

SAA FAMILIES

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Tending the Garden of Your Relationship

By JEAN MCBRIDE, M.S.

Good marriages are grown, much like gardens. In the beginning, a gardener enthusiastically plans the garden and prepares the soil, tenderly sows each seed and places each bedding plant in its place. Assuming all goes well, the new plants emerge and the garden takes shape. You find those routine tasks of watering, weeding, and caring for the garden become easy to do. It's thrilling

to watch your hard work come to fruition. Little compares to the absolute joy of harvesting your first green bean or cutting a bouquet of snapdragons you've grown.

Then for many gardeners, daily maintenance seems more a chore than a thrill as the season wears on. They aren't quite as vigilant in doing the tasks, allowing more time to pass between waterings, even to the point of letting leaves wilt and flowers droop.

New couples start out much the same way, with plans for wonderful lives and high hopes for the future. In the beginning, the idea of not talking about everything under the sun or spending time with each other seems ludicrous. "We'll never be like those long-married couples

you see in restaurants who don't talk" you vow to each other.

But as the reality of stepchildren, former spouses, mortgage payments, job responsibilities, broken water heaters and the like insert themselves into your relationship, those intimate talks may become more difficult and fewer and farther between. That's when, like the gardener, you may neglect the routine maintenance tasks that keep the garden of your relationship flourishing.

Marriages do somewhat better than green beans with this kind of inattention. Sometimes a couple can go on for years as if there wasn't a drought. In time, however, the lack of attention takes its toll. And by then, both with plants and marriages, it is difficult to restore the kind of vitality needed to keep growing.

Now is the time to commit to the regular maintenance of your relationship. Keep talking, mend rifts caused by arguments, spend time alone as a couple, laugh together, make love, get out of town now and then, make eye contact, touch each other, say I love you. Learn to put issues with former spouses and stepchildren into perspective. Focus on each other, working to build a strong and healthy couple relationship. From that base you can handle just about anything that life tosses your way.

From the forthcoming book Encouraging Words for New Stepmothers by Jean McBride, M.S., LMFT. Reprinted by permission of CDR Press.

1001 Ways to Be Romantic

By Gregory J.P. Godek

Here are seven items for a lifetime romantic checklist:

1. Improve your relationship in a specific way, once a month, forever.
2. Make love in Paris.
3. Do something so outrageous that it becomes a story your family will tell for generations.
4. Never forget a single anniversary, birthday or Valentine's Day.
5. Celebrate your 25th anniversary by renewing your wedding vows.
6. Give a gift that is so special it becomes a keepsake or family heirloom.
7. Make love one thousand times.



FROM THE EDITOR

By JEAN MCBRIDE, M.S., LMFT

Welcome to the spring issue of SAA Families. In this issue, we are taking a look at the couple relationship in stepfamilies. It has been suggested that in stepfamilies, the couple is the architect of the family, and the strength of the couple contributes to the strength of the family. In the year 2001, families seem to be busier than ever with each member going in many directions. It takes work and consciousness for a couple to find the time needed to nurture this valuable connection. We hope that some of the articles in this issue will encourage you to take care of yourselves as a couple.

We are pleased to introduce a new column by Ron Deal, MMFT, who will be looking at how the faith community can support stepfamilies. He encourages your questions and comments.

In SAA Families for Professionals we are introducing a new feature about which we are quite excited. Each issue will present a stepfamily case and discussion by three experienced clinicians. We hope to inspire and challenge those of you who are doing the good work of treating stepfamilies. Please let us know what you think.

We at SAA Families wish you the very best as you go about the business of being a stepfamily. Please let us know how it is going and how we may be of help and support to you. And, enjoy you families.

Tell Us How You Play Together

Our next issue is devoted to having fun as a stepfamily. We are looking for stories about stepfamilies having good times together. If you would like to share your story with us, please e-mail it to Jean McBride, editor at cdr@verinet.com. The deadline is April 15th.

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Editor: Jean McBride, MS, LMFT

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

MARGORIE ENGEL, MBA, Ph.D.

