



National Stepfamily
Resource Center

MEETING THE 5 CHALLENGES
OF BECOMING A STEPFAMILY



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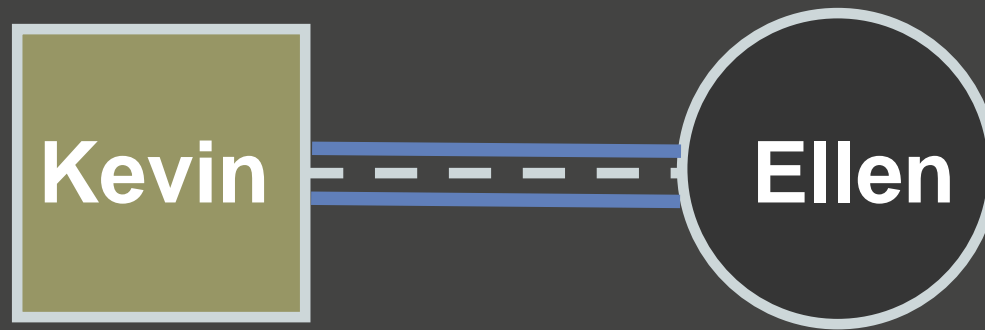
**Stepfamilies are different from
first-time families.**



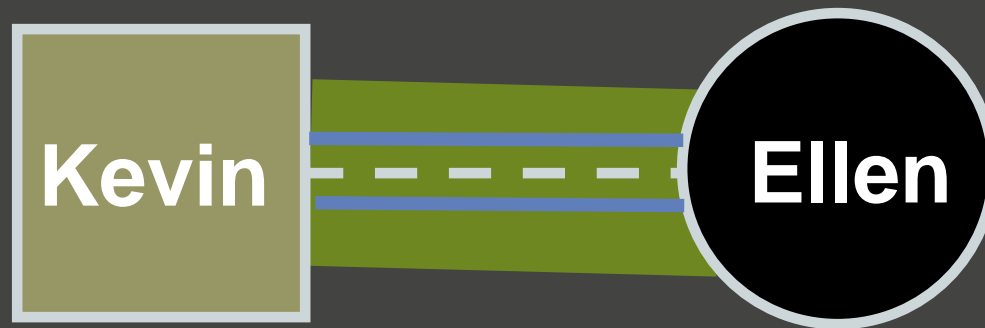
First-Time Couple Dating



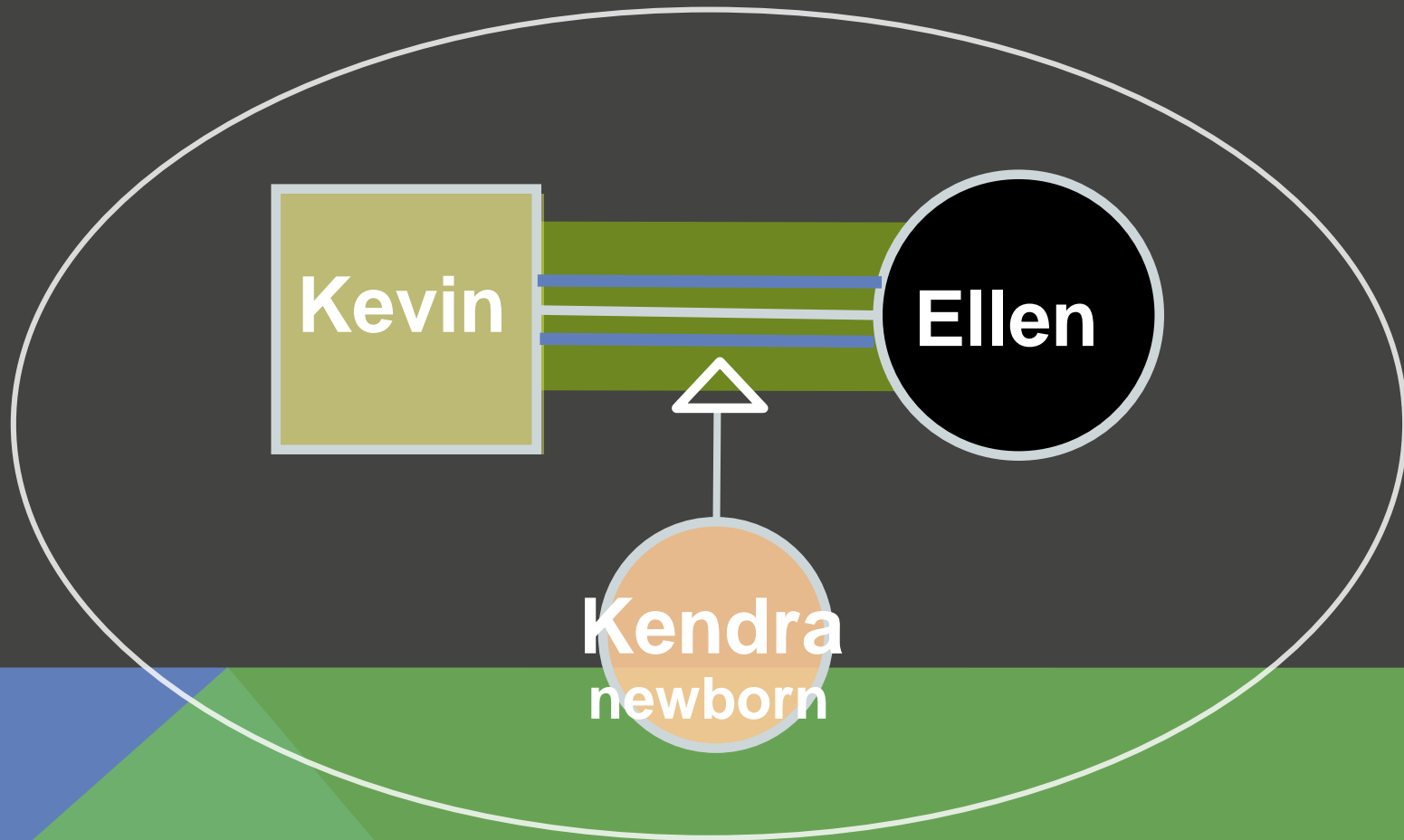
First-Time Couple has time to deepen attachment



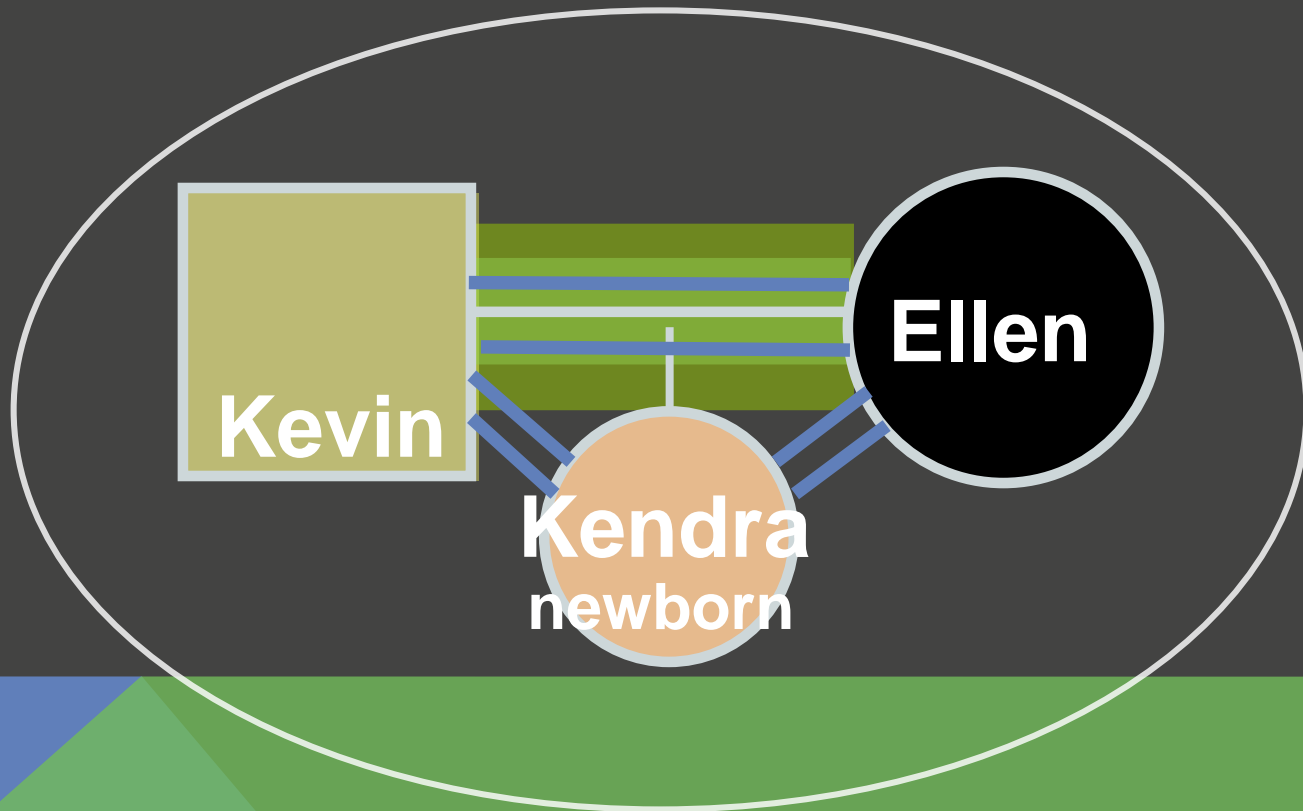
A first-time couple has time to form some shared ground



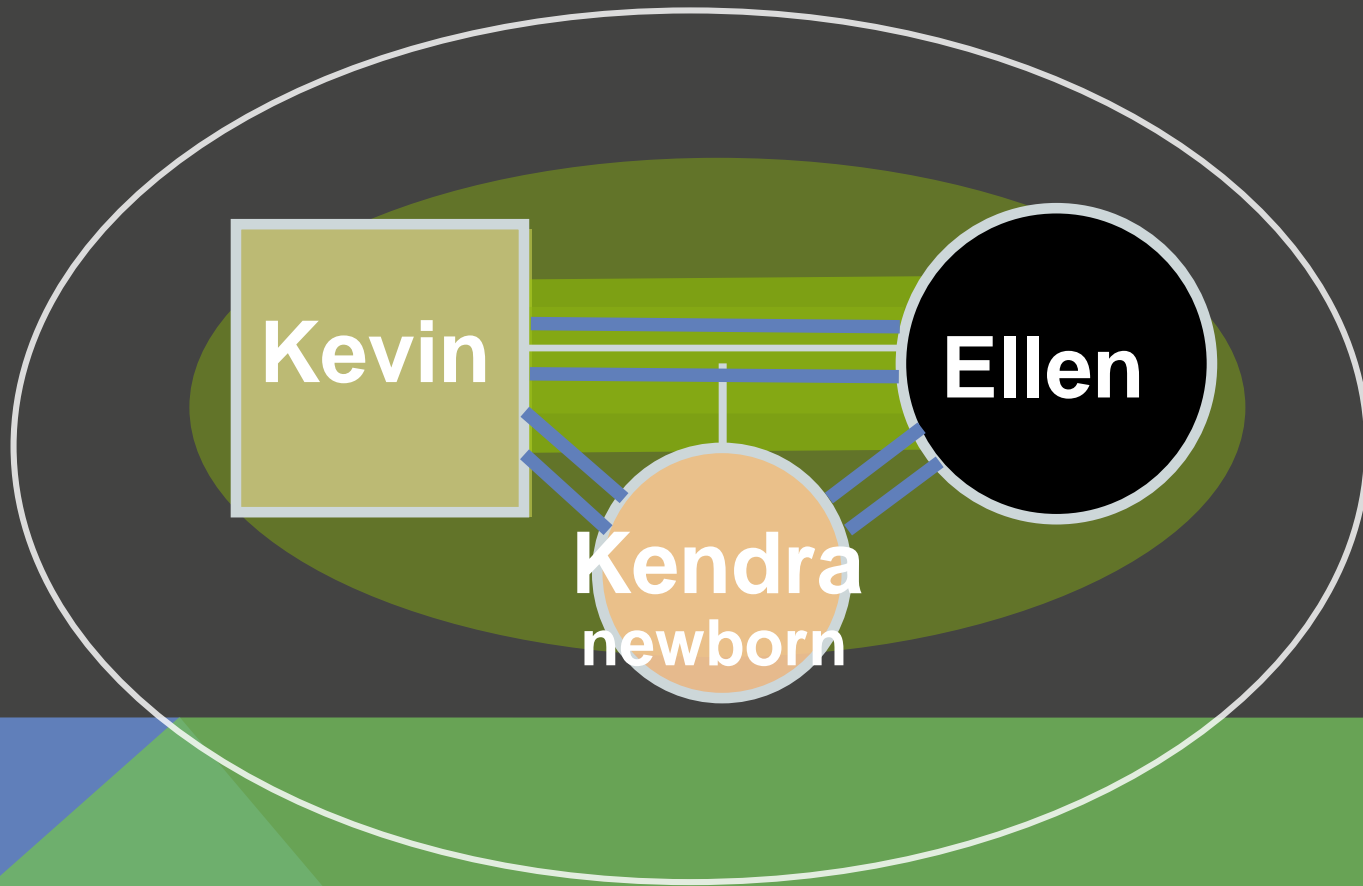
The first child enters the adults' established relationship



