

Challenges of Step Families

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By age 18, most of today's children will have to hesitate before answering the question, "What are your parent's names?" As they ponder this, they will realize that they also have new relatives in roles for which no titles exist.

Some researchers say that about one half of the children born in America since 1970 can expect to live in a step family at some point in their lives (Second Marriage, by Richard Stuart and Barbara Jackson).

In most life situations, we forget about the experts and rely on our own experience to teach us what we need to know. But in the realm of step parenting, experience lets us down. Fewer of today's parents lived in "recombined" families when they were young, and most of us see our natural parents as our only parental models.

Our culture has no traditions to provide remarried parents with a blueprint of expected problems and how to deal with them. In fact, the stereotypes of step family life are unrealistic and extreme,, as all too often stepparents are portrayed as either wicked and cruel (Cinderella) or perfectly adjusted.

Today's media tends to project a "wonderland" image of the step family, where instant love and good humor solve every problem. But this modern-day myth sets an impossible and unrealistic goal. Any step family that models itself after a television or movie step family will probably find itself deficient by comparison.

The myths that have emerged in regard to step parenting serve to confuse and frustrate family members in many instances. The widespread belief in these myths may prompt much of the stress and strain felt by stepparents. Some of these myths are:

- Y Stepparents and stepchildren should instantly love each other;
- Y There is only one right way to raise children
- Y Children who live in two homes are always worse off than children who live in one home on a full-time basis.

It is important to understand the difficulties which may surround a step family, but instead of being paralyzed by this fear or confusion, you can develop a plan of action to help yourself adapt. Remarried parents can create a family environment that is workable, if you address several important issues. Understanding some of the common challenges faced by stepparents - and planning ways to successfully meet these challenges - can be helpful.

Under ordinary circumstances, any marriage can be viewed as complex and

challenging. However, the problems of a second marriage are more complicated, since more people, relationships, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs are involved than in a first marriage. The two families may have differing roles, values, standards, and goals. Because its members have not shared past experiences, the new family may have to redefine the rights and responsibilities of each family member to fit individual and combined needs.

Time and understanding are the key components of negotiating the transition from single parents to step family status. The following tips may help:

- Y Let your relationship with stepchildren develop gradually. Don't expect too much too soon - either from the children or from yourself. Children need time to adjust, accept, and belong. So do parents.
- Y Expect to deal with confusing feelings - your own, your new spouse's, and the children's. Anxiety about new roles and relationships may heighten competition among family members for love and attention.
- Y Parental loyalties may be questioned, as conflicts arise. Your children may need to understand that their relationship with you is still important, but that it is different than the relationship you have with your spouse. One cannot replace the other - they must learn to share your attention and affections. You love and need them both, but in different ways.
- Y Understand that stepparents need support from the natural parent on child raising issues. Raising children is tough - raising someone else's children is even more difficult.
- Y Acknowledge periods of cooperation between step siblings. Try to treat stepchildren and your own children with equal fairness.
- Y Communicate! Don't pretend that everything is fine when it isn't. Acknowledge problems immediately and deal with them openly. Don't take sides - try to find out the whole story.

Admit that you need help if you're having problems. Don't let the situation get out of hand. Everyone needs help at some time. Join an organization for Step families or seek counseling.