

What Works (and what doesn't) in Building Healthy Stepfamilies*

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To form a healthy new family structure

Develop realistic expectations

Accurate information can save stepfamilies much pain and agony. Talk to other stepfamily members about their experience.

Compartmentalize

Spend both regular every day and special vacation time in one-to-one relationships: Adult couple, bio parent and child, stepparent and child, stepsiblings.

Shift Don't Blend

Choose family activities that bring outsiders together and that shift insiders out.

Getting to Yes

Taking enough time to listen to diverse needs will enable you to invent rules that satisfy both insider and outsider needs.

Holidays—"Something New, Something Old, Something Borrowed, Something Blue"

Major holidays where both families have firmly established rituals will often require extensive negotiation to create joint rituals that satisfy all stepfamily members. Keep something familiar and precious to each family while being creative about something that is new for everybody.

To develop a stepparent role

Require civility, not love.

As much as biological parents would like stepparents and stepchildren to love each other, we cannot require, or even expect strangers who did not choose each other to love each other.

However, we can require civility. The script goes something like:

"You have a father who will always be your father. Joe is your stepfather. I love him, You do not have to love him. I hope over time you will get to know him and maybe even love him. Meanwhile, you do need to be respectful of each other."

Biological parent remains primary disciplinarian

Stepfamilies usually fare better when the biological parent remains the primary disciplinarian until children are ready for a more active stepparent. The stepparent functions in the same way that an adult babysitter or uncle or aunt would, as an adult in charge, not as another parent. He or she enforces the "Rules of the House."

Stepparent functions as Adult Friend rather than as new parent

Stepparents will be more successful in a "monitoring" rather than a parenting role. Stepparents will be most successful expressing their concerns with "I" messages and a request rather than "you" messages and accusations. "Shoulder to shoulder" activities doing things both stepparent and stepchild enjoy—shopping, going to a baseball game together—work well for forging sp-sc relationships. Or find something the stepparent knows that the child really wants to learn (how to hit a ball, how to sew, etc.); or conversely, that child can teach the stepparent (computer skills, etc.).

Stepparent functions as "sounding board not savior"

Stepparents who step in as a "savior" are doomed to failure. Stepparents can, however, act as a sounding board for the biological parent. A useful model is that the stepparent gives input and the biological parent retains final say.

Stepparents need a sanctuary

When possible, establish a private, preferably sound proof, space in the house as a stepparent retreat. Encourage stepparents to maintain their friendships outside the family. Encourage stepmothers to keep their jobs as sources of mastery outside the family.

To help children adjust

Actively assist children with their loyalty binds.

Children do best when adults pro-actively and directly relieve children from their loyalty binds, both between their parents and between stepparent and parent of same sex.

A step at a time saves nine

Children will adjust best if you can move a step or two at a time. Introduce kids to your new partner and give them time to know them before announcing marriage plans. Choose two or three changes in rules and norms that really matter, and leave the rest the same. Leaving everything the same imposes too great a burden on the stepparent. Too many changes too fast requires too much change of children and will backfire in depression and rebellion. When there are two sets of children, try to ask about the same amount of change of each set. Managing the rate of change may require leaving two different sets of rules in place for awhile.

Dealing Constructively with Ex-Spouses, Grandparents, Etc.

Minimize conflict with your ex-spouse

Children do best when the conflict between the adults they love is kept low. Complain about your ex to your new spouse, your hairdresser, or your friend, not to your children, including adult children. Handle differences out of children's earshot. Use a regular call-in time, or a voice or e-mail "Transition Message" to transfer critical information peacefully.

Let go of all but life and death differences between houses

The negative impact on children of conflicting parents will have much more long lasting damage than whether or not your child eats sugar cereal. Handle differences between the houses in a neutral way: "In your dad's house you can watch as much TV as you wish, but you can't swear, ever. In Mom's house, your TV is limited but you are allowed to swear when you are upset as long as you don't call a person names to their face."

Make transition times as peaceful as possible for children

Keep conversation calm and civil. Never raise issues with your ex at these times. If necessary, lower the number of transitions between contentious parents to once a week rather than every half week) to lower conflict. If necessary, find a neutral drop off and pick-up place. Plan some "down time" for children before and after transition. Keep requirements for intense interaction to a minimum during these times.

Make a "Dutch door" between households

Think of the boundary between ex-spouses like a Dutch door with a top half needs to stay open, allowing communication to between adults about child issues. The bottom half of the door needs to close, drawing a firmer boundary between ex-spouses around more personal adult issues.

Respect the parent in charge

The "custodial" parent has final say over children's schedules on their watch. Neither parent should make a disciplinary decision or scheduling that affects the other parent's time without agreement from the other.

Let your children be where they are

It is more supportive to children to limit phone calls to times that do not interrupt the routine in the house where children are. Constant phone calls place children in a loyalty bind: "I am at my dad's but my mom misses me." We know that loyalty binds create depression and anxiety for children.

When an ex-spouse behaves badly

Support children without placing them in a loyalty bind. Validate the behavior in a neutral tone ("Your dad does get drunk." "Your mom says very bad things about your stepmom sometimes.") Then shift your attention immediately to the child: "That must be really tough for you." "That must be very confusing for you when she says those things." "That must be very scary when he starts drinking. Let's make a plan for you to be safe." Do not rant and rave about the other parent's failings. Ranting about your ex satisfies your needs, not your child's. When talking to your ex about bad behavior, use the model: "When you...(what the person did,

in behavioral, descriptive terms), "I feel.." (how you felt, or the effects on the child). "Would you.....?" (Make a request for action.) Avoid name calling. (See Joint Custody with a Jerk.)

Grandparents are people, too.

John cannot ask Gramma to cease her long term relationship with his children's mother. However, John can ask (nicely) that Gramma not invite his ex-wife to family gatherings. He can also request that Gramma not divulge information about John and his new wife to his ex-wife.

Gifts

It is natural for Aunt Gladys to give to the children she knows, and not to children she experiences as strangers. While children can be taught that some amount of inequality is part of life, her nephews, Tim and Tom, should be expected not to flaunt their gifts in front of their stepbrother Billy. Large inequalities are worth trying to rectify. Try a nice note to Aunt Gladys: ("Thank you so much for your gifts. I realize Billy is a stranger to you, but it is hard in our family when the boys receive gifts and Billy does not. Feel free to spend the same total amount of money, but we would so appreciate it if you could divide it three ways. It would mean a great deal to me in my new family.") Alternatively, create an "Aunt Gladys Fund" for Billy. Or make a special excursion for him at those times that Tim and Tom get special gifts.

Keep special events special

Graduations, weddings, Parents' Days, school plays, etc. belong to the child, not to the parents. At these events, parents need to remain absolutely civil and pleasant with each other. If necessary, take turns on Parents' Day. One year Dad comes and Mom visits on another week-end. Switch the next year. If stepmother's presence makes Mom crazy at a child's special occasion, stepmother should back off or keep her distance. At graduations and weddings, seat conflicted ex-spouses far from each other. Bride and groom can assign a rotating team of friends to lavish attention on a parent who may be having a hard time. Considered staggered arrivals and departures when necessary.

Use a skilled third party

Many couples agree in their divorce decree to consult with a mutually agreed upon professional skilled in dealing with post-divorce parenting issues. This can be done on a regular basis, and/or used as a resource for dealing with conflicted issues.

**Adapted from: Papernow, Patricia (1998). Becoming a stepfamily: Patterns of development in remarried families. New Jersey: Analytic Press.*



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