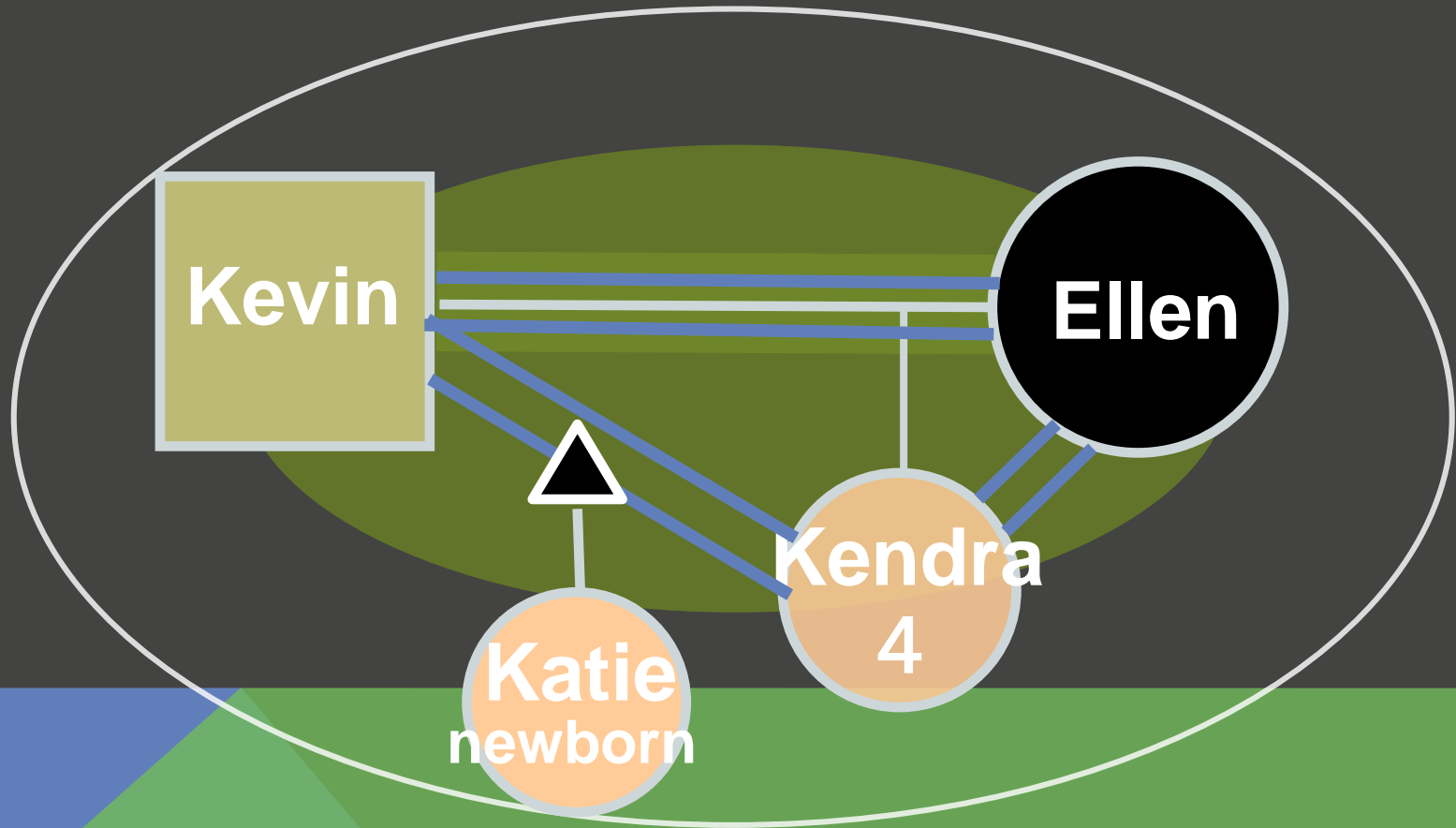
In a first-time family, parents and children start out wired for attachment to each other



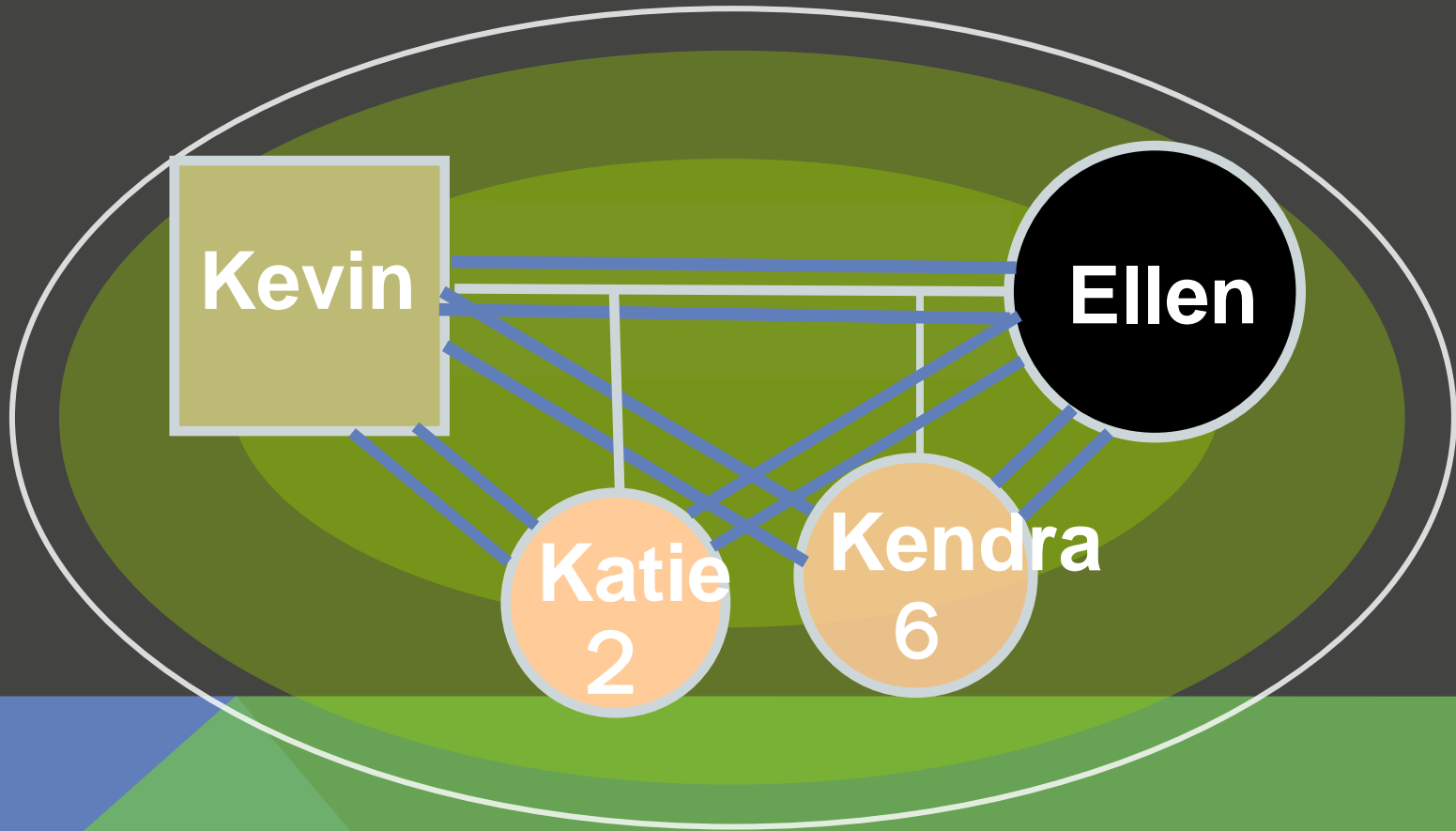
The family's shared ground grows over time



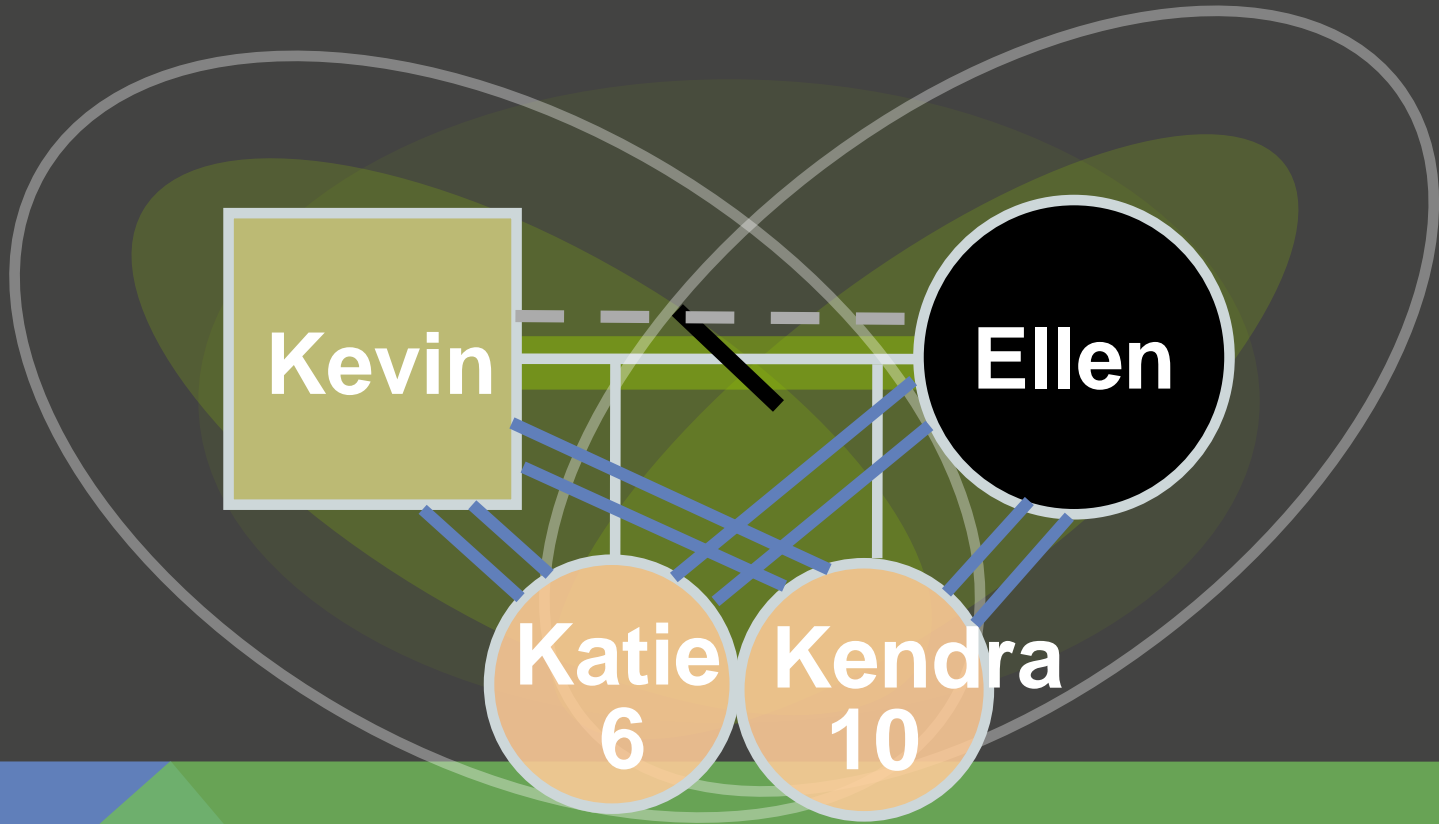
The next child enters this growing web of connection



