



Keeping Stepfamilies Happy and Healthy

by JUDY BERANGER

“Traditionally we know that nuclear families have family trees – stepfamilies have family forests!”

Defining or describing families in all its forms is a difficult task. Many have tried to capture it by describing its composition but in the end the true essence of family is its “function” rather than its “form”. According to Statistics Canada, an increase in stepfamilies (often referred to as “blended families”) has changed the composition of Canadian families by more than half a million. The various compositions of stepparents, stepchildren, stepsiblings and siblings newly born to the stepfamily are like any other family structure in that they want to feel part of a trusting, secure environment where people feel safe and valued, where communication is nurtured and difficult situations are addressed in a timely fashion.

As couples come with children from first relationships the complexity of family restructuring can be complicated. Stepfamily members often find themselves reacting to, rather than planning for, the emerging network of relationships. Resentments, torn loyalties, guilt and other emotional struggles that can be a part of adjusting to larger numbers of family members under one roof, takes time to resolve and requires a real commitment to the greater good. The adjustment in the family reorganization can vary depending on whether the previous family ended as a result of a death or a divorce. As time passes and commitment deepens there can be many pleasurable moments and new opportunities resulting from the integration of new family members.

Much of the literature talks about how children in nurturing stepfamilies are often more flexible as a result of being exposed to a wider variety of relationships, opinions and feelings and often end up with better coping mechanisms. When the couple bond is strong, the children from both sides experience loving and healthy role models, sometimes for the first time. Stepparents offering friendship to the child, on the child’s terms, also do quite well if there is no interference from others.

In their books *How to Win As a Stepfamily* and *Therapy with Stepfamilies*, John Visser, M.D. and

Emily Visser, Ph.D. suggest important tasks for stepfamilies to work toward to establish their unique family identity. There are a number of tasks that need to be accomplished with some more difficult than others. Some of the tasks and strategies include:

1. Dealing with Losses and Changes – It is important to recognize and identify that all involved in the family reorganization have dealt with or are dealing with some level of loss and change. Courteous relationships between former spouses are important, although, for some people, it seems difficult, if not impossible to maintain. Stepparents and stepchildren need time to gradually develop their relationships. It is helpful to:

- Support expressions of sadness
- Help children talk and not act out feelings
- Read stepfamily literature and make changes gradually
- Engage professional help if patterns seem to get stuck
- Inform children of plans in which they are involved
- Accept the insecurity of change

2. Negotiating Different Developmental Needs – Taking a stepfamily course or a parenting course geared toward stepfamilies can be very helpful in order to:

- Accept and understand the additional life cycle phases
- Communicate individual needs clearly
- Negotiate incompatible needs
- Develop tolerance and flexibility

3. Establishing New Traditions – Honoring old, treasured traditions is as important as ensuring that new traditions are developed and nurtured. It could be as simple as making or ordering pizza every Friday night or a tennis game every Saturday morning. Before long you hear the children say “we always do that!!”

- Recognize ways of doing things may be different – not right or wrong
- Stepparents gradually take on discipline
- Use “family meetings” for problem solving and giving appreciation

- Communicate between households if possible
- Retain/combine appropriate rituals

4. Developing a Solid Couple Bond – A strong couple bond can protect the children from another family loss, and it also can provide the children with a positive model for their own eventual couple relationship. The adults need to arrange time alone to help nourish their relationship.

- Plan for couple “alone time”
- Decide general household rules as a couple
- Support one another with the children
- Expect and accept different parent-child, stepparent-stepchild feelings
- Work out money matters together

5. Forming New Relationships – Caring relationships take time to evolve. The expectation of “instant love” between stepparents and stepchildren can lead to many disappointments and difficulties. Activities involving different subgroups can help relationships grow, for example, stepparent and stepchildren working on a project together. Other strategies might include:

- Fill in past histories and do fun things together
- Make parent-child 1:1 time and stepparent-stepchild 1:1 time
- Be fair to stepchildren even when caring is not developed
- Follow children’s lead in what to call the stepparent and explore options for a respectful, special name

6. Creating a “Parenting Coalition” – Children sometimes become caught in loyalty conflicts and feel personally insecure if specific critical remarks are made about any of their parents or stepparents. Being a stepparent is an unclear and at times difficult task. Stepparenting is more successful if stepparents carve out a role for themselves that is different from and does not compete with the biological parents.

- Keep children out of the middle and share what happened since they were away rather than quiz the child on what s/he did in their other home
- Do not talk negatively about adults in the other household
- Control what you can and accept limitations
- Avoid power struggles between households
- Plan special times for various household constellations

7. Accepting Continual Shifts in Household Composition – It is very normal for children to want to enjoy both their households if they do not feel caught in the middle and parents keep their differences to themselves.

- Give children time to adjust to household transitions
- Avoid asking children to be “messengers” or “spies”. Avoid asking questions about the other household that can create discomfort
- Consider teenager’s desire to change residence as a normal request
- Set consequences for your household only
- Provide a personal place for each child/teen regardless of how long they spend at the other parent’s house

8. Risking Involvement Despite Little Societal Support – Teachers are strong advocates in schools, churches, sports, activities etc. and are quite supportive to and often members themselves of stepfamily constellations. Parents can:

- Give legal permission for stepparents to act when necessary
- Continue stepparent-stepchild relationships after death or divorce of parent when caring has developed
- Stepparents include self in stepchild’s activities
- Find groups supportive of stepfamilies
- Remember that all relationships involve risk

Children in stepfamilies have often been compared to people who have dual citizenship in two countries. Food, language, customs, traditions, music, roles, birth order, religion, money, leisure time, pace of life, schedules are often quite different. Every time they move from one home to the other home it is likened to flying international to a new culture. Things are different, not wrong, and it takes a little while to adjust.

In *Growing Up Divorced*, Linda Bird Francke says that children actually suffer the most in bad marriages and/or in bitter divorces. As much as some children take a longer time to adjust and grieve and let go of the hope that their parents will get back together, others invest in the stepfamily formation where there are wonderful opportunities to experience what a happy couple and a happy family is like, often for the first time. In the nurturing stepfamilies children report perks in being able to add step-brothers and step-sisters, more grandparents, aunts and uncles, pets and family friends to the list of who can love them and who they can love back.

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