

Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies

Working with Others

Lesson 6

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There are many people outside your stepfamily who can provide support, comfort, and joy. The number and variety of individuals may be different from your first family, but they are just as important.

Grandparents, friends, current and former in-laws, former spouses, teachers, clergy, and leaders of children's activities may all be part of stepfamily life. All these people can be helpful for one or more members of the stepfamily. Of course, they may also be sources of tension and stress.

The Former Spouse/ The Absent Parent

The former spouse, as a parent to one or more of the children, continues to play an important role for the children. When two people divorce or separate, their relationship as spouses ends.

Because the parent-child relationship continues, the biological parents need to develop ways to handle new parenting responsibilities regardless of a new stepparent.

Ideally, the parents can work as a parenting team. This type of relationship is generally best, but there are exceptions.

In some situations children need protection from a parent. Examples include when a parent has abused, neglected, or deserted a child. Continuing a relationship with this parent isn't in the child's best interest.



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But in most families, it works best if the biological parents cooperate. Children adjust more quickly and have fewer long-term problems when they maintain close and supportive relationships with both parents.

It helps for parents to make visitation and financial arrangements with each other, rather than with the child. Parents need to avoid making negative comments about the other parent when the child is present. Feelings need to be vented in private with a friend, another relative, a therapist, or a support group.

Stepping Stone: Open Communication Lines

It's important to continue communicating with your former partner no matter how angry you are. Open communication will help ensure that good decisions are made for your children.

Both parents want their views heard. Use the following techniques to help keep your conversations with your former partner constructive and productive.

Preparation

- Remind yourself the conversation is in your children's best interest. This is not an opportunity to seek revenge.
- Understand the issue and what you feel the best solution is.
- Consider other options, especially those your former spouse or partner might like.
- Think about what is negotiable and what isn't.
- Use neutral, factual language.
- Make statements explaining your feelings: "I feel . . ." Avoid statements that accuse: "You always . . ."
- Explain your views clearly.
- Ask your former spouse or partner to explain, without interruption, what he or she is thinking.
- Be willing to compromise when possible.

Sample Dialogue

- Find a neutral location if you are meeting to discuss an issue. *"Sally, I'd like to meet at Friendly's Cafe Thursday evening to talk about Thomas. Is that okay with you?"*

- Pick a time to have a phone conversation convenient for both of you and when your children cannot overhear. *"John, I need to talk with you about Marie. I know she's at school now, and I wonder if this is a good time to talk?"*
- Use common courtesy. *"Thanks for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice."*
- Set a goal to introduce the topic. *"I'd like to talk with you about Lynn's summer plans."*
- Start with neutral facts. *"Lynn's school vacation is June 29 until August 25."*
- Share the child's views with the other parent if appropriate. *"Lynn says she'd like to go to 4-H camp this summer."*
- State your opinion or feelings about the issue. *"I think it's a good idea."*
- Ask whether the other parent needs more information or time to consider the issue. *"I'd like to know what you think. Would you like to look at the camp brochure and take some time to think about it?"*
- Identify areas of agreement and areas of potential conflict. *"I'm glad you agree camp would be good for Lynn, but we need to discuss who will pay for it."*
- Prepare to negotiate. *"Lynn can contribute some of her lawn-mowing money, and I can afford half of the remaining fee. Can you pay the other half?"*
- Stick to the topic and try to avoid other unresolved issues. *"I recognize you're still angry about our credit card bills last year, but that has nothing to do with Lynn's summer plans. Let's please try to stick to this subject."*
- Take a break if you feel an argument beginning. Schedule another meeting if necessary to conclude the discussion. *"We seem to be getting angry about the money issue. Let's take a break now, think things over, and discuss the matter again on Friday. Is that okay with you?"*

Time and experience often ease the tension as parents learn to co-parent without living together.

