

# Guidelines to Building a Successful Stepfamily

*Carole and Ronald Krist Samaritan Center for Counseling and Education*

**1. Remember: A stepfamily is a family born of loss.**

The loss may be abandoning one's dream of a perfect, lifelong marriage. It may be the unchosen absence of a biological parent. Losses result from the changes that take place when a stepfamily is formed—changes in residences, jobs, schools, friends and/or routines. Stepfamily members need time, patience and emotional support as they adjust to multiple losses.

**2. If possible, start out as a new stepfamily in your own place.**

It helps to cut down on feelings involved with "territory" if stepfamilies can start out in their own house or apartment. For many, this may not be possible. If that is the case, get together with all who will be living in the house and decide from scratch how things will be worked out – sharing rooms, for example. Remodel or repaint. Buy some new furniture or rearrange what you have. Give everyone a voice. Avoid having the adults assign everything.

**3. It is important for the couple in a stepfamily to set aside time to build their own relationship.**

Sometimes, the parents who share the new couple relationship have mixed feelings about making theirs the primary relationship in the family. After all, parent-child bonds preceded the new couple relationship. However, a strong and primary couple relationship is the key to a successful stepfamily. It may protect the children from another family loss. It also provides the children with an important positive model for their own eventual marriage relationship.

**4. The expectations of "instant love" between stepparents and stepchildren can lead to disappointments and difficulties.**

It takes time to develop caring relationships. Television models of stepfamilies ("The Brady Bunch" and "Eight is Enough" as examples) serve to perpetuate the myth that intimacy is instantaneous. It's okay and normal not to be sure whether you care at all about these strange people who have suddenly invaded your life. Not all problems that arise can be solved in 28 to 56 minutes, either. Expect 18 months to 2 years adjustment time.

**5. It is often best to begin forming relationships with stepchildren on a one-to-one basis.**

Don't try to get to know them all in a bunch. A little individual time with each is important initially. Later on, activities involving different subgroups can help build new family bonds. For example, a stepparent and stepchildren can enjoy an activity together, or a natural parent, child and stepsibling can work together on a project.

**6. It is important for a parent and natural children to spend time together in addition to stepfamily activities.**

This helps the child experience less loss in sharing a parent.

**7. In general, it is wise for the stepparents to assume a co-parenting role slowly**

Effective discipline requires the consent of the "discipline." Discipline by a stepparent is not usually accepted until a friendly relationship has been established. Concentrate on that first. Although the biological parent may be the primary disciplinarian initially, it is important that both adults support each other's authority in the household. Remember too, that natural families also have problems in the area of discipline.

**8. Do not try to replace your stepchild's birth parent.**

Most stepchildren want their stepparent to be a friend, not someone who is taking away their other parent. Stepchildren appreciate the presence of an adult friend at times when a parent is "too close." There is a healthy and helpful objectivity in stepparents. The child may therefore be able to talk more freely. So be yourself! When one stepchild was asked, "Do you ever get to where you like your stepparent?" She replied, "I love my stepparent." However, that may rarely be said out loud.

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# Guidelines to Building a Successful Stepfamily (continued)

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**9. Understand that divided loyalties sometimes make it difficult for children to relate comfortably to all the parental adults in their life.**

Warm and loving stepparents may even cause especially severe loyalty conflicts. In such a case, rejection of a stepparent by a stepchild may have nothing to do with the personal characteristics of the stepparent. Try not to let any acting out on a child's part get to you personally.

**10. Courteous relationships between ex-spouses are important, even if difficult to maintain.**

Children accept the reality of living in a stepfamily more easily if they are not constantly caught in the middle between two hostile parents. Direct contact between all parents is healthier than communication through children.

**11. For most individuals in stepfamilies, there are counterparts with whom there is competition**

It is difficult for natural mothers and stepmothers, natural fathers and stepfathers, and stepchildren and their stepsiblings not to feel competitive. It helps to acknowledge this reality. The question underneath is "Am I loved?"

**12. Encourage tolerance toward differences in values and lifestyles.**

Different value systems are inevitable in a stepfamily because of different previous family histories. Having an appreciation for and an expectation of such difficulties can lead to more flexibility and relaxation as compromises and alternatives are worked out. Recognize that there is no "right" or "wrong" way. Negotiation and re-negotiation are needed.

**13. "Visiting" children often feel like outsiders in the home of their non-custodial parents, and in the neighborhood.**

**Actively help them feel at home.**

Some things that can help are: if they have some place in the house that is theirs (a drawer for clothes, shelf for toys, etc.); if they are included in family chores and projects when they are visiting; if an adult introduces them to places and people in the neighborhood.

**14. Remember that all families experience stressful times.**

Children tend to show little day-to-day appreciation for parents. Parents at times are naturally angry at children. Because stepfamilies are families born of loss, the mixture of feelings can be even more intense. Having an understanding and acceptance of the many negative as well as positive feelings can result in less disappointment and more stepfamily enjoyment for all.

*Information for this article was drawn from conference addresses and from Visser's book *Stepfamilies: A Guide to Working with Stepparents and Stepchildren*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, Inc., 1979.*

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