

## Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies-- Lesson 1: Taking Time to Think about My Stepfamily<sup>1</sup>

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Adapted for use in Florida by Millie Ferrer-Chancy<sup>2</sup>

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*Dear Participant:*

*Congratulations on participating in this six-part Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies home study program. Its purpose is to help adults living in a stepfamily with children under the age of 18 understand the challenges and realities common to many stepfamilies.*

*The course is designed to take approximately six weeks. Begin Week 1 by reading Lesson 1 and work on the activities throughout the remainder of the week. During Week 2, read Lesson 2 and work on those activities. Continue through all the lessons until you have completed Lesson 6.*

*Please complete the survey when you have finished all six lessons and send it to the address listed on the form. You might find it helpful to set a certain time and a certain place to work on the lessons. You can do most of the activities by yourself, but several of the activities suggest visiting with others, including your partner, to complete the*

*exercises. Hopefully you will find the lessons helpful in your day-to-day living.*

### Taking Time to Think about My Stepfamily

Did you know that the stepfamily is becoming one of the most common family forms in our country? Did you know that thousands of stepfamilies are formed each week in the United States?

Stepparents have a ready-made family from the very beginning. The new family members must learn to live together. The stepchildren and stepparents have to learn to get along.

Then there are former spouses, grandparents, friends, current and former in-laws, teachers, clergy, and other people who must learn to adjust to the new stepfamily.

Usually these are not easy processes. They can take a lot of time. There are many stepping stones to creating a successful stepfamily.

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This first lesson in the *Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies* home study series helps you think about the myths and realities of living in a stepfamily. The other lessons are designed to help you focus on specific issues that are important to stepfamilies. The titles of the other lessons are:

Lesson 2: Building a Strong Couple Relationship

Lesson 3: Building Step Relationships

Lesson 4: Understanding a Child's Realities

Lesson 5: Understanding Financial and Legal Matters

Lesson 6: Working with Others

### **What is a Stepfamily?**

A stepfamily is defined in many ways. The definition used here is: a family in which one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship. The adults may be married or living together.

Names which apply to these families include:

- Blended
- Remarried
- Binuclear
- Combined
- Reconstituted

It is important for you to decide how to describe your new family. One term may be comfortable for some of the members and not the others. Throughout this series, the term stepfamily will be used. If this is uncomfortable, please use a term acceptable to you.

### **Stumbling Stone: Believing Myths of Stepfamily Living**

Stepfamily myths strongly influence the way persons in stepfamilies adjust and react to one another.

The following myths about stepfamilies can be stumbling stones on the trail leading to a strong stepfamily:

*Myth 1: Adjustment to stepfamily life needs to occur quickly.*

People are anxious to go on with their lives after a divorce or the loss of a partner. They may think that forming a stepfamily will make life more complete and instantly happier. They are going to be disappointed.

Stepfamilies can be very complicated with so many people involved. You have to get to know each other and to work at the changes stepfamily living brings. It takes a long time and is hard work.

*Myth 2: Stepparents are wicked, especially stepmothers.*

Fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, make us think of a cruel stepmother who is mean to an unwanted stepchild. You think of yourself as a nice person, wanting to do a good job with your new family, but the world seems to have another idea.

The notion of a wicked stepparent can impact you in a very personal way. It can make you very self-conscious about stepparenting. It can be a real stumbling stone to creating positive relationships between you and your stepchildren, especially if you are a stepmother. With time, patience and understanding, positive adjustments can happen.

*Myth 3: Only a first-married family can be a real family.*

We live with the image of a first-married family as being the only type of family that can be considered a true family. But different kinds of families, like single parent families and stepfamilies, have existed for generations and are very common in most communities.

Many have been very successful in rearing children. Most important is the support and care a family of any kind can offer to each one of its members.

## Stepping Stone: Understanding the Realities of Stepfamily Living

A stepfamily can build on its strengths by looking at reality, rather than believing the myths. Here are some typical day-to-day realities that most stepfamilies experience.

*Reality 1: A stepfamily is often born of loss.*

A divorce, death or separation generally comes before the stepfamily. The feelings that come with loss must be taken into consideration.

A parent who has died may be elevated to sainthood, and the partner wants an exact replacement. Or, an adult may be looking for the exact opposite of a former partner. Children grieve the loss of their first family, no matter how imperfect it may have been. It is not unusual for stepfamilies to discover these feelings of loss create tension that needs to be recognized and dealt with by family members.

*Reality 2: Stepfamilies are not like first time married families.*

It is very difficult to create a stepfamily in the image of a first married family.

Why?

- Children may share two households.
- A biological parent is absent.
- A stepparent has no legal authority over a stepchild.
- An adult child may never live in the same house with the stepparent.
- Each family coming into a stepfamily has a different history.

When stepfamilies try to make their family look like that first family, they may experience disappointment and a sense of personal failure. Stepfamilies can learn to build on their new family's strengths, rather than trying to act like a first married family.

*Reality 3: There is no such thing as instant love.*

It is not fair to expect all members of a stepfamily to love each other immediately. We learn to care deeply for others over time and through many experiences with each other.

Stepchildren are expected to love their new stepparent instantly, and the new stepparent is expected to love new stepchildren like their own.

This expectation is common whether the stepfamily involves children at home or adult children on their own. Stepbrothers and sisters also are expected to like each other.

It can be devastating to expect instant results. Success involves a slow process over many years. Some researchers say it takes four to eight years or more.

A more reasonable goal might be to move slowly from a neutral feeling or even a feeling of strong dislike toward tolerating a new family member, then liking, and learning to love very slowly.

*Reality 4: Negotiation and conflict are normal.*

Partners forming stepfamilies expect joy, peace and happiness that may have been lost in earlier relationships. That is not usually the case with new stepfamilies. There are many differences, many personalities and many difficult situations.

