

Negotiating Relationships Key to Happy Stepfamilies

by Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran

Approximately 40 percent of today's marriages are remarriages for at least one of the spouses and about 60 percent of these marriages involve children. The newly formed stepfamily is usually faced with balancing feelings of loss, confusion, wariness, 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:

Discipline

The trust and security that develops from the parent-child bond allows parents to discipline and guide their children. Looked at another way, biological parents usually have "permission" from their children to discipline them.

Stepchildren often do not feel trust and security with the stepparent. Consequently, stepparents do not have automatic permission (from the children) to parent the children. For a child to follow the direction of the stepparent, the stepparent must win cooperation from the child.

Stepparents often do not understand this and become frustrated in their attempts to discipline stepchildren. Usually discipline is best left to the biological parent, at least until the relationship between the child and stepparent is stable.

Nowadays, respect is not automatically given just because one is an elder. Respect is earned over time and is influenced by interactions with the child as well as the biological parents' opinions. Aim to create mutual respect between the child and stepparent.

Sometimes stepparents have the perception that the biological parent is being irrational in the handling of their children or that parents treat their own children differently from the stepchildren. This can obviously create much tension in the marital relationship. Negotiate how you will handle these normal feelings to create a sense of equity.

Another problem that arises is the stepparent getting into the middle of arguments between the parent and the child. Stepparents need to let the children and the biological parent work on their relationship together without interference. If you are the stepparent and your partner and stepchild are arguing, bury yourself in a book, go out for a walk, or jump into the shower so you can't hear them. Don't get involved unless they ask for your input.

Competition

Sometimes the stepparent tries to compete with the natural parent to win the child's affections or tries to become "super Mom/Dad" overnight. No one can be "Mom/Dad" overnight, much less "super Mom/Dad." Children (and the natural parent) may resent these efforts.

Sometimes the child competes with the stepparent for the biological parent's attention. This is very similar to sibling rivalry and is recognized when a child says things like "I'm going to tell my dad on you."

The competition problem most commonly arises when the child was very young when the parents separated and the child is unfamiliar with what a marital partnership looks like, or the natural parent has been single for awhile and the child is not used to sharing the parent, or a guilty/hurt divorced parent gives the child too much power.

Understand that sometimes an insecure child will test a parent's loyalty by doing things which are intended to find out, "How much do you love me?" and "Do you love me more than her or him?" or "If you really loved me, you'd buy me this bicycle, or take me on this trip, or spend the rest of your life one-on-one with me." In these situations, help the child see that the relationship between partners and the one between parents and children are very different and that a balance of both is possible.

Sometimes the stepparent competes with the stepchild for the biological parent's attention. This often happens when stepparents have no children of their own. Stepparents often do not understand the kind of attention a child needs. Explaining the needs of the child to the stepparent can be helpful as can ensuring that there is some quality couple time.

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