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Successful Stepfamilies

How to create a happy, functional stepfamily.

By Jeffrey Cottrill

Perhaps you're getting married to someone with children from a previous relationship, or else you have children and are getting remarried. Are you (or your new partner) ready for an instant stepfamily? To make it work, you need to let go of any preconceived notions you may have about the situation -- and make room for adjustment and compromise.

It's not uncommon for at least one of the spouses to have children from a previous marriage, and this can create awkwardness and even upset. Children are often the most affected by a divorce. It's traumatic enough to see their parents break up, but how do they feel about you (or your new partner) suddenly appearing in their lives as a "replacement"?

If you're marrying somebody with kids, it's vital that you understand that the children are a major factor in his or her life -- which makes them one in yours, too. Similarly, if you're a parent marrying a non-parent, keep in mind that your partner is jumping straight from having no children to being a stepmom or stepdad -- an awkward transition at best. And if *both* of you are parents, you need to find a way to "blend" your respective families.

"The first couple of years are usually chaotic, because the family is reassigning everyone to new roles," says Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D., the president of the Stepfamily Association of America. "Everybody's jockeying for position in a new family. The order changes: the baby may no longer be the baby, or the eldest child may no longer be so. Everybody has to figure out where he/she fits." The challenge of a stepfamily is to make order out of chaos: all family members need to learn their respective roles, and to work/play together as a team, if not a family.

Are you ready?

Creating a stepfamily is a huge decision -- much bigger than getting married without dependent kids from earlier relationships -- because of the obvious baggage. It's not enough just to love somebody. You have to make sure your love is strong enough to share your partner's family life -- and even if you're sure, you can't just jump into it without preparation.

Dr. Peter Marshall -- a child psychologist practicing in Barrie, ON and the author of *Cinderella Revisited: How to Survive your Stepfamily without a Fairy Godmother* (Whitecap Books) -- points out that the relationship with potential stepchildren will be a vital factor in whether your marriage will last. "If you don't want to get involved in parenting, or your partner doesn't, it won't work," he says. "If you want to live with a person, you need to think about whether you want to take responsibility for his or her children. It's very stressful: life gets extremely complicated, and it's not just temporary. Some people are just not ready for it."

Jeannette Lofas, Ph.D., CSW, the president and founder of The Stepfamily Foundation, stresses the necessity of careful consideration. "Keep in mind that two out of three remarriages fail," she says. "Would you take the children on a plane to San Francisco if there was only a 1/3 chance that the plane would work? Prepare very carefully. Marriage takes a lot of work to survive nowadays; stepfamilies take even more." Dr. Lofas suggests premarital counseling to make sure you and your partner really know what you're getting into; a counselor will help you to work out a family plan, or at least to start creating a plan. "Learn how a stepfamily functions," she advises. "The couple has to work out a system for agreement; otherwise there'll be a lot of conflict. Make sure that you agree on the plan, and that the agreement is clear to everybody."

Lillian Messinger, the author of *Remarriage: A Family Affair* (Plenum Press) and a pioneer in family counseling in Toronto, has seen problems arise with couples who hadn't taken the children from their previous relationships into consideration *before* they married. "Too frequently, a remarrying couple hasn't stopped to consider that it's not a honeymoon period -- it's a new type of family," she explains. She suggests that having children and stepparents get to know each other early on, on a gradual basis, will help ease tensions. "The new relationship has to involve the children as it develops -- they should be part of the courtship, and if the kids have any problems, they shouldn't keep them secret. An advance relationship before the marriage is extremely important."

Dr. Engel adds that doing homework on your own might be necessary. "You should look at your own knowledge base for relationships with children," she advises. "Read a good child-development book in order to understand how children develop. Talk to other people in stepfamilies as well." Learning about stepfamilies second-hand is no substitute for experience, but it will help you find your way. "Parenting is a hard job. There's lots of chaos and you're bound to become the 'bad guy' sometimes."

Above all, don't expect it to be easy, or that you and your partner's children will love each other immediately. (Sometimes, in fact, love *never* arises between stepparents and children -- but mutual respect and liking will take you a long way.) The more prepared you and your partner are, the better you'll be at withstanding the bumps along the way.

