

## Meeting the 5 Challenges of Becoming a Stepfamily

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**[Slide 1] [Intro Slide]**

Hello. I'm Dr. Patricia Papernow. This module describes the five major challenges that stepfamily structure creates for connection and intimacy, and gives you some evidence-based and practice-proven strategies to meet each challenge and forge successful, thriving step relationships.

**[Slide 2] [SFs Are Different]**

Let's begin by looking at how stepfamilies and first-time families are different.

**[Slide 3] [First-time couple]** First-time couples like Kevin and Ellen usually have time together before children arrive to deepen their sense of connection to each other.

**[Slide 4] [Time to deepen attachment].**

They have time to hold hands, snuggle, and love each other, without kids interrupting.

**[Slide 5] [Time to build some shared ground].**

First-time couples also have time to build some shared sense of how "we" do things. Maybe Kevin and Ellen find they both love 60s music. Kevin introduces Ellen to the outdoors and, over time, they find some favorite hiking and camping spots that are "ours."

**[Slide 6] [First child enters the adults' established relationship]**

In a first-time family, children enter their parents' already established relationship.

**[Slide 7] [red lines for parent-child attachment]**

Children in a first-time family usually arrive wired to reach to parents for soothing, protection, and care., and their parents are wired to reach back.

**[Slide 8] [Shared ground grows over time]**

Children in a first-time family also enter the couple's established ways of doing things.

And, over time, the shared values, habits, and rituals grow. Kevin and Ellen take Kendra hiking in a front pack before she can walk. The family sings 60's songs on long car rides, and some of them become Kendra's lullabies.

**[Slide 9] [Next child enters]**

In a first-time family, the next child (& the next) enters this established growing web of emotional and behavioral connection.

**[Slide 10] [Attachment deepens and shared ground grows]**

If things go well, attachment becomes ever-more secure, and shared ground grows. Now the whole family sings 60's songs on long car rides and they spend time each summer at their favorite lakeside campground.

*Skipping briskly ahead,*

**(Slide 11) [Divorce and 2 single-parent families.]**

suppose things did not go so well for this family. The parents split (or one dies) and children become part of two, single-parent families.

**[Slide 12] [Factors in positive post-divorce adjustment]**

Research establishes several critical factors in children's post-divorce adjustment:

Two of the most important are

(1) “*Authoritative* parenting” practices, i.e. parenting that is both loving *and* moderately firm, and

(2) protecting children from adult tension or conflict.

Maintaining some familiar rituals and structure also helps. Maybe both Ellen and Kevin continue to sing in the car and singing familiar lullabies at bed-time.

**[Slide 13] [binuclear family 2 years post divorce]**

Here is this “binuclear family,” as Constance Ahrons calls it (1994), two years post-divorce. Over time, single-parent families build their own strong sense of how “we” do things. [For positive models of divorce, see *The Good Divorce* (Ahrons, 1995), *We’re Still Family* (Ahrons, 2004) and *Mom’s House, Dad’s House* (Ricci, 1980/1997)].

**[Slide 14] [New SF]**

So, what happens when Kevin and Claire start dating?

Claire, the stepparent, enters as an outsider to all of this. This is a very different way to start a family than the start of Kevin and Ellen’s family.

**[Slide 15] [First-time couple].**

**[Slide 16] [New SF after a year]**

Here is this stepfamily a year later. Kevin and Claire are in love. However, even after a year together, as you can see, the red lines that mark the powerful parent-child attachments lie between parents and children. *Not* between children and their stepparent, Claire.

Furthermore, notice that the green areas of shared agreements about everything from what is a “loud” noise to whether camping is fun, or a form of torture, lie between the parent, Kevin and his children, and with Kevin’s ex-wife Ellen. Not in the stepcouple or in the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

All of this means that **parents** in a stepfamily are “stuck insiders.” They have the strongest bonds with everyone in the family—their kids, their partner, and their ex-spouse, Stepparents are “stuck outsiders” not only to parent-child relationships, but to ex-spouse relationships.