Eight Best Gifts for Grandchildren

1. Spend time one-on-one with grandchildren and step-grandchildren.
2. Listen for their concerns as well as their joys.
3. Send special letters and notes just for them.
4. Offer companionship for activities they enjoy.
5. Share your history and family traditions.
6. Be a role model to show older people can be fun.
7. Accept grandchildren and step-grandchildren just as they are.
8. Give the best gift of all — love.

Source: North Dakota State University Extension Service

When tough issues continue to exist, parents who get along help children adjust better to the changes in their family life. Parents may have to involve a helping professional or mediator to resolve serious disagreements.

Grandparents and Other Family Members

Stepfamilies can find support from the extended family. Grandparents and the extended family can provide a link between the children's past and their future. They can provide unconditional love and support for children during the divorce and remarriage.

Grandparents and other family members may think divorce and remarriage are traumatic events. Their anger, sense of helplessness, and loss may make it difficult for them to accept the new stepfamily. They may need help feeling comfortable with your new stepfamily situation.

Extended family members may feel uncertain of how to relate to your stepchildren. It is not unusual for biological children to be treated differently from stepchildren.

Stepchildren represent changes in a family. The stepfamily couple will need to have discussions, privately and with the children.

The children will need support and straight answers in handling new and often puzzling situations. This might happen when grandchildren and step-grandchildren



Photo by rohitseth/123rf.com

living together receive different types of birthday gifts from grandparents and other relatives.

Stepping Stone: Maintaining Connection With Grandparents

- Recognize the importance of grandparents and the emotional well-being this connection can provide for children.
- Keep communication lines open. Help arrange times when children can be with their grandparents, reassuring the grandparents of continued contact.
- Stay calm. If relationships become heated, avoid threatening to cut off visits.
- Keep children's best interests in mind.
- Create opportunities for step-grandparents to get to know their step-grandchildren. Start with short visits.
- Keep your expectations realistic and give everyone time to deal with feelings.

- Include grandparents and step-grandparents in your stepfamily's special activities.

—*Einstein and Albert, 1990.*

Stepping Stone: Building Bridges Outside the Family

Friends and Other Stepfamilies

Friends and other stepfamilies can be valuable resources in the life of your stepfamily.

Old Family Friends

Old family friends that knew you and your ex-partner may feel torn between the two of you. They may feel uncomfortable relating to you. If you are interested in continuing the friendship, let them know.

New Friends

This may be the time to reach out to new friends. Getting involved in new hobbies or new community groups may give you the opportunity to meet other people with common interests.

You may find you and your partner enjoy making new friends together. Each of you also may find it helpful to pursue a new interest and friendships independent of the other.

Other Stepfamilies

Getting to know other stepfamilies can often be reassuring. Talking with each other may give you the assurance that the challenges you are facing are normal. You may exchange ideas on new approaches for day-to-day situations.

Few models for stepfamily living exist. Stepfamilies may need other stepfamilies to find new traditions or techniques that “fit” the new family.

School Teachers and Administrators

Schools may need your input to be supportive of your stepfamily. There are some steps to help schools be more sensitive to your stepfamily's needs.

Communicate

Talking with the teachers, school principal, or guidance counselor about the stepfamily may help the school be aware of your family situation. They may not be aware the child is dealing with a stressful situation.

Information about visitation may help them understand misplaced items or notices that did not reach both homes. Working with the school can result in support rather than additional stress.

Provide Information

Since official forms may not allow enough space for information about the stepparent, give the school the stepparent's name, relationship, and phone numbers.

If a limited power of attorney allows the stepparent to sign permission slips and authorize emergency medical treatment, the school should be informed.

Provide this information to each child's teacher and request it be placed in the permanent folder. More information on setting up a limited power of attorney is presented in Lesson 5.

Make Requests

Ask that information about school events be sent to the absent parent. There may be no recognition the child has two households.

In most cases, it would be supportive of the child's welfare if the absent parent had information about the child's school life. Either the full-time or part-time parent may request this information.

Leaders of Children's Activities

Many of these individuals may not have any experience with stepfamilies and may be unaware of the complexities. Work with them in the same way you work with the school.

