



HUMAN RELATIONS

Foundations for a Successful Stepfamily

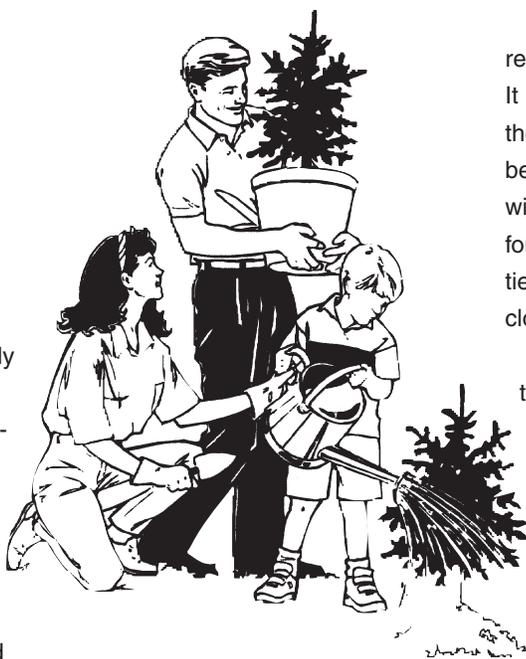
Human Development and Family Studies Extension

This guide has been adapted from a packet entitled "Premarital Expectations: A Guide for Living in Step-families," by Marilyn Coleman and Jill Hastings.

Are you considering remarrying and becoming part of a stepfamily, or have you recently done so?

The prospect of creating a stepfamily can evoke feelings of excitement, relief, nervousness and worry — all at the same time. Experiencing a wide variety of feelings is normal and common. Because building a successful stepfamily requires a lot of energy and commitment, it is important for partners to talk about what they expect from each other and their new family, both before and after the marriage occurs. This enables them to discuss important issues and can help them avoid serious problems down the road. It is critical to have realistic expectations and goals for stepfamily life. Time spent wisely during courtship can lay a foundation for positive stepfamily relationships.

This guide highlights several important topics that you should discuss with your partner before and after marriage, and provides suggestions for creating a successful stepfamily.



People desire to get married or remarried for a variety of valid reasons. It is important for partners to discuss their motives for wanting to marry, because they may be different. Likewise, an understanding of and respect for each other's basic values and priorities is essential to the success of any close relationship.

Losing a spouse through death or the dissolution of a previous marriage is usually accompanied by strong feelings, such as intense sadness, anger and/or guilt. Each person in the prospective marriage needs adequate time to heal before reentering another marital relationship, or the adjustment to stepfamily life will likely be much more difficult.

Individuals should assess their feelings about former partners and honestly consider how those feelings are impacting their present relationship.

Jobs

A person's employment frequently occupies a large percentage of his or her time and energy, making it something around which family life largely revolves. Consider these questions when thinking about your work:

- Does your new marriage require a job change for you or your partner?
- Whose job has priority in deciding

Personal goals and expectations for the new marriage

Beginning a new relationship, especially a marriage, requires careful consideration. Think about these questions:

- What goals do you have for this marriage?
- What values are important for you to have in common with your partner?
- How have you managed the strong feelings about your former partner? To what extent do these feelings affect your present relationship with your new partner?

where to live, working overtime and so forth?

- How compatible are the demands of your jobs?

Employment can bring many positive outcomes, such as financial support, friendship and self-esteem. However, jobs can also be emotionally and physically demanding, time-consuming and stressful. When contemplating marriage, it is important for partners to understand each other's feelings about their jobs and the amount of time and commitment they require. The life changes that a new marriage brings may tempt individuals to change or discontinue their current employment. However, too many major changes at once can be stressful. Often it is recommended that partners continue in their same job situations until they have made an initial adjustment to their new stepfamily.

