



Tips for Successful Stepfamilies: GO SLOW

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Many people don't realize that stepfamilies are NOT just like first-marriage families. This is a main reason that so many stepfamilies start out strong, but end in divorce. Smart cooks don't try to cook a steak the same way you make french-fries, and truckers don't try to find an address in Dallas using a map of Chicago. It just doesn't work! Creating a successful stepfamily can be a very difficult task. Each person brings a different personality, a history, preferences, styles, loyalties, and habits to the new family. Add to that the feelings of hurt and loss that many people bring to their new family and you have the makings of a perfect storm! This information sheet is one in a series that helps stepfamilies understand the unique challenges facing them and offers ideas on how to overcome these challenges.

What is a Stepfamily?

A simple working definition of a stepfamily is: A family in which at least one of the adult spouses has children from a prior relationship. All stepfamilies have experienced the loss of previous family relationships. This loss may be the result of a death or a divorce and will have to be grieved in one way or another. This is, in part, what creates a lot of confusion for many stepfamilies.

Marriage is supposed to be a time when a new relationship and family is born. For some it is a "second chance," the beginning of "happily ever after." For others, though, the marriage is also accompanied by sadness, anxiety, and grief over what is being left behind. What makes matters worse is that different family members experience the grief and the new family differently. They often don't understand how the other could be feeling "that" way. This creates tension, which can lead to fights and hurt feelings. Here are some things to remember about the processes that will help you understand what you, your ex-spouse, or the children may be experiencing:

- Grief from divorce tends to follow a cycle of love, anger and sadness, and people can cycle through each several times.
 - Love may include a fondness and longing to be with the person lost, the hope of reconciliation, and guilt over the loss.
 - Anger may be frustration over what was lost, resentment, rage, and/or hurt.
 - Sadness may come as loneliness, depression, despair, and/or pain.
- At the start, these feelings may present themselves with great intensity, but as time passes, they typically decrease and become less problematic.

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- Allow your children (and maybe yourself) time to work through these feelings before entering into a new relationship.
- Understanding what a grieving ex-spouse is experiencing can help to negotiate the co-parenting relationship (more about this in a different sheet).

Bringing a Stepfamily Together

Some families have great intentions that back-fire because their expectations are not realistic. Unrealistic expectations are like expecting to find a place in Dallas with a map of Chicago! It won't happen!

At times, parents who remarry want their children to love and accept their new partner just like they do. They want to move on from the old family and to rapidly create a new one. A common roadblock these families encounter is deciding what to call the new parent. Names help form identities and thus become part of the vision the parent may have for the new family. However, the stepparent will often have very different relationships with each child. They youngest may call their stepfather "daddy," the middle child may call him by his first name and the oldest may refer to him by his last name in order to establish more distance between them. Children need to be allowed to grow into relationships at their own pace. It's better not to force a stepchild to call the new parent "mom" or "dad." Doing so is like telling them that those old relationships don't matter. A parent that expects a child to quickly enter into a relationship they are not comfortable with will most likely produce strife, anger, and resentment in that child.

Another strategy to bring everyone together into a new family is to deny that a stepfamily is different from any other family. Denying that your family is different from a biological family shuts down your growth as a family because you can't see the real problems and struggles of the members. Some people won't even use the name "step" because they want to be just like any other family. However, it's healthier to accept your uniqueness so you can find creative solutions to your family's challenges. Pressuring a person into being something that they are not almost always results in resentment and rebellion.

A third strategy recognizes that a stepfamily needs time and understanding. In stepfamilies time is needed to be able to adjust to the styles, rules, and responsibilities that come

with the new living arrangements. Below are some examples of how a new stepfamily might function.

- A stepparent doesn't feel threatened or like a failure because she or he isn't bonding with their stepchild.
- A stepparent allows the stepchild to determine how "close" the relationship should be and how fast it develops.
- A stepparent recognizes the attachment the children feel to the biological parent and doesn't force the issue by insisting on being called "daddy" or "mommy."
- A stepparent understands the frustration that children may have over the loss they have suffered and seeks to soothe their pain.
- A stepfamily might have family meetings to discuss with the children ideas surrounding how to honor old family traditions and establish new ones.

- A stepfamily respects the need for "mini-family" meetings or activities that allow the parent to spend time with their children without the step relations being present.

Unrealistic expectations of what should happen and how fast that change should take place are the biggest enemies of successful stepfamilies. These unrealistic expectations lead families to use strategies that attempt to pressure and force family members together in ways that make them uncomfortable. Research suggests that it takes five to seven years for a stepfamily to form the kinds of relationships that would identify them as successful. What this means is that many stepfamilies that fail could be successful if only they were to go slow and reduce the pressure.

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