Another one arrived in the mail this week. Circular-filed when they're addressed to "Occupant," it's those specifically addressed to Steve or to me that pique my curiosity enough to reach for the letter opener. This time, it's an outfit called The Right One(r) (subtitled "The Relationship Experts") promising to provide me with a "continuous stream of...successful, intelligent and compatible singles" if I would like to "take the first step" by filling out their Confidential Screening Profile Form. Ah, the ATM machine approach to instant connections. And it was sent to a couple who have been married for 14 years! Why in the world? And then I remember that we do not share the same last name. Maybe that's why. Still, there's that nagging thought – maybe this outfit knows something about stepfamily marriages...



Stepfamily couples today really do understand that relationships don't run on automatic. We expect to extend effort. The tough part is that neither partner has socially prescribed roles – there's nothing specific to fall back on. We're winging it and perhaps too often find ourselves thinking, "This is not what I had in mind."

So, what is the work of the couple in a stepfamily marriage and what adjectives characterize good stepfamily marital partners? The personals ads use adjectives that attract including passionate, witty, romantic, expressive, and sophisticated. While those are charming attributes, as a second wife, my recommended list runs more along the lines of respectful, kind, flexible, generous, communicative, and funny.

Respectful and Kind

Staying in touch and even building good connections with ex-spouses is a growing trend. According to a recent People magazine, Fergie and Andrew are "best buddies;" exes Frank Sinatra and Andre Previn reached out to Mia Farrow when the Woody Allen/Soon-Yi story broke; and James Taylor became close again with Carly Simon (who has been happily remarried for 14 years) after her diagnosis of breast cancer. Yet this doesn't appear to be just a celebrity trend. Throughout the country, exes who share the same children are looking back on years of rancor and trying to figure out why they didn't reach this new point of respectfulness much sooner. Not only does this make life easier for the children; it also allows the parents to honor their lives as all of a piece. With clear behavioral boundaries between the past and the present, the remarriage partners and the stepfamily relationships

are chosen and cherished additions – not total replacements.

Flexible

It takes a tremendous amount of flexibility to create a successful stepfamily marriage. In order to be able to extend the needed flexibility, couples must earn heaps of each other's trust. Folks with varying degrees of kinship and relationship will be constantly moving in and out of our homes – visitations, holidays, children's milestone events – and wallets or pocketbooks.

Generous

The willingness to share resources creates bankable good will in stepfamilies. The resources are time (those regularly scheduled weekly "dates" when adults can shed the parent role), effort (creating the psychological space for your spouse to have private one-on-one time with each child), and money.

Communicative

By the time we're old enough and experienced enough to remarry, let's hope we have learned how to walk arm-in-arm without seeing eye-to-eye. While first marriages haven't cornered the market on lousy communication skills, it's imperative that we learn workable methods to reduce the pain and prevent another divorce. When we have exhausted our ability to help each other, it's time to reach out. SAA recommended books, articles, board members, support groups, and chapters are available for assistance. No stepfamily member has to feel alone.

Funny

Stepfamily couples need the capacity to make each other laugh, especially when caught using our ex's name in the midst of lovemaking or an argument. I did the reverse at my daughter's wedding last fall – repeatedly called her father (from whom I have been divorced for 20 years) by my husband's name. Fortunately, the men were amused. And, then, there are the coincidences. For Steve's birthday this year, his first wife's sister and my sister (who do not know each other) both sent the same birthday card. (It's something about the fat lady singing but I'm not going to go there.)

While we're extending love and compassion to our stepfamily partner, the sheer complexity of daily living can put a damper on romance and "connection." When that's happening in your marriage, you'll know it is time to create a special word, phrase, or handshake that is an instant signal to say, "I love you." Sometimes it's these little things that make a huge difference and help couples come out of the stepfamily chaos more married than ever.

STEPFAMILIES AND THE LAW

By LAURA W. MORGAN, J.D.

When Cooperation Just Isn't Working

Sometimes even the best of intentions do not always work when it comes to the interaction of former spouses. If there is a problem, it inevitably affects the new marriage. If your child's other parent is not willing or able to cooperate on behalf of your children, and you have exhausted the avenues of communication, mediation, and cooperation, there are some legal avenues to pursue.

