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Tana Seymour

Connie Francis

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

Patricia Steffens

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Supporting Stepfamilies: What Do The Children Feel?

Tana Seymour, Project Assistant, Extension Family Life
Connie Francis, Extension Educator-Home Economics
Patricia Steffens, Extension Family Life Specialist

Children enter stepfamilies with a history of loss and change beyond their control. They have often experienced a troubled marriage or a painful death. Their family structure has changed dramatically. They wonder if they are "unlovable" and somehow to blame for all that has happened.

Adults often believe that "children are young and resilient so they'll bounce back." Children are swept into the turbulence of divorce or death and the drastic changes that follow, and into the dating and remarriage of their parents. They have no control over any of these events that are having a major effect upon their lives and they feel helpless and angry.

While it is likely that children are more flexible than adults, their adjustment depends on how well they are helped through this chaotic time. For the parent and stepparent to have a good relationship with their child, they must recognize and understand the child's feelings and what motivates his or her behavior.

Loss of Power and Control

Children have no choice in the matter of a divorce or death, nor do they have a choice in the events that follow. This powerlessness interferes with their confidence and sense of security. Children, like adults, need to feel they have choice and control in their lives.

To help children feel as though they do have some personal power, give them as many choices as possible for different aspects of their lives. Giving children choices like selecting what they want to wear, what they want to eat for breakfast, or how to spend their allowance will help children see that they do have some control, which helps eliminate their feeling of helplessness. Children also need to be included in discussions about new rules, family activities, etc. Even though adults may have the final say, children's needs should be heard and considered.

Guilt

Many children assume they, in some way, were responsible for the loss of their parent. They believe their "bad behavior" was the reason, or that they were so "unlovable" that their own parent wouldn't stay.

These feelings of unworthiness can cause children to behave in different ways. They may withdraw from friends and family, thinking, "How can anyone love me when my own parent didn't?" Children may misbehave because they are angry with themselves.

To soothe a child's feeling of guilt, adults must visit with the children right away, discuss the changes, and provide them with straightforward, non-judgmental information about what is happening. They don't need the "gory details", but a clear explanation of the situation which includes the assurance, "You did nothing wrong and your Dad/Mom and I will both always love you."

Guilt can also consume a child if they feel disloyal to one biological parent. Often the child who likes or enjoys the company of their stepparent feels disloyal to their biological parent. The accompanying guilt may be a contributing factor in a child's behavior toward a stepparent and can cause the child to push the stepparent away.

Loyalty Issues

Children develop a deep sense of commitment to family, especially to their parents, and are taught from birth to love and respect them. A child's identity comes from his or her mother **and** father, thus nearly always creating a very strong attachment to both parents. After a divorce this can be difficult and confusing for children. They often feel they have to "take sides", choosing where to place their loyalty and affection.

When a stepfamily is formed, the situation becomes even more complicated. Children may believe their acceptance of a new stepparent will mean they are betraying the biological parent. They may be fearful that expressing pleasure in the new home or time spent with a stepparent will be seen as disloyal to the biological parent. Rejection of a stepparent may have nothing to do with the personal characteristics of that person, but may reflect a loyalty struggle going on within the child.

Children and adults need to accept the fact that children can show affection to more than two parental adults. Adults should avoid competing for a child's affection and encourage a child to enjoy a positive relationship with a stepparent. Children need to be reassured that having a warm relationship with a stepparent will not endanger the relationship with the biological parent. In addition, a wise and compassionate stepparent will try to understand the child's struggle and reach out to help. The child's loyalty conflicts can then diminish, and family relationships can improve.

Anger

Children are often angry about the losses they have experienced because they had no input about decisions that were made. They are living within a new set of relationships because of their parents' choices, not their own. A child may be experiencing feelings of frustration, sadness, fear, and jealousy as well as the confusion created by all these feelings, which can result in anger.

Children may be angry with the non-custodial parent for infrequent visits or at the custodial parent if they had to move away from friends. They may be angry at the stepparent because they were starting to

adjust to having their parent all to themselves and now they have to "share" the parent.

