

Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies--Lesson 2: Building a Strong Couple Relationship¹

Adapted for use in Florida by Millie Ferrer-Chancy²

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Building a Strong Couple Relationship

Each of you brings into your relationship a set of expectations of how you and your partner will act. Sooner or later you may be disappointed, but your relationship with each other is very important for the success of your stepfamily.

You need to be a strong team that can make decisions together and provide care and direction for your family.

A strong, healthy relationship benefits the children in your family. Children feel more secure and have a sense of well-being when the adult couple provides leadership for the family.

You and your partner can serve as a model for children. As they reach adulthood they will have some idea about how adults care for each other and manage a family.

Intimate relationships take hard work. They do not just happen—they require attention. Partners need to pay attention to each other and constantly support each other. A couple who has a strong relationship can help each other during tough times in the stepfamily.

The stepparent/stepchild relationship improves with a strong couple relationship. Stepparents who feel good about their partners may be more patient with the process of building a family.

A positive feeling about the partner helps the stepparent to not give up. A strong partnership may actually help stepchildren behave better and become happier over time. The children may be more willing to allow the stepparent into their lives when they think you are having a good relationship.

It may take your stepchild 18 to 24 months to be friendly to you. That is very normal, especially for teenage stepchildren.

It may have nothing to do with you as a person or a stepparent. Your stepchild may need time to accept

1. This document is FCS2169, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), University of Florida. This material was reprinted with permission of Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service. Publication: May 2000. Reviewed: February 2009. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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the new family arrangement. You need the support of your partner to not feel isolated.

A positive couple relationship will limit the chance of more family losses. Most stepfamilies are anxious about the possibility of another loss, especially in the early stages.

Second marriages end in divorce at higher rates than first marriages. A satisfying couple relationship helps decrease the chances of divorce.

Stumbling Stone: Neglecting the Couple Relationship

Meeting the needs of the adults as a couple benefits everyone in the family. It can mean the difference between stability and divorce. Find activities that are inexpensive or free. It may take some creativity, but it is worth the effort.

Some examples are:

- Taking walks.
- Doing volunteer work.
- Attending school or other community events not necessarily involving your children.

However, you may have to deal with the following obstacles:

Family issues may interfere with the couple relationship.

You may feel you are betraying your child by sharing your time and affection with a new partner. A teenager who has acted as your sounding board may really resent being replaced by a new stepparent. Knowing that a strong couple relationship will benefit children in the long run may help you build a caring relationship with the partner.

The children may not support the idea of the adults having time alone.

Children may resent your attention to each other. They are not concerned about your privacy nor are they concerned about your needs as a couple.

Plan an activity the children can participate in during the parents' time alone. This activity will minimize the child's resistance and any guilt the parent may experience.

Child care may be hard to find or cost too much.

Some stepfamilies have financial difficulties trying to deal with day-to-day needs and paying child support. Forcing a teenager to sit with stepsiblings may not be a good idea until good relationships are established. Some families are able to set up an exchange with another family. They take care of your children when you go out and you take care of theirs when they go out. This gives both couples some time without children.

It also may be possible to arrange visitation schedules with the non custodial parent to provide an opportunity for the couple to have some privacy.

Personal fatigue and overload interferes with the couple relationship.

You may lack the energy to focus on your partner after dealing constantly with family issues. Neglecting yourself impacts the family.

Think about the things you like to do by yourself that could be squeezed into a day packed with many obligations.

- It could be as simple as setting your alarm clock 15 minutes earlier to do something you really like to do. This extra time, although not much, could allow you to drink a cup of coffee and read the paper without interruption.
- You may work with your partner to trade off child care times so each of you can do something on your own every week.

Stepping Stone: Understanding the Challenges of Creating a Strong Partner Relationship

Individuals in a relationship go through stages. You often are very excited to have a new partner and find it easy to communicate in the beginning.

You will soon find each of you has many adjustments to make in combining households. This can happen even if one of you brings no children into the new family.

