

Remarriages



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❖ Myths & Realities

About 50 percent of all marriages in a year are remarriages for one or both spouses. Remarriages and marriages that form stepfamilies (one or both spouses have children from a previous relationship) are more complex from the start. It's vital that couples forming stepfamilies learn some specific information about how to build healthy stepfamilies.

Take the following quiz, and see if you can identify what is reality, or true, and what is a myth, or false.



	True	False
1. Attachment between stepparent and stepchildren needs to occur quickly.		
2. Children ages 9 to 15 usually have the most difficult time adjusting to a new stepfamily.		
3. Children of divorce and remarriage are forever damaged.		
4. The stories and myths about wicked stepmothers do not affect today's stepfamilies.		
5. It's not unusual for a stepfamily to take at least 4 years or more to feel like a solid family unit.		
6. It helps stepfamily adjustment if the nonresidential parent withdraws.		
7. Living in a stepfamily formed after a parent dies is easier than living in a stepfamily formed after a divorce.		
8. Part-time stepparenting is easier than full-time stepparenting.		
9. A strong couple relationship is an important part of forming a strong stepfamily.		
10. A stepparent living with a stepchild has the same legal rights as the biological parent.		

Answers

1. **False:** More than likely, attachment between stepparent and stepchildren won't happen right away. It takes time, often years, for family members to get used to, accept, and adapt to different family histories, rules, routines, and individual habits, attitudes, values, and rituals. The more new relationships to be formed, the more time it will take. Keep the following in mind.

- The stepparent should not expect to take a parental or disciplinarian role with stepchildren in the beginning years.

- The biological parent should not expect the stepparent to feel the way he or she does about a biological child.

- The older the children, the longer the process of adjustment.

2. **True:** Older children have the most history with biological parents and typically have the following characteristics, making it more difficult for them to adjust to a stepfamily.

- Developmentally, they are very self-focused and may think you've messed up their lives with all these changes.

Answers (continued)

- They have the capacity to focus on what others think. They may feel embarrassed by the divorce and the remarriage.
- They are most susceptible to loyalty conflict dilemmas (feeling caught between their parents). Developmentally, teens are very focused on relationships and actively process and think about what they mean.
- Younger children think with less complexity. They are often more willing to be inclusive and open to accepting more than two parents.

3. False: It's important to know that most children of divorced parents (more than 80 percent) do well despite increased risks to their well-being. There's a lot of variation—and there's a lot that families and communities can do to support children's development after they've experienced divorce and/or remarriage.

4. False: Stereotypes can set up expectations and affect everyday life. Parents should discuss preconceived notions and stereotypical thinking with their children.

5. True: Instant love or instant blending of a stepfamily does not exist—that is an unrealistic expectation. Most stepfamilies take years to adjust.

6. False: When a child has no contact with a parent, he or she may build fantasies about that other parent. Unless there is abuse, a child benefits from contact with both biological parents.

7. False: A child who has had a parent die may build fantasies about that parent and may have a standard that the stepparent cannot live up to. The child may also feel jealousy or resentment toward the stepparent. It's important to allow a child time to process a parent's death. Most will need some professional help.

8. False: The role of the stepparent is usually even less clear when stepchildren are part-time residents of a household. It works best if the biological parent is the primary parent and disciplinarian and the stepparent supports this role.

9. True: The couple relationship is the newest and the weakest link and therefore is the most vulnerable. Taking time together as a couple and working to build strengths in the couple relationship are key to successful stepfamily living.

10. False: Stepparents are not automatically recognized as legal caretakers of their stepchildren. Stepparents cannot sign consent forms or authorize medical services. Authorization can be given by the biological parent, but it is not set up by law. Also, there are no legal ties to stepchildren if the biological parent dies or if the couple divorces.

❖ Strategies for Stepparenting

Because the “baby carriage” came before the “love” and “marriage” in stepfamilies, it's vital that couples discuss the approach they'll take in parenting their children. Below are some tips developed from studying the patterns of successful stepfamilies.

Develop realistic expectations for a stepparent/stepchild relationship. Don't expect instant love from stepchildren. *You can expect respectful behavior, and your spouse should help you emphasize this,* but you cannot expect a child to care for you the way he or she cares for a parent they've spent many years with. In turn, behave respectfully toward your stepchild by acknowledging his or her feelings, concerns, and desires. Modeling this behavior usually results in a stepparent's being treated respectfully. *There is rarely a perfect blending in stepfamilies, where everyone in the family feels the same level of connection to each other.* There can be different levels of closeness for each pair. In stepfamilies, it's most important that family members are *satisfied* with the level of closeness they have with each family member and realize that it's okay to feel closer to some than others.

Discuss your role with your spouse. Stepparents sometimes feel compelled to step in as a “savior” for the parent who's been having a hard time with the children, taking over to provide order and discipline and often the biological parent is in favor of this. *The couple should realize, however, that children are often not ready for a stepparent in a disciplinarian role, so this is usually doomed to failure.*

Sometimes stepparents see their spouses as too easy on the children and want to enforce stricter discipline in the home right from the beginning. A discussion is necessary. Biological parents need to take time to hear and understand the stepparent's input, but stepparents need to take a more gentle, nonjudgmental stance and hear the biological parent's point of view. *A helpful model is that the stepparent gives input into how things are done, but the biological parent retains the final say*