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Step by Step

By Jeffrey Cottrill

We're all familiar with the image of the Wicked Stepmother and Wicked Stepsisters from the fairy tale *Cinderella*. Fortunately, most stepfamily situations aren't anywhere near that bad. However, the reason why there can be a negative stigma attached to stepparents has far more to do with misunderstandings and preconceived notions than with "evil". Being a stepparent is a confusing, difficult job: sometimes easier, but often more difficult than being a biological parent. "I often feel that I have all of the responsibility, but none of the authority," says Paula, a stepmother of three pre-teen boys. "I can drive them to hockey practice, bake cookies for them, do their laundry, and cook their meals, but if I try to discipline them, they come back with 'You're not my Mom -- you can't tell me what to do!' It makes me really mad!"

If you're marrying somebody with children from a previous relationship, it's important not to mistake your stepparent role as being the same as that of a natural parent. It's also vital to accept that your spouse's kids are going to be a significant part of your life and vice-versa -- whether they (and you) like it or not. Meanwhile, the biological parent should recognize that the transition for the new stepparent will be awkward and complicated.

The key is not to have any set assumptions about how things should work, because no two stepparenting situations are alike. There's no guarantee that you'll forge a strong bond with your stepchildren -- and even if you eventually do, you'll never be their mommy or daddy. But believing that you're "off the hook" as far as parental responsibilities go is not a wise assumption. And what if *both* you and your new spouse are parents -- making you both stepparents as well? How do you work out that situation?

It's clear that being a stepparent requires its own set of guidelines. Although your situation is unique, some of the following tips should help to smooth the road ahead.

A stepparent's role

"Stepparents are additional parents, *not* replacements," says Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D., the president and CEO of the Stepfamily Association of America (SAA; website www.saafamilies.org). "The biological parent remains primarily responsible for the child, while the stepparent signs on to become a support system for both the parent and the child."

This points to one of the most common mistakes that new stepparents make: they assume they are immediately to "take charge" in a parenting role towards the child. Often this is done with the best of intentions, but it's one of the worst ways to attempt to win a stepchild's loyalty or affection. Your spouse's child likely still has a strong relationship with his or her other biological parent, and nothing you do can change that. It's not uncommon for children to feel hostile toward new stepparents even before the marriage -- either because they still harbor reconciliation fantasies about their parents, or simply out of fear that the stepparent is a threat to the parent-child bond. Age and maturity don't always resolve these issues: even *adults* often object to the prospect of their parent marrying someone new. So you have to respect the child's relationship with the other parent right from the start and clarify -- both to the child and to yourself -- that you are not a replacement for the child's parent. If you quickly assume the role of "new parent" (particularly in regards to authority or discipline), that's handing out an invitation for the child to rebut with the infamous "You're not my mother/father!" routine.

"A stepparent usually has weaker -- or even no -- bonds with a stepchild," says stepparenting expert Peter Gerlach, MSW, a council member of SAA and the founder of www.sfhelp.org. "If the stepchildren are young, the potential for developing bonds is greater; if they're adolescent or teenaged, they often don't develop the

same intensity of emotional bonds. An unfortunate stress occurs when one believes that a stepparent and children have to 'love' each other; it's almost impossible for them to develop the same quality of bond."

On the other hand, this doesn't make you devoid of responsibility for your spouse's kids. After all, *you're* going to be the responsible adult at the times when the biological parent isn't present. "It takes time to develop a deeply loving, caring relationship. But you don't have to 'love' a child to fulfill care-taking issues with him or her," Dr. Engel points out. Just as a teacher or babysitter can fulfill the role of temporary caretaker and disciplinarian for non-related children, so you must be prepared to take on some measure of supervision and authority.

"Both parents and stepparents should pay attention to what is effective child discipline," says Gerlach. "Discipline is an art and a science, and often done ineffectively -- parents doing what they've been taught or how they were disciplined as kids." When there are children involved, a couple should ideally discuss responsibility, authority, and discipline styles before they get married. (If this advice comes too late for you, you can still benefit from doing it now.) You need to agree upon what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and what the consequences will be when the children misbehave. Then call a family meeting to share your conclusions with the kids. Depending on the children's ages, you may wish to choose a few points that are negotiable -- but make sure you know what the stepparent's "deal-breakers" are before you start changing the rules. In the beginning, it's best that the biological parent carry out most if not all of the discipline.

