

Tips for Successful Stepfamilies: Moving Your Marriage from Surviving to Thriving Part 2



Insiders and Outsiders

There must be unity in the couple relationship in order for stepfamilies to be successful. Often in stepfamilies, it can feel like there are “insiders” and “outsiders.” The stepparent becomes sort of an outsider because of the pre-existing histories and blood ties in the parent-child relationship.

The downward spiral will continue unless a bridge is created between them. Because the biological parent is invested in both sides they are the only one who can bridge the gap. They do this by making their marriage the priority and positioning the stepparent as their teammate. Here are a few tips on how to create the bridge:

- Both spouses must first understand and agree on the “go slow” strategy (see previous fact sheet Go Slow). A unified team approach won’t happen if there is not a shared strategy.
- Communication between the spouses must be open and constant. Couples should ALWAYS maintain a time when they can be alone and away from the children.
- Set a date night and keep it. This will help the couple keep the marriage as a priority.
- Connect with each other each day, even if it is only for a few minutes.
- Include the stepparent in all parenting decisions, but let the parent set the rules and handle the discipline (see fact sheet Help! I’m a Stepparent).
- Share your feelings frequently. Talk about the insider/ outsider process and decide together on what needs to be done to manage the stress.
- Understand the need for mini-family times (a time for family members with blood-ties to be alone together) and resist the urge to compete for time with your spouse.

Understand Where the Children Are Coming From

Most remarriages occur two to three years after a divorce. This is just about the time that the children have begun to adjust to the divorce and again feel a sense of normalcy and stability. During those two to three years, some children develop a very deep relationship with their parent. They get used to having that parent all to themselves and create a lifestyle that is adapted to being alone with their parent, or at the least, alone with their parent and brothers and sisters. For example, one girl used to climb into her mother’s bed every morning. In bed, the two of them would cuddle for 30 minutes before getting up. This created an intense bond between the two of them. However, the behavior that helped to form that bond had to be changed when her mother was remarried.

Children who lose one parent through divorce are often terrified or angry when they think that they are now losing the other parent through remarriage. Their strong emotions can drive them to compete with the stepparent for their parent’s love and attention. At times, they will try to manipulate their parent by making them feel guilty. They sometimes begin to have problems at school or with drugs in order to get attention. The parent may become confused and believe that they shouldn’t let their children think that they love their new spouse more than they love them. However, this is a misplaced belief. The love between a man and a woman is neither more nor less, but very different from that between a parent and child. The parent must be careful to spend time with the child(ren) while not neglecting the couple relationship. This is often a difficult balance to achieve.

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Here are some ways that the stepparent can support their spouse's effort to become the bridge in the new family:

- Understand the child's perspective; how would you feel in the child's place?
- Understand that the child is reacting to the situation, not to you personally (Don't get offended).
- Extend compassion in these circumstances. NEVER try to "fight fire with fire."
- Don't become resentful of either your spouse or the child.
- Be flexible. Look for ways to support your spouse and help him or her.
- Take your time. It may take a while, but eventually the child will again feel secure in their parent's love, and the competition for attention will fade.

Conclusion

The success of a stepfamily depends on slowly moving the "outsider" to more of an "insider" position in the family. This is done when the parent becomes a bridge between the stepparent and the children. Becoming a successful bridge depends on teamwork. The couple must take time for them- selves, and both should try to understand the feelings of the children and be patient as they once again adjust to a new family arrangement.