A stepfamily can go through five stages of development that can be described as honeymoon, chaos, awareness, action and commitment. It may take four or more years until relationships become satisfactory and you reach the final stage.

Even then, things that happen may make you slide backward. It takes constant work to move forward in these stages.

Honeymoon

The adults may have wonderful ideas of creating a new, happy family, but the children may think otherwise. You may welcome the help and support of a new mate, and you are certain your children will be just as eager.

Even when their absent parent has shown little love or interest, children often have fantasies of their parents reuniting. They are likely to resent a new stepparent being around. They want the new stepparent to just go away, no matter how nice the new stepparent is.

Chaos

Reality sets in. There are loyalty struggles. A parent may feel a tug between the child and the new mate. A child will likely feel a strong loyalty toward the absent parent.

Everyone may be grieving. The parent may be grieving the loss of the former relationship and not even realize it. The new stepparent may be grieving the loss of an ideal family. The children are likely to be grieving the breakup of their original family. Recognizing grief is very important!

Everyday living can be a struggle. Conflicts can arise around:

- Eating
- Disciplining

- Watching television
- Grooming
- Teaching manners
- Doing housework
- Spending habits
- Setting curfews for teenagers
- Everything

When you are in the middle, it is hard to realize there may not be a right or wrong way, but just different ways of doing things.

- There are likely to be boundary issues.
- Older children may not want young step-siblings around or want to share bedrooms.
- Other children may have two households and two sets of rules.
- Some children may come to visit only on weekends and feel they have no space to call their own.

The absent parent may be adding problems. It can be money or custody issues. You may feel sabotaged by your ex-partner in everything you do.

This stage is very hard. Some families get stuck in chaos and conflict. They may need the help of a mediator, a counselor, clergy person, or social worker to move into the next stage. You may want to join a support group for couples in stepfamilies.

Awareness

You begin to realize your stepfamily is very normal. **You begin to realize** your problems are very common for stepfamilies. **You begin to realize** you feel like an outsider because the rest of the family has a prior history.

It has nothing to do with you as a person. **You begin to realize** you are trying to be the super stepparent or super-parent to overcome grief and guilt, but it is not working. **You begin to realize** that your stepchild is not rejecting you as a person, but as

a new stepparent who is not wanted. **You begin to realize** you cannot change your ex-spouse; you can only change your own behavior.

Action

You and your partner begin to talk about the issues. The two of you decide what small steps you can take in addressing some of the problems.

For instance, your son who comes to visit every other weekend will be given one drawer to call his own.

You support your mate in disciplining her children, but you realize it would be wise to step back and not directly discipline them until they begin to accept you.

You try not to become emotional with your ex-mate. It is helpful to maintain a business approach whenever communication is necessary.

Commitment

A strong relationship takes commitment. You realize you and your partner cannot give up when the demands of an “instant” family become overwhelming. Neither can you take each other for granted. Building a strong couple bond takes time and work.

Stepfamily life is complex and often provides very little time for building a strong couple relationship. The instant task of parenting can set a tone of denial for the couple's needs.

Time together is not a frill. It is a necessity. Looking seriously at the calendar and scheduling time together may mean some changes. It will be a benefit both to the couple and to the children.

Stepping Stone: Recognizing the Importance of Communication

Learning communication skills for dealing with conflict is important for maintaining a strong couple relationship.

You may think the perfect couple never has conflict. First of all, that is impossible. Secondly,

healthy conflict and disagreement are crucial to a long-term marriage or relationship.

That may sound crazy, but Dr. John Gottman, a marriage counselor and researcher from the University of Washington, found that arguments and disputes don't have to drive a couple apart.

It is how you argue that makes the difference. You do not need extra ordinary skills to settle conflicts that make both partners feel okay.

Good communication is not a difficult process. Think about it. Every day you talk with other people and are quite successful. It may be with a neighbor or a person at work or another family member.