Adults need to acknowledge and help children understand their feelings of anger. Children need to be reassured that feelings of anger are normal. Parental direction may be needed to help children learn the difference between angry feelings and angry behavior. "Experts agree that it takes from three to five years for the new family members to work through the obstacles they are likely to face in developing good and positive feelings. These barriers must come down before a loving relationship can be created."¹

Fear

Children believe their families will always be the one constant in their lives. When divorce or death destroys their traditional family unit, they are dramatically let down. This loss may shatter their trust in adults, including their own parents.

Children may be afraid that all relationships will end in failure and that they may lose another family. This fear may make it difficult for the child to form a bond with his or her new family members. Children may worry that their new stepparent may not like them and may reject them. Some children may also worry that their own parent will "divorce" them. Then when a remarriage takes place and the parent shares his or her love and attention with new stepfamily members, a child's fear of abandonment can become even more intense.

Parents and stepparents need to assure children of their love and show continued caring. Give extra hugs and "I love yous", and spend "child-focused" time with them. It will take time for children to find their place in the new family, feel secure, and realize there is enough love to go around.

Where Do I Fit In?

Children have a strong desire to belong. Their security, or lack of it, depends upon their feeling of acceptance and having a place within the family. From infancy, a child works to establish his or her place in the home. The changes brought about by their parent's divorce or death upsets that security.

Children form views, opinions and behaviors that reflect their family's outlook. They absorb their family's values, beliefs, and convictions and try to fit within the family pattern. When a stepfamily is formed, many of the old views, values and rules are dismissed and family members must adjust to a new set of ideas and rules. Children cannot simply wipe away the years of personal development and immediately become different people just because they are now stepchildren in a new family.

Children in stepfamilies may even be experiencing a shift in the birth order. In biological families, children have learned how to find their place and how to react. If new stepsiblings are now part of the family, children may find their family "position" has changed, which can cause confusion about roles.

Adults who understand the changes and confusion children face will be better able to ease the transition into a stepfamily. It is critical that all stepfamily members understand how things were done in the first families and then discuss the expectations of the new family. Don't expect too much change too quickly and **be willing to compromise**. Be sure each child finds a way to be special and significant in the family.

Understanding is the Key

Stepfamilies are structurally and emotionally different from first families. "Upset and sadness are experienced by the children and at times by the adults as they react to the loss of their biological family or to the loss of a dream of a perfect marriage. Acceptance that a stepfamily is a different type of family is important, as is the recognition that many upsetting behaviors result from these feelings of insecurity and loss."²

Adjusting to all these changes is difficult for children. They cannot enjoy the new family until they have had a chance to feel hurt and sad and angry about the losses and changes they have experienced. Children of any age are confused if it is not clear to them what is going on around them.

Parents and stepparents need to understand what motivates children's behavior. A child's misbehavior must be confronted and corrective steps taken. However, parents and stepparents need to understand that negative behavior is not always the result of hatred or personal differences. It may be caused by confusion over the situation in which the children find themselves.

Adults need to let children know they understand how upsetting it is to have to deal with so many changes. They need to acknowledge and accept their children's feelings. Try to view the situation through the eyes of the child. Be conscious of the fact that the child has suffered a loss in his or her life and is now being forced to accept a significantly different lifestyle. Talk with them about the changes that have taken place and those that may still occur. Children can adjust to changes if they understand what is happening and what they can count on.

"Before judging a child's actions and reaction, try to search out and appreciate the real cause. A little understanding might be the right foundation for the beginning of a strong relationship."³

For Further Reading:

Elizabeth Einstein & Linda Albert,
Strengthening Your Stepfamily, American Guidance Service, 1986.
Newman, Margaret,
Stepfamily Realities, New Harbinger Publications, 1994.

¹Eckler, James D., *Step-By-Step-Parenting*, Better Way Books, 1993.

²Emily B. Visher, Ph.D., and John S. Visher, M.D., *How To Win As A Stepfamily*, Brunner/Mazel, 1991.

³Eckler, James D., *Step-By-Step-Parenting*, Better Way Books, 1993.

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