One way to calm the waters is to take away some decision making from the former spouse. For example, if the former spouse is late on child support payments, you can get a wage withholding order. All states have laws that allow a custodial parent to obtain a wage withholding order on the non-custodial parent's earnings. This means a custodial parent can get an order from her local child support enforcement agency that directs her former spouse's employer to withhold wages to meet the child support obligation. The employer then sends the money to the support enforcement agency that then passes it on to the custodial parent. Although this process sounds cumbersome and ineffective, it has in fact increased the collection of child support by millions per year since 1996 when the federal government first required states to have this kind of law.

The situation is obviously more difficult if the non-custodial parent is self-employed. In that case, the custodial parent can have the non-custodial parent's federal tax refund intercepted for support, and can place a lien on the non-custodial parent's assets. Other measures such as license suspended or revocation is available.

Another example of taking decision making away from a recalcitrant non-custodial parent has to do with missed parenting/visitation time. Look for a change in the schedule that the non-custodial parent is more likely to follow. Perhaps changing to every other weekend or no weekends in the school year with extended time in the summer.

Some non-custodial parent miss parenting time because they feel uncomfortable coming to the custodial parent's home to pick up the children. In this case, a neutral transition location may help. In 1996 Congress passed a law that granted \$10 million to states to establish and administer programs to support and facilitate non-custodial parent's access to and visitation with their children by means of neutral transitions sites. Such centers have been established in the District of Columbia, Maryland,

Illinois, Nebraska, New York, and Florida. Check to see if your county has established such a center.

A last-ditch option in dealing with a non-involved parent is adoption by the new stepparent. The adoption of children by stepparents married and living with the children's custodial parent accounts for over half of all adoptions in the United States. Because adoption is a permanent step that effectively terminates the non-custodial parent's rights, it must be weighed very carefully and determined to indeed be in the best interests of the children.



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If you've moved recently or are planning a move soon, please tell us of your change of address. Every mailing results in paying at least \$25-30 dollars in address correction charges to the Post Office, plus the additional remailing costs. Please complete and return the form below to SAA, 650 J St., Ste. 205, Lincoln, NE 68508 or you may FAX this to (402) 477-8317.

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CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

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Thank You!

NEW FAMILIES: REVIVING AND CREATING MEANINGFUL BONDS

By C. Margaret Hall

New families are not to be confused with stepfamilies. They are families with flexible relationship systems and fluid gender role definitions, according to the author of *New Families: Reviving and Creating Meaningful Bonds*, C. Margaret Hall, a professor of sociology at Georgetown University. (Harrington Park Press). And that definition rolls nuclear, extended, and stepfamilies into one bundle.

Normally, I wouldn't buy that proposition. But Hall's observing the bigger sociological picture and her common sense advice (based on years of study and clinical practice) are practical for all families who want to strengthen bonds with children, stepchildren, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, steprelatives, and any other assorted kin.

After all, whether you're a parent or stepparent, these are valuable observations.

- It's sensible to attend the family's major events and participate in major family routines because it helps to understand the people, the past, and ourselves better.
- It's important to understand all the different families' power and influence on our own lives.
- It's wise to parent children loosely enough to give them the appropriate freedoms to grow in their own ways and not saddle them with our own hopes and expectations.
- It's essential to pay attention to our own development and goals for we can't be of much help to other family members unless we have those firmly in place.
- When we examine our own beliefs, we can determine if and how they restrict us and then discard the limiting ones and replace them with those that are more constructive.

Hall doesn't try to romanticize families. They can be tough and you can't always get from them (or give to them) what you'd like. But she says that love and concern can be expressed in many different ways (something stepparents need to be reminded of). "We need not be sweetness and light to one and all in order to be loving or caring," she says.

Families can have potentially lethal qualities, Hall says, and she offers some suggestions for protecting our-

selves at the same time we continue to love and respect those we're connected to. I've taken the liberty of applying some of the suggestions to stepfamilies, especially new stepfamilies where there's still a great deal of distrust and uncertainty – especially between stepparents and stepchildren.

Observe all members of your stepfamily closely. Know where you stand in relation to them, and know where they stand in relation to you. Do what needs to be done in family exchanges, and no more – unless you have your own particular reasons to do so. (What Hall doesn't say, but what I think must be added, is that the relationships in stepfamilies are quite fluid and that your standing – and others' – changes often in the early stages.)

Love your stepchildren and step-relatives with some reserve, but be careful about what it is that you say and do with them. Behave sincerely and authentically, but do not try to do only what they expect or want you to do.

