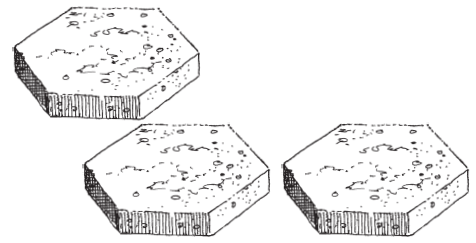


# Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies



## TEACHING GUIDE

### These are the purposes of this lesson:

- Explore the differences between biological families and stepfamilies.
  - Recognize the normal changes and adjustments stepfamilies experience.
  - Initiate discussion on how extended family members and the community can support stepfamilies.
- Have a flip chart, chalk board, or overhead projector with clear transparencies and a marker if you want to write down group responses.
  - Make enough copies of the evaluation form for each participant to complete at the end of the lesson.

## The Lesson

Did you know that stepfamilies are becoming one of the most common family forms in our country?

Did you know that thousands of stepfamilies are formed each week in the United States?

Stepfamilies have existed for many generations. In the past, stepfamilies were usually formed after the death of a partner. Today, most stepfamilies are created after a divorce.

### *What is a stepfamily?*

A stepfamily is a family in which one or both of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship. The children may still be living at home, or they might be on their own. "Blended," "remarried," "binuclear," "com-

## Plan the Lesson

As a leader, you will find that teaching this lesson will be smoother if you do the following:

- Read through the entire teaching guide before you present the lesson.
- Prepare yourself for each activity by thinking about people's reactions and how you will respond.
- Have an inexpensive paper plate and pencil for each participant.

bined,” and “reconstituted” are all names for these families.

Stepfamilies deal with common family matters. They work, shop, clean the house, and pay taxes. But they face special concerns as well.

Stepparents have a ready-made family from the very beginning. The new family has to learn to live together. The stepchildren and stepparents have to learn to get along.

Then there are former spouses, grandparents, grandchildren, friends, current and former in-laws, and perhaps teachers, clergy, and other people who have to adjust to the new stepfamily.

It is not an easy process. It takes a lot of time. There are many steps to creating a successful stepfamily.

## ACTIVITY 1

Give each person a paper plate and a pencil. Ask the participants to tear their plates into two sections in any way they desire (zig-zag, straight, curved, etc.), as long as it results in two pieces, not three or four. Now that you have two pieces, pass one piece to the person on your left. Put the two halves together, and examine the fit.

Do the pieces fit exactly?

Is it a smooth fit?

It is normal that the two halves do not fit because they come from different plates.

*The two paper plate pieces are like a stepfamily.*

- Each adult and the children have a history. Everyone brings into the relationship different traditions and different ways of doing things.
- Each member of the family has his or her own package of habits, attitudes, values, and rituals.

- Even if one of the partners has no children, this individual also has certain expectations for routine daily living that may be different from the new mate’s.

Think about the differences between families when the couple is married for the first time, as compared to families where one or both adults have children from previous relationships. Often a stepfamily assumes it is to act and feel like a first-married family and, in reality, that is impossible because of differences they may not have considered.

Ask the participants to either write on the paper plate pieces or just think about some differences between biological families (first-time married) and stepfamilies.

Encourage the members to think about the differences between first-time married families and stepfamilies with different ages of children (young children, teenagers, adult children, adult children who have their own families).

Ask them to think about the first-time married family that moves through different stages of family life in a predictable way. Compare this to stepfamilies that suddenly may have children of different age levels and needs living together for the first time.

Suggest they visit with someone sitting next to them to think about these differences. After a few minutes, ask the group to share their ideas. Write the ideas on a flip chart, chalkboard, or transparency. As you bring this brainstorming session to a conclusion, group the responses to see if there are common issues.

As you can see from the responses from the group, stepfamilies must consider many differences, regardless of the age of the family members, as they go about their daily lives.

Here is a summary of the differences we may or may not have thought about:

***A stepfamily is born of loss.***

A divorce, death, break up, or separation comes before the stepfamily. You must con-

sider the feelings that come with that loss. A parent who has died may be elevated to sainthood, and the partner wants an exact replacement. Or an adult may be looking for the exact opposite of a former partner.

Children often grieve the loss of their first family, no matter how imperfect it may have been. It is not unusual for stepfamilies to discover that these feelings create tensions if no one is willing to recognize and talk about them.

### ***Individuals in stepfamilies have different personal histories.***

A man and his children may form a family with a woman who has no children. The father and his children will have memories, habits, and sometimes private jokes that do not include the new stepmother.

If both partners bring children to the family, there will be several different sets of histories and relationships. You cannot ignore these histories and relationships. Someone can feel like an outsider from time to time, but each case is unique and may require a different approach.