This is important because activities may conflict with visitation schedules, causing children to be late or absent. The needed permission forms and potential emergency situations are also considerations.

A Medical History

A medical history should include the following:

- Immunization record.
- Allergies (especially to medication).
- The name, address and phone number of the family doctor, and any other doctors that treat the child.
- The preferred hospital.
- Childhood illnesses.
- Current medications being taken.
- History of surgery and accidents.

The Medical Community

Children can become ill or have accidents without much warning. The medical staff may need to ask questions to properly treat the child. This can be especially difficult for the stepparent who may not have information about the child's health or previous medical history.

Unless the stepparent has power of attorney, permission for medical treatment may have to wait for a parent. Authorizing a limited power of attorney will allow the stepparent to make responsible decisions in the event of an accident or illness.

It is important to have an up-to-date medical history of each child. Both the parent and stepparent should be familiar with this information for each child. The information can be obtained from the family doctor if the biological parent will not provide it.

For children in school, much of that information is in their records. Updating the record annually, on or about the child's birthday, will keep it accurate.

Keep the information where the parent and stepparent can easily refer to it.

Other Resources

Thinking about the people who are significant in your lives helps you become aware of your resources. It also helps you identify other supports you may want and need to develop. Hopefully, there are many sources of support for each member of the stepfamily.

It can take time to learn how to interact with others to benefit the stepfamily. But, the joys of stepfamily life are greater and the challenges easier when a stepfamily effectively uses these resources.

Week 6 Activities

1 — Thinking About Your Social World

Who are the people that support you and your stepfamily? Use this exercise to help identify those people and the resources they have. Each partner may want to do this alone and then share when it is completed. On a large sheet of paper draw three circles, one inside the other.

- In the center circle,
 - Write your name.
 - Write the names or initials of all the family members, whether they are full- or part-time residents.
 - This circle is your stepfamily.
- In the next circle,
 - Put the names of the people who are close to you and make a difference in your life.
 - Friends, other family members, and your former partner may be included. Do not include anyone from the first circle.

This circle is your personal network.

- The third circle is your formal network.
 - Write in the names of people in organizations such as schools, places of worship, work, social service agencies, or possibly the court system.
- Take time to look over your social world "map." Think about these questions:
 - Who are the people I can talk to and share my problems and my successes?

- Who helps me have fun and to play? When did I last see this person or these people?
- Who challenges me to think about things in a different way?
- Who are the ones that create stress? Is it stressful for the whole family or just some of us? Are there any strategies that might work to reduce that stress?
- Do I need to find someone who is good at solving problems or at having fun together?
- List all the names from your circles of the people who provide your stepfamily with special support. Next to each name write the support they offer.
 - For example:
Aunt Dot: Fun and laughter.
John: A good listener, child sitter, golfing buddy.
- If possible, share your social world with your partner.
 - Do you see any differences?
 - Do you use the same or different support people?
 - How do you want to change your social world?

2 — *Doing Something*

Identify one person from your social world map you would like to see or talk to more often. Arrange a time to meet or visit over the phone. Take this opportunity to:

- Share information.
- Listen to each other.
- Laugh together.
- See some humor in your everyday stepfamily life.

Celebrate Your Family

You have studied about stepfamilies for the past several weeks. Now is the time to celebrate your own family.

A celebration requires some preparation and effort, and celebrating your family is no exception. There are two requirements: a desire to do something that will be good for your stepfamily, and the commitment to set aside some time for this celebration.

Celebrations can be simple. They do not need to cost money. Think about the family's strengths and abilities. What things does the family like to do? What celebration will be enjoyed by all the family members? Will it be a picnic? Will it be watching movies and eating popcorn? Will it be playing a game? Will it be cooking a special meal together? Will it be a hike?

Plan a celebration and put it on the calendar. Instead of putting off until later, make plans and do the things you have planned.

Have fun celebrating your family!

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Notes to Myself

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