Do not automatically please your family before yourself. Know who you are and what you want at all times. Make your own goals your first priority, but pay attention to what other family members need in order to fulfill themselves. Try to give your family constructive support whenever it's feasible to do so.

New Families isn't for the casual "how to" reader – though there are many ideas on improving meaningful family ties. But for anyone who wants to understand what's happening in one's own complicated family, it provides a picture of what a family – any family – must look like to deal successfully with its growth and change in an ever increasing complex society.

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Reflecting on the Couple Relationship

In our experience it has been important for us to periodically reflect upon what it means for us to be a couple. With all of the competing distractions in stepfamily life, the importance of being a couple can often be overlooked or taken for granted. We have found that not only is being a couple important to our relationship, it is critical to the success and happiness of our stepfamily.

JIM: In the relationships I've been in, there's been me, my partner, and the couple we create together. In my first marriage, we were just starting out. Like many traditional relationships, while I finished college, she worked; when I got a job, she stayed home to raise our children. It was about two people creating a life together – from scratch.

MARY: It's often the pressure a couple feels to do everything – have the car, the house, the job, and the kids – that keeps them so busy. They don't have time for each other. Often it's the kids that provide the glue for these families; at best, they can only be sticky notes for such relationships.

JIM: In our stepfamily, it felt much different. When Mary and I came together, we brought all of the baggage from our former relationships into our marriage. Each of us, parents and children, had established habits, values, and places in our original families. The importance of these original ties was invisible to the other partner before we formed a stepfamily.

MARY: The reason we five souls came together at all was because of the loving bond between Jim and me. Before we got married, Jim and I attended an excellent class to prepare us for becoming a stepfamily. When I realized that I had to put aside most of my romantic notions of us living happily ever, I almost bolted and ran!

JIM: The most important lesson we learned from the class was to give ourselves permission to put our couple first – even before the kids – recognizing it as the glue holding it all together.

MARY: It was my experience, as a stepmother of teenagers, that I was alone in my feelings of frustration and despair. It took us both understanding and communicating about our differing perspectives of our stepfamily experiences to stay focused on what was of primary importance – us.

We found the two greatest skills we had were flexibility and willingness to negotiate. Flexibility helped us try new approaches when what we were doing didn't give us the results we wanted. To illustrate, I would often dump my frustrations about Jim's kids on him believing that for him to be a good partner, he needed to know how I felt. In the middle of my discourse, his eyes would just glaze over. I realized that instead of getting closer to him, I was actually pushing him

away. I knew then I had to deal with my feelings differently. At first, I opted to vent my feelings with close friends. Eventually I saw my need to vent as a way I stayed stuck in old hurts and began to focus instead on what I was grateful for in my stepfamily.

JIM: Negotiation was another skill critical to our success in working through the minefield of conscious and unconscious issues brought from our pasts. By being able to share our individual perspectives and needs, we were better equipped to arrive at solutions that were workable for us both.

MARY: Another tool we employed from the start was going on "getaways" – times where Jim and I got to be alone away from home (remember, we had Jim's kids with us 24/7). The rules for getaways grew organically from the value we derived from them:

- (1) Focus utterly and completely on each other;
- (2) Leave all problems about home at home;
- (3) Talk only about things that nurture and sustain our "couple"; and
- (4) Allow ourselves to be profoundly intimate with each other.

When we had Jim's children with us all the time, we planned getaways every 6 – 8 weeks. As the kids began to spend time with their friends, we'd take getaways less often. Now that the kids have moved on with their lives, we still value our getaways, taking them on an "as needed" basis.

JIM: Our getaways were like setting the reset button on our relationship. When I got back home, I felt renewed in my love and commitment to Mary. It was a wonderful reminder of how much I cherish this woman, my wife, and how much I valued our being together as a couple.

MARY: Getaways allow me to see through the everyday knowing I have of Jim and marvel at his generous, loving spirit and how much I am blessed to be his wife. I am awed by how much fun we have when we are together relaxed and focused on each other.

JIM: Affording your life partner respect, attentiveness, love, and compassionate understanding is important to relationships in all families. When you are in a stepfamily, with so many divisive opportunities to pull people in different directions, it is critical to keep your eyes on the prize – your couple – as you create together your own unique stepfamily.