If things go well, attachment deepens
& shared ground grows



Divorce and 2 single-parent families

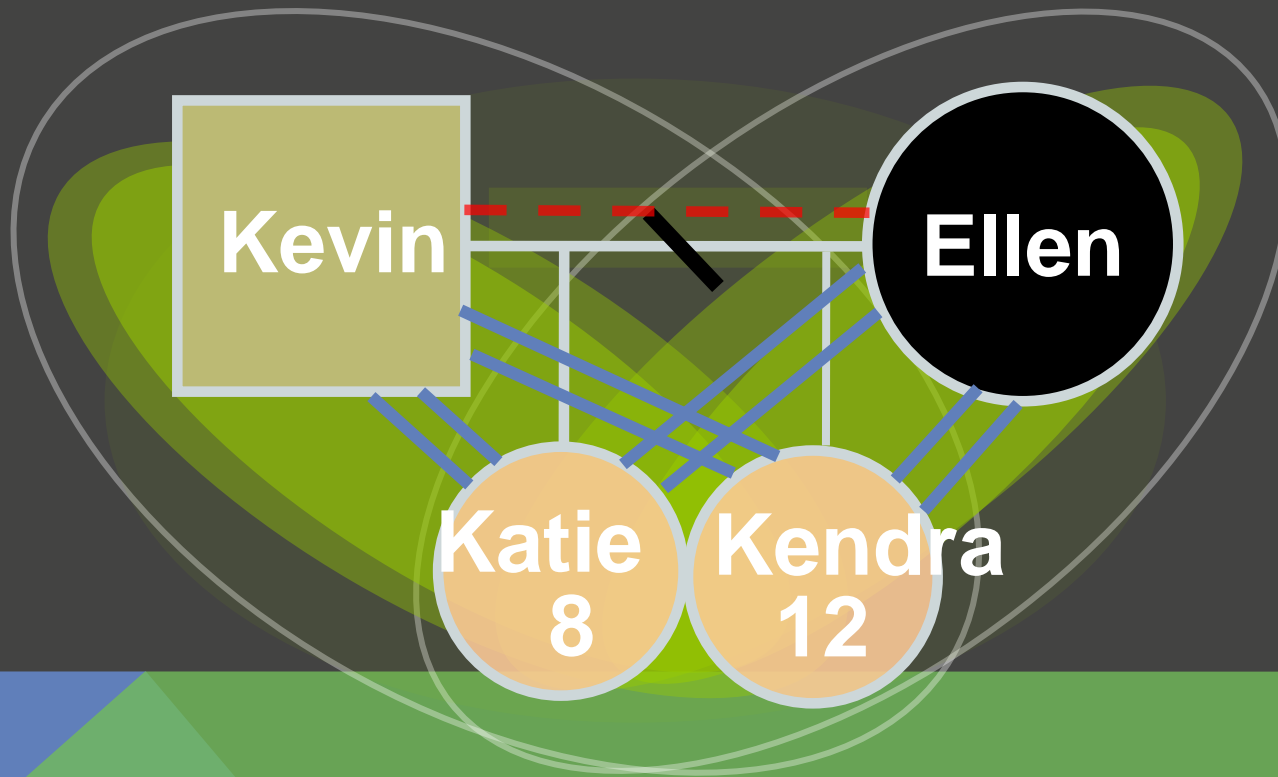


2 critical factors in positive post-divorce adjustment for children:

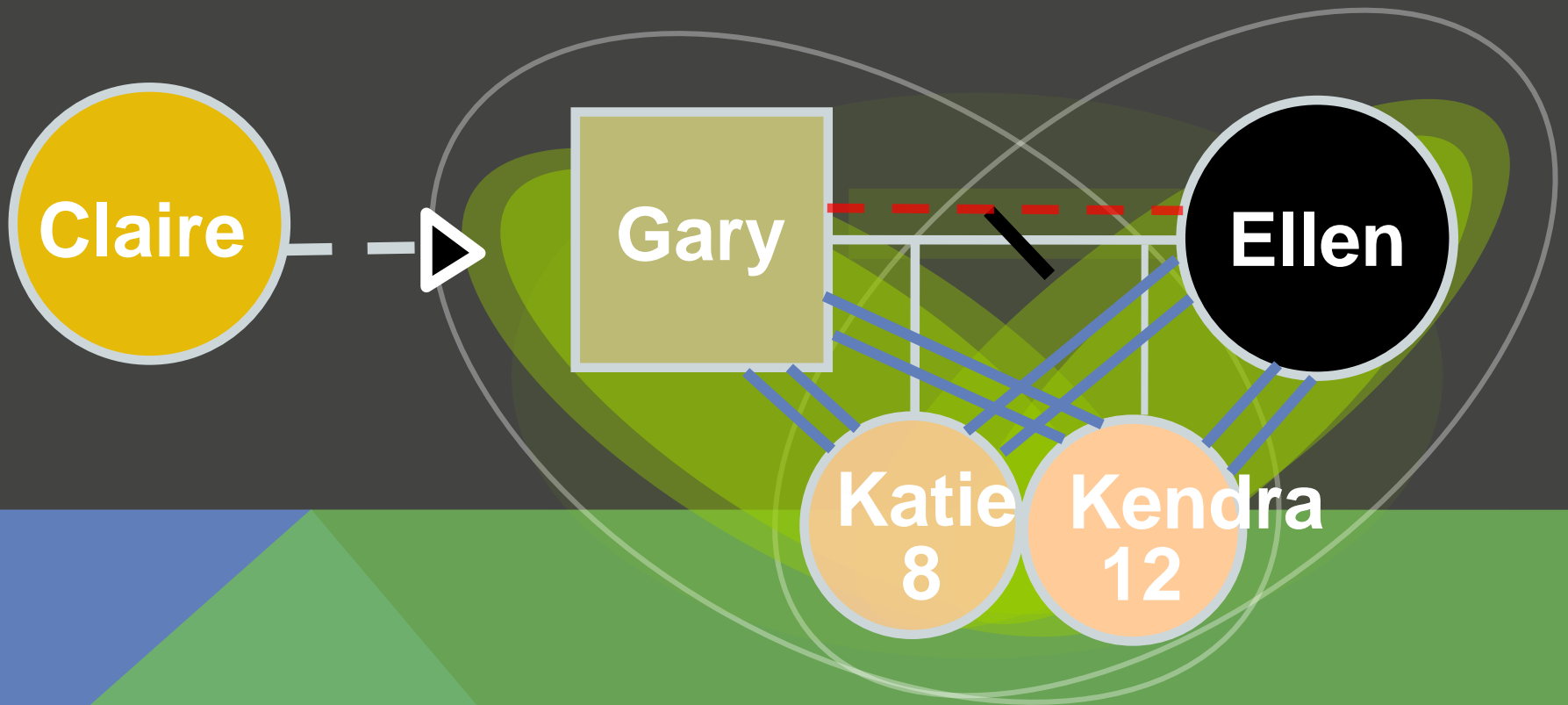
- *Authoritative* (loving and moderately firm) parenting
- Low conflict



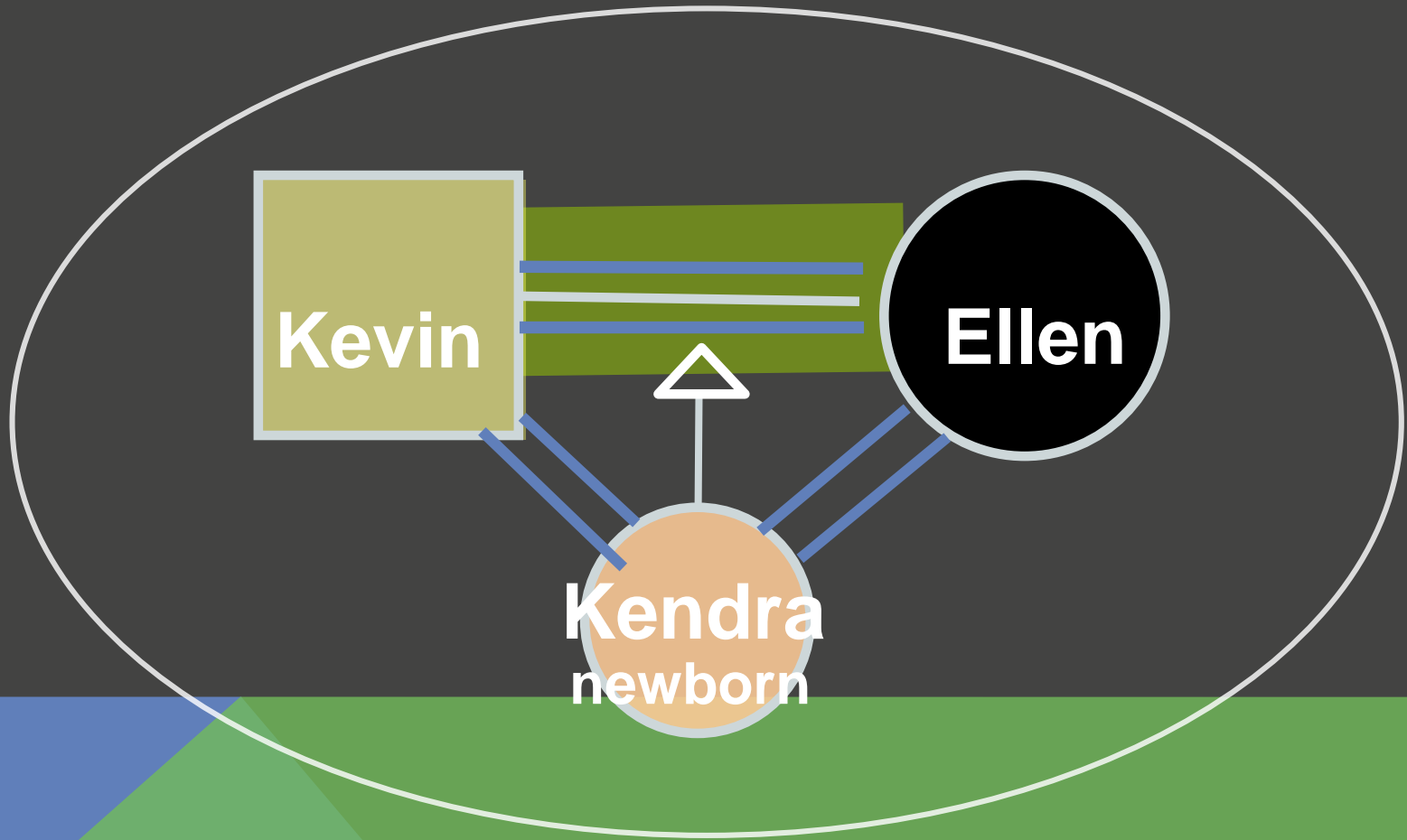
“Binuclear family” (Ahrons,1994) 2 years post-divorce



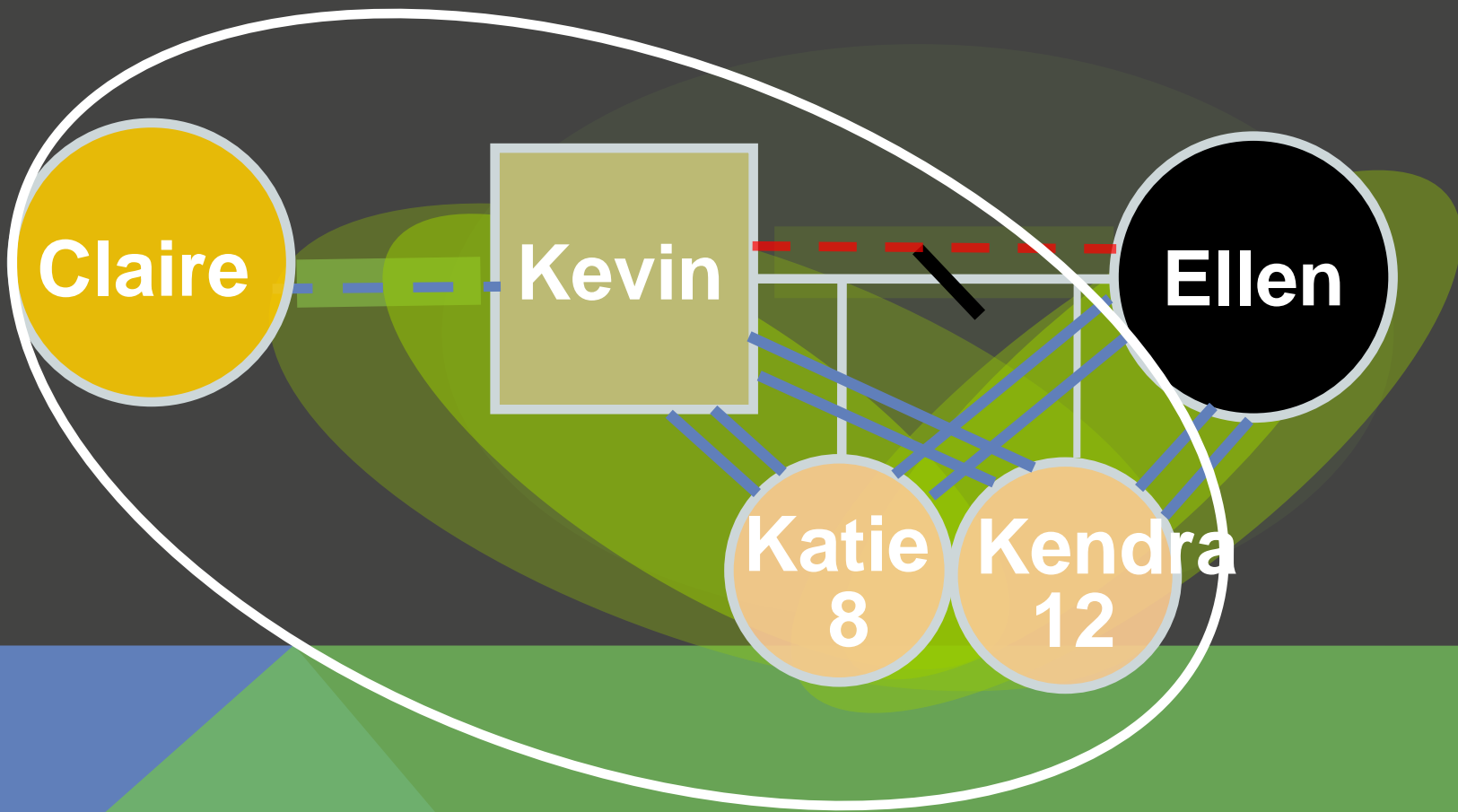
New stepcouple



Start of a first-time family



New stepfamily after a year together



STEPFAMILY ARCHITECTURE CREATES 5 MAJOR CHALLENGES:

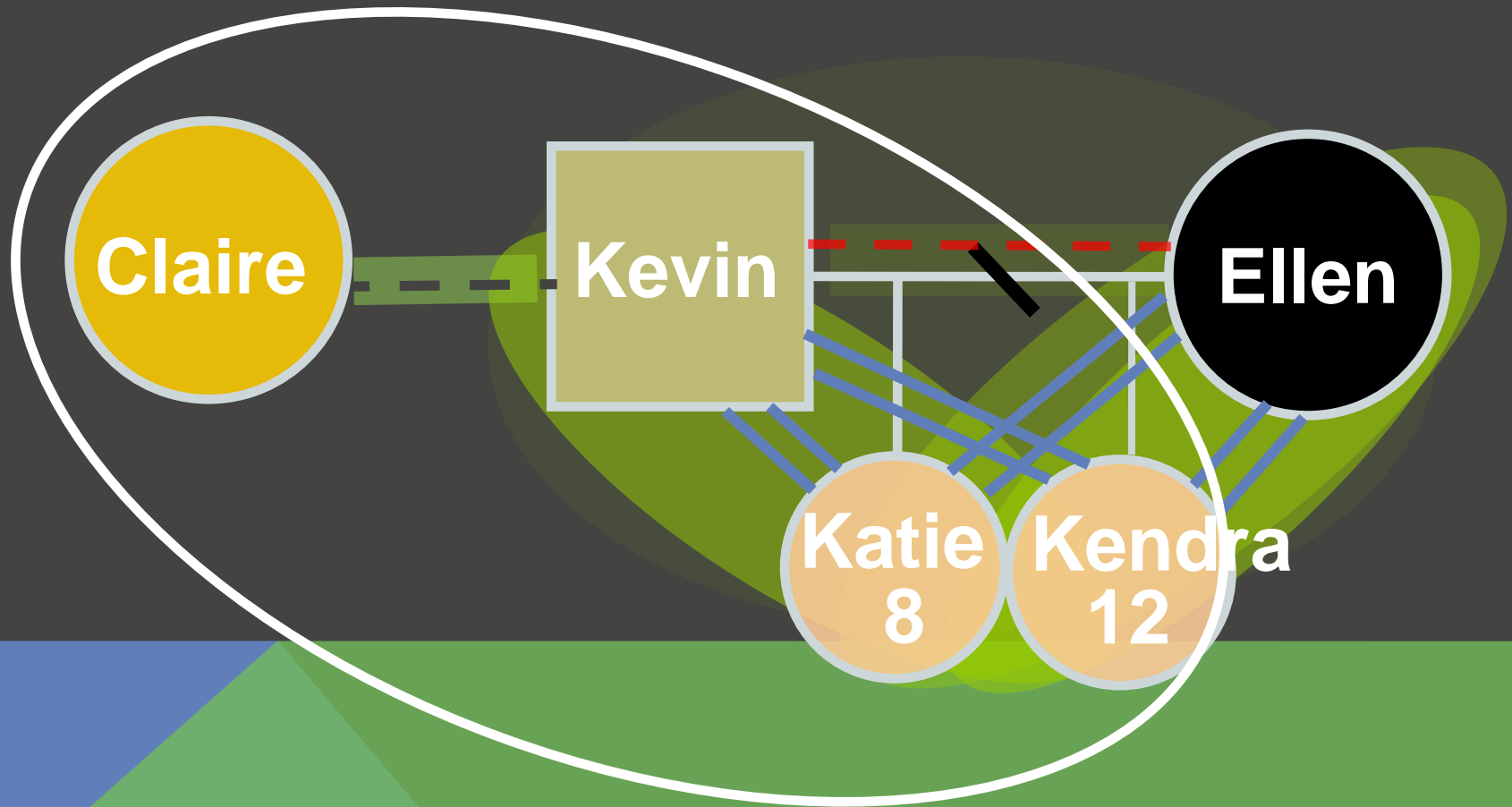
- 1. INSIDER/OUTSIDER positions in the stepcouple are intense and they are stuck.
- 2. CHILDREN struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and too much change, too fast.
- 3. PARENTING TASKS polarize the stepcouple.
- 4. A new FAMILY CULTURE must be built, while navigating a sea of differences.
- 5. EX-SPOUSES/OTHER PARENTS, dead or alive, are part of the new family.



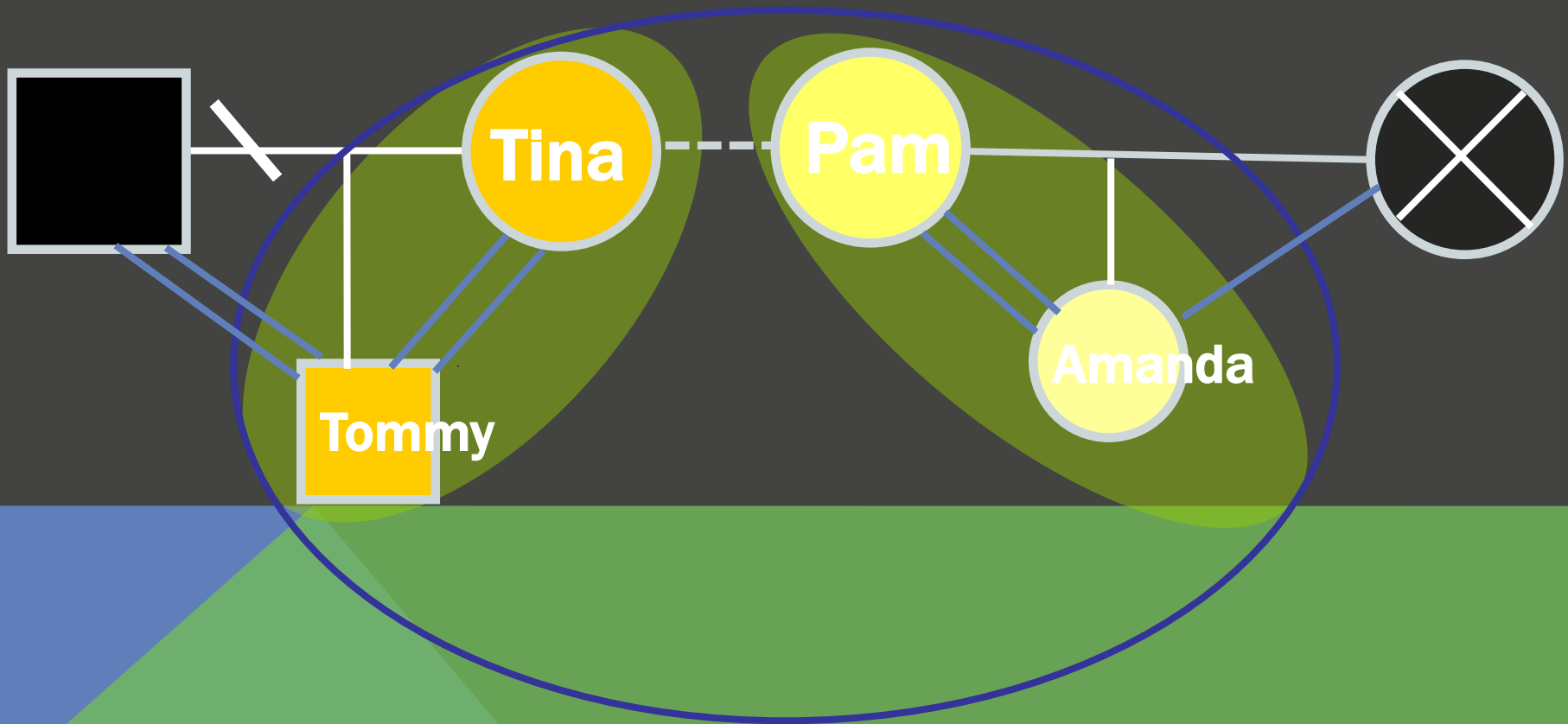
Stepfamilies come in many forms



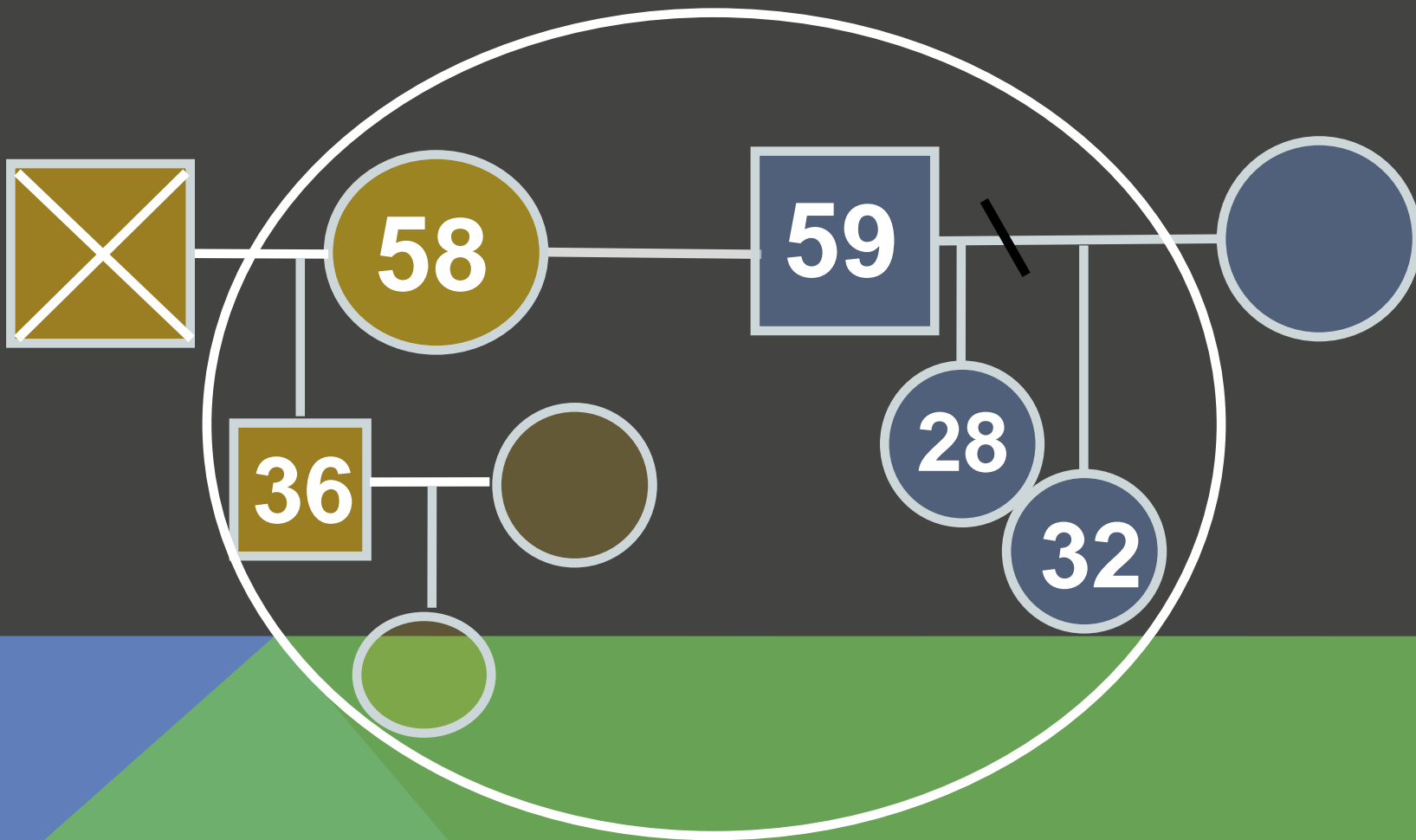
“Simple” stepfamily—only one adult brings children