### ***Traditions and values may be different.***

Everything—views about meals, homework, holiday celebrations, and inheritance expectations—is likely to be questioned in stepfamilies. Differences in traditions and values are not right or wrong, just different. The older the parents and children are, the longer the history will be and the more differences there will be. Stepfamilies that also include stepgrandchildren add even another layer of complexity.

Sometimes stepfamily members expect instant love. That is unrealistic. Any relationship takes time to build, even under the best of circumstances.

A biological family's relationship with each child begins at birth. But in a stepfamily, the new stepparent becomes an instant parent, and maybe grandparent, to people who

may seem like strangers. Individuals within stepfamilies may not necessarily even like each other. Building relationships requires commitment, time, and patience.

## **ACTIVITY 2**

As we think about the strengths and challenges of stepfamilies and the transitions stepfamilies should anticipate, we are going to take a quiz based on information from stepfamily research.

It will be a true-or-false quiz. You will not need paper or pencil. Just raise your hand if you think the statement is true. Are you ready?

### ***1. The stories and myths about wicked stepmothers such as Cinderella and Snow White do not affect today's stepfamilies.***

The answer is false. Our best-loved fairy tales have introduced and reinforced the image of the cruel, uncaring stepmother and the mistreated, unwanted stepchild for generations. Literature and research repeatedly identify this as a negative and influencing factor for all members of the stepfamily.

In some families, it becomes a major hurdle when building positive relationships between the children and the stepparent. Sometimes the stepparent, especially the stepmother, may be so intent on overcoming this stereotype that she tries to be "super mom." This role is usually overwhelming for everyone in the family and very discouraging for the "super parent."

### ***2. Children ages 9 through 15 usually have the most difficult time adjusting to a new stepfamily situation.***

The answer is true. Children in this age group generally have strong loyalty issues when a new stepparent enters the family.

- Having the biological parents reunite may still be their fantasy.

- They feel disloyal to their absent biological parent if they accept the new stepparent, even if the natural parent is deceased.
- They may have assumed a surrogate adult role by helping their single parent make decisions and now feel displaced and angered by having another adult in the family.

Younger children have had less time to establish strong loyalty ties and are more adaptable to the changes they are encountering. Older adolescents may be more concerned about “breaking away from the nest.” They may even welcome less attention focused upon them as their natural parent is concentrating on a new partner.

### ***3. A stepfamily functions better if the absent biological parent is deceased.***

The answer is false. Children do not have to be connected physically with their absent biological parent for this parent to be an important factor in stepfamily relationships. Even if a child cannot remember the parent, stories told by grandparents, older siblings, and other family members help create a memory. Sometimes this also creates a larger-than-life status for the absent parent.

The child can imagine a perfect parent, regardless of any real-life evidence, and cling to the idea that life would be better if they had their “real” parent. To cope, a stepparent should become aware of these dynamics and work on personal feelings of resentment.

### ***4. It is not unusual for a stepfamily to take at least four years or more to feel like a solid family unit.***

The answer is true. The new stepfamily has so many tasks that it may seem overwhelming. But, taking one step at a time, the new family will develop strength and security.

“Time” is an ally of stepfamilies.

From the study of stepfamilies, researchers have discovered predictable stages of successful stepfamily development, regardless of whether the couple is married or living together outside of marriage.

**Honeymoon stage**—In this first phase, the adults may be ecstatic over the new relationship. Most children probably think otherwise.

**Chaos stage**—The next stage is a chaos period when reality sets in.

- The parent feels the tug between the child and the new mate.
- Everyone may be grieving the loss of the first family but may not realize it. Everyday living is a struggle.
- Money is a big issue. Who will pay for what?
- Getting along with the ex-spouses and in-laws may be overwhelming.
- The stepparent finds that the stepchild rebels against his or her discipline.
- Adult stepchildren are concerned about their parent’s assets and belongings.
- Tension fills the air.

To get past this stage, a stepfamily, especially the couple, must develop a level of awareness of the many dynamics that are occurring. They begin to understand that the feelings of loss, disloyalty, and rejection are very normal among stepfamilies.

**Action stage**—This stage helps the partners take constructive steps in addressing the problems—little by little.

- A stepparent may plan a particular time to pay special attention to the stepchild.

- The stepparent may realize it is better not to directly discipline the stepchild but to support the parent in what needs to be done.
- The couple confront their feelings and support each other.

**Commitment stage**—This final stage helps the family not to give up and to take small steps toward greater family unity.

The family also realizes that important family events such as graduations, marriages, and births can take the family back a step or two. They realize stepfamily work, just as any family work, is never finished.

