfamily-related issues tend to become less prominent. In the main, they become subsidiary to more generic family issues. The stepfamily operates with less conscious effort. The relationships begin to work in a more direct, one-to-one way with less need to triangle others in. There is a degree of predictability and control not available earlier.

The only structural stepfamily work left unfinished in the working stage is usually that of the role of the stepparent. Perhaps this is because the stepparent's role is the most socially ambiguous one. In any case, the relationship between stepparent and stepchild is probably much more dependable and less breakable by the end of the working stage, but it may not be as intimate as the adult might want. In reality, the stepparent rarely, in any stage, gets to feel like an "insider". At best stepparents can hope for a position of intimacy, albeit a more removed and neutral intimacy than that of the parent. In a way, this can allow the stepchild to confide in a stepparent their concerns that could not be aired with a parent. It is also worth mentioning that a stepparent may have very different relationships with stepchildren in the same family; for example, be like a parent to one and like an aunt or mentor to another. What is important is that the connection be mutually acceptable to each involved member.

Therefore, the stepparent/stepchild relationship will continue to develop in the maintenance stage, solidifying and becoming more defined.

In many families, there is now more cooperation between a child's two homes.

Although disruptions (often major life-cycle developments like a young adult going off to college, a new baby in the home, an adult's illness) will undoubtedly cause stress, and the stepfamily will still tend at those times to divide along biological lines, the recovery is quicker because of the strong foundation.

These stages are a general overview. In some families there can be a return to an earlier stage. Also, some members in a stepfamily may progress more quickly than others. Occasionally (in about 1 out of 3 families) progress will halt because of individual or family dynamics that prevent movement as a whole. When this happens, it can be helpful to seek professional guidance.

6. Some Typical Stepfamily Difficulties

Stepfamily difficulties are listed in order to let stepparents know the kinds of challenges other stepfamilies have already faced, and to reassure them that their experiences are to be expected as well as probably manageable.

- Children with very ambivalent attitudes; for example, being enthusiastic about the stepfamily one day and rejecting the next
- Stepparents experiencing loneliness and often feeling left out (more common for the stepparent who has no biological or adopted children or when his/her children are away)
- Biological parents feeling overwhelmed, fearing the loss of the special relationship with the child, or losing control of aspects of the child's life
- Jealousies between stepsiblings, or between stepchild and stepparent over the biological parent
- Strain from trying to create a feeling of family closeness when the household composition keeps changing
- Children fearing more losses, experiencing jealousy, being caught in loyalty binds, having to make room for new, and foreign, children and adults, being used as messengers between households
- Children acting out their feelings indirectly, through poor schoolwork, moodiness, hostility or withdrawal
- Unanticipated "failures"; For example, one of the harshest realities in stepfamily experience is the discovery that, contrary to the fantasy, this new family takes much longer to settle into a stable, comfortable, predictable arrangement than most of us expect. Indeed, it may never completely settle, or resemble our goals at all. "Failure" results from our expectations; therefore, if we expect less and remain flexible about our goals and desires for the stepfamily, we may be able to reap more satisfaction from what we are able to create. Specific experiences of "failures" might include: 1. A stepchild who never does call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad", 2. Stepsiblings who never wholeheartedly accept one another, 3. A stepchild who opts to remain more of the time with the other household, and stymies attempts to build a significant stepfamily relationship, 4. A biological parent who cannot seem to support his or her mate's authority in the household. Any of these experiences might be seen as normal or acceptable, given the stage of development and/or the need for less rigid expectations
- Confusion about members of one's "family". Some studies have shown that even full siblings can disagree about whom they include in their perception of their family
- Frustration from having to negotiate basic things that never seemed to present difficulties before in the context of a first-time or single-parent household