While we have talked about things that have worked for us, use your flexibility and negotiation skills to learn about each other and grow in the experience. Find ways to celebrate your couple and make the glue of your family bond unbreakable!

Stepping with Faith

By RON L. DEAL

I heard it again today, this time from a marriage ministry director in North Carolina, “We want to minister to the spiritual and practical needs of stepfamilies, but don’t know how. Can you help us?” The answer is YES.

SAA *Families* is pleased to announce a new regular column designed to address the unique needs and issues facing stepfamilies from a faith-based perspective. In each edition of *SAA Families* this column will share resources for churches and offer a few words of hope for stepfamilies. Questions regarding faith and stepfamily matters are welcome and can be submitted to me directly (see below). But first, let me bring you up to speed with what SAA is already doing.

Some time ago SAA recognized the vast potential for equipping and supporting stepfamilies through the local church.

Many churches throughout the US regularly have marriage enrichment events and parent training courses. Very few, however, address the unique needs of stepfamilies. That is something we’re trying to change. Last October in Houston I was pleased to present a “Ministering to Stepfamilies” training seminar in conjunction with SAA’s Level I and Level II stepfamily training. This workshop has grown out of a stepfamily seminar and writing ministry that has developed over the last five years (visit www.swfamily.org/stepfamily). Other ministry workshops were offered at the national conference in New Orleans and will be offered periodically around the country.

In addition, resources for Christian stepfamilies are available through SAA. Dick Dunn’s workbook “New Faces in the Frame,” a Christian supplement (by Vannesa and Ben Henneke) to John and Emily Visser’s “Stepping Together” program is now available, as is my home study audio seminar and workbook entitled “Building A Successful Stepfamily.” And new resources are being created; I hope to soon have available a new one hour video pre-

sentation entitled “7 STEPS to Stepfamily Success.”

Finally, we hope with the establishment of this column to keep you abreast of new resources and address your spiritual concerns. If you have questions or comments you’d like me to address submit them to rdeal@swfamily.org or write “Successful Stepfamilies,” 1601 James St., Jonesboro, AR 72401. The health of your stepfamily and spiritual relationship with God are intrinsically linked. Together let’s strive to strengthen both of them.

NEXT ISSUE: “What can I do when the lifestyle of the other home is teaching non-Christian attitudes and values to my children? How do I help my kids develop a strong faith?”

Ron L. Deal, M.MFT. is Family Life Minister for the Southwest Church of Christ in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He is a member of the SAA Advisory Council, a licensed marriage and family therapist, and author of the “*Building A Successful Stepfamily*” seminar (seminar schedule and articles at www.swfamily.org/stepfamily).

Editor’s note: Over the course of the year, SAA Families will offer a variety of faith-based approaches to stepfamily living.



A Moment with Scripture

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”
(Eph. 4:29 NIV)

This verse is easy to apply when it comes to people we respect, but what about ex-spouses? The challenge of “building up” those we be-grudge is a tremendous one, yet the benefits are many: 1) when children hear and see your commitment to wholesome talk, they are relieved of a loyalty tug-of-war; and 2) you become a more cooperative co-parent who responds out of consideration rather than resentment.

“Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”
(Micah 6:8)

FROM LARRY KALLEMEYN

Thank You

In this edition of *SAA Families* we recognize and publicly thank each of you who have contributed to SAA this past year. As a small grassroots membership organization every gift is vital to help us fulfill our vision that stepfamilies throughout the country will be accepted, supported and successful. As an organization, we continue to strive to provide quality research based information and educational programs that will assist stepfamilies negotiate the difficult issues they encounter on a daily

basis. Additionally, we strive to positively impact stepfamilies through our work and education of counselors, clergy, educators, financial planners, media, and policy makers.

Because we receive no tax or government support, we must rely on you for your financial support. Thank you for allowing us to work on your behalf.



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CHAPTER NEWS

By GLORIA CLARK
Chapter Development Chair

Often when I speak to chapter leaders they tell me that they are having some difficulty starting a chapter/support group in their community. In the past I have invited people to write about their experience with getting a group up and running.

Recently I spoke to Helen Devine and she told me about what she and her husband Jerry are doing in Hous-

ton, Texas, to provide people in their area with support for their stepfamilies.

