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NF95-212 Supporting Stepfamilies

Tana Seymour

Connie Francis

University of Nebraska--Lincoln, cfrancis1@unl.edu

Pat Steffens

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Supporting Stepfamilies

*Tana Seymour, Project Assistant, Extension Family Life,
Connie Francis, Extension Educator,
Pat Steffens, Extension Family Life Specialist*

This is the first in a series of NebFacts developed to support and strengthen stepfamilies. For further information please contact your local Extension office.

"Nowhere does it say that only one type of family can look in the mirror and see healthy, happy children and fulfilled adults. Stepfamilies are what they are. They have their own set of characteristics and, as in any type of family, the family members can learn what to expect and therefore learn how to make their particular type of family work for them."

Stepfamilies are Different...Not Deficient!

Forty percent of all marriages today are remarriages for at least one of the partners. Approximately 65 percent of these remarriages involve children from a prior marriage. Thus, stepfamilies are formed.

A stepfamily is not worse than, better than, or a substitute for other families: it is simply different. There are challenges in all types of families, and adults and children in any type of family have similar goals. However, step-families face a more complicated journey because they involve more people in more complex relationships. In addition, there are several characteristics that are unique to stepfamilies. Recognizing and understanding these differences and how they may affect your stepfamily is important to the development of your relationships. Parents, stepparents and children can utilize their individual strengths to create strong, satisfying stepfamilies.

Born of Loss

The first difference to be recognized is that the step-family is born of loss. Two people entering into marriage for the first time usually have not experienced the major losses of divorce or death that members of a new stepfamily have known. For adults and children, feelings of insecurity, sadness and anger can all result from the loss of the bio-logical family or the loss of the dream of the perfect marriage/family.

If these feelings of loss are left unresolved, the growth of the stepfamily will be hindered because, ultimately, the denied feelings will come out in unproductive ways. When time is taken to recognize and resolve losses, and say good-bye to parts of the past, the resulting change in attitudes and behaviors will have a positive effect on new relationships.

Myths and Expectations

Myths and expectations are another critical issue for stepfamilies. Unrealistic expectations are a stumbling block for any family, and can cause unnecessary pressure and stress in a stepfamily. When stepfamily life is not what members expected, they may feel inadequate, discouraged, angry — a mixture of emotions may result. This can cause problems and disappointment which can lead to defeat.

The myth of "instant love" can be especially threat-ening, as it places unreal expectations on all members of the stepfamily. Stepfamily members cannot be pressured into loving each other — they must have time to "build" their relationships. Experts agree that this process can take from three to five years.

By communicating about the expectations of adults and children, and determining which expectations are realistic and possible, stepfamilies can begin to build a strong relationship.

Previous History and Traditions

Stepfamily members also bring along different traditions and ways of doing things, as well as expectations, based on a number of past family experiences. Each family member has his or her own package of habits, attitudes, values and rituals. These individual packages are familiar to those that have become accustomed to living with each other, but are unfamiliar to those who have not known or lived with each other before forming the stepfamily.

In addition, many memories have already been formed between family members that have shared a life previously. At first these different backgrounds may create confusion and cause the newcomer(s) to feel like an "outsider". The lack of familiarity can be threatening and uncomfortable. It generally takes considerable time for stepfamilies to learn about each other's histories, negotiate new traditions, and create their own family memories and personal relationships. Not only do stepfamilies have previous family experiences to deal with, but members of the previous family as well. Most often there are former spouses, grandparents and other relatives who have an influence on the stepfamily. These other adults may have a lot of influence on what happens with your children and the plans you make. This may create feelings of uncertainty, helplessness and a lack of control that first marriages usually do not experience. If those involved are willing to attempt to work out the best solution, these situations can be resolved.

Family Boundaries

Most stepfamilies must learn to deal with two separate family units overlapping through the children. These children move between two homes, coping with friends and possessions being in two places, two sets of rules and routines, and two different ways of doing things. They are torn by loyalty conflicts.

This transition between homes is not easy for children or parents; parting from loved family members is difficult. Parents in both households need to help children develop a sense of belonging. Children and adults must be involved in dealing with the issues facing the "two household" family members.

With parental support, quite often moving between two households can actually provide children with a richness of experiences which could not be provided by only one household.

Legal Relationships

Another difference to be noted between traditional families and stepfamilies is that stepfamily members are not all "legally" related. In traditional families, these legal ties entitle family members to the right to inheritance, school records, medical attention and other benefits. A legal relationship also represents a commitment between the adults and children. Unless the stepparent adopts, which is not always an alternative, the legal relationship within stepfamilies exists only between husband and wife but not between stepparent and stepchildren.

In some stepfamilies this lack of legal ties may present only minor problems. In others, the realization that, legally, the relationship between stepchildren and stepparents lasts only as long as the marriage, may cause some stepparents to be fearful of forming too close a relationship with their stepchildren. Previous losses of personal or family relationships may enhance this fear of losing the new step-relationships if the marriage ends.

Even though the lack of legal rights and ties can cause concern and frustration, it is important to take the risk and build a strong relationship between stepparent and stepchild. Even if a second divorce does take place, many former stepparents and stepchildren continue their relationship.

Stepfamily Success

It is important for stepfamilies to recognize that there are differences between the stepfamily and the first marriage family. They must also realize that there are various family models (i.e., stepfamilies, traditional families, single-parent families), each with its own special characteristics, challenges and rewards, joys and sorrows; each family type producing different situations and feelings.

"Nowhere does it say that only one type of family can look in the mirror and see healthy, happy children and fulfilled adults. Stepfamilies are what they are. They have their own set of characteristics and, as in any type of family, the family members can learn what to expect and therefore learn how to make their particular type of family work for them."¹

Time and patience are needed to build any relationship, and even more so in stepfamilies because of the additional challenges. Remember that no one has to love anyone else — concentrate on acceptance and respect. This respect and acceptance within the stepfamily will help merge two families into one — and love, too, may grow.

For Further Reading:

- Elizabeth Einstein & Linda Albert,
Strengthening Your Stepfamily, American Guidance Service, 1986.
- Emily B. Visher¹ & John S. Visher,
How To Win As A Stepfamily, Brunner/Mazel, 1991.
- James D. Eckler,
Step-By Step-Parenting, Betterway Books, 1993.
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