An instant family

The most frequent mistake that people make when marrying into stepfamilies is believing that they're like "normal" or nuclear families. Although stepfamilies have become much more common and accepted in recent years, people still fall into the trap of expecting them to run on automatic.

"Most people think that love will instantly appear," notes Dr. Lofas. "They think that a stepfamily will function like a biological family, and they say, 'I'm going to be the new father/mother.' But the kids don't *want* somebody new; they already *have* a mother or father. So stepparents need to know what their new roles entail. It's important to know the dynamics absolutely: the parent always feels conflicted in love between the new spouse and the children, and you have to work out how to manage that."

Dr. Engel also debunks the notion that a stepfamily is like a first family. "A stepparent is a support system for the parent," she explains. "Some new stepparents mistake their roles: maybe the woman wants to be the rescuing fairy godmother, or the man wants to make the kids shape up their behavior. But that's not your role -- you're just an assistant. Nevertheless, you're deputized. The other extreme are the stepparents who do nothing because they think they're not in charge. But you have to be the responsible adult when the biological parent isn't there."

Dr. Marshall, who himself lives happily in a stepfamily, believes that the key to surviving the situation is to be realistic. "You have to get rid of any preconceived notions about what a family *ought* to be," he explains. "Instead, say, 'what kind of family are we *going* to be?' You must be very flexible and willing to adapt. You never know how close a relationship might become -- you and the stepchildren might just stay polite strangers, for all you know. Don't try to force things into a particular mold. Lots of people live in families in which they don't necessarily 'love' each other, but they make it work."

This doesn't mean your stepchildren won't eventually grow to love you, or that your children won't learn to love your new spouse. But remember that a stepfamily is composed of two different families from separate backgrounds. "A frequent problem is when people want the stepfamily to blend straight away," observes Dr. Marshall. "You have to respect the old family, because the relationships between the natural parent and his or her children are very close. They need time to be the old family as well as the new."

And Messinger points out, "Often, the partners are at different stages of their lives, and have different attitudes towards child-rearing. Too many couples believe in the myth of the 'instant family,' or 'instant love.' It will take time for them to feel like a family. It requires a lot of planning in advance to avoid disappointment."

So don't expect to become the Brady Bunch. "Families don't blend," says Dr. Engel. "They combine, they expand, but they don't blend." So you should figure out what your (or your new partner's) role is, rather than making assumptions.

Set ground rules

So how is your clan going to function? Well, since conventional "family rules" are out, you'll have to make some new ones. Experts say that clear, all-inclusive plans are necessary to make a stepfamily work. Who spends time with whom, and when? What rules apply to everybody; what rules don't? What is everybody's role in the family? What are the budgeting/disciplinary/recreational systems?

"The couple needs to establish ground rules, like a business plan, and both partners have to agree on those rules and schedules," says Dr. Lofas. "A common error is when the couple has no rules at all. But every one of us has internal rules, and if a situation doesn't function as you want, you get uncomfortable. Time should be allotted for the parent and children, and for the couple."

"Communication is so important," stresses Dr. Engel. "It's essential that the couple talk together on how the household will operate. The natural parent should provide the information to his or her own children on house rules, so that it doesn't look like the 'bad stepparent' taking over." You may experience initial -- if not continual -- hostility from your stepchildren if they feel you're trying to replace one of their natural parents. "It's important for your stepchildren to understand that you're not a *replacement* for the lost parent, but an *addition*," she says.

Dr. Lofas points out that children may be less than thrilled about their parent marrying someone new. "They've experienced the losses of their original family and one biological parent," she explains. "Stepparents need to know that some of the things kids say are normal. They see themselves as rivals for love: 'who comes first, daddy, the new wife, or me?'"

Some anger, sadness, or acting out is perfectly normal for children of divorce. As a stepparent, you need to stay calm, kind, and adult in the face of outbursts -- and to avoid getting "hooked" by the hurtful things your stepchildren say or do to you. They have a right to their feelings -- but they do *not* have a right to be verbally or physically abusive to you. "Be very kind to your stepchildren, and validate any feelings they may be having about their parents' divorce, but do not be a doormat," recommends Diana Shepherd, editor of this magazine and stepmother of three. "Make it crystal-clear that you expect to be treated with the same courtesy you extend to them. This is definitely a two-way street: if you're rude to them, you can expect rudeness in return. So establish ground-rules early on about what is -- and what is not -- acceptable behavior."