- Dealing with animosity, overzealousness (a stepparent who, well-meaning or not, takes over the role of the other parent of the same gender), badmouthing, or a myriad of other possible irritations from the children's other household
- Negotiating relationships with many more people in the children's lives, like ex-grandparents, new grandparents, one's ex's new girlfriend's mother, child friends from each household, and so on. (This could, of course, be a joy as well as a difficulty, depending on the people. In any case, it does make life more complicated)
- Difficulty getting information from the children's schools, which in many cases will send out only one set of information
- Parents can feel threatened by new stepparents moving into their children's lives; and communication that could help relieve some of that concern is often disallowed, too brief or misunderstood

Helpful Actions Stepfamily Adults can Take to Encourage the Development of a Happy and Successful Family Life

Here are some suggested courses of action that stepfamily adults would do well to familiarize themselves with and become skilled at doing. You will find specific ideas and recommended language to deal with some of the most common stepfamily challenges.

Building a solid couple relationship: First and foremost among the "jobs" of the stepfamily adults, building the couple relationship is actually a prerequisite for composing a stepfamily. In the face of lots of pulls in other directions, the couple needs to dedicate special time and attention to their own relationship. Otherwise, the underpinning of the stepfamily weakens and all the work becomes more difficult. A set time during each week for the couple to be together, whether as simple as coffee together on Sunday morning or a walk on Friday evening, allows a sense of trust that relief is in sight, and a commitment to the nourishment of the couple, that makes a big difference. Especially in the face of the difficult work that stepfamily integration usually requires, the simple joy in spending time together as two people in love rather than as worker bees, will lend strength, humor and resilience to the adults. At times, Sunday coffee feels like the only thing that holds the whole shebang together!

Dealing with emotions: One of the biggest mistakes made in any family is in avoiding or ignoring feelings of grief and anger over losses experienced and changes made. In a stepfamily particularly, there have been major losses. In addition to those already mentioned, stepmembers can experience gaining a new sibling, stepparent or stepchild, rearranging the rooms or having to share a room in a house, losing the closeness and/or responsibility and autonomy of a single parent household, etc. In addition, there are new jealousies and loyalty conflicts; for example, many stepchildren must fight off feelings of liking or appreciation of new stepparents in order not to feel disloyal to biological parents. A child may have to face sharing a parent for the first time in years. These feelings must be expressed and addressed in order for the stepfamily to reach its maximum potential for satisfaction. One way in which to deal with these feelings straightforwardly is to tell children what would be normal for a person to feel in their circumstances. For example, "You know, I bet it would be hard for you to let yourself like me; many kids think if they like Dad's new girlfriend, they're somehow being disloyal to their Mom." Another important step is to let kids know that there is room for their real feelings; rather than accepting the acting-out behavior at face value. "I've noticed you like to go right to your room when you get here, without talking like we used to. I'd like to know, if you could tell me, what's really going on with you. I imagine that you're pretty mad at me." Even though you may not get clear answers, you have expressed the willingness to see through a child's actions and to hear the true feelings. This may eventually make it possible for the child to know her or his own feelings, and perhaps even find healthier ways of expressing them. It is also wise to assume that people have good reasons for their emotions and reactions, even if the reasons are not obvious. This attitude helps build respect and trust. Specific skills to learn and emphasize are reflective listening and I-messages, and family meetings can be invaluable tools.

Finding ways to address the different developmental needs of the family members: For example, the new couple, at a time of feeling excited about their new relationship and wanting to spend a lot of family time together, may have an adolescent child who is needing, appropriately, to break away from family life and find more autonomy. The job is to become aware of and find ways to validate and respond to all those differing needs, at least to some degree. In this example, it can be

helpful simply to spell out the dilemma in developmental terms: "Actually, your job right now, at 15, is to figure out who you are by trying out different things, and by being different from your parents. It's also a time most kids your age are very impatient with being around home, and want to be off and about. That's fine, and as it should be. At the same time, we're forming a new family here too and the rest of us are craving spending time together and doing fun things so we can get to know each other better. Can you imagine some way we can do both jobs?" In this case, we are also eliciting the child's ideas and help, which can include him/her in the grown-up job of managing the family. Sometimes this is irresistible to kids, and they can come up with remarkable solutions if asked.

