Parenting can be a challenge in any family, but living in a stepfamily can add more issues to the parenting role. Partners forming stepfamilies expect joy, peace, and happiness that may have been lost in earlier relationships. Because children look at the world differently than adults, they may view the stepfamily in other ways.

Much of what children understand depends on their age. At each age, there are certain feelings and reactions children will experience. For some children, it is a happy event to have a new family with more people around. For others, the many changes and uncertainties are difficult and challenging. Generally, children ages 9 to 15 may have the hardest time adapting to a new family situation.

It can take four years or more for a stepfamily to seem like a family. It can even take 18 to 24 months for children to be friendly to a new stepparent. There are many differences, many personalities and many difficult situations. These are normal adjustments.

Learning to handle new relationships in a positive way enables the stepfamily to move toward the happiness that the partners are seeking. Stepfamilies must work at understanding, being flexible, and developing a style of their own.

What can the adults in a stepfamily do to work toward the happiness they seek?
Stepping Stones for the Adults in a Stepfamily

• Take your time and expect love and care to come slowly through shared experiences with stepchildren.

• Discipline may work better if the biological parent takes the lead with the stepparent’s support until the stepparent-stepchild relationship is stronger.

• Give your family and yourself permission to try things differently. Since there are no rules or perfect ways to be a stepfamily, find out what “fits” for your family.

• Stepfamilies should expect negotiation and conflict to be a part of everyday life.

• Give children accurate, age-appropriate information about what is happening in the new family.

• Discuss rules and roles and make them clear so that the children understand what is expected.

• Try to understand children’s feelings, especially when they are not what you expected.

• Expect family members to grieve about the loss of their biological family. Make it comfortable to talk about these feelings.

• Parents should share negative statements and feelings about the absent parent with someone other than the child. Encourage grandparents and other relatives and friends to avoid criticizing the absent parent in front of the children.

• Assure the children that love is not limited. They can like or love all the members of the family, including a stepparent, and still love and care about the absent parent.

• Spend time doing things with each child and in various combinations of family members, but do not force togetherness, especially with teenagers.

• Learn as much about child development and effective parenting and step-parenting practices as possible.

• Work cooperatively with the absent parent far in advance to make the needed arrangements for holidays and other occasions.

• Build your own stepfamily traditions. Include family members in discussions about changing old traditions to fit the new family.

Stepping Stones for the Couple in a Stepfamily

• Schedule time to catch up with each other on a regular basis.

• Work constantly at learning more about each other.

• Listen to each other without becoming defensive.

• Develop a deep friendship that will protect your relationship when conflicts arise.

• Always treat each other with respect, even when you disagree.
• Show your appreciation and admiration to your partner on a daily basis.

• Keep fun and romance in your relationship.

• Present a united front to the children when dealing with expectations and discipline.

• Grant a limited power of attorney to the stepparent for use in emergencies, if possible.

• Communicate about family finances with your partner on a regular basis.

• Review all insurance policies for coverage and beneficiary status.

• Review and revise your wills or make one if you do not have one.

• Join a support group for stepfamilies if that would help your family.

• Seek help from professional financial and counseling services to help you overcome major hurdles if necessary.

• Remember that time is your greatest ally in building a strong stepfamily.

• Keep your sense of humor. A little laughter can brighten the day.

References


Reviewers
Thanks to Daniel Botz, J.D., for his review regarding stepfamily legal issues.

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Author
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## Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies Participant Survey

Date of Program: ____________________________  
Program County: ____________________________  
Leader: ____________________________________  

Thank you for participating in our program! To help us improve this program, we would like to gather your responses to the questions below. Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to respond to any questions you do not want to answer. This information will only be used for program evaluation purposes, and you will not be identified in any way by the information you provide.

1. Because of your participation in this program, did you learn anything new?  
   Yes  No  
   If yes, what did you learn?

2. Because of your participation in this program, do you plan on taking any action or changing anything in your life?  
   Yes  No  
   If yes, what?

3. Gender:  
   Female  Male

4. Your age:

5. Marital Status (please check only one):

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Single, living with partner</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Separated or divorced</th>
<th>Prefer not to respond</th>
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6. What makes you interested in learning more about stepfamilies?

7. For the following items, please indicate your level of agreement by placing a check in the appropriate box.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>After participating in this program, I gained knowledge about steps to help stepfamilies:</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Show appreciation and affection to each other.</td>
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<td>Value each other in ways that show a commitment to their family.</td>
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<td>Use positive and effective communication with each other.</td>
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<td>Look at a family’s challenges as opportunities to work together.</td>
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<td>Have strong beliefs and values that enhance a family’s well-being.</td>
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<td>Have enjoyable times together.</td>
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</table>

8. Please provide any additional comments you may have.

9. May we contact you later to talk with you about this program?  
   Yes  No  
   If yes, please leave your contact information.
   Name  Address  Phone  Email

Thank you for completing this form. We appreciate your feedback!

To group leader: Thanks for sending completed forms to Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies Program, 343 Justin Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506.