Shepherd also recommends taking parenting counseling with your partner. "It's really important that you're on the same page in terms of your expectations. Talking to a parent about his/her children can be a delicate matter, and arguments about the kids can cause a rift in your relationship. A parenting counselor can give you objective advice based on years of training and experience. The counselor isn't on your side or your spouse's side: he/she is looking at what's best for the children." This objective advice tends to turn down the heat in discussions about hot-button issues such as discipline.

The biological parent should always be the head disciplinarian, so don't expect to immediately become an authority figure to your partner's children. According to Dr. Marshall, "you can't get too involved with discipline too soon, because that's almost inviting children to say, 'you're not my father/mother! You can't tell me what to do!' You do need to have a measure of authority as an adult, but you have to ease into parenting, developing your role slowly. Children accept their biological parents first because they have met the kids' needs and taken care of them. When the natural parents exercise discipline, it's based on an emotional attachment, an established relationship."

Stepfamily dynamics

"It's important not to diminish the biological, non-residential parent in any way," Messinger says. "The children have a right to that parent's love." Ex-spouses will still be linked to each other via their children -- as will uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. "You must develop a family plan for a second marriage: think of all the ties the kids have," advises Messinger.

According to Engel, the children might feel like they're being replaced by a stepparent. "Teens may have become more mature in a single-parent family, and had more responsibility looking after things," she says, "but the stepparent may make them feel demoted. When the adult steps in, they might feel as if they've lost power. So the child will strike out, and the circumstance, not the adult, is to blame.

"Understand that the hostility may not be personal," she continues. "The children may feel that they're losing their parent. It's very important to make time for parents to be alone with their own children, to show that they're not abandoned; meanwhile, stepparents should build a history of common interests and create some one-on-one time, too." A common mistake is to assume the family must do everything together, she adds. "Kids need time with friends and their natural relatives. There's no problem with the father going away with his own children on a trip, for example. Everybody can get along by combining and compromising interests."

Don't let either your devotion to your own children or getting to know your spouse's let you forget that you have a new spouse, too. Some stepfamilies sacrifice their marriages for the kids' sake. "There's an old joke that stepparents don't have their honeymoon until the end of the marriage -- when the kids have grown," says Dr. Engel. "You have to nurture the marriage as well. Take a walk after dinner or go to a movie. Or have the children spend time with their non-residential parents on the same weekend, so you have a child-free weekend together." If the marriage is shaky, effective stepparenting will become impossible.

Because there are so many different types of stepfamilies, what works for others won't necessarily work for you. "There simply isn't one model that works in every situation," Dr. Marshall admits. "You can't teach a course in it, like with first-time parenting, because the issues aren't as predictable. There's a world of difference between a stepfamily with one three-year-old and one with four teens from different families." It's your and your spouse's responsibility to write a script for your own situation. If you can't, enlist the help of a counselor -- preferably one who has experience with stepfamilies.

Getting in step

According to Dr. Engel, "Adults all want the same thing: they all want supportive relationships, and they want to rear happy, healthy children. Stepfamilies aren't as big a risk as the media make them out to be. People are trying harder now to work together, much more and much earlier. Typically, it takes a number of years, but they do it."

It takes a great deal of time, adaptability, understanding, patience, and open-mindedness to have a happy stepfamily. Along the way, accept that there are going to be problems and awkwardness. Make a commitment to nurturing your marriage, and to raising happy, well-adjusted kids, and don't be afraid to ask for help -- from your spouse, family, friends, or a professional counselor if necessary. Your goals (a happy marriage and happy kids) are too important to forfeit by suffering in silence.

For more information and advice on being part of a stepfamily, visit the Stepfamily Foundation website at www.stepfamily.org; the Foundation offers worldwide telephone counseling. The Stepfamily Association of America's site -- www.aaafamilies.org -- is also very helpful.