

Increasing Your Chances of Stepfamily Success: *What You Should Know*

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If you're reading this, you've probably figured out that building a blended family is a very complicated process.

One critical point that we often overlook is that most families already have an existing story that defines their values, traditions, dreams, and goals, many of which are carried on from previous generations. These stories are important and they provide a sense of cohesiveness to the family. Unfortunately for stepparents, they can present challenges as you try to join the existing family and merge with already established stories. It is normal to want to create your own new stories to represent the new family.

How do you and your partner want to define this new family?

There is so much to consider and it is rarely discussed. If there is one thing you take away from this article, let it be this: the task of creating a new family identity and a sense of cohesion with new members who do not have any common history is one of the most difficult transitions a family can attempt to make (Gold, 2016). The stress associated with attempting to make this transition has a direct impact on the health of the relationship between the adults attempting to start the new family unit. It is often overlooked and inadequately managed.

According to Gold (2016), the stress levels in stepfamilies can rise to levels consistent with first marriages. With divorce rates for second marriages at 67% (and third marriages at 73%), the dissolution of the marriages is being attributed to high stress in stepfamilies during the first 5 years (Gold, 2016).

Stepfamilies are the fastest growing family unit in the United States, and when we consider the lack of social support generally offered by society, these new family units are fighting an uphill battle to remain intact (Gold, 2016).

Some of the adaptive challenges stepfamilies face include elements that may have caused the first marriage to dissolve (Gold, 2016). Examples include managing equality between spouses, communication, finances, intimacy, responsibilities at home, and time reserved to maintain or improve the health of the marital relationship (Gold, 2016).

In addition to those challenges, blended families are also faced with trying to manage previous financial commitments, relationship boundaries, previous spousal relationships (including residual anger and resentment between former spouses), and the stresses associated with parenting and stepparenting (Gold, 2016). Unfortunately, the difficulties in stepparenting are one of the main reasons the divorce rate is higher for couples with stepchildren (Kuther, 2015).

Parenting is hard under the best of circumstances and introducing stepparenting can be even more challenging, as there is often high tension and conflict over parenting strategies when compared to the marriage between biological parents (Kuther, 2015). While previous research has shown that an authoritative parenting-style by the stepparent was beneficial for stepchildren, more recent studies are showing that the children who feel most negative towards their stepparents perceived them to dominate the household, set new rules, and act as a disciplinarian (Cartwright et al., 2009). In many cases, stepparents find themselves in a position where they may need to be a disciplinarian and some stepparents may

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actually be encouraged by their spouses to take on a disciplinary role in the early stages of becoming a stepfamily (Cartwright et al., 2009).

When considering a disciplinary role, stepparents need to remember that, unlike parents, they are unable to rely on the previously established bond that a typical parent-child relationship has.

Stepparents need to be aware that their attempt to discipline a stepchild will typically be met with anger and resistance, can encourage emotional distress in children, and may end up causing additional behavioural issues (Cartwright et al., 2009). In addition, children can start to feel alienated by the biological parent when the biological parent is seen as taking sides with the stepparent, or is allowing the stepparent to take over control of the household (Cartwright et al., 2009). With all of this in mind, it is easy to see how a stepparent's parenting style can be a fundamental element to the success of a stepparent-child relationship.

The stepparent to stepchild relationship is the most complex and challenging relationships in a stepfamily context and their bond is one of the major tasks of stepfamily life (Schrodt, 2006). Stepparents need to consider and use various styles of stepparenting so that children and teens are better able to facilitate their adjustment into new stepfamily situations. If the children are not properly engaged, they can create one of the greatest sources of stress for the stepfamily and the new partners.

So what can you do? Which parenting style is likely to have the most positive impact?

A stepparent with a highly supportive parenting style combined with an authentic ongoing affinity towards their stepchildren is more likely to generate a close, reciprocal relationship with their stepchildren (Cartwright et al., 2009, Schrodt, 2006). When stepparents are able to show consistent acceptance of their stepchildren and encourage the biological parent to continue to hold responsibility for their care and discipline, there is a higher probability that positive relationships between the stepparent and stepchild are likely to

grow, ultimately creating a stronger stepfamily unit and a happier, healthier partnership between the adults (Cartwright et al., 2009).



Wendy Kenrick is a Registered Psychotherapist in Ontario, Canada with private practice locations in Waterloo and Oakville. Wendy has a special interest in working with parents and stepparents as they begin to work on the unique and complex process of building a blended family. Having grown up in a divorced family, being a stepdaughter for over 15 years, and with four stepchildren of her own, Wendy is intimately familiar with the challenges blended families can face. For more information about Wendy's practice, please visit www.wendykenrick.com.

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