Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Stepfamily Life

Each year, SAA receives hundreds of questions about various aspects of stepfamily life. Here are brief answers to some of the most common queries.

What is a stepfamily?
Why use the term "stepfamily"?
How are stepfamilies different from first-time families?
What can stepfamilies do to be successful?
How can joining the Stepfamily Association of America (SAA) help?

Q. What is a Stepfamily?
A. A STEP FAMILY IS: A family in which one or both of the adult partners bring children from a previous relationship.

CHILDREN IN STEPFAMILIES ARE REFERRED TO AS:

• Siblings - biologically related; from the same parents.
• Stepsiblings - not biologically related; parents are married to each other.
• Half-siblings - partially related biologically (i.e., share one parent).
• Mutual child - a child born to the remarried couple.
• Residential stepchildren - live in the household with the remarried couple the majority of the time.
• Nonresidential stepchildren - live in the household less than half of the time.

A STEPFAMILY HOUSEHOLD: A stepfamily is formed when a parent marries a person who is not their child's other biological parent. People can be members of a stepfamily and not live all of the time in the stepfamily household. For instance, when both of a child's parents remarry, the child becomes a member of two stepfamilies - a stepfamily in the mother's new household and a stepfamily in the father's new household.

Unfortunately, the Census Bureau does not recognize that the child can be a member of two stepfamilies. The Census Bureau only counts the household where the child lives most of the time.

Since divorce courts still typically decide that mom will become the primary custodial parent, you can see that our stepfamily statistics usually only count biological mom and stepdad households (also known as Stepfather Households). Our statistics do not include the biological father and stepmother household even when the child spends a lot of time with them.

Of course, the reverse is true if a divorced custodial dad marries again. In this case, the children primarily live with dad and stepmom so the statistics will include their household (also known as Stepmother Households) and the child's mother and stepfather's household would not be counted in the stepfamily statistics.
Q. Why use the term "stepfamily"?
A. Preferred explanation:
As a general rule, the term stepfamily is preferred because it is consistent with the naming of all other family types. All other family types are defined by the parent-child relationships (e.g., biological, foster, adoptive, single-parent).

While the choice of stepfamily (and any step attribution) is seen by some as negative (the wicked stepmother, treated poorly as a stepchild, etc.), SAA and stepfamilies hope that, through education, the term stepfamily will acquire a positive, or at the very least a neutral, connotation.

Referring to stepfamilies as "blended families" is troublesome to stepfamilies and the professionals who work with them. It is a catchy media phrase that does not describe either a family relationship or what happens when at least one partner to a marriage brings children from a prior relationship (marriage ended by death or divorce or an unwed parent).

Stepfamilies do not "blend." If one is determined to use a cooking phrase, try "combine or fold gently." Children in stepfamilies do not lose their individuality or their connection and active attachment to the parent who is not part of the remarriage of mother or father. A stepfamily does not recreate a first family (i.e., blend into something entirely new with all prior connections severed and the former existence obliterated). Therapists have learned (and research confirms) that when stepfamilies try to "blend," they are typically doomed to failure. Children actively balk at inferences that the stepfamily is to be considered their new family eligible to demand their full attention and loyalty. They know they have divided loyalties. (Consider the confusion when both parents remarry and the child is expected to be a full-time member of TWO "blended" families.) Parents must accept the reality that their children have lots of "parents" now and the nurturing no longer comes from a traditional family structure. Instead of trying to blend everyone, it seems far better to help all individuals to understand the nature of the extended and expanded family with various segments having permeable boundaries. It is not helpful for anyone in a stepfamily to pretend that they are blended. The concept itself precludes working together with the expanded family members.

B. Short explanation:
The concept of a "blended family" sets up unrealistic expectations and makes all aspects of adjustment more difficult than they need to be.

C. Additional comment:
The media seems to have a love affair with the designation "blended family." "Blended" is like hearing chalk screech on a chalkboard. Stepfamilies are not blended! Healthy ones recognize that children from prior relationships have two families and do not blend solely into one family. Stepfamilies that try to ignore this reality are typically doomed to either failure or considerable unhappiness on the part of several or all of the stepfamily members. We are combined families, extended families, expanded families, almost anything is better than blended as a designation!

Q. How are stepfamilies different than first-time families?
A. Some of the uncomfortable feelings you may experience come from these differences.
Most people find that knowing about the differences helps. That's because learning about something helps us understand that our feelings are not unique, that there is nothing wrong with us. Learning can give us a feeling that we will be better able to handle our situation, and can help us feel more in control. And that gives us a sense of relief!

