



Tips for Successful Stepfamilies: Moving Your Marriage from Surviving To Thriving—Part 1

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A strong marriage is the foundation to healthy child development—especially for children coming from a divorced family. A loving, healthy stepfamily can, over time, reduce many of the negative effects of divorce on children. However, children that continue to witness marital problems between their parent and stepparent may lose even more of their sense of stability, and their ability to trust. This can have long-term negative effects on children's development, and their own ability to form stable relationships in the future.

A new stepfamily is not just about how the new union between a husband and a wife affects children—it is also how children affect the new marriage. Children often resist and, consciously or unconsciously, try to sabotage their parent's remarriage. This is a normal response. Many children fight to hold onto the dream that their biological parents will somehow get back together.

Even though there may be strong resistance, there is hope for stepfamilies! That hope depends largely on how the husband and wife manage the stress that will likely come during the formation and ongoing adjustment of a new stepfamily. A strong and stable stepfamily is also capable of nurturing healthy development in children. The following sections of this article will briefly outline some tips for building a strong and a stable stepfamily by focusing on the marital relationship.

Special Challenges to Remarriages

In order for a stepfamily to be the best that it can be, **the marriage must be the top priority**. A strong marital relationship is the foundation for a healthy stepfamily. Marriages have not done well in our society. Here are some statistics about marriage in the United States:

- Approximately 40 percent of first marriages end in divorce.
- 75 percent to 80 percent of divorcees remarry.
- Around 46 percent of all marriages today are remarriages.
- 60 percent to 70 percent of remarriages end in a subsequent divorce.

There are several reasons why are remarriages at a greater risk for failure than first marriages? One reason is that remarriages are very different from first marriages, especially when there are children involved.

- In first marriages, the couple forms a strong bond before children come along. This pre-existing bond helps them stay together when faced with the challenges of raising kids.
- In remarriages, the parent-child bond comes before the marriage and competes with the couple relationship.
- The divorce rate is 50 percent higher in remarriages with stepchildren than in remarriages without children.

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When it should be the strongest relationship in the family, the couple relationship is often the weakest in stepfamilies. But don't get discouraged! There are some things that can be done that will help build up this relationship and keep the family together.

Two Must Do's for Stepfamilies

First, stepparents need to understand that biological parents often find themselves in an emotional bind. Parents are keenly aware of the psychological suffering that their children have gone through due to the divorce, and that they still may be struggling to overcome. As a result, they often feel guilty for the pain they have brought into their children's lives. Most parents will try to alleviate their sense of guilt by attempting to protect their children from future pain. They do this in many different ways such as:

- Making decisions about the children without consulting with the stepparent (after all they are my children they reason);
- Making sure that their children don't go without (emotionally, materially, and physically);
- Being excessively permissive (they've already suffered enough, or maybe this will help make up for...);
- Stressing their loyalty to the children (my children come first no matter what).

Unfortunately, a parent's attempt to shield their children often comes at the expense of the couple relationship. *The biological parent must remember that if he or she does not do whatever is necessary to move their spouse into a position of priority, the relationship will flounder and the stepfamily will not thrive.*

Second, stepparents can also add to the bind in which the biological parent finds himself or herself. Often stepparents feel a lot of insecurity about their position in the new home. This insecurity can cause an explosion that often follows a similar pattern:

- The biological parent invests much time and energy into the children.
- The stepparent begins to feel like an outsider.
- The stepparent begins to wonder about their partner's commitment to the marriage relationship.
- After some time these feelings build up and the stepparent may try to "fix" the problem by cornering their spouse into an either/or position.

This strategy rarely accomplishes the desired results. Usually, having to choose between their spouse and their children only increases the frustration building up in the biological parent and creates resentment. *Stepparents should be patient and look for ways to help reduce the stress in the family. Stepparents must remember that stress in a stepfamily generally divides people along biological lines, at least in the beginning of the relationship.* When push comes to shove, the stepparent will lose.

Cultivating and growing any marriage is a big job. However, remarriages have some unique barriers that must be understood by both spouses if they are to succeed. Learning how to balance the preexisting parent-child relationships with the new spousal relationship is one of the more important issues that face remarriages. This process takes time and a lot of communication. The next fact sheet in this series will focus on other important issues that you may be facing in your marriage. To be successful it is important to keep learning about the differences between first marriages and remarriages. And, always remember to GO SLOW.

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