The "Brady Bunch" situation

You might expect that a stepfamily in which both you and your spouse have children from prior relationships -- what Gerlach calls a "complex" stepfamily -- would present even greater challenges than when only *one* of you is a parent. However, according to Dr. Engel, it may actually be easier. "Yes, there would be more confusion and less money to go around, but on the flip-side, each adult is loved unconditionally by one or more of the children -- whereas somebody who's only a stepparent has to *earn* that love and respect," she says. "And each adult understands how their spouse feels: it's natural to love your biological children more than your stepchildren."

In other words, neither spouse gets shortchanged in the parental-bond department; this may help to prevent some awkwardness or misunderstandings when it comes to the adults' roles toward their biological children and stepchildren. Yet this doesn't mean that you should expect a complex stepfamily to run smoothly.

"A sobering fact is that 60% or more of stepfamilies in the U.S. break up," Gerlach points out. Couples should learn about why most stepfamily marriages end in divorce -- and how to avoid the common pitfalls -- before they marry. "Most people don't, and the results speak for themselves." Such education can include reading up on the subject or taking parenting classes or workshops.

Gerlach also reveals that many couples deny or suppress the fact that they are forming a stepfamily because they have unpleasant associations with the concept. "Accept that you're in a stepfamily," he advises. "Even when you're courting, accept that you would become a stepfamily if you got married. Many people ignore or minimize this fact. They wind up sadly disappointed, and it hurts their kids. So get really clear on what a stepfamily *is*."

In accepting that you're forming or already in a stepfamily, you must learn to make room for adjustment and compromise. Rather than trying to force a family group to happen, you will have to adapt to living in what's essentially a coalition of two different family groups. Contrary to popular belief, families don't "blend" together. You will not become the Brady Bunch, but you can learn to get along and respect -- if not "love" -- each other.

Stepfamilies and divorce

As Gerlach indicated, sadly, more than three-fifths of stepfamilies eventually divorce. In many cases, the children and their former stepparents may not continue their relationships, particularly if those relationships never developed beyond bare tolerance in the first place. However, there are occasional cases in which the stepparent and child have bonded over time and may want to continue their relationship post-divorce. Although most positive step-relationships rarely get beyond being "friends", there are cases in which a stepparent can become almost like a second parent to a child.

"We're finding more and more often that stepparents and stepchildren do maintain their relationships," Dr. Engel reveals. "It may depend on how old the kids were when the couple married, how long they were together

in the stepfamily, and their personalities and common interests. In many cases, there isn't a continuing relationship because most remarriages end early -- within one or two years -- so there's not enough time for a real bond to develop." On the other hand, many people consider their close friends to be "family" -- and these bonds can be stronger than those between blood relations.

So if you and your stepchildren were close during the marriage, you shouldn't disappear from their lives post-divorce. And if you're the biological parent, you should recognize that it's in your kids' best interests for them to maintain a healthy relationship with your ex. However, if you're having a less-than-friendly divorce, this may lead to some awkwardness in maintaining the step-relationship. Gerlach suggests that the adults should segregate the issues ending the marital relationship from those involving others. Who's involved in this divorce other than the two divorcing spouses? Consider how this relationship split will affect the children and other relatives: a broken marriage doesn't necessarily need to end other relationships formed via the marriage.

Tom grew close to his two stepchildren during his seven-year marriage to their mother, Jane, who had primary custody of the kids. After their marriage broke down, Tom and Jane agreed that he would remain part of the children's lives, although he would no longer take part in day-to-day activities. "I take them to a movie about once a month, and I attend special events with their parents," he says. "Last month, Jane invited me to my stepdaughter's Sweet Sixteen Birthday party; I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Step in time

In a first marriage, each spouse brings his/her family and friends to the relationship. In a second marriage, you may have to add children, ex-spouses, and sometimes even ex-in-laws to the mix. That's a lot of relationships to create and keep running smoothly -- especially if you don't particularly like some or all of this extended stepfamily.

