

Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies

Building a Strong Couple Relationship

Lesson 2

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Each of you brings into your relationship a set of expectations of how you and your partner will act. Sooner or later you are likely to be disappointed, but your relationship with each other is essential for the success of your stepfamily.

You need to be a strong team that can make decisions together and provide care and direction for your family.

A strong, healthy relationship benefits the children in your family. Children feel more secure and have a sense of well-being when the adult couple provides leadership for the family.

You and your partner can serve as a model for children. As they reach adulthood, they will have some idea about how adults care for each other and manage a family.

Intimate relationships take hard work. They do not just happen — they require attention. Partners need to pay attention to each other and constantly support each other. A couple who has a strong relationship can help each other during tough times in the stepfamily.

The stepparent/stepchild relationship is likely to improve with a strong couple relationship. Stepparents who feel good about their partners may be more patient with the process of building a family.

A positive feeling about the partner helps the stepparent to not give up. A strong partnership may actually help stepchildren behave better and become



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happier over time. The children may be more willing to allow the stepparent into their lives when they think you are having a good relationship.

It may take your stepchild several years to be friendly to you. That is normal, especially for teenage stepchildren.

It may have nothing to do with you as a person or a stepparent. Your stepchild may need time to accept the new family arrangement. You need the support of your partner to not feel isolated.

A positive couple relationship will limit the chance of more family losses. Most stepfamilies are anxious about the possibility of another loss, especially in the early stages.

Remarriages end in divorce at higher rates than first marriages. A satisfying couple relationship helps decrease the chances of divorce.

Stumbling Stone: Neglecting the Couple Relationship

Meeting the needs of the adults as a couple benefits everyone in the family. It can mean the difference between stability and divorce. Find activities that are inexpensive or free. It may take some creativity, but it is worth the effort.

Some examples are:

- Taking walks.
- Doing volunteer work that you both enjoy.
- Attending school or other community events not necessarily involving your children.

However, you may have to deal with the following obstacles:

Family issues may interfere with the couple relationship

You may feel you are betraying your child by sharing your time and affection with a new partner. A teenager who has acted as your sounding board may really resent being replaced by a new stepparent. Knowing that a

strong couple relationship will benefit children in the long run may help you build a caring relationship with the partner.

The children may not support the idea of the adults having time alone.

Children may resent your attention to each other. They are not concerned about your privacy nor are they concerned about your needs as a couple.

Plan an activity the children can participate in during the parents' time alone. This activity will minimize the child's resistance and any guilt the parent may experience.

Childcare may be hard to find or costs too much

Some stepfamilies have financial difficulties trying to deal with day-to-day needs and paying child support. Forcing a teenager to sit with step-siblings may not be a good idea until good relationships are established. Some families are able to set up an exchange with another family. They take care of your children when you go out and you take care of theirs when they go out. This gives both couples some time without children.

It also may be possible to arrange visitation schedules with the non-custodial parent to provide an opportunity for the couple to have some privacy.

Personal fatigue and overload interferes with the couple relationship

You may lack the energy to focus on your partner after dealing constantly with family issues. Neglecting yourself affects the family.

Think about the things you like to do by yourself that could be squeezed into a day packed with many obligations. It could be as simple as setting your alarm clock 15 minutes earlier to do something you really like to do. This extra time, although not much, could allow you to drink a cup of coffee and read the paper or check your email without interruption.

You may need to work with your partner to trade off child care times so each of you can do something on your own every week.

Stepping Stone: Understanding the Challenges of Creating a Strong Partner Relationship

Individuals in a relationship go through stages. You often are excited to have a new partner and find it easy to communicate in the beginning.

You will soon find each of you has many adjustments to make in combining households. This can happen even if one of you brings no children into the new family.

A stepfamily can go through many stages of development, which may take four or more years until the couple finds the peace and harmony that they were seeking. Even then, things that happen may make you slide backward. It takes constant work to move forward in these stages.

The adults may have wonderful ideas of creating a new, happy family, but the children may think otherwise. You may welcome the help and support of a new mate, and you are certain your children will be just as eager.

Even when their absent parent has shown little love or interest, children often have fantasies of their parents reuniting. They are likely to resent a new stepparent being around. They want the new stepparent to just go away, no matter how nice the new stepparent is.

Reality sets in. There are loyalty struggles. A parent may feel a tug between the child and the new mate. A child will likely feel a strong loyalty towards the absent parent.

Everyone may be grieving. The parent may be grieving the loss of the former relationship and not even realize it. The new stepparent may be grieving the loss of an ideal family. The children are likely to be grieving the breakup of their original family. Recognizing grief is important!

Everyday living can be a struggle. Conflicts can arise around:

- Eating
- Disciplining

- Watching TV
- Grooming
- Teaching manners
- Doing housework
- Spending habits
- Setting curfews for teenagers
- Everything

When you are in the middle, it is hard to realize there may not be a right or wrong way, but just different ways of doing things.

There are likely to be boundary issues.

- Older children may not want young step-siblings around or to share bedrooms.
- Other children may have two households and two sets of rules.
- Some children may be there only on weekends and feel they have no space to call their own.

