

Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies

For Parents



Parenting can be a challenge in any family, but living in a stepfamily can add more issues to the parenting role. Children look at the world differently than adults. Partners forming stepfamilies expect joy, peace and happiness that may have been lost in earlier relationships. Children may view the stepfamily much differently.

Much of what children understand depends on their age. At each age, there are certain feelings and reactions that children will experience. For some children it is a happy event to have a new family with more people around. For others, the many changes and uncertainties are difficult and challenging. Generally, children ages 9 to 15 may have the hardest time adapting to a new family situation.

Research indicates that it can take four years or more for a stepfamily to seem like a family. It can even take 18 to 24 months for children to be friendly to a new stepparent. There are many differences, many personalities and many difficult situations. That is very normal.

Learning to handle new relationships in a positive way enables the stepfamily

to move toward the happiness which the partners are seeking. Stepfamilies must work at being understanding and flexible, and develop a style of their own.

What can the adults in a stepfamily do to work toward the happiness that they are seeking?

Stepping Stones for the Adult in a Stepfamily

- Take your time, and expect love and care to come slowly through shared experiences with stepchildren.
- Discipline may work better if the biological parent takes the lead with the stepparent's support until the stepparent-stepchild relationship is stronger.
- Give your family and yourself permission to try things differently. Since there are no rules or perfect ways to be a stepfamily, find out what "fits" for your family.
- Expect negotiation and conflict to be part of everyday life in a stepfamily.
- Give children accurate information about what is happening in the new family that is appropriate for their age and stage of development.
- Discuss rules and roles, and make them clear so that the children understand what is expected.
- Try to understand children's feelings, especially when they are not what you expected.
- Expect family members to grieve over the loss of their old family, or the loss of living like a first-time married family. Talk about these feelings.
- Share negative statements and feelings about the absent parent with someone other than the child.
- Assure the children that love is not limited. They can like or love all the members of the family, including a stepparent, and still love and care about the absent parent.

- Spend time alone with each child and in various combinations of family members. But, do not force togetherness, especially with teenagers.
- Learn as much as possible about child development and effective parenting and stepparenting practices.
- Work cooperatively with the absent parent—far in advance—to make the needed arrangements for holidays and other special occasions.
- Build your own stepfamily traditions. Include family members in discussions about changing old traditions.

Stepping Stones for the Couple in a Stepfamily

- Pay close attention to your couple relationship. Schedule time together on a daily and weekly basis.
- Keep fun and romance in your relationship.
- Present a united front to the children when dealing with expectations and discipline.
- Take turns actively listening to each other's concerns without becoming defensive.
- Consider granting a limited power of attorney to the stepparent for use in emergencies.
- Communicate about family finances with your partner on a regular basis.
- Review all insurance policies for coverage and beneficiary status.
- Review and revise your wills or make one if you do not have one.
- Join a support group for stepfamilies if you would like support from others having stepfamily experiences.
- Seek professional financial and counseling services, if necessary, to help you over major hurdles.
- Keep your sense of humor. A little laughter can brighten the day.

Want to Know More?

A home study course for stepfamilies with children in the home, a video, and other stepfamily resources are available through your local county extension office listed below.

Other Resources

The **Stepfamily Association of America (SAA)** has a comprehensive catalog of resources on divorce, remarriage and custody issues.

Call **1-800-735-0329** to request a catalog.

Building Strong Stepfamilies from Cornell University Cooperative Extension, Broome County, NY, was used as a resource for this publication.

Thanks to M. Gayle Price for her review of this fact sheet.

Thanks to Paula Seele and Karen Hunter for layout assistance and graphic design.

Prepared by Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D. Extension Specialist, Family Systems, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University.

Supported by a grant from the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Hutchinson, KS.

**Kansas State University
Agricultural Experiment Station and
Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan**

MF-2238j August 1997

It is the policy of Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service that all persons shall have equal opportunity and access to its educational programs, services, activities, and materials without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, or other nonmerit reasons. Kansas State University is an Affirmative Action employer. These materials may be available in alternative formats.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, Richard D. Wootton, Associate Director.

File Code: Human Devel. & Family Relations—5

CS 8/97-10M