
Stepfamilies: Stages of Stepfamily Development

The challenge of stepfamily life

In a newly-formed stepfamily, individuals face important challenges. Adults may wonder how they will ever find the time and energy to pull themselves and their children into a supportive stepfamily. They must build a marriage, support biological children, get to know stepchildren and help everyone get along.

The fact that all this must take place between zig-zagging schedules, back-and-forth visits of children to former spouses and the daily stresses of life can feel overwhelming. Blending many individuals into a working stepfamily takes great effort.

It takes many years to develop a stepfamily into a strong family unit. The first several years of a stepfamily's existence are often the most difficult.

How exactly does a stepfamily go from being a group of strangers to a working unit? Patricia Papernow, a family-life specialist, has identified seven stages of stepfamily development. Recognizing the developmental process and keeping the final goal in mind can help stepfamily members weather all the changes.

Remember, a stepfamily will never be like a traditional nuclear family. It is a different type of family. However, stepfamilies can be first-rate families. Children and adults in stepfamilies can adapt and thrive.

Early stages

Fantasy: In a new stepfamily, adults may fantasize about having a “whole” family again. Since they are happy about their new marriage, they expect everyone to be instantly in love. Stepparents may fantasize about saving children from the hurt they may have experienced.

Children's fantasies are usually the opposite. They may believe in the myth of the wicked stepmother. They often want stepparents and stepsiblings to disappear. They may dream about going back to living alone with their single parents. They may hold onto the hope that their biological parents will reunite.

Immersion: It isn't long before these fantasies come into conflict and the reality of trying to “blend” is apparent. Frustrations usually start to build. Stepparents may feel lonely and jealous when children keep them from spending intimate time with new husbands or wives. They may feel rejected when they realize that stepchildren



don't want to be "saved" by them. Biological parents often don't want to give up the dream of the perfect family. Feelings stay inside and no one discusses the problems.

Children may act out if they feel stepparents are coming between them and their biological parents. They may resent a stepparent who is trying to replace their absent mother or father. Different lifestyles also may clash. For example, a father and his children may expect a family meal at six o'clock. A mother and her children plan to grab a quick bite before scout meetings or play rehearsals. Different plans and routines may lead to confusion and misunderstandings.

Awareness: Hurt feelings, losses and differing needs must come into the open. Stepparents may feel responsible for family problems. Often, when they realize that other family members contribute to problems, they talk about their concerns.

When parents recognize that children and new spouses aren't instantly in love, biological parents may fear that the marriage will fall apart. They feel torn between the new spouse and protecting their children from any more pain.

It's hard to be open about negative feelings. Often stepfamilies get stuck in these early stages because they don't know how to begin talking about their problems. These tips may help:

- Learn about the way stepfamilies function. This can help individuals let go of their fantasies and work toward realistic goals.
- Adults shouldn't talk negatively about absent parents in front of children. If a child feels his or her relationship with the absent parent is threatened, he or she may act out.
- Listen to children's feelings. Don't interrupt children or dismiss their feelings.
- To resolve conflicts, parents need to strategize and everyone must be open to change.

Middle stages

Mobilization: Those family members who feel most unhappy are usually the first to try to change the situation. When family members address issues and talk about what bothers them, they are revealing their needs.

For example, a child who complains about an early bedtime may need more quiet time with his or her biological parent in the evening. A stepparent may want the opposite, to reserve the evening for the couple. There is no wrong or right. Everyone's needs are important.

Action: Although conflicting needs may cause arguments, getting them out in the open can lead to change. The couple can begin to work together to find solutions and create new rituals. They may find better ways to meet their needs and their children's needs. For example, the biological parent may plan to do an activity with his or her children each night after dinner. The time after that activity may be reserved for the couple. Also during this stage, the biological parent will often step back and allow stepparents and stepchildren to work out problems among themselves. These tips may help stepfamilies work out their differences:

- Practice stating feelings in private before talking to a family member. This can help clarify true needs and feelings.
- Remind yourself to stop and consider the point of view of other family members.
- Sit down together and plan a strategy to meet family members' needs. This may require creative thinking and juggling of household routines. Remember that all family members' needs are equally important.

The later stages

Contact: As stepparents become more comfortable in their roles, they may enjoy spending time with their stepchildren. The family grows used to the different traditions and lifestyles. For example, a stepfather who used to sleep late on Saturday knows his stepchildren like to wake up for an early bike ride. Instead of being angry he sleeps late on Sunday.

Resolution: A stepparent can never replace a biological parent. He or she can, however, grow close to stepchildren as a friend or companion. Rules and routines that caused misunderstandings in the past are now normal parts of everyday life.

In some families, old fantasies are let go, intimacy grows among family members and a new family emerges. But not all families become close in this stage. Children who enter stepfamilies in their teen years may never feel connected to stepparents. They can reach an understanding about cooperation and respect, however.

For some families the process of stepfamily development will take only four years or less. For many, it can take seven or more years. Most families get stuck in the early stages for a time. Individual family members may move through the process at different rates. Some children will be quick to accept change. Others may hold onto dreams of a different family life for a long time.

Sources:

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