Financial matters

It is essential that partners communicate about financial decisions and their personal philosophies about money. Each person brings previous experiences and perspectives about family finances to the new marriage — often the expectations are vastly different. Consider these questions:

- How much money do each of you make? Who provides what proportion of support and living expenses?
- What financial responsibilities do you have to other family members (child support, maintenance, care for an elderly parent)?
- How should money be allocated to children?

Financial matters are a common source of tension in many families, but they can be especially problematic in stepfamilies. Stepfamilies are usually more complicated than first-time families because there are more relation-



ships to consider and more sources of income. Child support payments can be a difficult issue in stepfamilies. Child support obligations continue the link between former spouses and are often a source of persistent problems. It can be stressful for individuals in one household to have to base their financial decisions on the needs of another household. For example, it is not uncommon for wives in new marriages to be frustrated because their husbands must pay a substantial amount of money to support their children from a previous relationship.

Before getting married, it is important for partners to decide whether they will pool their resources or keep them separate. It is also highly recommended that they construct a tentative family budget. Although discussing financial issues will not likely eliminate all problems with money, it helps partners understand the specifics of each other's financial situation and provides the impetus for making important decisions together. For more information concerning finances in stepfamilies, see MU Extension guide GH 3507, *Living in Stepfamilies: Making Financial Decisions*.

Household arrangements

A major issue for new stepfamilies is where they will live, and who will live with whom. Consider these questions:

- What living arrangements work best for your family?
- Do children live with you now, or do you anticipate they will in the future? Do they have a special place for their belongings, even if they only live with you for short visits or holidays?
- Who should be responsible for which household chores?

In an ideal situation, the new stepfamily is able to begin living together in a place they can call their own. Moving into a home in which a previous spouse and/or children lived can be uncomfortable and make the new members feel like outsiders. Creating a home together that is new to all family members provides a fresh start for the stepfamily. However, a new home is often impractical, financially or otherwise. In any case, it is essential that all family members have spaces of their own, even if they do not live in the household all the time. Also, being able to choose how to decorate one's own room or space is usually exciting and can ease the transition into stepfamily life.

Parenting in stepfamilies: Ideas for success

- ✓ Be realistic and patient in your effort to build a stepfamily.
- ✓ Talk to other stepparents, who can be a valuable source of support and ideas.
- ✓ Let children choose what name to call the stepparent.
- ✓ Educate yourself about stepfamily life by reading books and articles about stepfamilies.
- ✓ See **Helpful resources** (on page 5) for some ideas.
- ✓ Be unified with your spouse about rules, methods of discipline, and other important issues.
- ✓ Have family meetings regularly to provide a time for individuals to communicate about relevant issues and concerns.
- ✓ For more information about how to conduct family councils, see MU Extension guide GH 6641, *Family Councils: The Key is Communication*.
- ✓ Ease into the stepparent role by focusing on building a friendship with your stepchildren before trying to parent them.
- ✓ Get outside help when needed from a counselor or by attending an educational program for stepfamilies.

It is also important that family members be involved as much as possible in making decisions about household chores. Children will be less likely to resent decisions made by parents or stepparents about chores and other responsibilities when they have participated in the decision-making process. Partners should keep in mind that there are many ways to perform household chores, and people from different families often have different expectations regarding who should be responsible for which tasks. Discussing these issues before the marriage occurs paves the way for a smoother transition to stepfamily life.

Children

Building relationships with stepchildren is a huge task, one usually requiring a great deal of time and effort. You should consider these questions:

- How well do you know and relate to each other's children?
- What types of custody/visitation arrangements do you currently have?
- What do you want and expect from your stepchildren?
- What role do you want your partner to play in your children's lives, now and in the future?
- What types of rules and discipline do you want operating in your home?
- Do you and your new partner want to have children together?

It is absolutely necessary that partners spend adequate time discussing their beliefs about child rearing, discipline, rules and other issues related to their children before they decide to get remarried. Once partners make the decision to get married, it is important that they tell their children directly

and give them an idea of the effect the remarriage will have on their lives. Children will likely have many questions and concerns about the new family, and it is important to take time to address these questions in a serious, respectful manner. Making sure that children are included in the wedding plans and other family-related decisions gives them the feeling of having some control over their lives.

