
Stepfamilies: Strengthening Your Couple Relationship

And they lived happily ever after. This dream may sound good in fairy tales, but real marriages have many ups and downs. Building a strong relationship takes time, attention and lots of energy!

In stepfamilies, the couple relationship is the key to a strong family. Spouses who work together can overcome problems, but this isn't a simple task. Couples who head stepfamilies face special challenges in their marriages.

- The couple relationship is newer than one or more parent-child relationships. It may be more fragile or easily shaken.
- Each parent may be trying to keep a relationship to his or her own children while developing ties to stepchildren.
- Work, outside commitments, and arrangements with former spouses add to the demands. Many couples have difficulty finding time to strengthen their own relationship. As busy as they are, couples need time to be alone. Couples must talk about what they need and want from each other, as well as their hopes for the whole family.



Letting go of the past

The past often carries over and affects new relationships. After a divorce, letting go of the dreams and wishes that a couple once shared may be hard.

Even if the marriage was unhappy, the first couple may have had hopes and future plans. For example, they may have planned to work together in a small business or remodel their home. Adults need to mourn the loss of a marriage before entering a new relationship.

For the new couple, dealing with former spouses can be a trying task. It's easy to fall into the trap of arguing about former spouses. There are many reminders that a husband or wife was once married to someone else. A new wife may receive a phone call for "Mrs. Thomas Grant" only to find out the caller is looking for the first Mrs. Grant. The new couple must talk about their feelings and discuss methods for dealing with former spouses.

Family communication

Couples may be so anxious for a new marriage to succeed they keep their negative feelings inside. Their conflicts remain unresolved. Family members with stored-up frustrations may explode with anger at any time. Couples must communicate and express their needs and wants to each other. Hinting about feelings or keeping them hidden only leads to hostility.

Open and clear communication takes time and trust. Using “I messages” can help. For example, a hurt spouse may say, “You always choose your son’s ideas over mine.” An “I message” like “I feel hurt and left out when you and John make the plans for the weekends,” is more likely to open communication.

It’s wise to leave discipline to biological parents at first. In the meantime, partners should discuss what they expect from their children. Communicating calmly in private can help a couple to develop common goals and support each other in dealing with children.

After the couple communication takes place, talk to the children about plans and household rules. Talk about family members’ roles and duties in the household. Talk about family chores and the consequences for not completing them.

Children who fear losing parents to new marriages may try to unite with their parents and exclude their stepparents. For example, a stepdaughter may shrug off her stepdad’s idea to go to an afternoon movie. He may feel angry if she turns to her mother and says, “What are we going to do today?” Try not to take the child’s negative behavior as a personal insult. Talk to the child about his or her feelings and concerns.

Partners must remain united. A secure marriage can help the whole family cope with hard times.

A complicated world

Have you ever considered how complex stepfamily households can become? The structure of a stepfamily often affects marital satisfaction. Some stepfamily households are somewhat simple. A couple may have one stepchild who lives with them on the weekends. Some are more complex. Both partners may have biological children living with them most of the time. The more complicated the family makeup is, the greater the chance of running into difficulties. Family researchers have found marital satisfaction is usually higher in simpler households.

Couples in complex family situations have to make an extra effort to recognize their special pressures. They need to communicate clearly and find time to strengthen their marriages.

Just the two of us

Living with children, full- or part-time, can make it difficult for couples to find time for each other. The demands of children, ex-spouses, relatives, work and parenting can be overwhelming. Often when couples do find a few moments, they talk about their conflicts or make arrangements for the children. Couples must find time to be alone, time to be intimate and time to have fun with each other.

The goal is to set aside time for children and friends, as well as time to be alone and time with a partner. Partners’ time alone can be used to resolve conflicts and to enjoy each other. A couple’s strength contributes to the feeling of “family”.

Work at strengthening your couple relationship

- Plan time each week for activities each of you enjoy. If you don't plan a walk or a dinner together, it won't happen. Make time to be together.
- Tell your partner about your expectations, needs, feelings, and frustrations. Communicate clearly and directly with your spouse.
- Support each other. Recognize that you will run into bumps along the way. It takes time to create a satisfying and loving relationship.
- Set a time to discuss stepfamily matters. These may include finances, children, housing and transportation arrangements. It may help to set a time limit when discussing these issues.
- Allow time for yourself. Continue special activities, such as gardening, reading, painting or woodworking.
- Talk with your partner about the strengths you each see in your relationship. Let your partner know when you feel happy and satisfied. Bring out the positive side of your relationship.
- Make new friends as a couple. Common interests and friends are important when building your couple relationship.
- Remember, when your couple relationship is happy, you will have more happiness to share with your children.

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