This is what I am calling “stepfamily architecture.”

**[Slide 17] [5 challenges”]**

Stepfamily architecture creates 5 major challenges:

1. First, insider-outsider positions in the adult stepcouple are intense and they are stuck.
2. Children in stepfamilies struggle with losses and loyalty binds, and all too often, too much change too fast.
3. Parenting tasks divide the adult stepcouple.
4. The family must forge a new family culture while navigating a sea of differences.
5. And, last but not least, stepfamilies include at least one ex-spouse, dead or alive, outside the nuclear stepfamily, who is inextricably connected to the family.

**[Slide 18] [Stepfamilies come in many forms.]**

Let’s pause to note that stepfamilies come in many forms. All of these forms have in common that at least one adult brings children from a previous relationship.

**[Slide 19] [Simple SF Kevin and Claire]**

In what researchers call a “simple” stepfamily one adult brings children. As if any stepfamily could be “simple”!

**[Slide 20] [Complex sf”]**

In a “complex” stepfamily, both adults bring kids. The stepcouple may be married or, (as in this couple) unmarried “cohabiting” couples.

Most statistical measures only count stepchildren who are under 18.

**[Slide 21] [Later life stepfamily]**

However, while overall divorce rate for American couples has remained relatively steady, the divorce rate among older Americans doubled since 1990 (Brown & Lin, 2012), with a concomitant rise in newly coupled older adults (Ganong, 2008).

This means that large numbers of young adults and adults are becoming stepchildren, with issues that are surprisingly similar to those of younger stepchildren!

**[Slide 22] [lesbian stepcouple]**

Stepcouples may be gay or straight. They may be preceded by divorce as in Tina's side (on the left) of this family, or by death, as in Pam's (on the right).

**[Slide 23] [Single mom with disappeared husband.]**

Increasingly, stepfamilies are formed by *neither* divorce *nor* death. If this never-married single mom finds a new partner

**[Slide 24] [ Stepfamily (unmarried) with new partner]**

they will form a stepfamily.

**[Slide 25 Stepfamily, not a remarried family]**

This slide also tells us that we can no longer equate "remarried family" with "stepfamily." If this couple marries, it will be FIRST marriage for both, not a remarriage, and it will be a stepfamily, with all of the challenges we have been discussing.

**[Slide 26] [5 challenges]**

So stepfamilies may formed of one parent-child unit, or two. Stepchildren may be under 18 or young adults, or adults with their own kids. The stepcouple may be married or unmarried, gay or straight, formed by divorce, death, or neither. However, in *all* of these stepfamily forms,

at least one adult brings children from a previous relationships. The resulting family structure makes a very different foundation for building a family, and creates these five challenges.

**[Slide 27 Adler Baeder study].**

It does appear that these challenges are less intense for African American families. In fact, the African-American community may have something to teach us about doing this right. Adolescents in African American stepfamilies are doing better than their Anglo counterparts. In fact Black adolescents in stepfamilies are doing as well as White children in never-divorced families. This is perhaps due, among other things, to a culture that accepts cross-household parenting, and that values the resources that can be brought to children from a network of neighbors, grandparents, friends, and ex-spouses (Berger, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993; Stewart, 2007).

**[Slide 28] [ challenges.]**

Next I want to describe each of these 5 challenges more fully and give you some suggestions about what works to meet them, based on the research and over three decades of practice.

**[Slide 29] [5 challenges with just #1 filled in completely: 1. Insider/Outsider positions in the adult stepcouple are stuck and they are intense.]**

FIRST CHALLENGE: Insider/Outsider positions in the adult stepcouple are stuck and they are intense.

**[Slide 30] [First-time family]**

In a first-time family, remember that children enter the *adult couple* unit, wired to attach to both parents, and vice versa, and shared ground builds throughout the family over time.