"My best advice to other stepparents is to try to develop a solid working relationship with the children's other parent ASAP," says Mary, stepmother of two. You are now business partners -- you're in the business of raising happy, healthy kids -- so you need to be able to have respectful, constructive conversations. "You can't be a doormat: you have to establish boundaries early on. But you should still practice unfailing courtesy and kindness towards your spouse's ex; the quality of your life will improve immeasurably."

The parent must make an effort to give his/her spouse as well as his/her children some one-on-one quality time. "I urge you to make time to nurture your husband-wife as well as the parent-child relationships," advises Mary. "Schedule a weekly date with your spouse, and some regular activity with your kids: like reading a bedtime story every night or flying kites on Sunday afternoons. The stronger the marriage, the better it is for the kids."

As you see, marrying into a stepfamily is a weighty decision with numerous potential consequences for everyone in both families. Loving your partner isn't enough to make the marriage last; you have to be sure that you can handle sharing your partner's extended family and/or that your partner can handle yours. And once you get beyond that, you have to let go of any assumptions you have about stepparenting and keep an open mind.

"A typical biological parent says, 'Of course I love my children,' but a stepparent may just learn to respect them at best," says Gerlach. "But most stepparents share their spouse's desire to nurture the kids properly." Expecting neither an "instant family" nor to exclude your stepchildren from your relationship is a good place to start. Thoroughly discussing expectations and roles with your spouse, being absolutely consistent regarding rewards and discipline, and making time to nurture your relationship as a couple will help to ensure you won't become another divorce statistic. Learning to live cooperatively takes time and effort, but the rewards are well worth it.

Ten Steps for Steps

1. Recognize that the stepfamily will not and cannot function as a biological family. It has its own special state of dynamics and behaviors. Once learned, these behaviors can become predictable and positive. Do *not* try to overlay the expectations and dynamics of the intact or natural family onto the stepfamily.
2. Recognize the hard fact that the children are not yours and they never will be. You are a stepparent -- not replacement parents. Mother and father (no matter how awful the natural parents may be) are sacred words and feelings. You are a stepparent, a step removed. Yet in this position, you can still play a significant role in the development of the child.

3. Super stepparenting doesn't work. Go slow. Don't come on too strong.
4. Discipline styles must be sorted out by the couple. The couple, ideally with the help of a Stepfamily Foundation-trained professional, needs to immediately and specifically work out what the children's duties and responsibilities are. What is acceptable behavior and what are the consequences when children misbehave? Generally, in the beginning, we suggest that the biological parent does the disciplining when possible. Together, the couple should specifically work out jobs, expected behaviors, and family etiquette.
5. Establish clear role descriptions between the parent, stepparent, and respective children. What specifically is the job of each one of us in this household? Be as detailed as possible. Give it as much attention as you might give it if you were writing a job description for your business.
6. Know that unrealistic expectations beget rejections and resentments. There is no model for the step-relationship except for the wicked stepchild and invariably cruel stepmother of fairy tales. Note the absence of myth around the stepfather. It is vital for the survival of the stepfather to be able to see and delineate expectations for each member of the family, especially the primary problem areas in step: e.g., money, discipline, the prior spouse, visitation, authority, emotional support, territory, and custody.
7. There are no ex-parents, only ex-spouses. Begin to get information on how best to handle the prior spouse.
8. Be prepared for conflicting pulls of sexual and biological energies within the step-relationship. In the intact family, the couple comes together to have a child. The child is part of both parents, generally pulling the parents' energy together for the well being of the child. In step, blood and sexual ties can polarize a family with conflicting energies.
9. The conflict of loyalties must be recognized right from the beginning. The conflict is particular to step and is a round robin of confused emotions. Often, just as the child in step begins to have warm feelings toward the stepparent, the child will pull away and negatively act out. He/she might think, "If I love you, that means I do not love my real parent." The feelings are normal and must be dealt with. "Who am I loyal to first?" is a question constantly asked in a step situation.
10. Guard your sense of humor and use it. The step situation is filled with the unexpected. Sometimes we don't know whether to laugh or to cry. Try humor.

This list has been reprinted with permission from The 10 Steps Digest, a booklet put out by The Stepfamily Foundation, Inc. For over 25 years, the Foundation has provided worldwide telephone counseling as well as given lectures and seminars on the unique dynamics of the stepfamily.



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