

Building a stepfamily that lasts, Part Two

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Last time we introduced six building blocks to creating a stepfamily that lasts.

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.

Building Trust

The first issue to resolve is the absence of trust between family members. Trust is the foundation of a healthy stepfamily. Without trust, there is no vulnerability; without vulnerability, there is no sharing and no growth. Too many families subtly or not so subtly discourage their members from sharing, under the guise of “being nice” or because sharing is just too painful.

A culture must be created where members can share their needs, concerns, disappointments, and disagreements; in other words, a safe environment to be vulnerable. Healthy trust happens when family members believe they are valued and they learn how to understand and be open with one another. In healthy stepfamilies, dialogue and interaction are welcome.

It takes courage to create an atmosphere where interactions can happen without threat of reprisal. Yes, there must be boundaries; but too often adults use boundaries as a form of control or to cover the fact that they are clueless about how to help their family become healthier and more cohesive.

Lack of interaction among family members is a sure sign of family dysfunction because trust is built through interaction. Strangers become cohesive friends and family members as they hear each others stories and learn about each person’s needs, priorities, strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears. This happens far too infrequently in most stepfamilies. Incidentally, this kind of sharing and vulnerability must start at the top—with the adults.

Developing trust in a new stepfamily is difficult because most remarrying adults (and children) are emotionally and spiritually wounded and wounded people are extremely self-protective. Vulnerability (opening oneself up to more potential pain or hurt) sounds like a really bad idea. However, for the family to grow, family members must allow themselves to be vulnerable. Without the healthy interactions that evolve from people who learn to trust one another and be vulnerable with one another, families become stagnant, lifeless and sterile.

Okay, how we develop trust in our stepfamily? First and foremost, it must be intentional, viewed as a long-term goal and role-modeled by the adults in the family. A pervasive attitude that each family member is valued and important, and brings his or her own unique blend of personal traits to the family needs to be cultivated. Next, interaction and sharing is encouraged, even if it leads to conflict. Sharing can be both natural and planned. The focus should be on personal sharing. This normally begins with safe, benign information and grows to include more significant feelings and beliefs. Here are a few ideas:

- Sharing favorite stories
- Sharing favorite traditions
- Best thing that ever happened
- Expectations about the family
- Observations about other family members
- Family experiences: hiking, camping, bowling, miniature golf, etc.
- Family games, such as *The Ungame*, which downplay competition and emphasize disclosure
- Creating some new family traditions-to compliment not replace

Now, I want to reinforce two critical factors: First, this is a top-down process—adults should always go first. Second, never punish vulnerability or disclosure. Encourage sharing even if it creates some conflict. We'll talk about how to do healthy conflict next time.