

# Building a Stepfamily That Lasts, Part One

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Stepfamilies are somewhat of an enigma in our culture. Divorce rates are higher in stepfamilies than in nuclear families, yet census data suggests that soon stepfamilies will outnumber all other family forms. Divorce rates overall are stable, hovering around 45-50%, yet marriage rates are actually dropping. Some suggest that we are losing faith in marriage—I hope not. Marriage is a great institution; not perfect, but a wonderful place to grow and share life. When marriages don't succeed, however, most people (75-80%) remarry. The time between a death or divorce and a remarriage is also shortening; currently less than two years (less for men). Most remarriages involve children (75% or more); which means a new stepfamily is being formed.

Okay, had enough dry statistics? My point is that there are a lot of stepfamilies and many of these struggle to survive. So the question is, how do we create stepfamilies that will last? How does a stepfamily become a family? A place of safety where family members feel respected, accepted and valued; a place where needs are met and members are committed to one another and to the family. Sounds impossible? You may be right. Most stepfamilies never become as cohesive as nuclear families. Some family members never seem to “buy-in” to the new family, preferring instead to remain aloof and disconnected. The high divorce rate for stepfamily marriages (55-70%) certainly provides ominous proof that many stepfamilies do not survive. In *Becoming a Stepfamily*, stepfamily expert Patricia Papernow says that it takes four to seven years for a stepfamily to begin to look, feel and act like a family. In fact, the first year of two of stepfamily life can be so turbulent that many families never see year four, let alone year seven.

Yet more and more stepfamilies are springing up. I imagine a time will come in the near future when stepfamilies will outnumber other family forms. People continue to remarry, with all the hopes and dreams of creating family—again. If stepfamilies are to survive; specifically, if your stepfamily is to survive, what steps can you take? How can you help create a sense of family in your stepfamily? Let's begin answering that question by examining the dynamics of a typical stepfamily.

## The Typical Stepfamily Scenario

Most stepfamilies begin as a fractured group of wounded people. In fact, a defining characteristic of all stepfamilies is that they are born of loss. Changes are happening that make everyone uncomfortable. There is a conspicuous lack of trust. Motives are suspect. Family members are disconnected; sometimes feeling like strangers. Interactions are either superficial or hostile. Members wonder, “Is this a safe place?” “Will my needs be met?” “Will I be able to interact freely with my mom/dad?” “Will I be treated differently?” To answer these and other questions, the stepfamily must develop an atmosphere of safety, where

individuals can ask questions, confront issues and learn to trust one another and where both family and personal growth is promoted.

Sure, each family member brings strengths and many bring a determination to succeed; but few have an awareness of just how wounded they are or how far away from “family” their new stepfamily really is and even fewer have a plan to take their new family to a place of cohesion, safety and acceptance.

Adult couples bring a dream of doing “family” again—and doing it right this time. However, more often than not, their children do not share this dream. Most children are still adjusting to earlier changes and grieving earlier losses; many hope their biological parents will re-unite. Adults rarely think through how to include their children in this dream. They assume the children will “come along for the ride” with no need to prepare them or sell them on the benefits of this new venture. The idea that a new stepfamily will function (at least in the first few years) like a cohesive team or family is not a dream, it’s a delusional fantasy—and a dangerous one at that. False assumptions, unrealistic expectations, and unresolved issues are the trademarks of new stepfamilies. To survive and thrive, the family must develop a strategy, a developmental plan, for moving the assembled members from being a disconnected group to becoming a healthy, fully-functioning stepfamily.

#### Six Building Blocks

To become a cohesive group, six inter-related issues must be addressed and resolved. I will outline them below and examine them in more detail in the next few issues.

1. Develop trust among family members by creating an atmosphere where it is safe to disclose and be vulnerable.
2. Develop clear family goals and identify obstacles to growth.
3. Address the inability to have healthy conflict.
4. Increase buy-in and commitment by family members.
5. Create an atmosphere of mutual accountability.
6. Create a family identity.

Next time, we will examine these building blocks in greater detail.

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