**[Slide 31] [First-time family]**

So, in this first-time family, sometimes mom is closest to Kendra or Katie. The next minute or the next day or the next year, dad is. AND, even when one child has no use for a parent, the couple, and the family, have a base of secure attachment and familiar, shared ways of doing things **that are comforting and that bind the family together.**

**[Slide 32] [New stepfamily]**

In contrast, in a new stepfamily, every time a child enters the room, or a conversation the parent becomes a stuck insider and the stepparent becomes a stuck outsider. Like most outsider stepparents, Claire often feels left out and invisible. Like most insider parents, Kevin often feels torn between the people he loves.

This is a core challenge for stepcouples. It comes early and it often stays present in some form, or reappears, even in well-established, thriving stepfamilies.

**[Slide 33] [Three things that help]**

Here are 3 strategies for meeting this challenge (for many more, see Papernow, 2013).

**1. Normalize and empathize.**

It helps immensely to have language for these stuck insider/outsider positions. It can be comforting to know that these stuck positions come with the territory of stepfamily structure, and that the feelings they engender are normal, understandable even though they are painful.

Normalizing begins with empathizing. We can say to Kevin and Claire, “It’s so stunning isn’t it. Every time a child enters the room or the conversation, you, Claire, become the outsider.

And you, Kevin, become the insider. You Claire, become the outsider. As the outsider you, Claire, feel invisible and left out. As the insider, you, Kevin feel torn between the people you love.” I always ask, after I have shared a piece of normalizing information, “Does this sound familiar?” and “How does it feel to hear this from me?”

Normalizing and empathizing can begin to help lift the shame, soften the pain, and deepen the couple’s compassion for each other.

## **2. Spend one-to-one time**

That word “blended” implies that you’d solve these insider/outsider issues by spending time together as a whole family. But that is exactly when these insider/outsider positions are most intense!

In fact, we best support *all* the relationships in a stepfamily (stepcouple, parent-child, stepparent-stepchild, and if they are interested in each other, stepsiblings) with one-to-one time in what family therapists call “subsystems.” The adult stepcouple needs time alone to build their intimacy and establish shared ground. Stepparents and stepchildren need time alone together, away from the parent, to build their own new relationship. (Otherwise the stepparent-stepchild relationship is always trumped by the stronger parent-child relationship.) And, as we will see, parent-child time is critically important for children.

## **3. Practice good interpersonal skills.**

Strong stepcouples face the same insider/outsider challenge as struggling ones do. Strong stepcouples find their empathy for each other. They communicate openly *and* constructively, rather than blaming each other, and/or becoming avoidant.

Claire, the stepmom, says: “*When your kids are here, I feel like I don’t exist.*” Even if she has said it kindly, Kevin feels scared and torn. If she was sharp, he will feel even worse! A



skilled Kevin could take a breath, put his arm around Claire, and say something like, “*That’s a little hard to hear. But that must be tough. Tell me more.*” Instead, Kevin gets defensive and critical. He says, “*What’s your problem? They’re my kids!*”

A skilled Claire might still be able to take a breath, and reach out to Kevin: “*Sounds like this is a tough subject. Let’s start again!*” Instead, she strikes back: “*But I’m your wife!*” Kevin lashes back: “*Don’t make me choose!!*” And they’re off!

Sue Johnson’s book, *Hold Me Tight* (2008) and any of John Gottman’s books (1994, 2006) offer good concrete descriptions of the skills that building connect rather than disconnection in couples.

**[Slide 34] [5 challenges with #2 filled in: 2 Children struggle with losses, LBs, and too much change too fast.]**

Moving on to the SECOND CHALLENGE.

Children struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and too much change too fast. . (You can learn more about this challenge in Module 11.)

A stepfamily is very different experience for children than a first-time family. And, a stepfamily is a very different experience for adults than it is for children. For adults, the new stepcouple relationship is a wonderful gift. **It is often a loss for children.** Kevin and Claire love to snuggle with each other. When they do, *they* feel wonderful. However, Kendra and Katie, sitting on the sidelines, feel uncomfortable and abandoned and anxious.

