

# Foundations for a Successful Stepfamily

The prospect of building 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. Building a successful stepfamily requires significant energy and commitment, so partners should talk about expectations for each other and their new family before and after marriage. Such dialogues address important issues and can help avoid serious problems down the road. Realistic expectations and goals are crucial to creating a healthy, successful stepfamily. Time spent wisely during courtship can lay a foundation for positive stepfamily relationships.

## Personal goals and expectations

Beginning a new relationship, especially a marriage, requires careful consideration of several questions:

- What are your goals for this marriage?
- Do you share with your partner the values you believe to be important?
- How have you managed any strong feelings about your former partner? To what extent do those feelings affect your relationship with your new partner?

People get married or remarried for a variety of valid reasons. Partners should discuss their motives for wanting to marry, because they might differ. Likewise, an understanding of and respect for each other's basic values and priorities is essential to the success of any relationship.

Losing a spouse through death or the dissolution of a previous marriage is usually accompanied by strong feelings such as intense sadness, anger or guilt. Each person in the prospective marriage needs time to heal before entering another marriage, 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 affect their present relationship.

## FOCUS on Kids

*This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children. We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.*

## Jobs

Employment frequently takes a large percentage of a person's time and energy, which can have a significant effect on family life. Consider these questions when thinking about work:

- Does your new marriage require a job change for you or your partner?
- Whose job takes priority in deciding where to live, working overtime and so forth?

- How compatible are the demands of your jobs?

Employment has its advantages: financial support, friendship and self-esteem, among other benefits. Work can also be emotionally and physically demanding, time-consuming and stressful. When contemplating marriage, partners should understand each other's feelings about their jobs and the amount of time and commitment they require. The life changes of a new marriage may bring with it the temptation to change or discontinue their current employment. However, making many major changes at once can be stressful. Each situation is different, but partners should generally continue in their same job situations until they have adjusted to a new stepfamily.

## Financial matters

Each person brings their own experiences and perspectives about family finances, and expectations are often vastly different. Partners should discuss financial decisions and their personal philosophies about money:

- How much money does each of you make? Who provides what proportion of support and living expenses?
- What financial responsibilities do you have to other family members (i.e., child support, maintenance, care for an elderly parent)?
- Should children be given an allowance? For what and how much?

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 relationships and financial matters to consider. Child support payments can be a difficult issue in stepfamilies, because they continue the link between former spouses and are often a source of persistent problems. It can be stressful for individuals in one

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household to have to base their financial decisions on the needs of another.

Before getting married, partners should decide whether they will pool their resources or keep them separate. They should also construct a tentative family budget. Although discussing financial issues will not eliminate all money problems, it helps partners understand the specifics of each other's financial situation and provides the impetus for making important decisions together.

## Household arrangements

The living situation is a major issue for new stepfamilies:

- 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 can begin living together in a place they can call their own. Moving into a home in which a spouse's previous family lived can be uncomfortable and might alienate new family members. Creating a home together that is new to all family members provides a fresh start, but a new home is often impractical, financially or otherwise. In any case, all family members should have spaces of their own, even if they do not live there all the time. Being able to choose how to decorate one's own space can be exciting and may ease the transition into stepfamily life.

Family members should be involved as much as possible in making decisions about household chores. Children will be less likely to resent decisions about chores and other responsibilities if they participate 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 marriage paves the way for a smoother transition to stepfamily life.

## Children

Building relationships with stepchildren is a huge task that usually requires a great deal of time and effort. Take steps to ease the transition into the role of stepparent:

- How well do you know and relate to each other's children?
- What are your current custody or visitation arrangements?
- 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 in your home?

- Do you and your new partner want to have children together?

Partners must discuss their beliefs about child rearing, discipline, rules and other issues related to their children before they decide to get married. Once partners make the decision to get married, they should tell their children directly and give them an idea of the effects it 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. Including children in the wedding plans and other family-related decisions gives them a feeling of having some control over their lives.

Parents need to realize that their children will probably not view the marriage with the same emotions as they do. Although the parents are looking forward to gaining a new partner, the children might feel as if they are losing their parent to a 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.

Stepchildren will probably not automatically feel strong positive feelings for their stepparents, and vice versa. Although two adults may love each other, they may not necessarily love each other's children right away. Patience is crucial in a stepfamily, because it can take years for bonds to develop in stepfamily relationships.

How children are affected will likely differ depending on their age and level of development.