The absent parent may be adding problems. It can be money or custody issues. You may feel sabotaged by your ex-partner in everything you do.

This stage is very hard. Some families get stuck in chaos and conflict. They may need the help of a mediator, a counselor, clergy person, or social worker to have less constant conflict. You may want to join a support group for couples in stepfamilies.

Gradually you begin to realize your stepfamily is normal. You begin to realize your problems are common for stepfamilies. You begin to realize you feel like an outsider because the rest of the family has a prior history.

It has nothing to do with you as a person. You begin to realize you are trying to be the super stepparent or super parent to overcome grief and guilt, but it is not working. You begin to realize your stepchild is not rejecting you as a person, but as a new stepparent who is not wanted. You begin to realize you cannot

change your ex-partner; you can only change your own behavior.

It helps if you and your partner begin to talk about the issues. The two of you decide what small steps you can take in addressing some of the problems. Think of all the relationships you have with your stepfamily, including former partners and members of other households. Talk about which relationships are difficult and which ones are helping you as a couple. Discuss where you would like the stepfamily to be. Remember your strengths and begin to develop an action plan where small steps can be taken to make life more satisfying.

For instance, your son who comes every other weekend will be given one drawer to call his own.

You support your mate in disciplining her children and realize it would be wise to step back and not directly discipline them until they begin to accept you.

You try not to become emotional with your ex-mate. It is helpful to maintain a business approach whenever communication is necessary.

Commitment

A strong relationship takes commitment. You realize you and your partner cannot give up when the demands of an “instant” family become overwhelming. Neither can you take each other for granted. Building a strong couple bond takes time and work.

Stepfamily life is complex and often provides very little time for building a strong couple relationship. The instant task of parenting can set a tone of denial of the couple’s needs.

Time together is not a frill. It is a necessity. Looking seriously at the calendar and scheduling time together may mean some changes. It will be a benefit both to the couple and to the children.

Stepping Stone: Recognizing the Importance of Communication

Learning communication skills for dealing with conflict is important for maintaining a strong couple relationship.

You may think the perfect couple never has conflict. First of all, that is impossible. Secondly, healthy conflict and disagreement are crucial to a long-term marriage or relationship.

That may sound crazy, but Dr. John Gottman, a marriage counselor and researcher from the University of Washington, found arguments and disputes don’t have to drive a couple apart.

It is how you argue that makes the difference. You do not need extraordinary skills to settle conflicts that make both partners feel OK.

Good communication is not a difficult process. Think about it. Every day you talk with other people and are quite successful — it may be with a neighbor or a person at work or another family member.

However, you may be getting nowhere with your mate. Your relationship seems so negative. You never seem to resolve important issues crucial to your stepfamily.

You know how to communicate, but your strategy for using communication skills with your partner may need attention. Here are four basic approaches:

Strategy 1: Calm yourself down

Whenever a hard issue comes up, do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel your body get tense?

You just can’t think straight when you are so upset. For some people, they immediately become defensive.

For others, they stonewall and refuse to talk. These reactions are bad news for your relationship.

Learn to recognize when you first become flooded with strong emotions. Make a conscious attempt to calm yourself down. It will not be easy. Find ways that work for you.

- Take deep breaths.
- Try muscle relaxation by purposely tensing your muscles and then relaxing them.
- Take time-outs. Stop thinking about the problem or you will not settle down.

It may seem artificial to say to your partner you need an intermission when she begins to talk about your child's poor table manners.

Let your partner know that you are not avoiding the topic. You just need a time-out to be able to settle down to hear your partner's point of view.

It can take as long as 20 minutes for your body's pulse rate to become normal after conflict.

Do not negatively think to yourself during time outs, like "He never appreciates me." Instead replace bitter thoughts with reassuring ones like "This is a bad moment, but things aren't always like this." Work at thinking about the good qualities of your partner, too, including the good times that you have had together.

Strategy 2: Listen and speak non-defensively

Being defensive makes it hard to build a healthy relationship. Speaking defensively is trying to defend yourself. To speak **non-defensively** is to do the opposite.

This strategy is not easy, especially when you feel emotionally attacked. For instance, your spouse may blame you for favoring your children over your stepchildren. Your instant reaction is to challenge that charge.

You have to start with non-defensive listening. You must be willing to listen to your partner's point of view and try to understand it. That doesn't mean you have to agree. It just means you have to try hard to understand and identify with your mate's feelings.

It may be as simple as saying "yeah," "I see," or nodding your head. Notice the mouth and eyebrows of the speaker. What message is being sent through facial expressions?

Think about your own body language. What message are you sending? Are you fidgeting? Are you rolling your eyes? Smiling sarcastically? Are you sending a message that you are truly listening to the reasons being given by your mate?

You may not like what your partner just said, but you need to listen.



When you are ready to speak, it would be easy to strike back with a personal verbal attack. Instead, simply respond without criticizing or showing contempt.

Just be specific and state how you feel. "I get really upset when I hear you accuse me of playing favorites. I realize we are having different ideas of how to be fair to everyone."