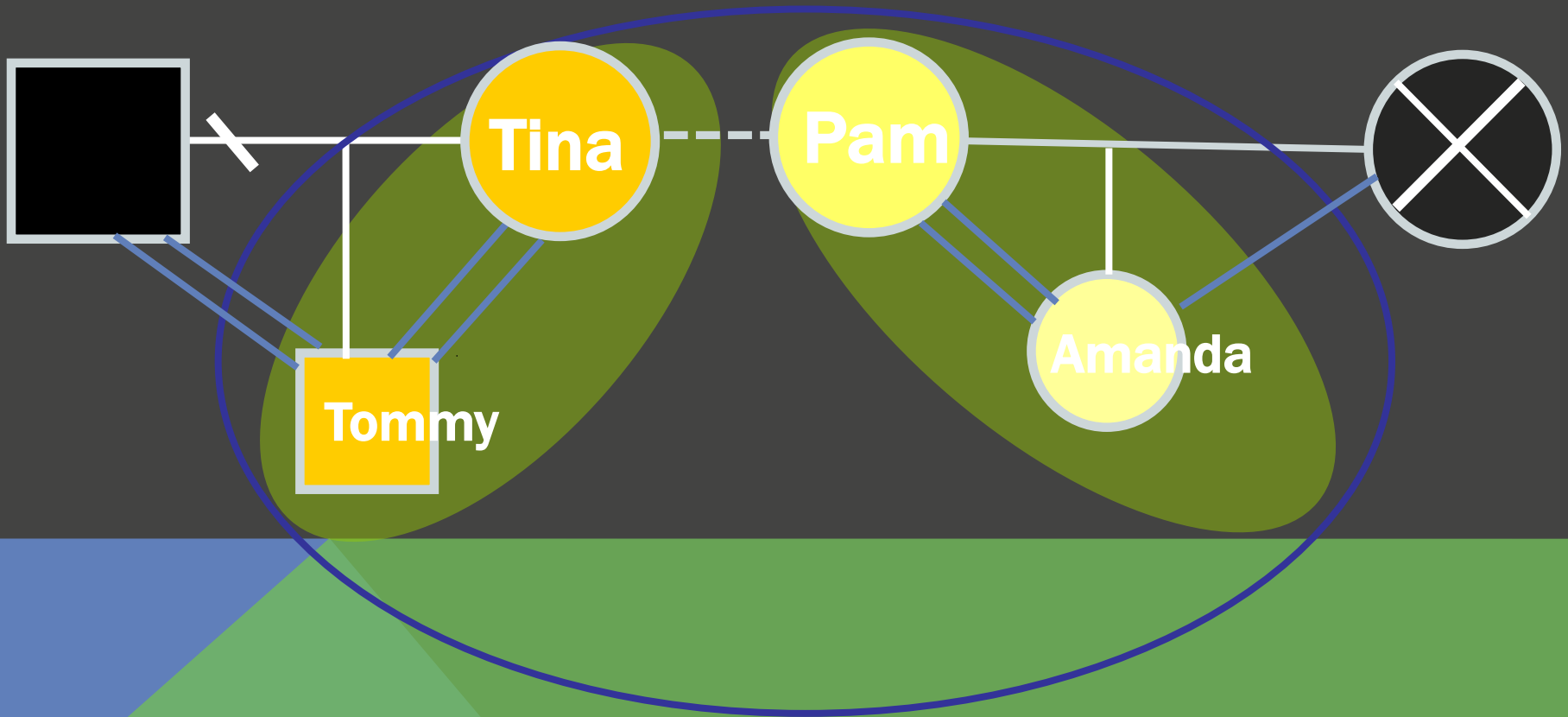
In a “complex” stepfamily, both adults bring children



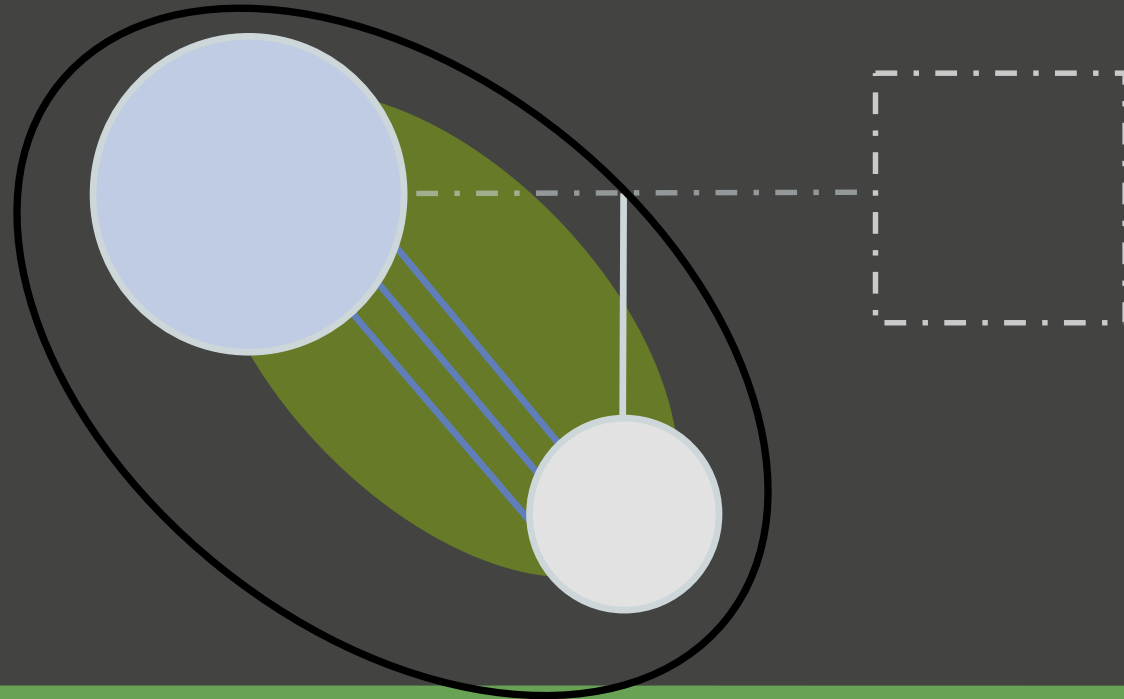
Older recouplers with adult children



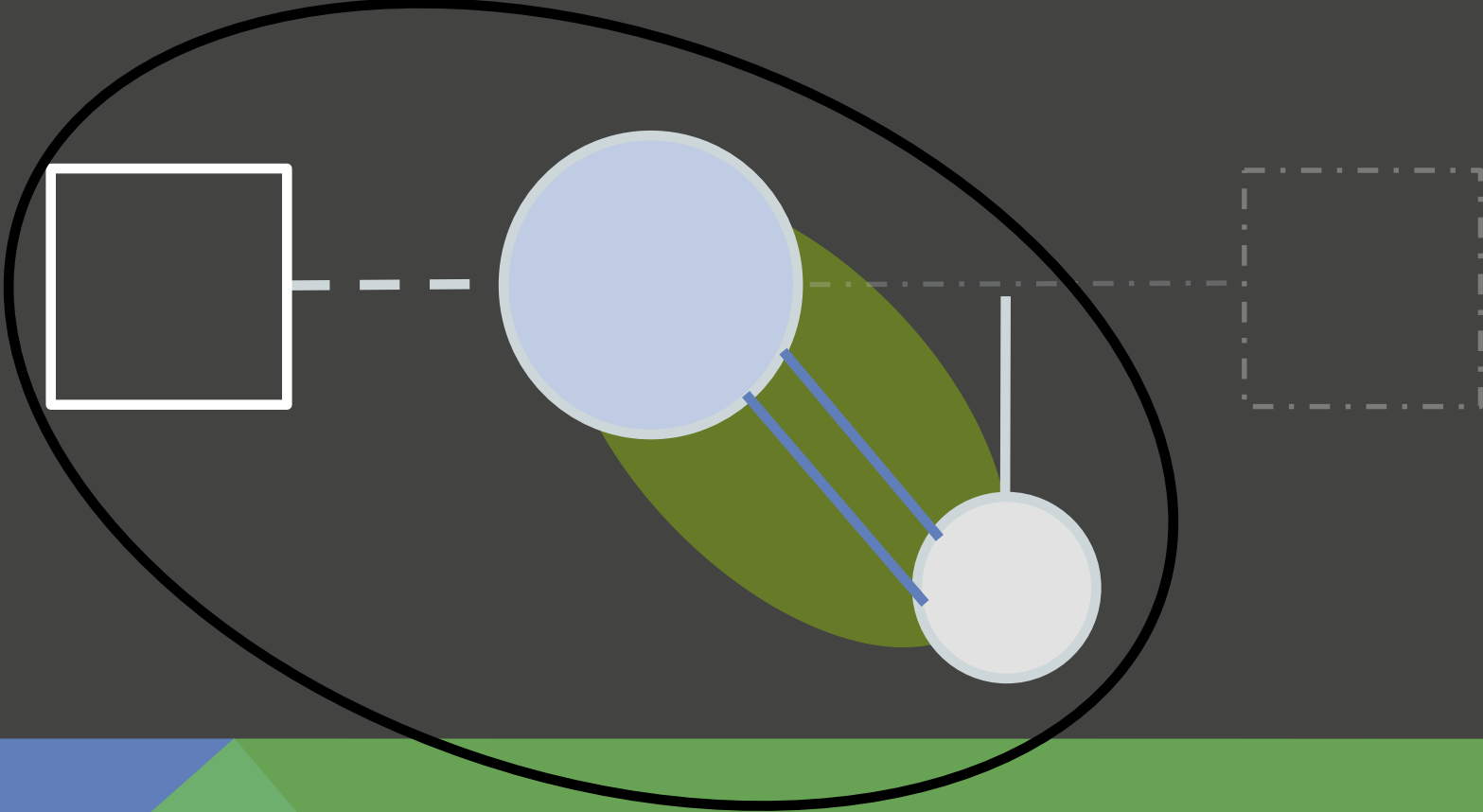
Stepcouples may be gay or straight, formed by divorce or by death



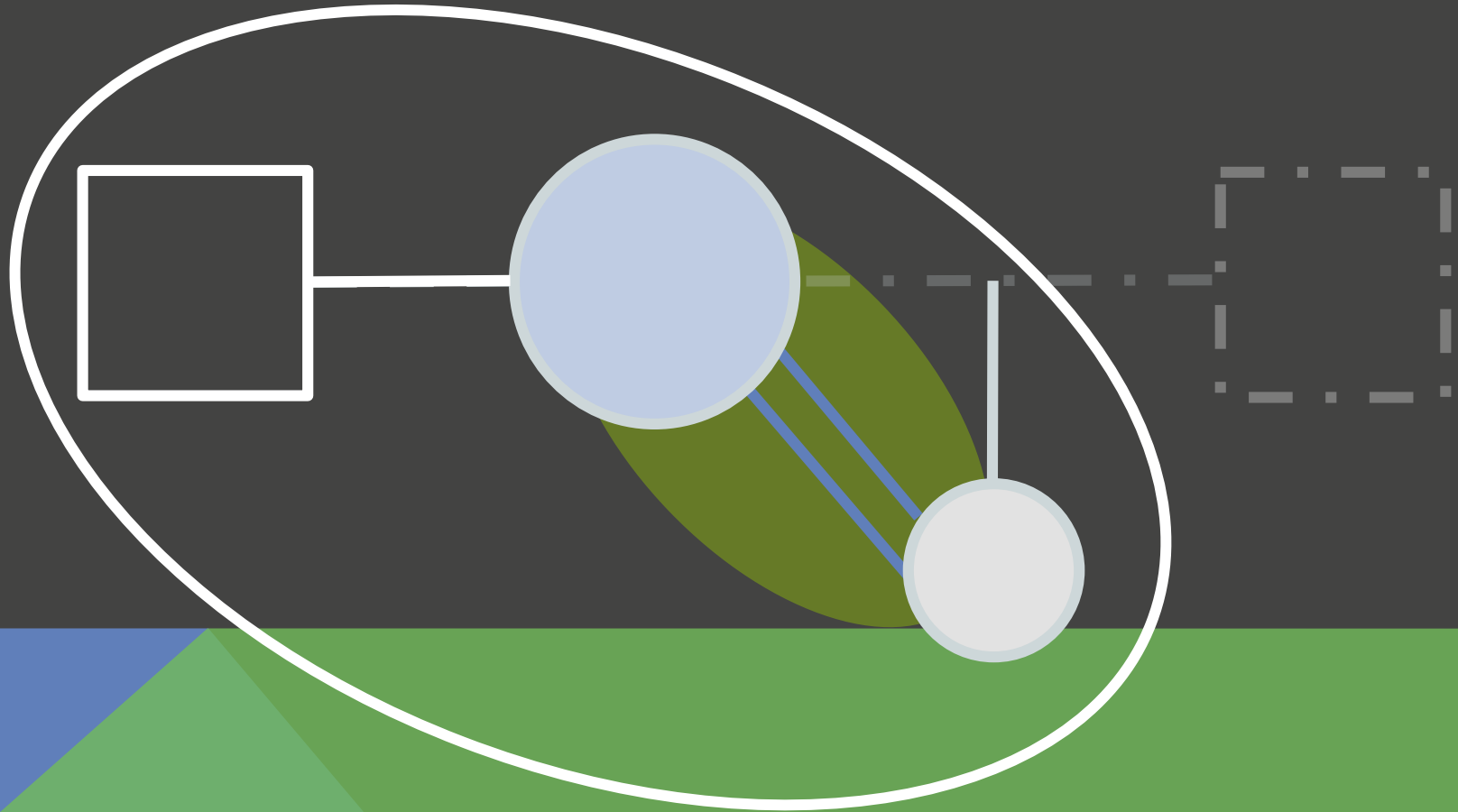
Out-of-wedlock birth



Stepfamily.