***5. A strong couple relationship is an important part of forming a strong stepfamily.***

The answer is true. Couples need to develop a plan to build and maintain a strong, caring relationship. This will help strengthen their own stepfamily.

Time is often a premium when children are in the home, and parenting issues take priority.

Parents may feel guilty about giving attention to the new mate rather than the children.

Research has shown that parent-child relationships strongly impact the well-being of a stepfamily. Strong couples who work as a team have less risk of dissolving their relationship than couples who are pulled into power struggles against each other.

Each partner needs to know when the other feels like an outsider, and work to decrease that feeling. Effective communication and time for problem-solving, romance, sex, and recreation are as essential for stepfamily couples as they are for all couples.

Dealing effectively with the child's absent parent and other relatives is a critical factor in the day-to-day life of the couple.

Child support, visitation, and holiday schedules involve teamwork and support from the new couple.

The couple may find they need professional advice when they recognize deeper problems in the relationship. Seeking help from a trained therapist, clergyperson, or social worker experienced in working with stepfamilies is desirable.

***6. A stepparent living with a stepchild has the same legal rights as the natural parent.***

The answer is false. It is often a surprise to stepparents that they do not automatically have permission to sign parental consent forms for school and medical purposes.

The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., suggests that the child's parent provide the stepparent with a limited power of attorney. This will help protect everyone, especially in an emergency, when the natural parent is not available.

Furthermore, the stepparent has no legal ties to a stepchild if the natural parent dies or if the couple divorces.

Other matters like estate planning and writing a will are delicate matters for stepfamilies. An experienced attorney should be consulted to discuss such issues.

**ACTIVITY 3**

There are many people outside the immediate family who provide support, comfort, and joy for the stepfamily. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, current and former in-laws, former spouses, and perhaps teachers, clergy, and leaders of children's activities are all part of stepfamily life. Of course, they may also be sources of tension and stress.

Think about ways people outside the stepfamily can be supportive. Break into groups of three or four and take on the role of one of the following groups:

- Grandparents
- Living absent parent
- School personnel
- Leaders of a community group (such as youth group, religious group, or civic club)

Be ready to share one way each person or group can be helpful to the stepfamily and what obstacles the person or group would have to overcome to be supportive.

Depending on attendance, you may have more than one group discussing each topic. Allow five to ten minutes for small group discussion, then ask for feedback from each group. If you have time, you might encourage other groups to react to each other's suggestions.

There are many sources of support and varied resources for stepfamilies. Often, however, people outside the stepfamily do not realize what might be helpful or what might be detrimental.

## **Grandparents and Absent Parents**

Grandparents and absent parents may have to deal with strong feelings of anger and grief toward people within the new stepfamily. Remaining neutral and flexible may be huge tasks, but in the long term, it will be best for the child.

Adults within the stepfamily can aid solid stepfamily growth if they are not openly hostile and negative about absent parents and related friends and relatives.

Maintaining a business approach, rather than dealing with emotions, can be helpful if relations are strained.

Grandparents may find that spending time with their grandchildren can be an invaluable source of support to the children. A child might need someone to share concerns with, as well as joys.

Grandparents do have to realize that fault-finding of family members will not help the child nor the stepfamily in their many adjustments. If a grandparent has a specific problem that needs addressed, he or she can discuss it privately with the parent, but the stepfamily boundaries need to be respected.

## **Schools and Community Groups**

Schools and community groups also have to be sensitive to the situations of stepfamily members. For instance, the leader of a youth group that is sponsoring a father-daughter event may need to visit with the child who has no living biological father, or the custodial parent, to help the child not feel awkward or left out of the occasion. The school or community group may not recognize that a child has two households. Forms, curriculum, and general approach are designed for a one-household child. But that is not always the reality.

## **Summary**

Partners forming stepfamilies expect joy, peace, and happiness that may have been lost in earlier relationships. These expectations are not usually met in new stepfamilies. There are many differences, many personalities, and many difficult situations. This is very normal.

Learning to handle conflict in a positive way helps the stepfamily move toward the happiness the partners are seeking. Stepfamilies must work at being both understanding and flexible and develop a style of their own. At the same time, support from significant others can help build lifelong bridges to stability and commitment for the stepfamily.

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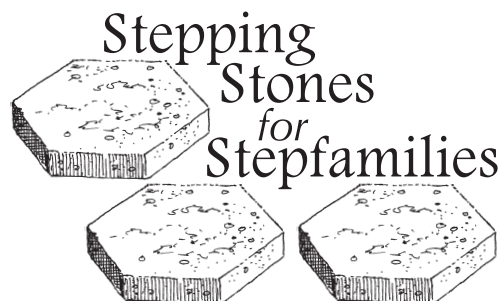
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