

# Best to Avoid Assumptions in New Stepfamilies

by Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran

**I**t is estimated that 40 percent of today's marriages are remarriages for at least one of the spouses and approximately 60 percent of these marriages involve children. The newly formed stepfamily is usually faced with balancing feelings of loss, confusion, wariness, confusion, and excitement.

No one really knows how to create a stepfamily very well, but leadership, patience, communication, compassion, and forgiveness will help. In general, it is best to avoid assumptions, take nothing for granted, negotiate everything, and make time to consider and talk about these typical stepfamily concerns:

## **The Couple Relationship**

In first marriages, the couple has time alone before making space for children. In remarriages, the couple has little time alone, no time to strengthen their own relationship, are subject to constant intrusions, and may feel guilty about feeling resentful when their children interfere with their own need to be in a relationship. Stepparents may feel guilty about resenting a stepchild. Stepchildren may feel guilty about resenting their parent and their stepparent. These are all normal feelings and things that can be talked and laughed about.

The couple relationship must always be primary. In first marriages, couples do not need to feel guilty that their relationship is primary. The same should be true in second marriages. Consider that the children will benefit from a strong couple relationship in terms of stability and develop healthy working models of a happy marital relationship.

For more information about stepfamilies, read "Winning as a Stepfamily" by Emily and John Visher. Consider joining the Stepfamily Association of America. There is a local chapter in Portland which can be reached at 503-227-4166. The most important thing you can do to ensure the success of your stepfamily is to learn to negotiate respectfully. There is a big difference between reacting and responding, between arguing and discussing, between attacking and expressing, and between defending and listening. The following conflict resolution model is offered to help you in all your negotiations:

### **I. Identify the Issue in Need of Resolution**

- A. Identify a mutually acceptable time for discussion.
- B. State the problem objectively, clearly, and succinctly.
- C. Share good intentions in trying to reach an agreement.
- D. Note areas of agreement or the things you have in common.

### **II. Share Perspectives/Identify Needs and Interests**

- A. Create discussion ground rules:
  - 1. Agree on a length of time for discussion with no distractions.
  - 2. Take turns speaking and don't interrupt each other.
  - 3. Be respectful, don't call each other names or lose your temper.

4. Focus on attacking problems together instead of attacking each other because there is a problem; remember you are trying to win cooperation from the other to help you get what you want or need.
  5. Take a time-out when needed to cool down or process the information before responding.
- B. Separate the person from the problem:
1. Describe how the situation or behavior (not the person) is a problem for you (use “I-statements” or some other form of statement designed not to blame the other person or create a defensive response).
  2. Let the others know that you would like their help in finding a solution that works for all of you.
- C. Describe the “whys” behind why you want what you want (your needs and interests).
- D. Make sure you are heard and understood by the others before the others describe the problem from their perspective:
1. Ask and answer questions to create clarity and understanding.
  2. Paraphrase and summarize what the other person has said instead of responding and reacting to what he or she said.
- E. Allow each party equal time and attention in sharing perspectives. Don’t repeat yourself.
- F. Make sure all of you feel heard and understood before moving on to the next stage which is to brainstorm solutions (“A problem well stated is a problem half solved”).

### **III. Brainstorm Solutions**

- A. In brainstorming, each party suggests as many mutualizing solutions as possible. They are things you could reasonably expect the others might possibly agree to and designed to meet as many of all parties’ expressed needs and interests as possible.
- B. Be creative and spontaneous; this is not the time to stop and evaluate each solution.

### **IV. Evaluate and Prioritize**

- A. Examine each possible solution in terms of the needs and interests it addresses for all parties.
- B. Evaluate each solution in terms of its “do-ability.”
- C. Order the solutions in terms of the needs that are met by it and the ability to carry it out.

### **V. Choose Among Options**

- A. Choose the solution which seems to meet the most needs and interests of all parties.
- B. Maybe identify the second and third most likely solutions for a later trial.

*VI. Create an Implementation Plan and agree on who is going to do what by when.*

### *VII. Evaluate/Refine*

- A. Identify a later time to discuss and evaluate how the solution is working.
- B. Consider if there is anything any of you can do to improve upon the solution for all parties.
- C. Consider if trying one of the other solutions on a trial basis is desirable.

### **VIII. Acknowledgments**

- A. Evaluate how the conflict resolution process worked this time and what you might do to improve the process next time.
- B. Note success and share appreciation for effort.

Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran, M.S., N.C.C., was a mediator, family counselor, and nationally recognized trainer in the field of separation and divorce. Her family and friends welcome visitors to the garden they created in her memory at Lamb Cottage in Skinner Butte Park.

Original publication date: 11/24/1997 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon