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Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies

Lesson 3

Building Step Relationships

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"Time passes, children grow out of their insecurities, ex-spouses marry, move away, or otherwise loosen their hold. Couples grow closer through their crises and stepparents become an accepted part of family history. In step-parenting the greatest ally is time. Use it well!"

—By a stepparent

Relationships between children, parents, and stepparents can be stressful. Parenting can be a challenge in any family, but living in a stepfamily makes the parenting role even more difficult.

Stepparents are instant parents, often put into that role without previous parenting knowledge or experience.

The children are a reality that cannot be ignored. Relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are usually challenging, regardless if the stepparent has other children.

A stepparent has to find a way to relate to stepchildren that likely will be different from the child's relationship with the biological parent. This can be hard.

Stepparents and stepchildren often have feelings of spite for one another. Stepparents may be less tolerant of the children's personalities and behaviors than are parents.

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The stepparent can feel like an outsider. The stepparent's feelings may come from knowing the parent and children usually have closer ties and a longer history. Children know what is expected from them and they know what to expect from the parent.

Stepchildren may feel the stepparent is an unwanted intruder into their family life. They also can feel like outsiders when the parent gives attention to the new stepparent.

By spending time together as a stepfamily, these feelings will ease as relationships develop. It is also important to spend time with each child alone, especially in noncompetitive activities. Go for a walk or a bike ride together. Do something natural, but do not force togetherness with your new stepchildren, especially with teenagers.

Getting to know your stepchildren will calm their fears about the changes likely to occur. It also may come as a relief to you to know many changes and challenges are normal when two families with different experiences and expectations come together.

As Lesson 1 indicated, "instant love" is unrealistic. The expectation that "instant love" will occur between stepparent, stepchildren, and step-siblings is not fair.

Some researchers say it takes four years or more to develop a sense of caring and unity in stepfamilies. Children in early adolescence are likely to have the hardest time adjusting.

Establishing small realistic goals for the stepparent-stepchild relationship is important. Showing affection and disciplining your stepchildren will likely come gradually. In a new stepfamily, stepparents who take a reserved approach with these two issues for the first couple of years will likely experience fewer conflicts and frustrations.

Additionally, as a couple, you may limit the amount of affection that is shown toward one another when the children are present. Displays of affection between a stepparent and a parent are often difficult for children to accept.

Stepchildren may see this affection as competition for their parent's love. Stepchildren may feel the stepparent is trying to replace the absent parent. Teenagers may be embarrassed about this public display of sentiment since they are dealing with their own developing sexuality.

Legal relationships do not occur naturally in stepfamilies. The lack of a legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren makes the stepparent role confusing and frustrating. There is a loss of status.

Without written authority, stepparents can't legally approve emergency medical care. Likewise, they legally cannot request school records or sign important papers.

Stepparents are often given responsibility for the children, but without legal authority. Because of this, stepparents may have feelings of resentment and may be less involved.

Talking with your partner about your feelings and frustrations concerning legal issues that pertain to stepchildren is encouraged. This will also help you clarify your stepparent role.

Stepping Stone: Recognizing that a Stepparent Benefits from the Partner's Support

Parents can help stepparents by assisting them in getting to know each child as an individual. Sharing past stories, pictures, and home videos of the children's past might be helpful. When sharing the children's history, be aware even the presence of the other parent in pictures may cause the stepparent to feel a bit uncomfortable.

Stepparents need someone to listen to and support them as they adjust to their new roles. Listening to your partner who is having difficulty with your child can be extremely uncomfortable.

It is important you acknowledge the feelings of the stepparent, even if you do not agree. Ignoring or downplaying the situation will likely increase tension. It does not allow the family to move toward unity.

Couples need to set aside time each week to problem solve and make plans for their family. But keep in mind that some problems in relationships cannot be solved.

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Some problems just do not go away. For instance, an absent parent may continue to be very hostile to the new stepparent. You have to learn how to deal with these types of problems in a satisfactory manner. It will take much time and patience.

Knowing your partner cares about how you feel about family issues is important to a stepparent. A parent can lead discussions, helping define roles and expectations between the stepparent and the stepchildren.

Another way to support a stepparent is for the partner to provide written authority that authorizes the stepparent to approve emergency medical care for the stepchild. This is especially important when minor children are involved. The stepparent may feel more valued and appreciated in the relationship if this role is clearly defined. It will likely lead to more involvement with the stepchildren.