However, you may be getting nowhere with your mate. Your relationship seems so negative. You never seem to resolve important issues crucial to your stepfamily.

You know how to communicate, but your strategy for using communication skills with your partner may need attention. Dr. Gottman suggests four basic approaches:

Strategy 1: Calm yourself down.

Whenever a hard issue comes up, do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel your body get tense?

You just can't think straight when you are so upset. For some people, they immediately become defensive.

For others, they stonewall and refuse to talk. These reactions are bad news for your relationship.

Learn to recognize when you first become flooded with strong emotions. Make a very conscious attempt to calm yourself down. It will not be easy. Find ways that work for you.

- Take deep breaths.
- Try muscle relaxation by purposely tensing your muscles and then relaxing them.
- Take time-outs.

It may seem artificial to say to your partner that you need an intermission when she begins to talk about your child's poor table manners. Let your partner know that you are not avoiding the topic. You just need a time-out to be able to settle down to hear your partner's point of view.

Dr. Gottman indicates that it can take 20 minutes for your body's pulse rate to become normal after conflict.

Don't think negative thoughts during time-outs. Replace bitter thoughts, "He never appreciates me," with reassuring ones, "This is a bad moment, but things aren't always like this."

Strategy 2: Listen and speak nondefensively.

Being defensive makes it hard to build a healthy relationship. We speak defensively when we try to defend ourselves. To speak nondefensively is to do the opposite.

This strategy is not easy, especially when you feel emotionally attacked. For instance, your spouse may blame you for favoring your children over your stepchildren. Your instant reaction is to challenge that charge.

You have to start with nondefensive listening. You must be willing to listen to your partner's point of view and try to understand it. That doesn't mean you have to agree. It just means you have to try hard to understand and identify with your mate's feelings.

It may be as simple as saying, "Yeah," "I see," or nodding your head. Notice the mouth and eyebrows of the speaker. What message is being sent through facial expressions?

Think about your own body language. What message are you sending? Are you fidgeting? Are you rolling your eyes? Smiling sarcastically? Are you sending a message that you are truly listening to the reasons being given by your mate?

You may not like what your partner says, but you need to listen.

When you are ready to speak, it would be easy to strike back with a personal verbal attack. Instead, simply respond without criticizing or showing contempt.

Be specific and state how you feel, "I get really upset when I hear you accuse me of playing favorites. I realize we are having different ideas of how to be fair to everyone."

"You stupid jerk!" shows strong contempt and will produce no resolution of the problem. "I should have known you would say something like that," blames and criticizes your partner. It goes nowhere. Avoid:

- Whining.
- Making excuses.
- Using phrases such as, "Yes, but..."
- Bringing past baggage and problems into the conversation. Keep the discussion focused on the situation at hand.

If the two of you are constantly thinking negatively of the other, it will be tough to respond nondefensively at first. If you rarely have positive thoughts about your partner, you are hindering your ability to listen and speak nondefensively.

You need to tell yourself what is right in your relationship. Recall the good times. You need to think of the things that your partner does well.

These types of positive inner thoughts set the stage for not being so defensive in a conflict. Stop yourself when you begin to think bad thoughts.

Begin to share these positive thoughts. Everyone appreciates a sincere compliment or a thank you from time to time.

It may shock your mate at first. You may even encounter some cynicism if the two of you are negative to each other most of the time.

Don't give up. You might be surprised to see your partner beginning to do the same thing! Being positive is hard work. It is so much easier to find what is wrong.

Strategy 3: Work at supporting your partner.

Put yourself in your partner's shoes and recognize the importance of his or her emotions. It is a real art, and it takes time.

This strategy is especially important for persons who tend not to acknowledge the emotional part of a partner's message. You may offer a very rational answer. She wants to hear that you understand how she feels.

Each of you can validate your partner in several ways. You can compliment your spouse or mate by honestly praising him or her: "You really did a good job cleaning up that mess."

You can offer a sincere apology. This shows your partner you respect his or her gripe: "I see what you mean. I was wrong."

You can take responsibility. If your husband gets upset because you fail to tell him when you will be late, you can say, "I really made you angry, didn't I?"

This response shows you recognize your partner's reactions to your behavior.

You may want to start in very small ways. If there is constant tension between the two of you, it may be a big change to think about ways to support each other.

Strategy 4: Overlearn these strategies—try and try again.

It takes practice to learn any new skill: to drive, to play basketball, to cook... These skills take practice to get better. Learning different communication skills takes practice also.

- Start small.
- Talk nondefensively when you are watching TV, riding in the car, or renting a video.
- Give your partner sincere compliments for small things that he or she does.
- Practice these skills even when you don't feel like it. You may be tired, hungry, sad, happy or distracted, but you have to keep trying.

- If your mate doesn't respond positively, you still have to keep it up.
- Add your own sense of humor and personality to the nondefensive language.

The more you practice when you are not in conflict, the more overlearning will pay off when you get emotionally tense with your partner.

These four strategies can help a relationship. It will not happen overnight. But if you work hard, stay motivated, and don't let setbacks discourage you, these skills can benefit you and your partner as well as the children.

It will take much trust, courage and strength to use these strategies when you are feeling angry and hurt. You may know them and think they sound good. The key is making them part of your communication when emotions are really high.

Stepping Stone: Recognizing When Problems Lie Deeper

Resisting opportunities to spend time together or time alone is never good. It may indicate there are deeper problems in the relationship.

It may be time to seek help from a therapist, clergyperson or social worker who is experienced in working with stepfamilies. Ask people you trust for suggestions on who to contact. Check out the person's training and experience. Look for a professional whose personality and values are compatible with your own.

Week 2 Activities

1. Recognizing Your Partner's Good Qualities

Both of you write down ten actions you like your partner to do. Do this by yourself and don't peek at your partner's list.

Here are some examples:

- Hold my hand.
- Call me a pleasing name.

—Be patient when I make a mistake.

—Try to brighten/cheer me up.

—Thank me for doing something.

Share your list with the each other and think about these questions:

—Were there any behaviors on your partner's list that surprised you?

—Were there any behaviors on your list that surprised your partner?

2. Reviewing the Four Strategies

- Write down the four communication strategies you just read about.
- Choose the one that seems most important to you.
- Put it in a place where you can see it frequently.
- As you get up in the morning, think about the strategy and how you might use it.
- Before you go to bed, think about what happened that day and what you learned about the strategy.
- Write your feelings and responses on the card and date it for further comparisons.
- Change cards when you are ready.

3. Planning Time Together

- Plan time alone with your partner this week. It may be as simple as taking a 30-minute walk around your neighborhood.
- Make satisfactory child care arrangements so you will not be distracted from your time together.
- Make ground rules to allow yourselves an enjoyable time. You may agree to not talk about such things as your stepson's behavior or the lack of financial child support from your ex-spouse.

- Try to spend time together on a regular basis.

Suggestions for Additional Reading

Fighting for Your Marriage, by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley & Susan L. Blumberg. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, by John Gottman. Simon & Schuster Publishers.

You Just Don't Understand: Women & Men in Conversation, by Deborah Tannen. Ballentine Books.

Couple Talk: Enhancing Your Relationship, by Charlotte Shoup Olsen & Trudy Rice. K-State Research & Extension.

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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, and *Divorce Matters*, a five-part series produced by Lesia Oesterreich, Iowa State University Extension, 1996, were used as a primary resources for this publication.

The latter resource was originally developed as *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting* by M. Mulroy, R. Sabatelli, C. Malley, and R. Waldron, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension, 1995.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following persons who reviewed this lesson: Betsy Bergen, Flo Biehl, M. Gayle Price, Elisa Shackelton, and Deanna Soll.

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Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies was supported by a grant from the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Hutchison, KS.