Disagreements and conflict can occur often. Learning to handle conflict in a positive way enables the stepfamily to move toward happiness the parents are seeking. Don't forget a sense of humor is very helpful.

*Reality 5: Individuals in stepfamilies have different personal histories.*

A man and his children may form a family with a woman who has no children. The father and his children will have memories, habits and private jokes that do not include the new stepmother.

If both partners bring children to the family, there will be several different sets of histories and relationships. These histories and relationships cannot be ignored.

Someone can feel like an “outsider” from time to time. Each case is unique and may require a different approach.

There can be differences in traditions and values. Everything from views about meals and homework to birthday celebrations is likely to be questioned.

These traditions and values are not right or wrong, just different. Stepfamilies must work at being both understanding and flexible in dealing with all of these differences, and still form a style of their own.

*Reality 6: Children are often members of two or more households.*

Children must learn to deal with two approaches to discipline, allowances, meals, schedules and much more. One household may have more money to spend than the other.

Decisions about space, visitation schedules, and who buys what must be faced immediately. These situations require sensitivity and adjustments for all members of the family. The changes eventually become routine and are just part of life in a stepfamily.

*Reality 7: There is an absent biological parent.*

The absent parent always has influence on the stepfamily, whether the parent has died, lives a long distance away, or lives just around the corner.

The relationship, or lack of relationship, between the child and the absent parent will have an impact on the stepfamily. It can involve visitation schedules, economic situations, or the absent parent's view of the new stepfamily.

Sometimes a lingering sense of loss will create concern as the child gives up the fantasy of the biological parents getting back together.

## **Stepping Stone: Recognizing Your Concerns**

Before a family with stepchildren is formed, all of its members are likely to have questions and fears. These uncertainties may not be shared with others. But they can impact how relationships develop.

Here are some questions that may be in the minds of different family members:

### *The Younger Child's Questions*

- Will we move to a new house?
- Will I have to share my room?
- What should I call my new stepparent?
- Will my parent still love me?
- Will my other parent still love me if I love my new stepparent?
- Will my stepparent be nicer to his or her own children than to me?
- Am I safe with my stepparent?
- Will my stepparent leave us too?
- If my stepparent and my parent have a baby, will they still love me?
- If I'm mean to my stepmother, will she leave so my real mother can come back?

### *The Teenager's Questions*

- How shall I act toward my new stepparent?
- Will I lose the attention of my parent?
- Will my curfew and other rules be changed?
- Will I be forced to be with my "new" family rather than my friends?
- Why do my new stepparent and parent have to act like newlyweds?
- How can I have privacy?
- What if I get a hidden crush on my new stepparent?

### *The Adult Child's Questions*

- How do I relate to my new stepparent, especially if the new stepparent is almost my age?
- Will I be expected to have contact with my stepsisters and stepbrothers and their families?

- Will my parent continue to be a good grandparent to my children?

- Where and how will we celebrate special occasions?

- Will I lose my inheritance?

### *The Parent's Questions*

- What kind of father will he be to my children?

- How can I help her feel less jealous toward my ex-wife?

- Will he understand the time I need to give to my children?

- Will he feel awkward living with my teenage daughters?

- Will my ex-wife make life miserable for us?

- Will her children and my children get along?

- Will she be willing to adopt my religion?

- Will he be willing to share housework and child care?

- Will my children and grandchildren ever accept her?

### *The Stepparent's Questions*

- Do the children like me?

- Will they accept me?

- What kind of discipline are they used to?

- How much time will they spend with their birth parent?

- How will I introduce my stepchildren to other people?

- Will my partner have to send a lot of money to his ex-partner?

- Should I take a job or stay home to get to know my stepchildren?

- Will her children have to spend every vacation with us?

- Will the children get upset if I redecorate the house?

- Is it okay to tell her that her child gets on my nerves?

- How should I treat my new step-grandchildren?

If stepparents, birth parents, and children, regardless of age, discuss these concerns, anticipate problems, and plan for changes before the stepfamily is formed, it may be easier to adjust afterwards. However, you may already be in a stepfamily and are looking for ways to step ahead.

## **Week 1 Activities**

### 1: Identifying Your Myths about Stepfamilies

- Talk about the myths you had about stepfamilies before becoming a part of one with your partner, children, stepchildren, friend, or someone who listens well.

- Ask yourself when you became aware of these views. What made you realize these beliefs were really myths and not necessarily true in real life? Think about situations that happened in your family that bring back thoughts of these myths.

### 2: Recognizing the Importance of Names

- Think about the different names that a stepfamily can call itself. How does each name make you feel?

- Share this information with other family members.

- If they are comfortable in sharing their own thoughts, find out their reactions to different names. You do not have to agree on one name. You just need to understand how each name affects each person.

### 3: Having Honest Expectations for Your Stepfamily

- Think about your honest expectations for your stepfamily. Think about each person involved. Think about the past experiences each of you has had and how well each of you gets along with each other

- Once you have done this, think about your expectations and how realistic they are. Be truthful with yourself.

- This week, pay close attention to how different family members react to each other. How do they talk to each other? How does it change when another family member is present?

- Identify two or three broad goals you hope to achieve in your stepfamily.

- Identify also what you want your stepfamily to learn from you.

#### 4: Planning Your Goals for the Future

- Think about the real difference you want to make in the lives of your family.

- Write these ideas down and share them with a friend.

- Discuss how you can help your family meet these goals.

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*Building Strong Stepfamilies*, a seven-part letter series written by Judith J. Winckler, Cornell University Cooperative Extension, Broome County, NY, 1992, was used as a primary resource for this publication.

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