Helen and Jerry are long-time members of SAA and active on the Board of SAA. They are both marriage and family therapists. Jerry is currently Chairman of the Board. They are both part of the SAA training faculty. Helen and Jerry have been married and in a stepfamily for many years. Helen writes:

Over the past 2 years I have been disappointed in my attempts to start new SAA chapters in the Houston area. All have begun with lots of energy and expectations only to melt away within 3-4 months. I have many explanations for the decline but keep coming back to the practical bottom line – busy stepfamilies who want support but cannot make the time commitment on a regular basis to sustain the group long enough for people to experience the benefits of membership.

More recently my husband, Jerry, and I were invited to teach a Sunday School class at a church we do not attend for remarried couples. We were pleasantly surprised to find 10 couples enrolled who were anxious to learn and grow together in the stepfamily experience. The openness and candidness of the group was apparent from the first meeting. By the second meeting several mentioned wanting to continue the class. By the third meeting they had begun to ask how to form a support group to meet their ongoing needs and interests. Even though these couples were not acquainted before this class was formed there seemed to be almost immediate trust and mutual support.

Jerry and I have been puzzled as to why this

particular group of strangers were comfortable together so quickly. Maybe belonging to the same church gave them a sense of having more in common than just their remarriage status. Their spontaneous desire to stay together may be based on the desire to establish more and better relationships within their church community. Many expressed relief and gratitude that their church leadership was validating their particular family structure and not asking them to just fit into the first family structure.

Practical considerations may be just as important as the group dynamics. Child care is always provided during Sunday School and church attendees are used to setting aside an hour on Sunday morning for their educational needs. It is easy to learn about program offerings from church bulletins, newsletters and announcements.

This group format may be an option for other church communities to utilize the Sunday School time for stepfamily classes and support groups. Following a series of introductory classes, evening meeting times could be arranged to meet members' time needs.

Sincerely,

Helen Devine, Ph.D.



Come to the Children's Rights Council 13th National Conference May 4-6, 2001

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—Margaret Wuwert, Ohio, grandmother,
attended 4 conferences

"The quality of speakers and information offered at CRC conferences is the best bang for the buck I have ever seen — and I attend many conferences!"

—David Arnaudo, former administrator,
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Conference

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| CEUs (APA) ___ or CLEs ___ | 10 |

All rates include 6 meals — Continental breakfast Friday, Saturday, and Sunday; two lunches Friday and Saturday; and Banquet Friday evening.

Gala Benefit Reception

Benefit for Children's Rights Council at the British Ambassador's Residence, 3100 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. (adjacent to the Vice-President's Home). CRC is requesting from \$500 to \$5,000 per ticket. Free transportation from hotel to the Embassy.

Thursday evening, May 3, from 6 to 8 p.m. (the evening before the CRC Conference).

For CRC Members \$100 (2 for \$195).

Additional tax-deductible contribution \$ _____

Total enclosed \$ _____

Membership in CRC is \$35 per year.

Note: Please consider an additional contribution to help make this conference and the Gala Fundraiser Reception a success. Thank you.

All contributions to CRC are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Your name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Fax _____

Enclosed is _____ per registrant. I enclose check, money order, or charge my Visa ___ MC ___ or AMEX ___

Account No _____ Exp. date _____

_____ I can't attend but wish to make a tax-deductible contribution to the success of the events.

Make Your Own Hotel Reservation by April 10. Call Holiday Inn Bethesda, Maryland at 1-877-888-3001, \$99 a night; mention CRC conference. Shuttle service between airports; subway connection from National Airport.

Step Carefully! For Steparents

By Bobbie Collins

A stepmom recently wrote, asking how she should handle her stepdaughter's upcoming wedding. Naturally, both her husband, his ex-wife and much of her family would be there. The stepmom was concerned about possible trouble at the wedding. We answered:

Your relationship is to your spouse, not to his former family. While his daughter is your stepdaughter, the real, blood relationship does not include the stepparent. Keep that in mind as we look at how you might consider handling the upcoming event.

Who is the event for? That's the important question. In your case, the wedding is for your husband's daughter. As some have said about any bride's wedding, "It's her day." So, the emphasis should be on her wishes.