Stepcouple –first marriage not a remarriage



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AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPFAMILIES

Black children in stepfamilies are
doing as well as White children
in never-divorced families

(Adler-Baeder et al., 2010).



THE 5 CHALLENGES OF STEPFAMILY ARCHITECTURE

- 1. INSIDERS and OUTSIDERS
- 2. CHILDREN
- 3. PARENTING
- 4. FAMILY CULTURE
- 5. EX-SPOUSES/OTHER PARENTS

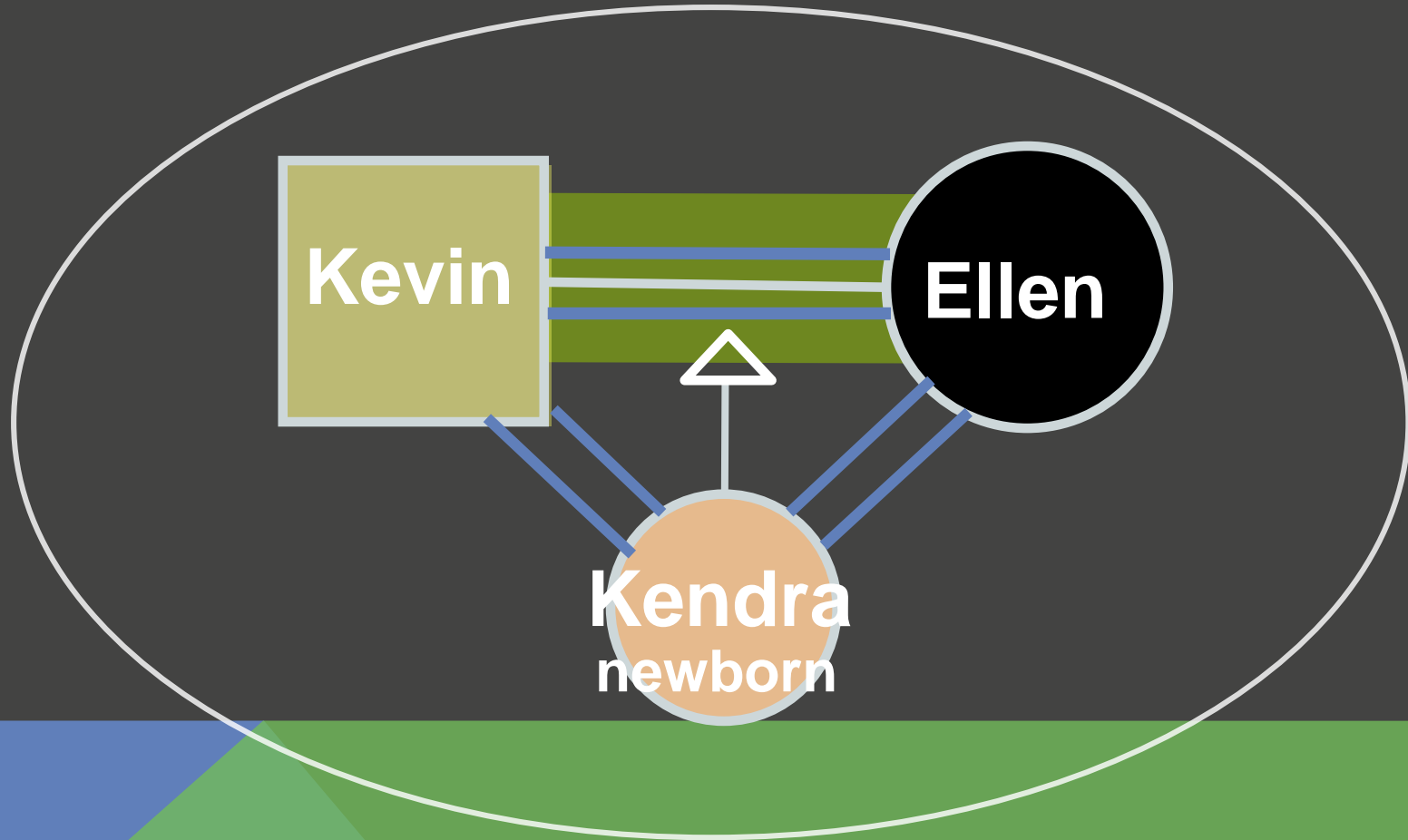


THE 5 CHALLENGES OF STEPFAMILY ARCHITECTURE

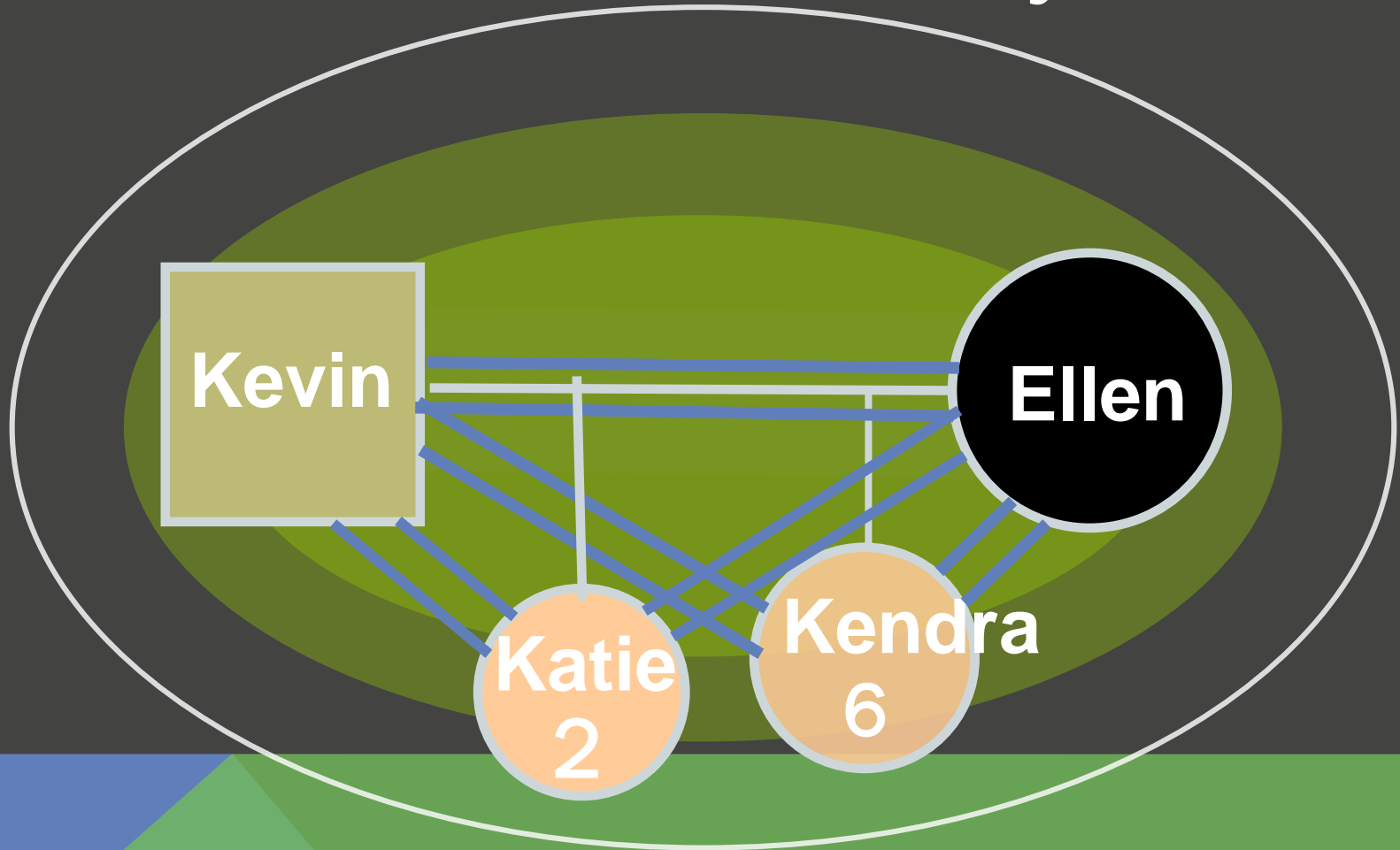
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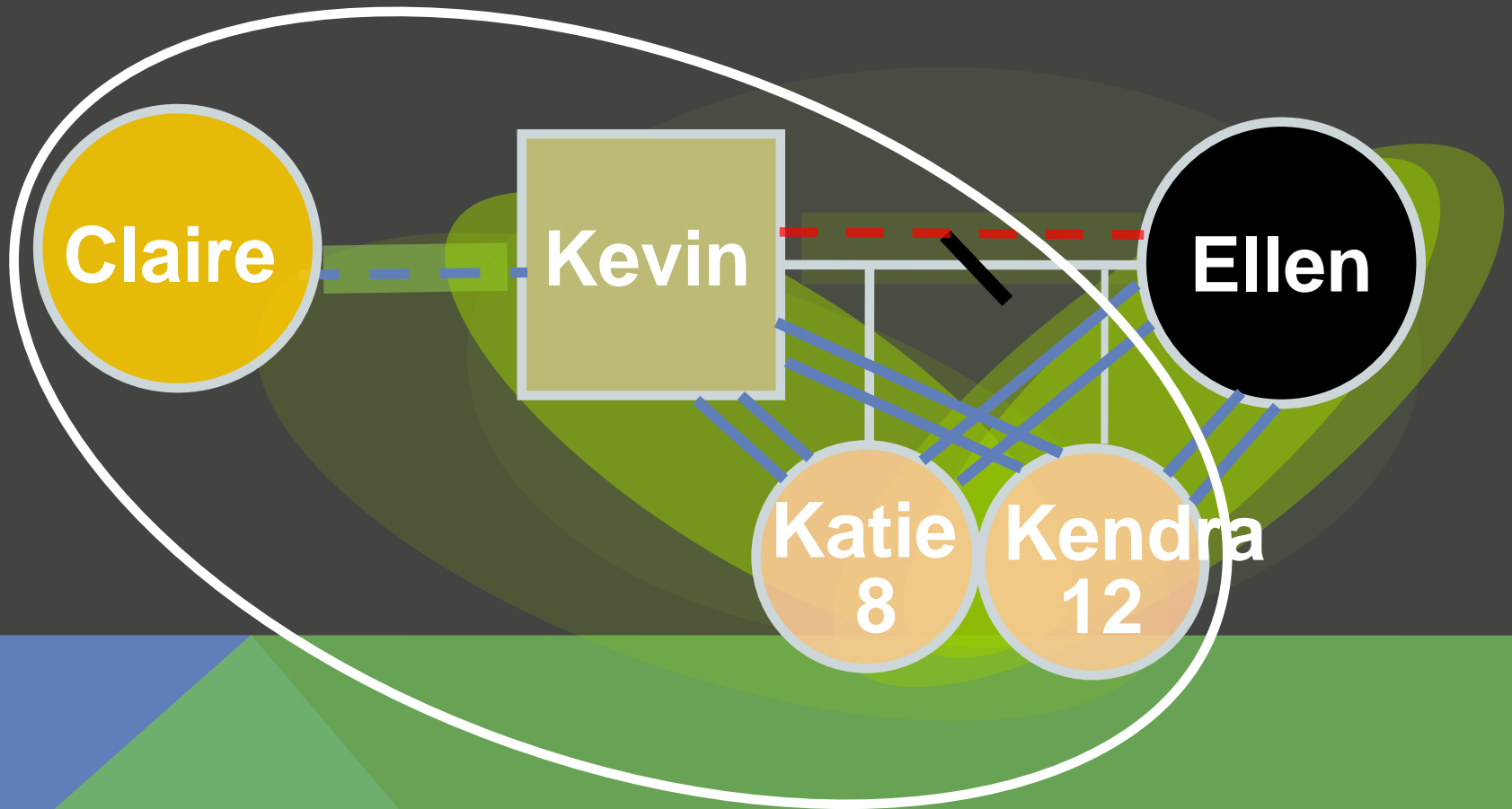
Start of a first-time family



First-time family



New stepfamily



3 THINGS THAT HELP MEET THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER CHALLENGE:

1. Normalize and empathize.
2. Spend lots of one-to-one time.
3. Practice good interpersonal skills.



THE 5 CHALLENGES OF STEPFAMILY ARCHITECTURE

- 1. INSIDER/OUTSIDER positions are intense and they are stuck.
- 2. CHILDREN in stepfamilies struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and too much change too fast.
- 3. PARENTING
- 4. FAMILY CULTURE
- 5. EX-SPOUSES/OTHER PARENTS



3 WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH LOSSES, LOYALTY BINDS, & CHANGE:

1. A step at a time saves nine.
2. Set aside regular, reliable parent-child one-to-one time.
3. Provide empathic, caring connection.



