

Building A Stepfamily that Lasts, Part Five

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We have been exploring six building blocks to creating a stepfamily that lasts. Stepfamilies are complex. Stepfamily members experience unparalleled levels of stress and relational overload.

Family members must learn to overcome numerous barriers, including grief and loss, guilt and shame, loyalty issues, poorly-defined rules and roles, differing parenting styles, relationships with former spouses, and the list goes on.

It takes courage to be a stepfamily; it takes hard-work and commitment to stay a stepfamily. One thing is certain, you will be stretched.

Below are the six building blocks we have been discussing.

- Develop trust.
- Develop clear goals.
- Learn to do conflict well.
- Get family members to “buy-in” to the family.
- Create an atmosphere of mutual accountability.
- Create a family identity.

The fourth building block is to encourage family commitment. Family members need to “buy-in” to the family and the family-making process.

This is no easy task and happens only when every family member feels that their concerns, issues and needs have been heard and acknowledged. This is difficult, because family members are not close, communication is awkward, rules and roles are ambiguous and at least some of the members are uncertain if they even want to be part of the new family. Teenagers are the most difficult to get on board.

Some ways to increase family member buy-in:

- Emphasize family values.
- Build new traditions (but honor old ones).
- Become a “listening” family. Really hear the concerns and needs of others.
- Model a healthy marriage.
- Reduce ambiguity: make rules, roles, expectations etc. crystal clear.
- Give everyone a chance to have input.
- Be tolerant and patient.

The fifth building block is to create an atmosphere of mutual accountability. Clear expectations and buy-in by family members leads to accountability interactions.

Accountability is the willingness of family members to be respectfully confronted by one another. Accountability allows others to speak into our lives and our beliefs; creating the possibility of real change and real growth.

Members enter a stepfamily with closely-held unrealistic expectations that must be respectfully exposed if the family is going to survive and thrive. Again, this must be a top-down process. The adult couple must work to resolve interpersonal discomfort, but they must also model a willingness to have difficult conversations.

The stepcouple must continue to emphasize the value and benefits of family buy-in.

Suggestions for increasing accountability:

- Be intentional: One person defined accountability as “allowing someone to take us, kicking and screaming, to a place we really want to go.”
- Expose and re-define expectations
- Modeling of “tough” conversations by the adult couple
- Become more comfortable with conflict; see conflict as growth-producing vs. destructive.
- Believe that accountability and mutual respect lead to healthier family relationships.
- Continue to emphasize the value of family buy-in. Continue to make rules and roles crystal clear.

The final building block is creating a sense of family that acknowledges that individual members may be a part of several families.

Healthy stepfamilies actually exist across two or more households. Families that accept this reality seem to thrive; those that insist on loyalty to “one family only” do not. Again, this is no easy task; family identity can be confusing in a stepfamily—boundaries are not clear or distinct.

Family members need to be valued for who they are.

- Family members are valued, even those who are part of more than one family.

- Other households are respected and never demeaned.
- Adults build “parenting coalitions” to effectively parent.
- Individual and family needs are met.
- Members draw value from being a part of the family.

Building a stepfamily that lasts takes about five to seven years. . . so be patient.
Let me suggest that you consider joining a stepfamily support group -- a safe
place to share ideas and receive encouragement