**Another major issue for kids in stepfamilies is loyalty binds:** “If I care for my stepmother (or stepfather) I have betrayed my mom (or dad).” It’s important to know that even

children in friendly divorces feel these binds. *However*, adult conflict hikes loyalty binds to a truly unbearable level for kids.

Last but not least, for children, the adjustment to a stepfamily can be more intense, and take more time, than the adjustment to divorce (Ahrns, 2007; Hetherington, 1999<sup>b</sup>). Adults are often eager to move quickly toward making a new family. However, when the process moves too fast, children become overwhelmed and the whole family suffers.

**[Slide 35] [3 ways to help Children with Losses, LBs, and the pace of change]**

The good news is that adults really can help kids with to meet these challenges. (More in Module 11. Many more concrete strategies in Papernow, 2013)

**1. A step at a time saves nine.**

Research tell us that as the volume of change increases, children's wellbeing decreases (Amato & Booth, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Jaynes, 2007). Stepcouples are understandably excited and eager to move forward with their lives. Kids often need *much* more time than adults wish was necessary. Take new relationships one small step at a time.

Adolescents, especially adolescent girls, more vulnerable children, and children with deeper loyalty binds will need more time for adjustment, more one-to-one time with parents, and less time with the whole stepfamily.

**2. Regular, reliable parent-child alone time is critical for children**

It is very important to invest in the new adult stepcouple. It is *equally critical* to provide ongoing secure parent-child connection, even more so at this time of major transition.

Successful stepfamilies *balance* couple time with parent-child time. What works is both/and, not either/or.

**3. Parental empathy is soothing and regulating for children.**

Neurobiologists tell us that parental empathy is one of the most powerful regulating forces for children. It soothes children on a physiological level (Siegel, 2011; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). When parents can get how hard all these changes are for kids, it does help.

The classic book, *How to Listen So Kids Will Talk and Talk So Kids Will Listen* for a terrific accessible guide for the compassionate part of parenting. (Module 11 has more on meeting this of challenge parental attunement in a stepfamily)

**[Slide 36] [5 challenges with #3 filled in: Parenting Tasks Polarize the Adults.]**

The third challenge: Stepfamily structure divides the adult stepcouple around parenting tasks.

**[slide 37] [Parenting Styles chart]**

This cool little chart, adapted from Daniel Amen (Amen, 2000) describes parenting as ranging from *loving to hostile*, and from *firm to permissive*, making four parenting styles. Three of these, the ones in red caps, line up perfectly with a huge body of parenting research (Baumrind, 1989, 1991):

**Authoritative** parenting is *both* empathically loving *and* moderately firm. Authoritative parenting produces the best results for children on every measure imaginable. It is key to positive outcomes for kids in never-divorced, single-parent families and stepfamilies, and across class and ethnic differences (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

There is a suggestion of an exception-- urban black children may benefit, at least in measures of academic achievement, from firm authoritarian parenting (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

**Authoritarian** parenting is *hostile and firm*. It lacks empathy and warmth.

**Permissive** parenting is loving but not firm enough. It does not ask enough of kids.

**Unpredictable** parenting swings unpredictably between permissive and hostile parenting.

Here's the challenge: Stepfamily structure easily pulls parents and parents to opposite corners of this chart.

[slide 37] **[Parenting Styles chart ... stepparents]**

Stepparents often want more control and more order. They are pulled to the “hostile and firm” upper right, *authoritarian* parenting corner.

[slide 38] **[Parenting Styles chart...parents]**

Parents often feel much more tolerant, and want more understanding and kindness for their kids. They are often pulled to the lower left, *permissive* parenting.

[slide 40] **[Stepcouples easily polarize around parenting styles]**

When things go badly, an irritated stepparent says, “*Your kid is a lazy slob and should be punished.*” The parent gets defensive, “*She’s just being a kid.*” Stepparents get increasingly frustrated and even harsher, parents become increasingly protective, etc. The cycles of polarization can be intense and painful. Meanwhile, children do not get what they need, which is *authoritative* parenting, that is both nurturing *and* moderately firm.