## Preschoolers

Remarriage can be confusing to young children. Familiar routines will likely be disrupted, and they may require more attention and affection from their parents. They should 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 or hostility, because remarriage dashes hopes that their biological parents will get back together. New rules and routines or sharing space with new stepsiblings may lead to feelings of frustration. If children feel displaced by the new stepparent, they may try to attract attention by 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. Parents should reassure their children that they are still loved and important. Like preschoolers, school-age children need to maintain a positive relationship with both biological parents.

## Adolescents

Teens may experience many of the same feelings as school-age children — 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 already strive for greater independence and freedom at this time in their lives, they will likely 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. They have had previous relationships and are likely to have some different ideas about how things should be. It takes time to create a cohesive family unit. There will be many challenges in a new stepfamily, but partners will be better prepared to cope with the new family dynamics by discussing issues related to their children.

## Relationships with others

Relationships with others can dramatically affect the quality of life in a new stepfamily:

- How do you 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 role in the new family dynamic?

If possible, children should 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. If possible, maintain contact between children and their extended family.

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. Some are as simple as paying attention to individual relationships, and others require a more conscious, concerted effort on the part of all family members.

### ***Nurture the couple relationship***

Continue to build your relationship even after entering a new marriage. Parents often feel greater loyalties to their children because they have had longer-standing relationships with them, but partners must 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 their advantage by playing one parent against the other. In order to build unity, partners need to be honest

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### **Ideas for successful parenting in stepfamilies**

- Be realistic and patient in your efforts to build a stepfamily.
  - Talk to other stepparents. They can be a valuable source of support and ideas.
  - Let children choose what name to call their stepparent.
  - Educate yourself about stepfamily life by reading relevant books and articles.
  - Be on the same page as your spouse about rules, methods of discipline and other important issues.
  - Have regular family meetings to discuss relevant issues and concerns.
  - Ease into the role of stepparent by focusing on building a friendship with your stepchildren before trying to parent them.
  - Get outside help as needed from a counselor or by attending an educational program for stepfamilies.
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and open with each other and practice good communication skills. They should spend time alone together and nurture their friendship, because a strong marital bond is essential to the success of the stepfamily.

### ***Establish new traditions***

Family traditions create feelings of solidarity and oneness and can help a family create a sense of identity. Stepfamilies in particular benefit from this, because members must make an effort in order to feel as if they are actually a family. Creating new traditions unique to the stepfamily can help create a new family identity.

Holidays are opportune times for families to create new traditions, but leave some traditions 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, but still cook 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 to strike a good balance between change and stability.

### ***Find activities the entire family can enjoy together***

Family activities strengthen family bonds and help members get to know one another better. Work on a project around the house, take walks in the evening or play games together. Taking day trips and going on vacations can create lasting memories shared by the entire family. Include the whole family in planning activities to help them feel more involved and dedicated. 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, family members should also interact with each other on a one-on-one basis. Children often feel displaced by a new spouse or stepsibling, so spending private time with their birth parent helps children feel that they are still a priority. 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 children and the adult build a relationship and overcome any potential awkwardness from not knowing each other well. Let the stepchildren choose an activity they are comfortable with to 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 and unfamiliar roles. There are considerable differences between being a birth parent and a stepparent that may require significant adjustment. Forming a stepfamily is a big life change for all parties, and flexibility 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 hard work, creativity and endurance. Time is a crucial factor in the development of healthy stepfamily relationships, so patience will be important. Remembering that many stepfamilies achieve unity, happiness and fulfillment can help you through the rough spots. Discussing important issues with your partner will help lay a solid foundation upon which you can build a happy and successful stepfamily.

## **Resources**

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. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- *How To Win as a Stepfamily*. Emily and John Visher. 1991. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.
- *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*. Isolina Ricci. 1997. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- *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. New York: Kensington Books.

This organization offers useful information on stepfamily life:

- National Stepfamily Resource Center, <http://www.stepfamilies.info>

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- Visher, E. B., and Visher, J. S. 1979. *Stepfamilies: Myths and realities*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press.

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This guide was adapted from a packet entitled Premarital Expectations: A Guide for Living in Stepfamilies by Marilyn Coleman and Jill Hastings.

### **ALSO FROM MU EXTENSION PUBLICATIONS**

- GH6123 *Communicating Effectively with Children*  
GH6602 *Activities for Helping Children Deal with Divorce*  
GH6651 *Stress Management and the Challenge of Balance*

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