As a stepparent our (me, too!) primary responsibility is to support our spouse. Your husband is concerned about his daughter enjoying her day. How can you best support him in this event? When it comes down to supporting my wife, I try to consider her needs. If my spouse needs me to be by her side, I will do so. If she needs me to be absent from the event, I will do so. I try not to focus on my feelings, but on my spouse's feelings, and in this case, your stepdaughter's feelings and wishes.

It is crucial that we stepparents keep the big picture in mind. This event - this wedding - is not about you, or your relationship with your spouse or his daughter, but

about her beginning a new life. She wants her dad there.

That's wonderful for her and for him.

Your job is to support your mate (and his daughter). Therefore, my suggestion would be to first determine if they want you there. If not, give yourself a reward for being mature, and take yourself out for a date - go shopping, see a movie, have a nice dinner out, etc. Don't sulk and harm their day. You'll be seen as an adult who is unselfish and heroic, and you will get rewarded in your own mind (and probably by your mate!)

If they honestly do want you to be there, be extremely alert to signs that you are intruding. If you get any signals (say, glares from the mother of the bride), check with your spouse to see if he thinks you should disappear. If you agree you should, then do so without any fuss or a scene.

Just go somewhere else and take that time to yourself.

If everything seems to be going smoothly, blend in with the event. Keep in mind, still, that you are there for your mate and his daughter, not to stand out at the party. You'll charm more people by your quiet self-assurance and dignity than by being the life of the event.

Again, this is advice for any steps, husband or wife. It is not a gender thing, it is about caring, consideration, and common sense. What will matter most will be their - and your - impression of how you handled it.

StepFamilies In the News

BRIDE AGAIN, Spring 2001, "StepPets...Adapting and Adopting" by Barbara Purlmutter, SAA Prof. Affiliate

THE SECOND WIVES CLUB.COM, December 2000, "Stepfamily Holiday Helpers Q&A," by Margorie Engel, SAA President with a link to SAA.

STAR, December 19, 2000, "Why Geena Davis is Risking Marriage #4" by Jennifer Pearson. A discussion about having an "ours" child in a remarriage includes comments by Margorie Engel, SAA President.

UNION NEWS, Holyoke, MA, December 18, 2000, "Communication Crucial to 'Step' Holidays," by Ronnie Gordon. Multiple personal family stories about stepfamily holidays including a "Stepfamily Tips" sidebar by Margorie Engel, SAA President.

SEATTLE TIMES, December 16, 2000. "Re-inventing Holiday Traditions" included an interview with Barbara Perlmutter, SAA Professional Affiliate

LOCAL/MOM-SEATTLE HOLIDAY NEWS MAGAZINE, December 2000, "Making Stepfamily Holidays Work" by Barbara Perlmutter, SAA Professional Affiliate and Lauren Miki, SAA Chapter Leader.

MAPQUEST.COM, December 14, 2000, "Holiday travel guide for stepfamilies," by Margorie Engel, SAA President with a link to SAA

USA TODAY, December 12, 2000, "Who Will Help You Grow Old?" by Karen S. Peterson. Discussion of caretaking and kindness to elderly stepfamily members includes quotes by Lawrence Ganong, U. of Missouri-Columbia researcher and SAA conference presenter and Sally Corwin-Osgood, SAA Secretary of the Board.

EDUCATION WEEK, December 8, 2000, "The Truth About 'All Children can Learn'," by M. Donald Thomas and William L. Bainbridge, SAA board member, in a debate about criteria for evaluating school effectiveness.

Steps to Stepfamily Success

Plan to have family meetings at least once a month or, if problems arise, more often. Establish guidelines to follow.

Educate Yourself! Read! Participate in stepfamily workshops and SAA chapter support meetings.

Time alone as a couple is valuable. Spend at least 20 minutes of relaxed time alone with each other every day.

Strengthen the couple relationship. Use good positive communication skills. Develop leadership as a couple. Fight fairly!

And the smartest step to stepfamily success is to join SAA now! Complete the application form below.

SAA MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

PHONE # _____

Send Checks to: SAA, 650 J St., Suite 205, Lincoln, NE 68508
Or use your VISA or Mastercard and call 1-800-735-0329.

One Year Membership in SAA = \$40.00 (which includes the book, "Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead")



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