**[Slide 41] [Meeting the Parenting Challenge. 1. Normalize the challenge. 2. Practice authoritative parenting. 3. Discipline needs to remain in the hands of the parent. 4. Stepparents concentrate on connection, not correction. 5. Stepparents and parents need to help each other. 6. Skillful, constructive communication is critical.]** (Many more in Papernow, 2013)

Here are 6 tips for meeting this challenge

1. I keep the parenting styles chart visible in my office. I use it to help my clients to visualize this challenge and to normalize it.

2. The chart also helps me teach about *authoritative* parenting. When parents and stepparents are polarized, I can tell them that they do each have a part of the picture—kids do best with *both* warmth *and* moderately firm, realistic behavioral expectations.

3. Now let's add a critical piece of information.

The research is clear: Children do best when discipline remains in the hands of the parent, not the stepparent, until or unless the stepparent has formed a trusting, loving relationship with the child (Bray 1999a; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). *Over time*, especially with young children, i.e. under nine, *some* stepparents can, *sometimes* slowly, move into an *authoritative* parenting role. This is a process can take at least a couple of years, and sometimes more, especially for adolescent girls (Bray, 1999a; Bray & Berger, 1993). *Authoritarian* (harsh and firm) parenting by stepparents (the style the structure most easily pulls stepparents toward) is almost always toxic (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

**4. Meanwhile, stepparents need to concentrate on connection, leaving correction to the parent.**

**5. Stepparents and parents can help each other.**

Parents and stepparents do still need to form a team. Stepparents give input and the parent retains final say.

**[Slide 42] [arrow up on parenting styles chart]**

Often (not always!) stepparents can help pull parents *up* on the chart to more firmness and more requests for mastery.

**[Slide 43] [arrow over on the chart]**

Parents often need to help stepparents pull *over* toward more understanding and empathy.

**[Slide 44] [6 tips again]**

**6. Finally, open, constructive communication is critical.**

To be a team, parents and stepparents need to be able talk about parenting without triggering those awful cycles of polarization.

**[Slide 45] [Polarized stepparent and parent]**

This is more easily said than done. The structure pulls parents and stepparents to opposite corners. And, let's add that parents are *incredibly sensitive* about their parenting and their children. Stepparents, stuck in an unrewarding outsider position, are often *not* eager for "corrective input."

**[Slide 46] ["Soft/Hard/Soft"]**

The trick is to bring up hard things, but in a loving way. One way to do this is to use something I call "Soft/Hard/Soft" (Papernow, 2013). Soft/Hard/Soft is kind of like a reverse oreo cookie. For instance, imagine that you are a stepparent, and your stepkids leave their dishes in the sink, again! What comes easily is, "I can't believe your kids are such slobs." That's pretty much guaranteed to get you a defensive response.

To use Soft/Hard/Soft, first take a breath. Take the time to look inside for something "soft. "Soft" might be:

- Expressing caring ("I love you")
- Finding some empathy. ("I know this is new for your kids.")
- Offering appreciation. ("I know you've been working on this with your kids.")
- Expressing confidence ("We can solve this together.")

When find something soft to say, your body often becomes a bit more relaxed and your heart starts to open a bit. Next, try saying the "hard" thing, *but with that same "soft" loving energy*. ("The dishes in the sink are driving me nuts. Could you get the kids to knock them off?") And end with another "soft": "We'll keep working on this together."

**The fourth challenge.**

[Slide 47] [Challenge 4. Filled in: **Stepfamily must build a new family culture while living respectfully with a flood of differences**].

Stepfamilies must build a new family culture while living respectfully with a flood of differences. Especially early on, daily life in a stepfamily involves differences over everything from whether sugar cereal is a breakfast food or a sweet treat, to the “appropriate” cost of a pair of sneakers. Again, the already existing agreements about “how we do things” lie between *parents and children, not in step relationships*.

If you remember, Kevin and his kids love to camp and sing 60’s songs on car rides. Claire is used to vacationing in hotels, not tents. She can’t sing and much prefers listening to classical music. Camping and singing is comforting and grounding to Kevin and his kids. Both are miserable for Claire.