Parents need to realize that their children will probably not view the remarriage with the same emotions as they do. Although the husband and wife are looking forward to gaining a new partner, the children may feel as if they are losing their parent to the new spouse. This can be especially upsetting to children if they took on greater responsibilities in the single parent family and developed a peer-like relationship with their parent.

Also, stepchildren will probably not feel strong positive feelings for their stepparents automatically, and vice versa. Although two adults may love each other, they may not necessarily love each other's children right away. Patience is necessary for all parties in a stepfamily, because it can take years for bonding to occur in stepfamily relationships.

Children will likely be affected differently in the stepfamily, depending upon their age and level of development.

Preschoolers

Remarriage can be confusing to young children. Their familiar routines will likely be disrupted, and they may require more attention and affection from their parents. It is important that they feel loved by both of their biological parents, as well as the new stepparent. At this young age, most children will react positively to a stepparent who tries to establish a good relationship.

School-age children

Children in elementary school often

have a wide variety of feelings when one of their parents remarries. They may feel anger and hostility because remarriage dashes their hope that their biological parents may get back together. Feelings of frustration may occur if they have to share their space or possessions with new stepsiblings, or if they are subjected to new rules and routines. If children feel displaced by the new stepparent, they may try to attract attention by being “extra good” or acting out. School-age children may be embarrassed by the remarriage because they do not know how to tell their friends or teachers about it. Other common feelings include guilt, betrayal and uncertainty. It is important for parents to reassure their children that they are still loved and important. Like preschoolers, school-age children need to maintain a positive relationship with the biological parent with whom they are not living.

Adolescents

Teens may experience many of the same feelings as school-age children, such as anger, hostility and frustration. They may become withdrawn and seemingly apathetic to the new marriage. It is common for adolescents to feel displaced by the new stepparent.

Because teenagers are striving for greater independence and freedom at this time in their lives anyway, it is likely that they will clash with a stepparent who attempts to take on a parental role and expects to play a part in disciplining the children.

Although stepfamilies are “instant” families, it can take considerable time for individuals to accept their stepparent and stepsiblings as family. Stepfamily members have had previous relationships and are likely to have different ideas in some areas about how things should be. It takes time to create a new, cohesive family unit. There will be many challenges among members in a new stepfamily, but by discussing issues related to children, partners will be better prepared to cope with the new family dynamics.

Relationships with others

Relationships with others can have a significant impact upon the quality of life in a new stepfamily. Some questions to consider are:

- How do you presently communicate with your former spouse(s)?
- How much contact do your children have with their other parent?
- How do your partner’s parents feel

about their stepgrandparent role?

If at all possible, it is important that children maintain positive relationships with the biological parent who lives elsewhere. No matter how good the relationship is between a stepparent and stepchildren, a stepparent can never replace a biological parent. Children need to feel that both of their biological parents care about them. Efforts should also be made to maintain contact between children and their grandparents and other extended family members.

It is also essential that partners strive to have courteous relationships with their former spouses. This can be difficult, but good relationships between biological parents greatly benefit the stepfamily. Although feelings of hurt and anger may persist, former spouses should strive to make their children’s welfare their top priority in their dealings with each other.

Tips for successful stepfamilies

There are many things stepfamilies can do that will help them develop positive relationships with each other. The following are a few suggestions.

Nurture the couple relationship

One of the most important things partners can do in a new marriage is to continue to build their relationship. Parents often feel greater loyalties to their children because they have had a relationship with them for a much longer time. However, it is vital that partners present a united front to the children in their home. Children can sense when parents are not in agreement, and they can use the situation to work in their favor by playing one parent against the other. In order to build unity, partners need to be honest and open with each other and practice good communica-



Helpful resources

Books

These books provide excellent information about a wide variety of important issues in stepfamilies. All of these books can be purchased from online booksellers.