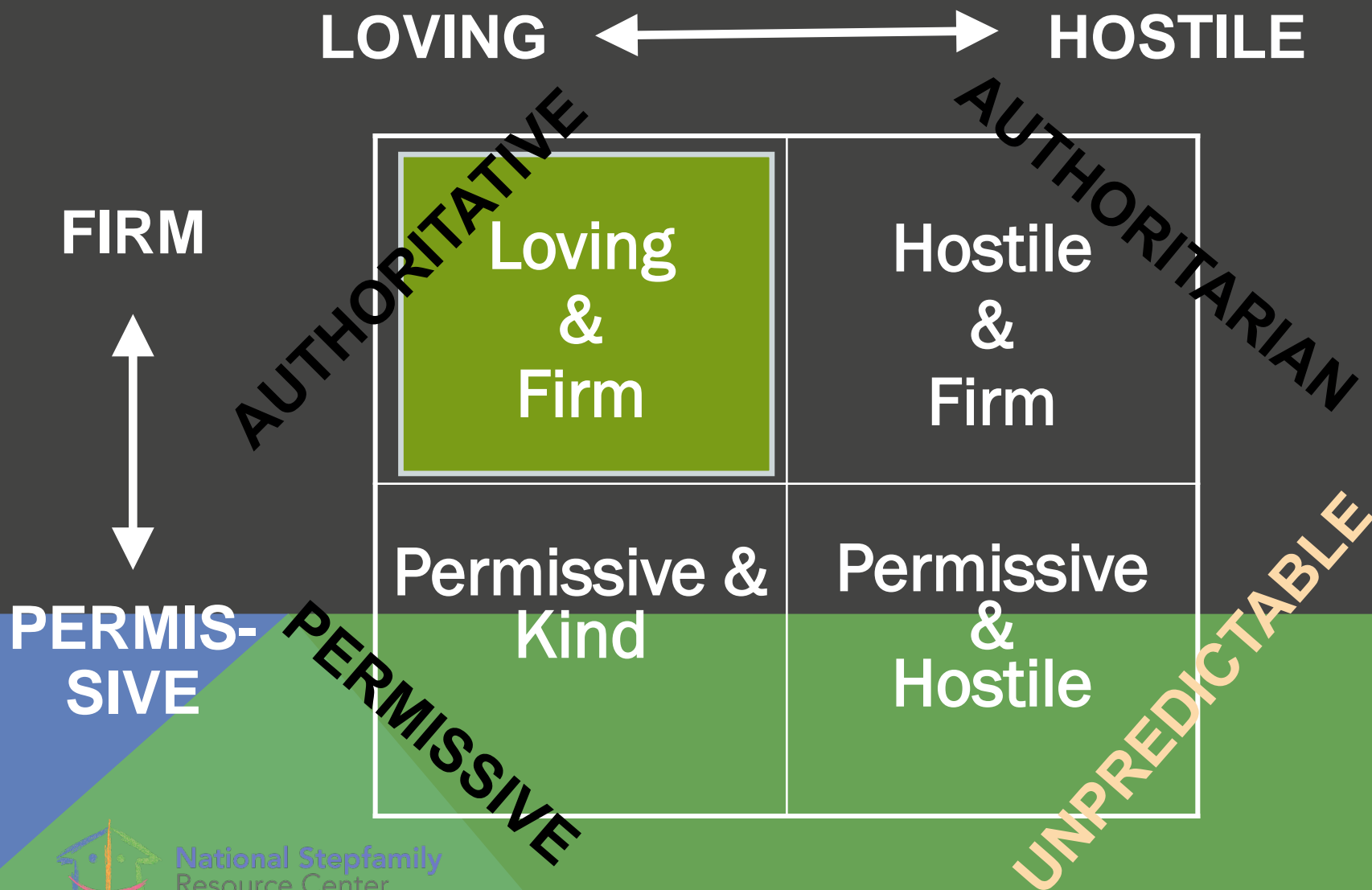
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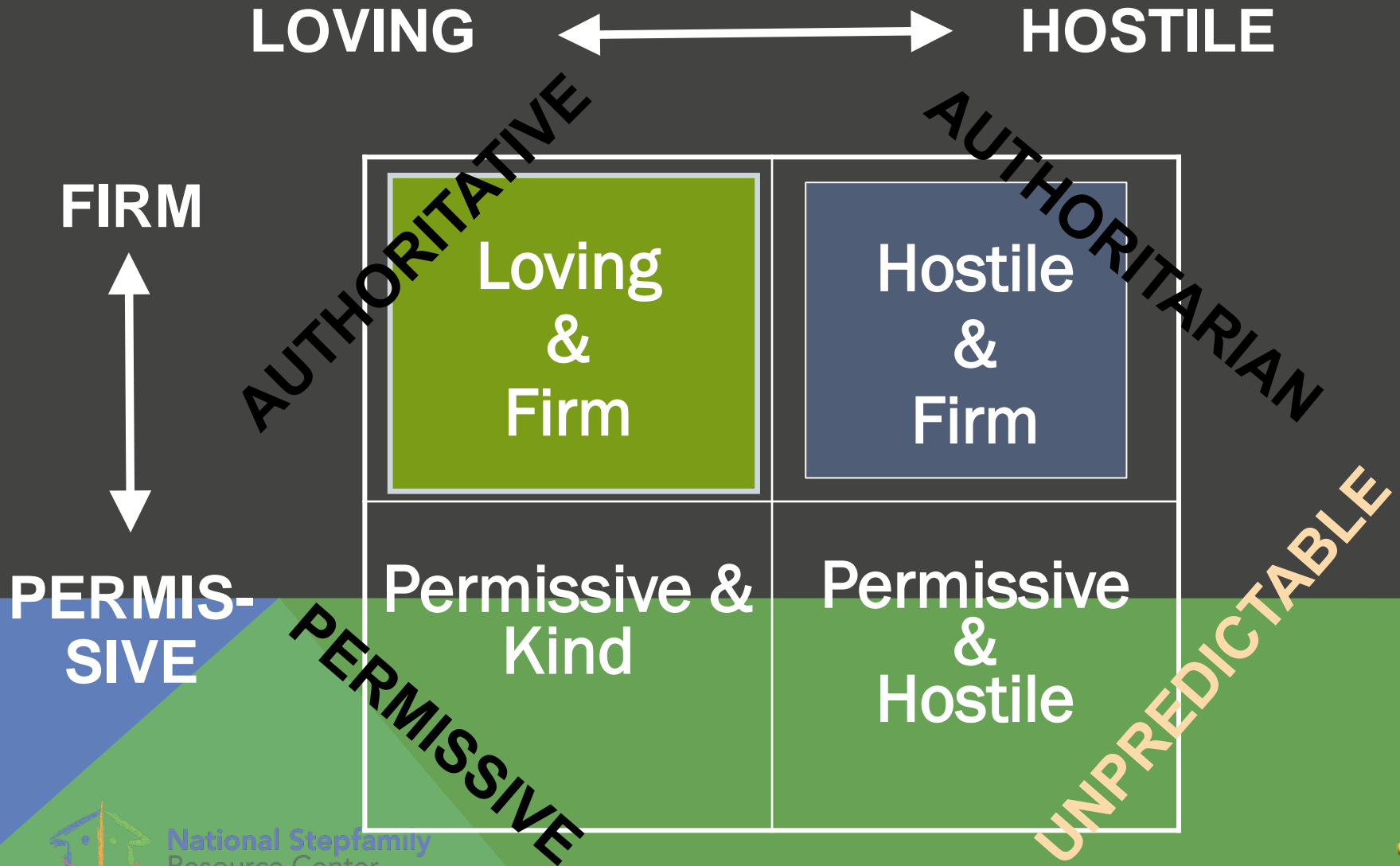


PARENTING STYLES

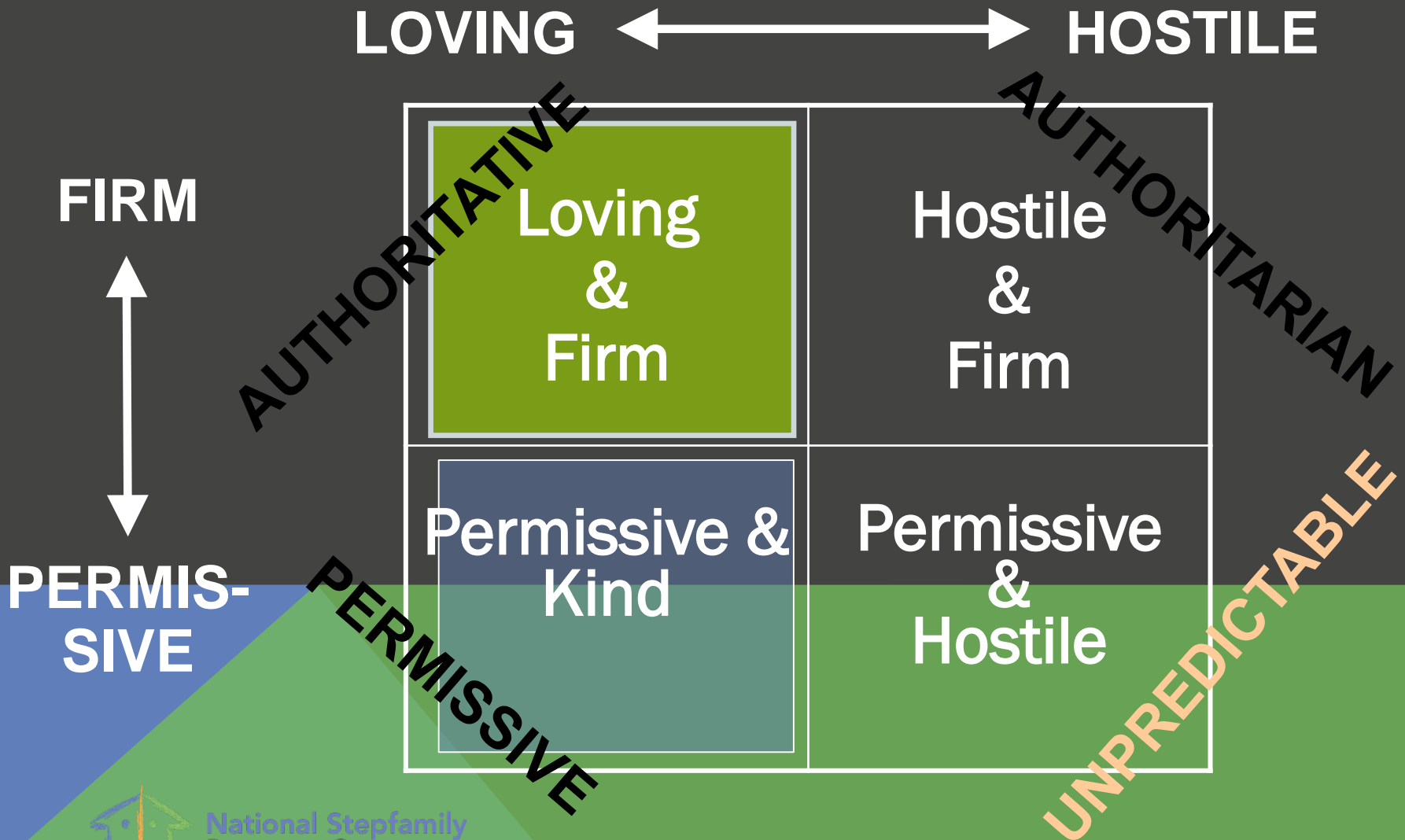
ADAPTED FROM AMEN (2000) AND BAUMRIND (1989, 1991)