Parents and stepparents should learn as much as possible about child development and effective parenting, especially for stepfamilies. Read books, participate in parenting classes, or join support groups — all of these can be done together and would invite communication.

Stepping Stone: Adjusting to the Stepparent Role

Stepmothers usually receive more pressure and less social support than other stepfamily roles. Research on stepfamilies indicates stepmothers have the most difficult role in the stepfamily.

Fairy tale stereotypes of the "wicked stepmother" only make a difficult role seem impossible. This myth combined with social expectations that women are more nurturing and effective with children sets up many stepmothers for failure.

Stepmothers may jump in too fast, especially those with no children of their own. She may overwhelm or scare her stepchildren with the attention she gives them. She may refrain from enforcing family rules and disciplining in fear of appearing too harsh.

Stepmothers may have the most difficulty building a relationship with a stepdaughter. There is generally less affection, less respect, and less acceptance in this relationship than in other stepfamily relationships. The daughter may resent the stepmother's closeness with her father.

This is especially true if the father and daughter had a strong relationship prior to the stepfamily. The stepmother's attempts to fulfill her role in the stepfamily may be perceived by the stepdaughter as efforts to replace her mother.

Society expects mothers to know all the answers about their children. Stepmothers are often asked to provide information about stepchildren they don't know. This often causes the stepmother to feel inadequate and frustrated.

Stepmothers tend to hold on to the "wicked stepmother" myth longer than other family members. Accepting the fact stepparents normally have different feelings towards stepchildren than they do their own may help the stepmother resolve feelings of guilt.

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Also as a stepmother, you should not anticipate signs of appreciation from stepchildren for work you do for them. That is not a common habit. Children generally do not express open appreciation even to biological parents.

The stepfather role gets less attention and tends to have more social support than the stepmother role. Stepfathers are generally less involved in parenting than are stepmothers. Although stepfathers may have fewer demands placed on them, they still must establish their place in the new stepfamily.

Establishing an acceptable level of authority in the family is a challenge for stepfathers. Many men are unsure about the degree of authority they have as a stepfather. The ages of the children influence how much the stepfather will assume in the stepfamily. The older the stepchildren, the more difficult it becomes.

For the first couple of years, stepfathers are advised to take a reserved or secondary parenting role. Stepfathers who find fulfillment in being supportive of their partners in the parenting role will experience fewer conflicts and more enjoyment in their new family.

Stepfamilies that have established fair roles, rules, and responsibilities that are consistently enforced tend to be happier and have fewer confrontations. It is important that the stepfather is involved in helping establish these rules and responsibilities.

Knowing when and how to show affection for stepchildren is difficult for many stepfathers. Stepchildren's values and their sense of what's right and wrong have been determined by another set of parents. A stepfather may feel uncomfortable showing affection or relating emotionally to stepchildren.

The relationship of stepfathers to stepdaughters is especially sensitive. What would be viewed by a biological family as normal affection and emotional support can easily be misinterpreted as sexual advances and inappropriate contact in stepfamilies.

Stepparents need to honor the privacy needs of stepchildren. Closed doors should be respected, especially with the adolescent child. You may need to give more attention to your clothing around the house. Using a robe may become a new habit when in the presence of your stepchildren.

Stepparents will become comfortable with the appropriate level of displaying affection by:

- Establishing open communication with stepchildren.
- Respecting each other's space.

The financial support in stepfamilies can be difficult. Stepparents usually are not legally required to support stepchildren.

This can lead to conflict over the available money. This conflict is made even more difficult if there are extreme differences in how you and your partner budget and spend money.

Children do not help the situation. Stepchildren and natural children tend to "keep count" of how much is spent. When a stepfather is viewed as favoring his children over his stepchildren or vice versa, there is a greater potential for conflict, disagreement, and behavior problems.

The absent parent also might contribute to the problem. Child support payments might be irregular or nonexistent, or the opposite could happen. The absent parent might shower his child with gifts and excessive money.

Communication is the key to dealing with tough financial issues. You and your partner will need to reach a consensus on how money decisions are made and who pays for what and how much.

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You will need to make contingency plans if child support is not available from the absent parent. Financial management is a difficult process. It will take time to compromise differing values on spending and saving. Lesson 5 gives more details on financial and legal matters.