Establishing new family traditions: The challenge here is to begin building a sense of "we-ness", without erasing or ignoring each member's previous way of, for example, celebrating holidays. Some treasured old ways of doing things can be saved, perhaps joined to other members' traditions, and gradually the new family can find some routines and rituals of its own. For example: in one stepfamily's first Christmas together, the father and his son put up their artificial tree complete with handmade ornaments, and the mother and her son put up their small potted live tree. The following year they did the same, but they added a new tradition of decorating a pine garland over the mantelpiece together.

Another stepfamily instituted "burger night" on Thursdays. This simple routine allowed a sense of something stable, something to count on, something "this family" does.

Forming new relationships: Particularly stepparent-stepchild ones. Taking on a stepchild or stepparent is a big job, and one that few people are prepared for. Instead of growing slowly into a relationship during pregnancy, birth, infancy, etc., we are thrust, or thrust ourselves, into an instant relationship. It takes years instead of months to develop a working relationship. There is some evidence that the older the stepchild at the time of the new family's inception, the longer it takes for a comfortable relationship to form. Usually the process is also complicated by understandable jealousies, anger, grief and loyalty issues for the child, and fear of isolation and rejection for the new stepparent. There can be similar struggles in forming stepsibling relationships, and it is wise to encourage patience and allow time to help with familiarity and shared experience. It is recommended that each pair of people have a bit of time to spend together regularly, so that shared experiences can start to build into a sense of familiarity and family history. This can seem overwhelming to read, especially if one has a large family. Remember, however, that this time need not be long or involved, but can be mundane and momentary. An errand run with a child can be a special time to ask about a friendship or school project. Cooking or reading together can be time that need not take much planning or effort, but will be like putting money in the stepfamily's bank account.

The traditional family meeting is always a good habit, no matter the family type. If you have struggling, loyalty-bound teens, the family meeting may have to come about in an indirect way; for example, when there is a specific conflict to resolve. After you've listened to suggestions and worked out some sort of tentative solution, you can then introduce other discussions that need family input and end with suggestions and planning for recreational activities . . . and all without even calling it a "Family Meeting"! These meetings eventually build up a sense of trust that everyone's concerns will be aired and valued, and a sense of safety because after the conflicts there is time for planning upcoming pleasurable events. In this way, the family can perceive itself as strong enough to survive its members' powerful feelings and go on. Even the adults need this reassurance at times!

Creating co-parenting relationships with ex-spouses: This task can be very difficult or even impossible in some cases, but is extremely helpful to children when it is possible.

Finding ways to relate to "exes" for this purpose shows the children that they are loved by both sides enough for the parents to put aside differences and possible discomfort to work together on their behalf. It can lessen a child's anxiety about loyalty. When we are able to talk civilly and respectfully between households regarding a child's well-being, it can reassure a child that there is room enough, love enough to go around and that all the adults are mature enough to be able to concern themselves with the child's needs.

Another possible benefit is in strengthening the re-mated couple's bond, since it can encourage each to do any unfinished resolving of the ex-relationship.

When each member of the new couple can have civil conversation with her or his partner's ex, that even more can reassure children and provide the best possible framework for co-parenting. In some stepfamilies, ex-spouses are absolutely unable or unwilling to create this framework. When this is true, then all the adults can do is work from their end, make sure never to criticize the ex openly in front of the child, and hope for time to shift the ex's attitude. This is extremely frustrating. There are techniques to try when the ex is or may be willing to cooperate. The first is a good rule of thumb in dealing with most people; that is, acknowledging (or at least stating) that you know the person loves the child and wants the best for the child. This at least begins conversations as though you are on the same side. Another helpful technique is to make full use of neutral communication devices such as fax machines and answering machines. One can make management arrangements simply by stating your plans along with "if I don't hear from you by such-and-such a time, here is what I will do". This eliminates some of the possibilities for struggle but, of course, won't work with all exes; some will manage to create battles no matter what you do. Another idea is to ask your partner to listen to messages or read mail from your ex if you are likely to bristle and react badly, and then let you know if there is anything you need to do. Adding to your own tranquillity as much as possible will allow you a better chance of acting in a way that will promote cooperative communication.