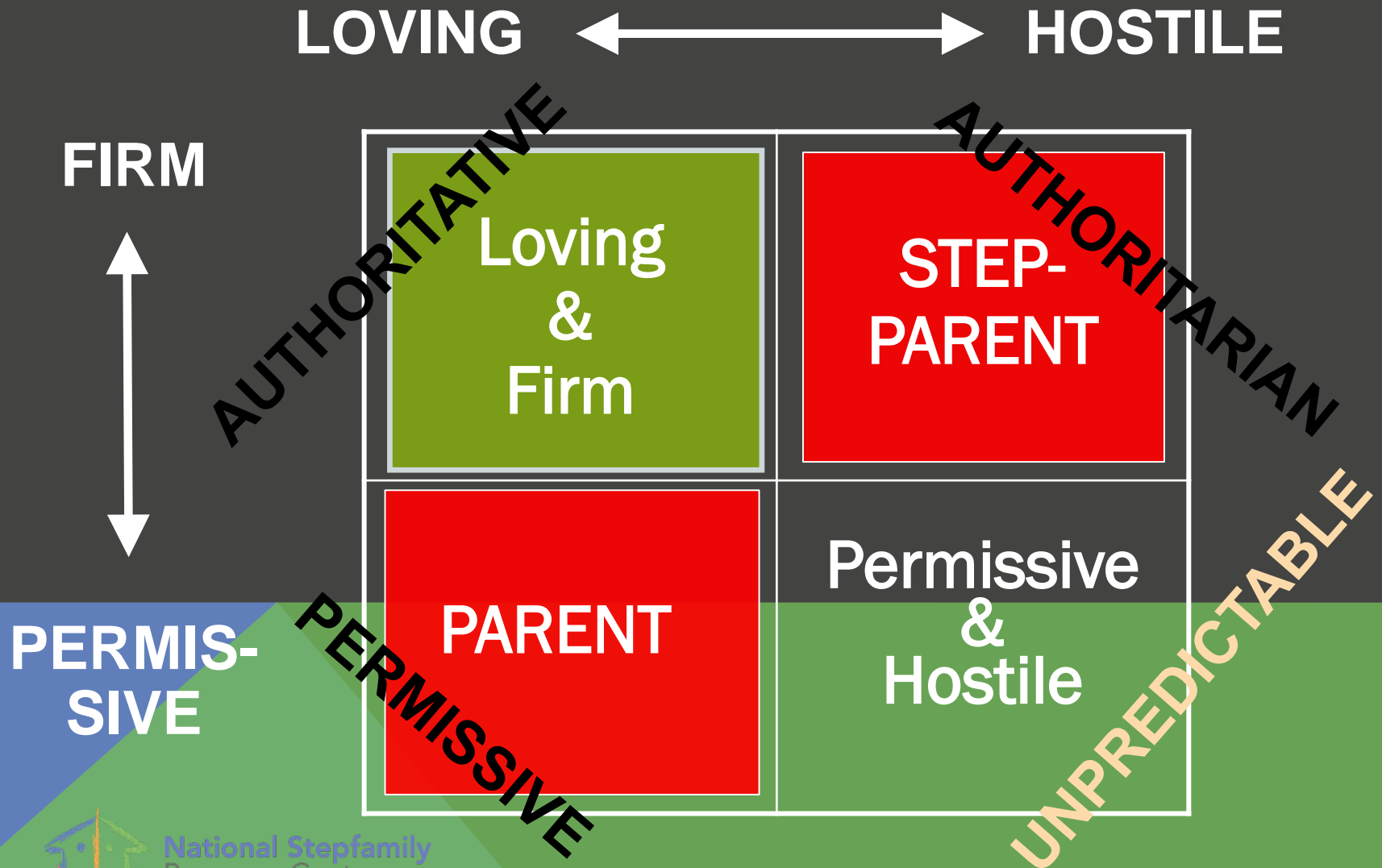
STEPPARENTS ARE PULLED TO “AUTHORITARIAN” PARENTING.



PARENTS ARE PULLED TO PERMISSIVE PARENTING



STEPCOUPLES EASILY POLARIZE AROUND PARENTING STYLES

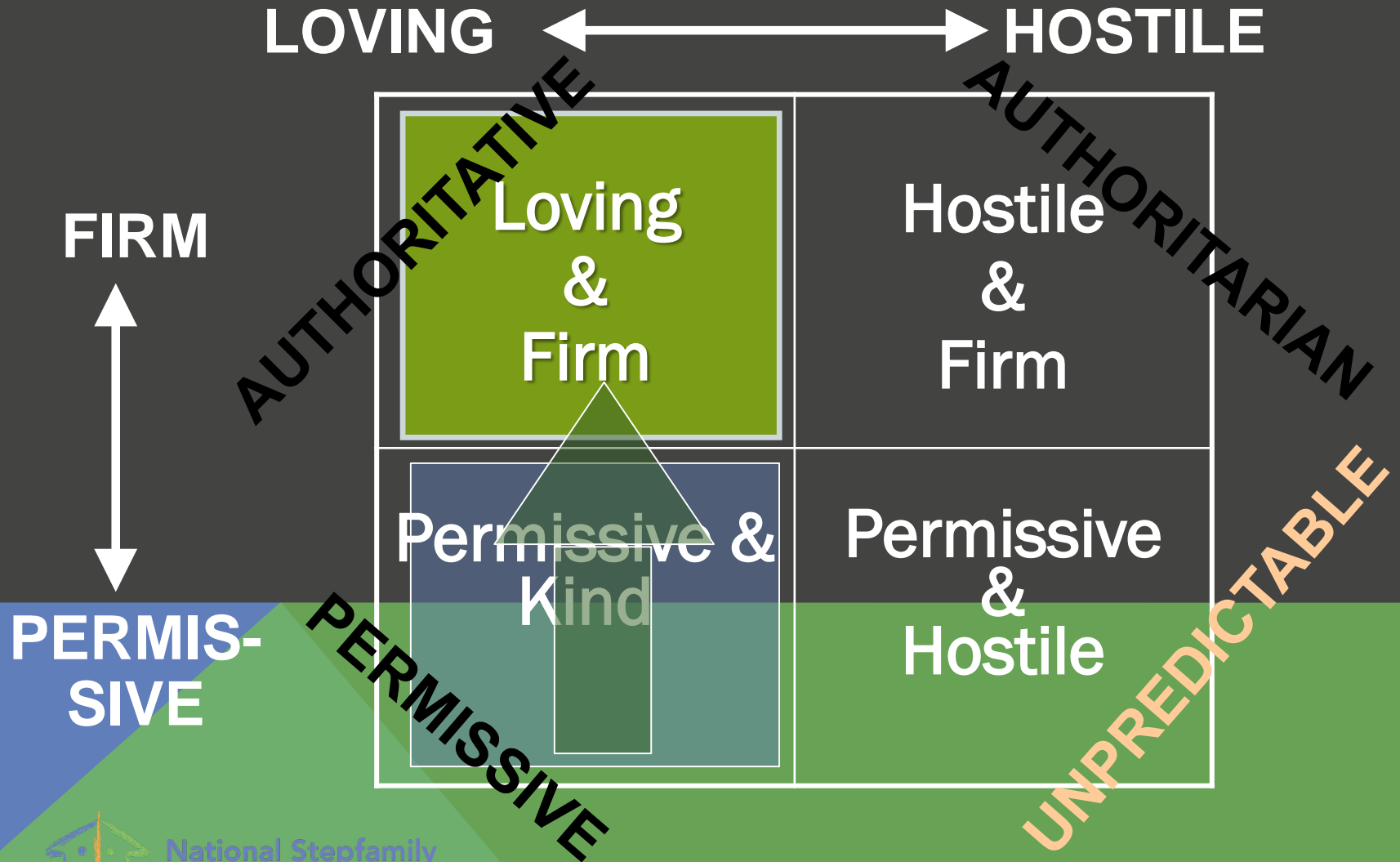


6 MOVES TOWARD MEETING THE PARENTING CHALLENGE:

1. Normalize the challenge.
2. Authoritative (loving and moderately firm) parenting practices.
3. Parents remain the disciplinarians.
4. Stepparents concentrate on connection, not correction.
5. Stepparents and parents help each other.
6. Open and constructive communication.



STEPPARENTS HELP PARENTS PULL “UP” TO FIRMER PARENTING



PARENTS HELP STEPPARENTS MOVE "OVER" TO MORE UNDERSTANDING.

LOVING ←————→ HOSTILE

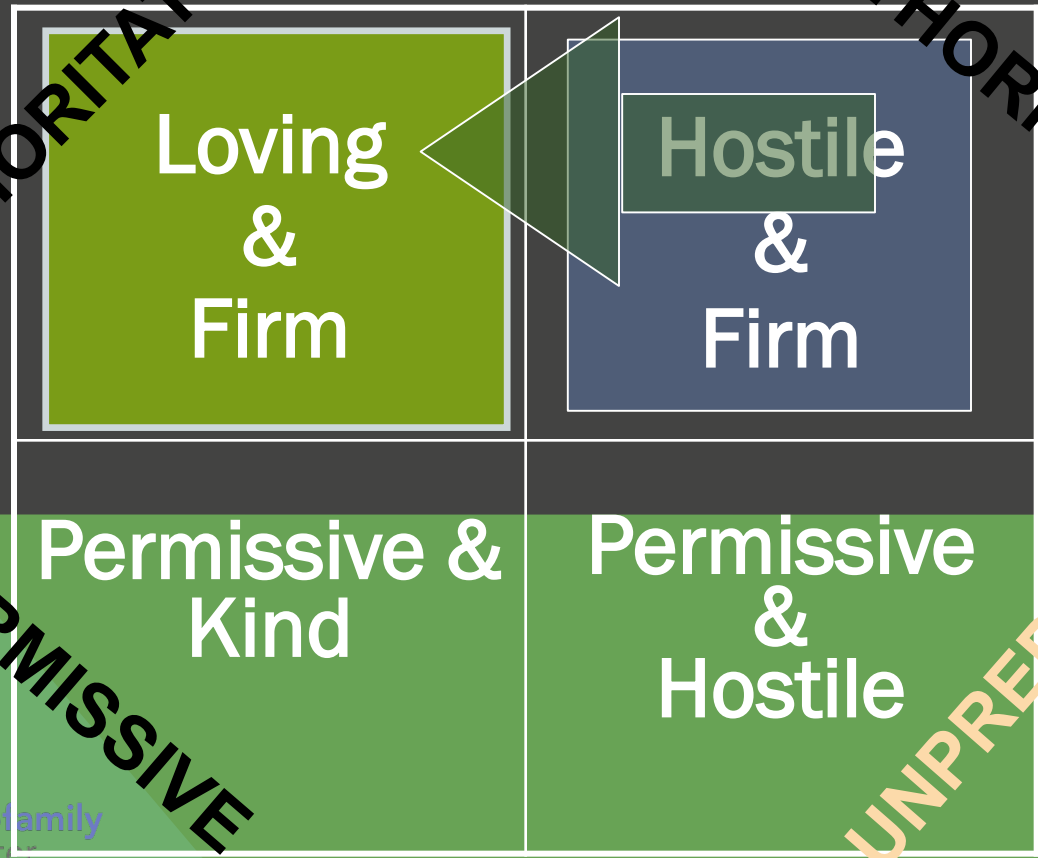
FIRM



PERMISSIVE

AUTHORITATIVE

AUTHORITARIAN



PERMISSIVE

UNPREDICTABLE



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LOVING



HOSTILE

FIRM



PERMISSIVE

AUTHORITATIVE

Loving
&
Firm

AUTHORITARIAN

STEP-
PARENT

PERMISSIVE

PARENT

UNPREDICTABLE

Permissive
&
Hostile



“SOFT/HARD/SOFT” (A REVERSE OREO COOKIE)

Start with something “soft” :

- Express caring (“I love you.”)
- Empathize (“I know this is new for your kids.”)
- Give appreciation & positive feedback.
- Express confidence (“We’ll keep working on this together.”)

Say the “hard” thing with that soft loving energy.

Add another “soft”.



THE 5 CHALLENGES OF STEPFAMILY ARCHITECTURE :

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- 3. PARENTING TASKS polarize the stepcouple.
- 4. A new FAMILY CULTURE must be built, while living (respectfully) in a flood of differences.
- 5. EX-SPOUSES



4 THINGS THAT HELP TO MEET THIS CHALLENGE:

1. Shift the metaphor
2. Developing a family culture is a process, not an event.
3. Try to resist arguing over who is “right” and who is “wrong.” Replace with: “Tell me about how you do that in your family.”
4. Use soft/hard/soft to bring up differences.



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- 4. A new FAMILY CULTURE must be built, while living (well) in a flood of differences.
- 5. EX-SPOUSES/OTHER PARENTS, dead or alive, are part of the new family.



3 WAYS TO MEET THE EX-SPOUSE CHALLENGE:

1. Protect children from adult conflict and tension.
2. Highly cooperative post-divorce co- parenting is best for kids. Low conflict “parallel parenting” is more common and also serves kids well.
3. Support ex-spouses to bring their very best skills, not their worst, to these relationships.



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**Becoming a stepfamily is a
process, not an event.**



**Stepfamilies can and do,
meet their challenges, and
form healthy, thriving
relationships.**





National Stepfamily
Resource Center

Meeting the 5 Challenges of Becoming a Stepfamily

Dr. Patricia L. Papernow

Member, NSRC Experts Council

Author, *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily
Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't*
and *Becoming a Stepfamily*



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