- *Developing Healthy Stepfamilies*, Patricia Kelley, 1995, Harrington Park Press, New York.
- *How To Win as a Stepfamily*, Emily and John Visher, 1991, Brunner/Mazel, Philadelphia.
- *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*, Isolina Ricci, 1997, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- *The Stepfamily: Living, Loving, and Learning*, Elizabeth Einstein, 1994, Published by author, Ithaca, NY.
- *Stepparenting: Everything You Need to Know to Make it Work!*, Jeannette Lofas, 1996, Kensington Books, New York.

Other Extension guides

Many states have published information about stepfamilies. The following is a sampling of potentially helpful guides.

- *How Age Affects a Child's Reaction to Stepfamilies*, Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet HYG-5217-96:
ag.ohio-state.edu/~ohioline/hyg-fact/5000/5217.html
- *Parenting in Stepfamilies*, Iowa State University Extension Guidesheet Pm-1547c:
www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1547C.pdf

Organizations

- National Stepfamily Resource Center: www.stepfamilies.info
- The Stepfamily Network, Inc., 555 Bryant Street #361, Palo Alto, CA 94301 (1-800-487-1073): stepfamily.net
- The Stepfamily Foundation, 333 West End Avenue, New York, NY 10023 (212) 877-3244: www.stepfamily.org

tion skills. It is also important that they spend time alone together and nurture their friendship. A strong couple bond is essential to the success of the stepfamily.

Establish new traditions

Family traditions strengthen families because they create feelings of solidarity and oneness among members. They can also help a family create a sense of identity. These outcomes are especially important in stepfamilies, where members must make an effort in order to feel as if they are actually a family. Creating new traditions that are unique to the stepfamily can help create a new family identity.

Holidays are opportune times for families to create new traditions. However, it is important to leave some tradi-

tions in place from previous families for the sake of familiarity and stability. For example, a family celebrating Thanksgiving could try one or two new recipes, while cooking a favorite dish of each family member. If they are accustomed to sharing the holiday with extended family, they might continue to do so but incorporate new activities into the day's events. This would help them find a good balance between change and stability in their traditions.

Find activities that the entire family can enjoy together

Participating in enjoyable family activities helps members get to know one another better and strengthens family bonds. Possible activities include working on a project around the house,

taking walks in the evening, and playing games together. Taking day trips and going on vacations can also help unify individuals and create lasting memories. All family members need the opportunity to assist in planning activities. This will help them feel more involved and they will be more dedicated to helping the activity be a success. By making family time a priority, family members will be able to see that you are committed to creating a strong stepfamily.

Spend time in one-on-one relationships

Although spending time together as a family is important and beneficial, it is also essential that family members interact with each other on a one-on-one basis. Because children often feel

displaced by a new spouse and/or stepsiblings, spending private time with their birth parent helps children feel that they are still important despite the changes in their family. It is also helpful for stepparents to spend one-on-one time with their stepchildren. Activities such as going out for ice cream or spending time in a park on a nice day can help both the child and the adult build a relationship and overcome the awkwardness that is often present among family members who do not know each other well. Letting the stepchild choose an activity with which he or she is comfortable (within reason) will increase the likelihood of a positive experience.

Be flexible and patient

Give one another time to adjust to new roles. Becoming a member of a stepfamily can be challenging because individuals acquire new roles that are likely to be unfamiliar. For example, there are considerable differences between being a birth parent and a stepparent, and these differences may require a lot of adjustment. Forming a stepfamily brings a lot of changes into the lives of all parties involved, and being flexible is crucial for the family's success.

Building a strong stepfamily involves more than love and good intentions. Being a member of a stepfamily requires a lot of hard work, creativity and endurance. In most cases, time is a critical factor in the development of healthy stepfamily relationships. This makes patience important, despite tri-

als and challenges. Remembering that many stepfamilies do achieve unity, happiness and fulfillment can help you survive the rough spots. Discussing important issues with your partner will help you lay a solid foundation from which you can build a happy and successful stepfamily.

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