If the struggle is a different one, such as an ex that requires continual involvement which feels bad to you or your partner, then you need to find ways to limit your exchanges to coparenting ones. In some families this is very difficult and requires some deeper understanding to unravel.

In all cases, this is an extremely important set of relationships to negotiate. At best, the two households work together with clear and open communication regarding the children's needs and are able to be amicable about it. In some families the two sides can even become genuinely friendly. However, if this is not your case, you are in good company. Do not hesitate to get support from outside your stepfamily to help you with this struggle.

Accepting continual shifts in household composition: Stepfamilies are more complex than single-parent or nuclear families. One of the reasons for this is the fact that children are often members of more than one household, and may also travel back and forth. So, especially if this is a "doubles" family (both adults have children), the household composition can change a great deal, from a lone couple to a houseful, and different combinations in between. Transitions can be especially difficult for children, and the more comfortable and prepared the adults can be (for example, by knowing and anticipating the transitional difficulties), the easier it will be for the children. For example, a family who gets their 14-year old stepson every other Friday night knows not to plan anything much for those Friday nights, nor to expect him to be friendly that first night. By Saturday morning there is much less tension, he has loosened up and feels secure enough to interact in a more sociable manner.

One of the most difficult situations is the one in which the children have free choice in where they will stay when, so that no one has a set or even partially set schedule to count on. The parent in this case will probably feel miserable, miss the child much more, and worry about losing her/him more than usual. Even if the child proclaims to like it better this way, it is anxiety-provoking for him/her also, not to be able to count on seeing that parent, and also to have that much control over her/his relationship with that parent and the rest of the stepfamily. It seems better for all concerned to follow a general outline, at least, with some flexibility for changes. Just know that most people have some difficulty with this continual shifting; being reassured that the feeling is normal, can bring some sense of relief. Also, it can help to remember that this arrangement will not last forever.

Support from outside the stepfamily is a critical ingredient in the making of a successful stepfamily unit. In the early stages, since most all the members are dealing with pain and discomfort, it is harder to support one another. Educational guidance, regarding what experiences are normal for certain stages of stepfamily development, also can take an amazing amount of the burden of fear and sense of failure away. The "new awareness" and "conflict and negotiation" portions of the working stage, in which individuals are learning to understand each other's feelings and experiences in the stepfamily, is another time when outside help can be remarkably effective. Stepfamily support groups, for adults and/or adolescents, have a great track record in helping to lower anxiety and isolation, and to encourage a sense of hope in struggling members. We all need outside help to give us the chance to talk about our fears, hurts and hopes. A good friend or therapist can be invaluable in helping us through the difficult moments, and when we can share the hard parts, we often naturally remember the good, solid reasons we are in this struggle in the first place.

Braving the challenges of becoming involved in spite of few models and little societal support: The task of forming steprelationships, particularly stepparent-stepchild ones, is uncharted territory for each beginning stepfamily. A worthy goal is to form one that is mutually satisfying, no matter what external expectations exist. Whether that relationship becomes one of friendship, mutual tolerance, deep love, mentorship, or something else will depend on what potential and desire exists between stepparent and stepchild, or between stepsiblings. Try not to be pressured by what you think you are supposed to be creating with this child; rather, make of it, slowly, whatever you can. Be prepared by knowing the average time it takes for stepfamilies to get through the working stage is four to seven years, and that that journey is usually not on a smooth road but on one that requires careful attention and dedication. However, these relationships can become extremely satisfying ones because of the fact that they may have been wanted and hard-won.

Additional "Dos and Don'ts"

This section contains important suggestions that have not been included elsewhere.