**Stepfamilies come about because of a loss.**
All stepfamilies have faced numerous losses and changes. It may be a final ending... the death of a spouse or parent. It may be the ending of a marriage or relationship. Endings are hard because they mean adjusting to loss and change. Because people have trouble separating from old ties, endings mean grieving. Both adults and children grieve.

**Adults grieve:**
- The loss of a partner.
- The loss of a marriage relationship.
- The loss of our dreams about the way we thought it would be because we are not "the first" for our new partner.
- The losses involved in the changes that happen because of the death or divorce (moving, a new job, change in life style, etc.).

**Children grieve:**
- The loss of a parent (even if the nonresidential parent visits regularly).
- The loss or lessened availability of the remaining parent when courtship and remarriage occur.
- The loss of stability.
- The changes that happen because of the divorce or death (new place to live, new school, loss of friends etc.).
- The loss of their fantasy of family the way they want it to be.

Unresolved grief can sometimes be seen in the continued warfare and hostility between some parents, or in the inability of a child to accept a stepparent. Children and adults may still be grieving when remarriage takes place, or the grieving may be "reactivated" at that time.

**B. The parent/child relationship has a longer history than the new couple's relationship.**
This can make it difficult for the adults to feel as though they are the primary, long-term relationship. It also means that the incoming marriage partner often feels like an intruder or outsider. Sometimes the close relationships that develop between parents and children in single parent households mean that the new adult partner has difficulty "being allowed in." Even the parent who looks forward to having someone share the load may find it hard to let a new partner help with parenting duties.

All of us have emotional "memory books." When parents and their children get together and "remember," it is like turning the pages of the book they made together. The difficulty for the stepparent is that he or she is not in this memory book, but his or her partner's "ex" is. Stepparents need to be aware that creating a stepfamily memory book takes time and can only be accomplished as people share activities.

The memory book you create with your partner is also vitally important. It means that when life gets difficult you will be able to leaf through your book and remember the good times, the funny stories, the romantic interludes, even the difficult times you have overcome. It takes time to build a history with your partner, and the memories created with your spouse don't have to compete with the memories they have with their children. But, it does help you understand why sometimes stepparents feel on the outside.
C. A biological parent (ex-spouse) is in another place.
Even if the other parent never visits or has died, he or she is a part of the children's past (just as you have people in your past whom your partner and stepchildren and children don't know). Children need to be allowed to have memories of their other parent. They need to be allowed to have pictures and to talk about the other parent. If a stepparent can't tolerate this very well, the biological parent can help out here by allowing the child time to recall past experiences. Research tells us that the children who adjust the best to divorce are those who have the easiest access to both their parents. This means they can talk to, write and/or see their nonresidential parent as often as possible.

It is important that a child be given permission (by the parent and stepparent) to love the other biological parent. It is also important for the child to be given permission by both biological parents to like the stepparents. Children who are asked to choose are put in a no-win emotional dilemma. Remember: to accept the present we need to accept and allow for one another's past.

D. Children are members of two households.
"Where do I belong?" and "Where do I fit in?" are questions asked by many stepchildren. Children have the ability to adjust to two sets of rules or two ways of doing things as long as they are not asked to choose which is better. It is important for parent and stepparent to talk about rules for the household, rules for behavior of the children and the consequences for broken rules. Once the adults are clear about the rules, they need to be communicated to the children in the family by the biological parent.

Authorities recommend that at the beginning, discipline come from the biological parent. This means that parent and stepparent decide on the rules together but that the biological parent announces the rules and enforces the consequences. Later, after relationships have developed, the stepparent can become more involved. Adults also need to understand that there is a difference between "parenting" and "discipline." Parenting has to do with things such as nurturing ("I love you."), transmitting values ("It's important to do the best you can.").

Giving positive strokes ("You really did a good job."), maintaining appropriate boundaries in the family ("Your mother and I are talking now about a grown up decision."), and setting appropriate limits on children's behavior ("You can play after the dishes are done."). Discipline has to do with enforcing consequences when values, boundaries and limits are not observed.

Flexibility on the part of the adults in one household can help to establish a "parenting partnership" with the other household. If this can happen, adults and children benefit. Often this parenting partnership cannot be established until feelings about the divorce and remarriage have settled down, but it is a goal worth working toward.

E. Stepparents may be asked to assume a parental role before emotional ties with the stepchild have been established.
Often a stepparent is thrust into the role of "instant parent." With no previous parenting experience, this person is asked to play a knowledgeable parent role in the household. Biological parents grow into their parenting roles as their children grow. Stepparents are often expected to adjust instantly as though parenting is an inborn skill. It is not!!!

