



L A K E F R O N T
W E L L N E S S C E N T E R , S . C .

161 West Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 2B Pewaukee, WI 53072
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Abundant Living... Discover the Possibilities!

STEPFAMILIES

Stepfamily Association of America www.saafamilies.org

A stepfamily forms when one or both adults in a new couple bring children from a previous relationship. Although stepfamilies look like first-time families on the outside, they are very different on the inside. The first step toward making a successful stepfamily is understanding the differences between stepfamilies and first-time families. The previous marriage may have ended in divorce or in death. The original parent may be a never-married single parent or an adoptive parent. The new couple may be gay or straight.

How Stepfamilies Are Different

Stepfamilies have "insiders" and "outsiders." In a first-time family, the adult couple is considered the "insider unit," but insider and outsider roles shift. Sometimes mom is closer to Danny. Next month, dad and Danny are closer.

In stepfamilies, insider and outsider positions start out painfully stuck. Agreements about every day issues lie within the parent-child unit, not between the adult couple. And single parent families usually have become a very tight unit. All of this makes stepparents outsiders in their new families. This outsider position often leaves stepparents feeling invisible, powerless, rejected and lonely. Biological (or adoptive) parents begin as the stuck insiders. They are most connected to their own children, to their new partner, and to their ex-spouse. Insider parents often feel torn and anxious trying to balance everyone's needs.

Children, too, occupy stuck insider and outsider positions. When Mike's 13-year-old son, Johnny, visits his dad's new family on weekends, Johnny enters as an outsider. David and Jenny, Mike's new stepchildren, are stuck insiders. They must share their space with a new stepbrother they did not choose and may not even like.

Letting Go of Unrealistic Expectations

New couples naturally wish for their new families to blend right away. Stepparents want their stepchildren to love them. Straining to make the impossible happen, however, creates constant failure. Stepouples need at least two years to begin to function as a unit. Some stepchildren will need even more time and some will need less. Letting go of understandable, but unrealistic wishes frees you to meet the challenges.

Children's Losses and Conflicting Loyalties

For adults, new partners are thrilling. For children, however, the entry of a new stepparent often creates loss and change. Mom spends the evening with her new boyfriend. Dad's new girlfriend bans a child's favorite sugar cereal. Stepparents also create conflicts of loyalty for kids. A child may think, If I care about my new stepmom, I am disloyal to my mom. Arguing parents make this situation even worse for kids. For all these reasons, children need time to adjust.



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Spending regular time in pairs helps shift insider-outsider roles. Carve out couple time, without children, to form a bond and to give stepparents time in the insider role with their new partner. Balance this with reliable parent-child alone time, including some vacation time. Re-establishing consistent parent-child time can improve the behavior of an acting-out or depressed child. Outsider stepparents maintain well-being and sanity by continuing activities with friends outside the new family. Develop stepparent-stepchild relationships by engaging in "shoulder-to-shoulder" activities, without the parent present.

A stepparent might say to his stepchild: "I will never take the place of your dad. His place in your heart is permanent. You have a big heart. Sometime, I hope there will be room in it for me. Even then, it will be a different place from your dad's place."

Further, expect civility—but not love. We can expect stepparents and stepchildren to treat each other with respect and decency. We cannot, however, demand love of people who did not choose each other. A parent might say to her son: "You have a right to be upset with all these changes. I will really try to listen. But you do need to be respectful to Mike, like any other stranger."

Recognize that Stepparents are Not Parents

Children benefit when stepparents can help parents become firmer. Biological parents need to help stepparents become more kind. However, stepchildren cannot initially accept any parenting from stepparents. The parent must remain in charge until children are ready. Stepparents can give input, but the original parent retains final say. Stepparents may consider expressing caring and encouragement: "How was that test?" And reporting concerns to the parent: "I think Johnny didn't do his homework." When parents are absent, stepparents aim for "adult babysitter," not parent. "While I am out tonight, Mike is in charge." Stepparents then enforce the rules of the house.

The "Other" Household

Decrease conflict with the "other" household. Parental conflict seriously compromises children's adjustment. Keep drop-offs and pickups peaceful. Handle differences between households calmly and neutrally: "You drink Coke at mom's house. We drink milk here." Address problems with your ex out of children's earshot. In conflicted divorces, stick to a detailed, iron clad visitation schedule.

A Therapist Can Help

Therapists with training and experience in stepfamily dynamics can help meet the challenges of stepfamily living. Couple therapy can offer a safe place to share feelings and can help resolve differences. A skilled therapist can sometimes help ex-spouses work together. If the children's behavior deteriorates, try increasing parent-child time, backing the stepparent out of a parenting role, and easing loyalty conflicts. If depression or acting out continues, seek help for your child, or for you as the parent. Children caught in intense loyalty conflicts sometimes appreciate a neutral therapist. Stepfamily living occasionally exposes very painful old "bruises." A good therapist can help resolve some of the old hurts and make living in the present easier.



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Books

Becoming a Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families, by P. L. Papernow, 1998. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.

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Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child, by I. Ricci, 1997. NY: Simon Schuster.

Stepfamilies: Love, Marriage and Parenting in the First Decade, by J. Bray and J. Kelly, 1999. New York: Broadway Books.

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last, by J. Gottman, 1994. NY: Simon and Schuster.

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