Expectations of instant love: You cannot instantly love your new stepchild, or expect your new partner to love your child the way you do. Nor, generally, does one love a stepchild in the same way as a biological or adopted child. This is Normal!

The use of inappropriate family terms.: Expecting or pressuring stepchildren to use biological terms ("he's your new Dad, so call him "Dad"!)" in steprelationships can be very destructive. In the above case, it would be quite likely that the child would become resentful ("he's not my Dad!) and

that this mistake would cost time, perhaps irrevocable time, in the stepfamily developmental process. It will be better to use whatever terms, names or nicknames that naturally develop, as long as they are reasonably respectful. Most stepchildren use their stepparents' first names.

After moving in together, try to keep changes to a minimum until the family has learned to know one another and deal with conflict. Only make 2 or 3 changes that will aid the stepparent in feeling more comfortable in the new situation. The high degree of continuity will reassure children that they are not losing everything. After the family is able to negotiate with one another effectively, changes will be less threatening.

Try to stay aware that each stepfamily member has basic needs: the stepparent needs to feel accepted and not so much of an outsider; the parent needs to stay connected with her/his children; the children need to feel some sense of control and to be able to express their feelings of loss; and everyone needs to build a home that will eventually feel comfortable, familiar, predictable and satisfying. If one knows, for example, that the stepparent is likely to feel isolated and rejected, one can be more understanding of and able to help identify what's really wrong.

Attempting to discipline stepchildren before any firm bond has been developed. This is likely to backfire. Instead, let the biological parent do the disciplining, and the stepparent help enforce the parent's rules. In a situation requiring discipline, and in the absence of the biological parent, the stepparent can say "I am making sure your Dad's/Mom's rules are followed". This whole area may be easier with very young children.

Starting out in a new home together, if at all possible, rather than on an ex-spouse's "turf" or the home of one of the minifamilies, can reduce some of the tension over territory and history. But this change, as all early stepfamily changes, must be weighed for its importance versus its impact on the children.

Being overly affected by the "wicked stepmother" stories, or the "perfect stepmother" image. Instead, assume that, as a stepparent, you will fall somewhere in between, and that you will make whatever you can of these new relationships. Some stepparents fall into a trap of trying so hard to avoid even the possibility that they could be labeled "wicked" that they exhaust themselves. This is a set-up for feeling resentful, which will create the same kind of tension which the stepparent was trying to avoid.

Pressing too hard to have your stepfamily resemble a nuclear family. Some families seem to manage to resemble a nuclear family. However, more often than not, this leads to problems such as resentment by the children who can see this expectation as pressure to forget or erase their absent parent. Other signs of this problem may be buried feelings of anger and grief, "acting-out", and a general sense of never "getting it right". Stepfamilies have their own structure, and it is very different from that of nuclear families. In order to reap the most success possible, it is important for stepfamilies to accept and address the stresses and opportunities particular to their own dynamics.

In Conclusion

A few stepfamilies have a relatively easy time settling in, but most of us are quite surprised by the degree of discomfort we experience in this process, and by the length of time required to make a fairly comfortable family situation. Operating in the dark, however, and in isolation, makes the whole thing feel much more difficult, and, at times, hopeless. It can be painful to experience the kinds of feelings that get stirred up in a stepfamily even when one knows one is "hitting the ground, hard" after the fantasy phase, for example, or knows that people in similar situations feel the same way. However, without that information, we are much more apt to give up before our patience and dedication pay off. If the couple relationship is worth having, then we must do what we can to embrace the whole stepfamily. Provide yourself with the tools needed -- education, support, communication, professional help if needed, safe and appropriate outlets for your feelings, humor and fun, and you are likely to emerge some years later with the knowledge that being a stepfamily member can be among life's most rewarding experiences.

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Note: Another important resource for stepfamily members is the Stepfamily Association of America. This excellent organization also offers a newsletter, regional conferences, local support systems and a catalogue of books and tapes. Please contact Mary Ann Aronsohn at **(626) 441-5131** for information regarding the Stepfamily Association of America.