For biological parents, the bonding process that happens means we are more tolerant of our children's personalities and behaviors than someone who doesn't know them so well. This is normal. The reverse is also true. Children are bonded to (and thus often more tolerant of) their biological parents.

Parents can assist the stepparent by helping them to "get to know" their child. They can show them the picture albums, run the home movies, tell the family stories and help fill in the gaps. Some children will enjoy being a part of this process. The painful part for the stepparent may be
the presence in the history of the child's other biological parent. Be aware that your acceptance of this parent will help this child be less resistant to you. You can be reassuring to the child that while you have an adult role in this household, you will not try to replace his or her other parent. Many stepparents find a satisfactory role in simply being a "helper" to the biological parent. This can work well, especially where stepchildren are elementary school age or older.

F. There is no legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren
This lack of a legal relationship (we are not birth, adoptive, or foster parents) is another reason our role as stepparent is unclear. There is a loss of status which may give us a feeling of wanting to be less involved. Yet there may be a sense of having legal responsibility - responsibility without authority.

No legal relationship with our stepchild means that unless we have written authority, we can't authorize emergency medical care, have access to school records or sign important documents. You may want to have written authority if you care for minor stepchildren. This can be secured by being granted a limited power of attorney (for example, to authorize emergency medical care) by the biological parent.

Q. What can stepfamilies do to be successful?
A. NURTURE AND ENRICH THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP...

- Affirm each other frequently! Demonstrate affection.
- Spend "alone" time together.
- Be honest and open.
- Practice positive communication.
- Fight fairly!
- Remember that "little things mean a lot!"

REVEAL AND UNDERSTAND EMOTIONS...

- Deal with and resolve the loss/pain from previous relationship so that it does not continue to interfere with the present one.
- Rid oneself from the bitterness which often exists after a divorce.
- Encourage the children to express and process their feelings. Because emotions are often more intense in a stepfamily and there are more complicating factors, it is important that emotions be expressed in productive ways.

HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS...

- All members of the stepfamily need to get to know each other well before a remarriage takes place.
- The myth of instant love and its antithesis of never-ending, unsolvable problems need to be dispelled.

DEVELOP NEW ROLES...

- Understand that a new family is being created and that all members will be developing some new roles and changing others.
- Former spouses must learn to co-parent, which is often very difficult.
- Children should not be used as messengers between households or as pawns in a power struggle.
The non-custodial parent needs to develop a new role and continue to demonstrate love and concern.
Stepparents, obviously, have to develop a new role with the children. Depending upon custodial arrangements, different roles are possible. The role of friend is a positive one and can be assumed if the children do not spend much time in the household of the stepparent. Generally, it is recommended to begin the relationship as a friend. Custodial stepparents need to develop a type of parenting role.
Neither authoritarian nor permissive discipline seems to work as well in a stepfamily as democratic discipline.
Shared roles and responsibilities have benefits in the stepfamily.
Grandparents are often neglected in stepfamily research. They, too, assume new roles and can play an instrumental role in stepfamily success. Educating grandparents, as well as other stepfamily members, is highly recommended.
Clear, open, honest communication is vital.
The couple relationship needs to remain strong. Struggles in which the biological parent feels "in the middle" or the stepparent feels alone can be very detrimental.
Whichever roles are finally assumed, the goal is family integration. It is important that stepfamilies begin to develop a sense of unity keeping in mind that this is not a biological family.

SEEK SUPPORT AND SEE THE POSITIVE...

- Learn about stepfamily dynamics by reading stepfamily books.
- Positive affirmation is important. Hopefully, support is evident from family, friends, and the community in general. Attend an SAA chapter support group.
- Join the Stepfamily Association to learn more about stepfamily living and support SAA's efforts to make every stepfamily a success. Groups such as Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., can be very beneficial.
- Emphasize the positive! Stepfamilies have many strengths.

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Q. How can joining the Stepfamily Association of America help?
A. Stepfamily Association of America works to accomplish its vision that stepfamilies will be accepted, supported and successful by providing information, education, support and advocacy for stepfamilies and those who work with them.

Becoming a member of SAA provides you and your family with a variety of educational resources and supports, including: The Stepfamily Handbook, a subscription to the online magazine Your Stepfamily, your emailed question answered by stepfamily professionals who comprise SAA's Board of Directors, and discounts on the books and educational materials from our catalog of stepfamily resources.

Additionally, your membership helps support these other important activities:

- Development of local chapters and support groups
- Training and support for professionals working with stepfamilies
- Media and public policy advocacy on stepfamily issues and concerns
- Support for research on stepfamilies and stepfamily life.

http://saafamilies.org/faqs/faqs.htm