

Stepping into an Extended Family a Challenge

Written by Mary Ann Aronsohn, LMFT (626) 441-5131
Printed November 26, 1997 in The Star, Pasadena, California
Reprinted with permission by The Star

It is common for people who are accomplished in many areas of their lives to state they have never felt as challenged or frustrated as when attempting to build a stepfamily. There are many reasons for this phenomenon, not the least of which is stepfamilies tend to be difficult to build.

Other reasons involve the fact that there is not much guidance on how to go about this task and there are unrealistic images in literature and popular culture to confuse the already complex issues.

In this short article, it's possible only to define stepfamilies, give some sense of what is different about this type of family, briefly describe some of the typical difficulties during the stages of development and give a few of the strategies designed to help ensure successful stepfamily life.

Stepfamilies now are being broadly defined to include all the members of the extended family which results when two people form a serious relationship in a household together, with one of both of these people having children from a previous alliance.

Stepfamilies are different from other types of families from the start. For this reason, a nuclear family model of development simply does not apply, and stepfamily members feel inadequate when comparing themselves to such a model.

Stepfamilies begin with great losses and big changes such as death or divorce, moves and shifting relationships. Parent-child relationships have existed prior to the new couple's relationship, which means each side has a history the other side does not share, the couple dives into parenting immediately, and that everything has to be negotiated.

Complexity is heightened by "exes" and their kin, and often by more than one household for the children. Contact with "exes" can range from cooperative and friendly to downright hateful.

The stages of development are different for stepfamilies, beginning with fantasy and involving a great deal of effort, learning and patience by all members. The steprelationships are the most ambiguous and difficult to define, and usually take years to establish.

Children may perceive the new couple relationship as a threat to their relationship with their parents and may resist the new structure with teeth and claws. Often, they are caught in loyalty binds which can feel agonizing, for example, "If I love my new stepfather, am I betraying my dad?"

Schoolwork and social interactions may suffer. Stepparents typically feel lonely and left out, biological parents fear losing closeness with their kids and feel torn trying to juggle everyone's needs. Everyone wishes for a more comfortable, predictable family life. Unexpected and powerful feelings of jealousy, fear and anger arise and have to be dealt with.

Some of the strategies for success are in building a strong couple relationship, dealing with emotions in constructive ways, establishing new family traditions, creating

co-parenting relationships with “exes” whenever possible, accepting continual shifts in household composition, keeping change to a minimum and avoiding disciplining children before warm, firm bonds have been established.

There is good news in all of this. Knowing about the stages of development can reassure people greatly, as can appropriate expectations. Sharing with others in similar situations is remarkably helpful. Basic information discovered in the past the hard way, such as guidelines for stepparents with regard to discipline, can make a difference of years in the process of stepfamily integration. Of the stepfamilies who look for help, most do well if they have the necessary information and work at it.

About one third of stepfamilies do not do well without outside help, for several reasons including particularly difficult ex-in-law issues and individual issues.

For example, stepparents who already experience pain from old abandonment issues and therefore find the rejection involved in stepparenting unbearable.

Stepfamily adults tend to be remarkably dedicated and generous in their efforts to create successful family lives. Without information about what is normal for stepfamilies, however, we are much more apt to give up before our patience and dedication pay off. Given the proper tools, we are more likely to emerge some years later knowing that stepfamily life can be a rewarding experience.