"You stupid jerk!" shows strong contempt and will produce no resolution of the problem. "I should have known you would say something like that" blames and criticizes your partner. It goes nowhere. Avoid:

- Whining.
- Making excuses.
- Using such phrases as "yes, but..."
- Starting with "you always...."
- Bringing past baggage and problems into the conversation. Keep the discussion focused on the situation at hand.

If the two of you are constantly thinking negatively of the other, it will be tough to respond non-defensively at first. If you rarely have positive thoughts about your partner, you are hindering your ability to listen and speak non-defensively.

You need to tell yourself what is right in your relationship. Recall the good times. You need to think of the things that your partner does well.

These types of positive inner thoughts set the stage for not being so defensive in a conflict. Stop yourself when you begin to think bad thoughts.

Begin to share these positive thoughts. Everyone appreciates a sincere compliment or a thank you from time to time. It may shock your mate at first. You may even encounter some cynicism if the two of you are negative to each other most of the time.

Don't give up. You might be surprised to see your partner beginning to do the same thing! Being positive is hard work. It is so much easier to find what is wrong.

Strategy 3: Work at supporting your partner

Put yourself in your partner's shoes and recognize the importance of her or his emotions. It is a real art. It takes time.

This strategy is especially important for persons who tend not to acknowledge the emotional part of a partner's message. You may offer a very rational answer. Your partner most probably wants to hear you understand how they feel.

Each of you can validate your partner in several ways. You can compliment your spouse or mate by honestly praising him or her. "You really did a good job cleaning up that mess."

You can offer a sincere apology. This shows your partner you respect his or her gripe. "I see what you mean. I was wrong."

You can take responsibility. If your husband gets upset because you fail to tell him when you will be late, you can say, "I really made you angry, didn't I?"

This response shows you recognize your partner's reactions to your behavior.

You may want to start in small ways. If there is constant tension between the two of you, it may be a big change to think about ways to support each other.

Strategy 4: Over-learn these strategies — try and try again

It takes practice to learn any new skill. To drive, to play basketball, to cook . . . these skills take practice to get

Communication Strategy Review

- Calm down if a conflict arises.
- Listen and speak non-defensively.
- Work at supporting your partner.
- Over-learn these strategies — try and try again.

— Dr. John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*.

better. Learning different communication skills takes practice also.

- Start small.
- Talk non-defensively when you are watching TV, riding in the car, or renting a movie.
- Give your partner sincere compliments for small things that he or she does. Acknowledge your partner when he/she says something to you in a way that shows respect.
- Practice these skills even when you don't feel like it. You may be tired, hungry, sad, happy, or distracted, but you have to keep trying.
- If your mate does not respond positively, you still have to keep it up. Be on the alert for cues that your partner is willing to "give and take" on a sensitive issue. It could be body language as well as what is said.
- Add your own sense of humor and personality to the non-defensive language.

The more you practice when you are not in conflict, the more over-learning will pay off when you get emotionally tense with your partner.

These four strategies can help a relationship. It will not happen overnight. But if you work hard, stay motivated, and don't let setbacks discourage you, these skills can benefit you and your partner as well as the children.

It will take much trust, courage, and strength to use these strategies when you are feeling angry and hurt. You may know them and think they sound good. Making them part of your communication when emotions are really high is the key.

Stepping Stone: Recognizing When There Are Deeper Problems

Resisting opportunities to spend time together or time alone is never good. It may indicate there are deeper problems in the relationship.

It may be time to seek help from a therapist, clergy person or social worker who is experienced in working with stepfamilies. Ask people you trust for suggestions on who to contact. Check out the person's training and experience. Look for a professional whose personality and values are compatible with your own.

Week 2 Activities

1 — *Recognizing Your Partner's Good Qualities*

- Both of you write down 10 behaviors you like for your partner to do. Do this by yourself and don't peek at your partner's list. Here are some examples:
 - Holding my hand.
 - Calling me a pleasing name.
 - Being patient when I make a mistake.
 - Trying to brighten me up.
 - Thanking me for doing something.
- Share your list with the each other and think about these questions:
 - Were there any behaviors on your partner's list that surprised you?
 - Were there any behaviors on your list that surprised your partner?

2 — *Reviewing the Four Strategies*

- Write down the four communication strategies you just read about.
- Choose the one that seems most important to you.
- Put it in a place where you can see it frequently.

- As you get up in the morning, think about the strategy and how you might use it.
- Before you go to bed, think about what happened that day and what you learned about the strategy.
- Write your feelings and responses on the card and date it for further comparisons.
- Change cards when you are ready.

3 — *Planning Time Together*

- Plan time alone with your partner this week. It may be as simple as taking a 30-minute walk around your neighborhood.
- Make satisfactory child-care arrangements so you will not be distracted from your time together.
- Make ground rules to allow yourselves an enjoyable time. You may agree to not talk about such things as your stepson's behavior or the lack of financial child support from your former partner.
- Try to spend time together on a regular basis.

Suggestions for Additional Reading

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail And How You Can Make Yours Last, by John Gottman. Simon & Schuster Publishers.

The Remarriage Checkup: Tools to Help Your Marriage Last A Lifetime, by Ron L. Deal and David H. Olsen. Bethany House Publishers.

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