Here are four things that help meet this challenge:

[Slide 48] [What helps? **1. Shift the metaphor. 2. Make changes slowly. 3. Shift from arguing over “right and wrong” to learning about each other. 4. Remember soft/hard/soft.**]

**1. First, it helps to shift the metaphor.** Forming a successful stepfamily is less like blending cake ingredients until smooth. It is a lot more like a group of Italians learning how to live well together with a group of Japanese.

**2. Second, developing a sense of “we” is a process, not an event.** In our group of Italians and Japanese, decreeing that everyone will eat pasta and use chopsticks will *not* solve the problem! It is going to take time to get to know each other. **Even when the two groups are working well together, some differences will remain.** Start with just a couple of new family-wide rules and rituals. Rules for safety come first.

**3. Third, shift from arguing over “right and wrong” to learning about each other.**

What the Italians experience as warmth, comes across as intrusive and aggressive to the Japanese. What the Japanese experience as basic civility feels distant and cold to the Italians. It is easy for each to think of the other as “wrong” or “rude” or “disrespectful.” **The challenge is to stay curious about each other, to learn about what these behaviors mean to each other.**

**4. Remember Soft/Hard/Soft** Differences are upsetting. Take a breath. Teaching stepfamilies to use skills like “Soft/Hard/Soft” can help everyone slow down enough to bring up issues in a way that builds connection and intimacy rather than breeding hurt and distrust.

**[Slide 49] [Five Challenges (fifth challenge filled in) 5. Ex-spouses, dead or alive, are part of the family.]**

Last but not least, ex-spouses, dead or alive, are part of the family. Alive ex-spouses affect everything from vacation planning to whether children have all their schoolbooks. Dead ex-spouses may be absent in body, but remain deeply embedded in children’s hearts. In fact, dead, disappeared, or abusive parents can sometimes create an even more intense loyalty bond and children have so little to hold on to. They hold on to whatever shreds of the parent they have.

**Here are 3 things to know about meeting the ex-spouse challenge.**

**[Slide 50][ 3 things that help. 1. Protect children from adult conflict. 2. Highly cooperative post-divorce co-parenting is best for children. Next best, encourage low-conflict “parallel parenting.” 3. Help ex-spouses to bring their best skills, not their worst.]**

**1. First**, the research is absolutely clear. Decades of studies tell us that is most destructive to kids is *not* divorce. It is adult conflict (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Grych & Fincham, 2001;). Even *moderate* tension between adults can impact a child’s



attention, immune system, and social functioning (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Mize, & Acebo, 2006). Adults need to do their best to protect children from conflict and tension.

**2. Second**, research tells us that highly cooperative post-divorce co-parenting is best for children. Sadly, this remains the minority. What researchers call “parallel parenting” is more common, and, as long as conflict remains low, it works very well for children (Hetherington et al., 1998; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

**3. Finally**, it is critical that we help ex-spouses to bring their best skills, not their worst, to these relationships. (Jeffrey Wittman’s book *Custody Chaos Personal Peace* is a great guide.)

**[Slide 51] [Stepfamily structure creates five major challenges. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.]**

So, to summarize, stepfamily structure creates five major challenges. Strong stepfamilies face the same challenges as struggling ones (Golish, 2003).

Successful stepfamilies meet these challenges in a number of ways. They support *both* parent-child relationships *and* new step relationships, by carving out lots of one-to-one time.

They take change one step at a time.

Parents are empathic and attuned.

Parents practice warm *and* firm, *authoritative* parenting.

Stepparents to begin with connection, leaving parents in charge of correction.

The new stepcouple takes change a step at a time.

All of the adults actively protect children from conflict.

And, strong stepfamilies communicate openly, with caring and respect.

**[Slide 51] [Becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event]**

Becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event. However, Stepfamilies can and do meet these challenges and build strong, satisfying relationships.

**[Slide 52. Stepfamilies do meet their challenges]**

**[Slide 53. Cover Slide]**