

## Stepfamily Myths

Myths are beliefs that strongly influence the way people in stepfamilies adjust to their new family and react to one another. The following myths about stepfamilies can be stumbling blocks on the stepfamily journey.

### **Myth #1 - Love occurs instantly between the child and the stepparent.**

This is the expectation that because you love your new partner you will automatically love his or her children; or that the children will automatically love us because we are such nice people. Of course, if we think about it, we recognize that establishing relationships takes time; that it does not happen overnight or by magic.

Even if we recognize the time involved, it is hard to accept that sometimes we are willing to have a relationship with someone who is not willing to have a relationship with us. That hurts, and when people hurt, they may become resentful and angry.

Stepfamily adjustment will be helped if we come to the relationships with our stepchildren with minimal, and, therefore, more realistic, expectations about how the relationships will develop. We may then be pleased when respect and friendship blossom and less disappointed if it takes more time than we anticipated.

### **Myth #2 - Children of divorce and remarriage are forever damaged**

Children go through a painful period of adjustment after a divorce or remarriage. Adults often respond to their children's pain with guilt. Somehow they feel they can "make it up" to them. This leads to difficulties in responding appropriately to our children's hurt and setting appropriate limits - an important part of parenting.

Researchers have hopeful news about children of divorce and remarriage. Although it takes some time, most children do recover their emotional equilibrium. Five and 10 years later most are found to be no different, in many important ways, from kids in first marriage families.

### **Myth #3 - Stepmothers are wicked**

This myth is based on the fairy stories we all hear as children. Because these stories tell about stepmothers who are not kind, nice or fair, we may be confused about our roles when we become stepmothers. We are nice people, wanting to do a good job, but the world seems to have another idea about stepmothers.

This negative concept of the stepmother role imparts us in a very personal way and we may be very self-conscious about our stepparenting. Research tells us that stepmothers

have the most difficult role in the stepfamily. (But, if you are a stepmother, you knew that already!)

#### **Myth #4 - Adjustment to stepfamily life occurs quickly**

People are optimistic and hopeful when they remarry. They want life to settle down and to get on with being happy. If your hope or expectation is that once the wedding vows are spoken life will return to normal (whatever that is), you are going to be disappointed.

Because stepfamilies are such complicated families, the time it takes for people to get to know each other, to create positive relationships, and to develop some family history is significant, usually at least four years.

#### **Myth #5 - Children adjust to divorce and remarriage more easily if biological fathers (or mothers) withdraw**

Children will always have two biological parents, and will adjust better if they can access both. This means they need to be able to see their nonresidential parent and to think well of him or her. Sometimes visitation is painful for the nonresidential parent, but it is very important to the child's adjustment and emotional health, except in those rare instances of parental abuse or neglect.

It helps if the residential parent and stepparent can work toward a "parenting partnership" with all the adults involved. Sometimes this can't happen right away, but it can be something to work toward.

#### **Myth #6 - Stepfamilies formed after a parent dies are easier**

People need time to grieve the loss of a loved one, and a remarriage may "reactivate" unfinished grieving. These emotional issues may get played out in the new relationship with detrimental effects.

Another problem is that it can be difficult to think realistically about the person who has died. He or she exists in memory, not in reality and sometimes gets elevated to sainthood.

When people remarry after the death of a spouse, they may want a relationship similar to the one before. When people remarry after a divorce, they are usually looking for something very different. New partners may find themselves competing with a ghost.>

#### **Myth #7 - Part-time stepfamilies are easier**

Relationships take time. Stepfamilies where the children only visit occasionally are hampered by the lack of time to work on relationships.

If your stepchildren come every other weekend, there is less time for one-on-one time between the stepchild and stepparent, and less time for family activities. Since stepfamilies follow an adjustment process (stages of development), it may take the part-time stepfamily longer to move through the process.

### **Myth #8 - There is only one kind of family**

This is the myth that says you will be just like a first marriage (or biological) family. Today there are lots of different kinds of families; first marriage, single parent, foster, and stepfamilies to name a few. Each is valuable and has different characteristics. Just because there are two adults in the stepfamily doesn't mean that it recreates a biological family. If this is what you are hoping for, you will be frustrated when it doesn't happen.