Guilt is common for many stepparents, and can come from many sources. You could experience guilt feelings for spending more time with stepchildren than with your own children. Guilt feelings may occur over financial support issues. If you are unable to meet the emotional needs of your partner and establish a respectful relationship with your former spouse, you may experience guilt.

Stepparents come into a stepfamily with idealistic hopes and dreams. These hopes and dreams are often too high and are unreasonable. But a stepparent can take significant steps to help the family adjust to its challenges.

Stepping Stone: Becoming a Confident Stepparent

The stepparent role takes time to establish. Be patient with the process. Here are strategies that can help you define and feel confident in your role as a stepparent.

Be a confident stepparent

Accept your stepparent role. You are not a substitute parent for your stepchildren no matter how absent the other parent may be. Slowly start developing your unique role and relationships with your stepchildren.

Allow time for the stepchildren to accept and get to know you.

All strong, caring relationships take time. Schedule time to do things with each child as well as the entire family. Be attentive to what your stepchild likes to do and build upon this knowledge when suggesting activities to do together.

Communicate with your partner

Discuss and agree upon reasonable expectations for your role. Be supportive of each other on issues of:

- discipline,
- family rules, and
- responsibilities.

Accept the child's other parent

You may never like the child's other parent, but you have to recognize that you cannot erase that biological bond.

There is no room for criticism in front of the children. This will only lead to more problems and will hurt the children.

Learn to respect and accept your stepchild

Be realistic in your hopes and desires. Developing a relationship with respect for each other will take a lot of effort and compromise. Loving your stepchild as your own is difficult, maybe even impossible, so don't expect it to happen quickly.

Slowly establish your role of authority

This is especially important if your stepchildren are in their teens.

Being a good role model is more beneficial than harsh discipline

Be prepared to support your partner in discipline matters. The two of you need to work together so you gradually assume more discipline for your stepchildren as time progresses.

Just go slowly.

Do not think you are the cause of everything that goes wrong

All parents have problems and disagreements with their children, especially teenagers. It is normal. Remember, you are not responsible for every emotional change and problem your stepchildren experience.

Work with your partner, stepchildren, and children on the division of household tasks

Establish family rules and split household chores in a way satisfactory to everyone, especially your partner.

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Encourage the parent and the children to spend time together without you

This will help your stepchildren gain confidence and respect for you.

Build unique stepfamily traditions and celebrations

This will help develop memories and family trust. For example, your family might decide each child will have a 'birth week' rather than just a birthday. This new tradition helps to accommodate celebrations and reduces tension with the absent parent and other relatives. It can be a delight to the child who has a longer period of time to celebrate.

Despite all the challenges that, at times, may be stumbling blocks, stepfamilies are still worth it.

After two or more years, the family will begin to stabilize. After a few more years, the family will begin to have a sense of belonging to a new and different family.

Children eventually adapt and reposition themselves within the new family. They benefit by learning to respect and value differences.

Because of the double exposure to lifestyles, values, role models, parenting styles, and skills, children can be better prepared for the realities of life.

Week 3 Activities

1 — Becoming aware of family wishes

For this activity, have a large piece of paper, scissors, glue or paste, and old magazines ready.

- Ask each family member to think about things they want for their stepfamily.
- Look through the magazines to find pictures that represent these things.
- Have each person cut out their pictures. A parent or older brother or sister may need to help young children. After each family member has found several pictures, ask each person to share what the pictures represent to them in terms of what they want for your stepfamily. The older members of the family may choose more symbolic things while young children may pick pictures of possessions. Everyone's pictures need to be valued and accepted.
- Arrange all of the pictures on the large piece of paper. Paste them to create a collage of "Family Wishes." Display it in a prominent place in your home.
- Talk about what each family member can do this week to begin working toward these wishes. Think of very small steps.

2 — Recognizing your stepparent challenge

- Write down on blank paper the issues, conflict, concerns, and challenges you are experiencing in your stepfamily. If possible, rank the top three or four items you listed.
- Look at the strategies listed in this lesson. Try and identify which strategies might help you with your issues.
- Add your own strategies to the list.
- Share and discuss your lists of issues and strategies with your partner and/or another stepparent or friend.
- Choose one strategy to focus upon during this week.

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Notes to Myself

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