Parenting in Stepfamilies

Couples like Phil and Kathy, shown in the example, often look forward to remarriage as an answer to problems they faced as single parents. There are two parents to share the load, two parents to discipline, and often two sources of income. And because the adults are in love and want to be together, they assume children also will welcome a newcomer. However, most single parents who remarry discover being a stepparent is not easy. This publication may have ideas to help.

Typical stepfamily problems
Although you want your new family to be just like everyone else's, stepfamilies are different from first-time families and pose unique challenges. It helps to understand what is normal in a stepfamily so that you can accept things as they are or make changes when needed. Most stepfamilies must deal with these problems:

- Divided loyalties. It is common for children in stepfamilies to feel torn in their loyalty between their biological parent and their stepparent. A child who accepts or loves a stepparent may feel that she or he is being disloyal to the first parent.

- Belonging to two households. Even if children only visit the absent parent, they belong to two households, with different rules, activities, and values. This frequently causes problems after a visit. You may hear, "My real mom lets me do that."

- Building relationships. Parents want a stepchild to quickly feel love, trust, and respect, but these feelings often take years to develop. A child who's pushed to express affection that's not there may also feel guilty or pressured.

- Stepparent discipline. The new stepparent often feels that he or she can help a spouse by taking over some of the discipline. Most children, however, often resent stepparent discipline and say, or at least think, "You can't tell me what to do, you're not my real dad."

- Being caught in the middle. Parents feel great loyalty for their children, but also want the new spouse to feel like a "real" parent. For example, when a mother sticks up for her children, her new husband may get upset but when she lets her husband change the rules, her children may feel betrayed.

- Rivalry among stepsiblings. As much as parents want a big, happy family, rivalry between stepsiblings is typical. Getting along with "new" brothers and sisters is more difficult than getting along with siblings in first-time families.

Discipline in stepfamilies
Here are some guidelines to make discipline easier.

1. Let the biological parent handle most discipline during the first few months and years. Children accept guidance and discipline more easily from someone they trust, love, and have lived with than from a newcomer. Allow the new stepparent to focus on building a strong relationship.

2. Discuss rules and consequences as a couple. Talk about behavior problems and expectations with your new spouse. This allows the stepparent to be involved with discipline even though the biological parent deals directly with the child.

3. Leave the stepparent in charge when the biological parent is gone.
Tell your children before you leave, "I've asked (stepparent's name) to take over while I'm away." This helps children understand that the stepparent simply carries out rules both parents have agreed upon. If possible, wait until the biological parent returns to enforce the consequences.

4. Remember that a stepparent's ability to handle discipline improves with time. Allow time for a positive and loving relationship to develop before stepparents share equally in discipline. It may take longer with older children.

Stages in stepfamily life
Researchers have found that most stepfamilies go through predictable stages as they learn to live together. Knowing how other stepfamilies adjust can help you understand what you're experiencing now and what to expect in the future. Families vary in the amount of time to complete the seven stages. In a study of stepfamilies, Papernow (1984) found that average stepfamilies required about seven years to complete the cycle, while others did it in four and some took as long as 10 to 12 years.

Stage 1: Fantasy
Adults sometimes fantasize that they are rescuing children from the problems of a single parent family. Children may hope that if they "just ignore this new guy," he'll go away, or that their biological parents will somehow get back together again.

Stage 2: Back to reality
The fantasy begins to crumble during this stage and often there are strong feelings that things are not right. The stepparent may feel loneliness or rejection from the children; the biological parent may feel close to the children but interpret a spouse's problems as lack of desire to be part of the family.

Stage 3: Awareness
Stepfamily members gradually make more sense out of what is happening and can name their painful feelings. At this point it can be helpful for adults to talk to other stepfamilies or to read articles and books to help them understand their experiences.

Stage 4: Airing differences
Spouses show more energy and strength and express their perceptions, needs, and feelings. There may be conflict in this stage when the stepparent talks openly about issues and the biological parent feels distress.

Stage 5: Working together
Once differences are aired, committed spouses can work together to build a solid marriage relationship and cooperate on discipline. Other family members can acknowledge differences between this family and original families.

Stage 6: Intimacy
Spouses can relate both honestly and intimately with one another.

Stage 7: Resolution—Holding on and letting go
Relationships begin to feel solid and reliable. As feelings between stepparent and child become close and caring, there can be pain at having to let go when the child continues to connect with the noncustodial parent.

A nurturing stepfamily
- Give it time. Building relationships takes years, not months.
- Talk to other parents in stepfamilies.
- Don't demand that children call the stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."
- Read books and articles to learn about "normal" stepfamilies and develop patience.
- Try to accept your feelings and gradually discuss them with your spouse.
- Talk together about rules and consequences for children.
- Get outside help. Talking to a counselor can help you deal with problems and build a strong, caring family.

For more information, contact the Stepfamily Association of America, 602 E. Joppa Road, Baltimore, MD 21204. The group publishes the quarterly Stepfamily Bulletin.


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