

## *Helping Children Thrive in Stepfamilies*

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**[SLIDE 1.] [title]**

Hello. I'm Dr. Patricia Papernow. In this module we'll talk about how to help children meet the challenges that stepfamilies create for them. Stepfamilies require significant adjustment for children. Often, in a stepfamily, what may look like a "resistant" child is actually a child struggling with losses, loyalty binds, and too much change. In this module I want to give you a baker's dozen of evidence-based and practice-proven tips for adults to help children of all ages in stepfamilies to thrive in their new relationships.

**[SLIDE 2] [Tip # 1. A new relationship is a gift for the adults. It is often a loss for children.]**

For adults, the new stepcouple relationship is an exciting and wonderful gift. Children *of all ages*, however, often feel a parent's recoupling as a loss (See the research of Claire Cartwright and her colleagues, summarized in Cartwright, 2008). For children, the entry of a stepparent brings a decrease in parental attention, and a raft of changes.

Although this awareness can be painful for the adults, understanding children's very different experience is the first step to being helpful. I often say to parents and stepparents, have you ever had a friend who went "gah gah" over a new love? Did you really want to watch the new couple snuggle or kiss? Now imagine that you are a child watching a parent snuggle and

kiss with an adult who is not your other parent. It can feel very scary and lonely. Adult children can have surprisingly similar feelings to younger children.

**[SLIDE 3] [Tip #2. Schedule consistent, regular parent-child one-to-one time.]**

One of the ways to help children's sense of loss is to schedule consistent, regular parent-child time. Successful stepfamilies carve out *both* adult stepcouple alone *and* regular and reliable one-to-one parent-child alone time. Multi-tasking time doesn't count! Label parent-child time clearly: "This is our time. Just us." If you need to change it, be sure to reschedule. Keep this time off-limits for nagging, criticism, and homework. Never withdraw parent-child time as punishment. Sometimes, just increasing reliable parent-child time can substantially improve a "resistant" or depressed child's behavior.

**[Slide 4.] [Tip # 3. Practice authoritative (loving *and* moderately firm) parenting**

Substantial research establishes that *authoritative* parenting is best for children on every measure imaginable (Baumrind, 1989, 1991; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Heller, & Farleigh, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 1993; Isaacs, 2002; Pruett & Pruett, 2009; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). *Authoritative* parenting is loving and emotionally responsive. *And* it also makes realistic demands for mature behavior.

**[Slide 5] [Research on auth've p'g]**

*Authoritative* parenting is a more powerful predictor of children's wellbeing than whether a child lives in a never-divorced family, a single-parent family, or a stepfamily (Dunn, 2002; Dunn, Deaton, Deckard, Pickering, O'Connor, & Golding, 2004; Golish, 2003; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1998; Isaacs, 2002 ).

The classic book *How to Talk So Your Kids Will Listen and Listen So Your Kids Will Talk* is still one of the best guides to authoritative parenting. The first half of the book is a terrific step-by-step guide to the loving compassionate side of good parenting. The second half does the same for calm, clear, effective discipline (Faber & Mazlish, 1980/2012).

It is important to know that parents and stepparents often disagree about discipline. (You will find more about this in the module entitled “Meeting the 5 Challenges.”) Stepparents often want more order and control. Parents often advocate for more tolerance and understanding. Often both of these positions have something to offer. Stepparents often need to help parents “firm up” and ask more of their kids. Parents often need to help stepparents “soften up” and deepen their understanding of and kindness toward their stepchildren.

**[SLIDE 6] [Tip # 4. Parents remain the disciplinarians.]**

Next tip--the research is clear: Children in stepfamilies do best when the parent remains the disciplinarian, until, or unless, the stepparent has forged a secure, caring, trusting **relationship**.

**[SLIDE 7] [Research re parenting and stepparenting]**

Even *authoritative* parenting, too early, by a stepparent can backfire (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). *Authoritarian* parenting (hostile, harsh, not warm) by stepparents is almost always toxic (Bray, 1999a, Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011).

**[SLIDE 8.] [Tip # 5. Stepparents begin with *connection*, not *correction*.]**

This means that stepparents begin with connection, not correction. Parents enforce the rules while stepparents concentrate on building relationships with kids.

**[SLIDE 9.] [Once a trusting relationship...]**

Once a trusting relationship is established, stepparents can sometimes *slowly* move into authoritative” parenting (warmth and caring combined with moderately firm expectations), especially with children under nine. “Slowly” means at least a couple of years, not a couple of months (Bray, 1999a; Bray & Berger, 1993). Meanwhile, a good model is: the stepparent has input; the parent has final say.

When the parent is out or away, he or she places the stepparent in charge. “John is in charge tonight. I expect a good report.” Much like a babysitter, aunt, or uncle stepparents do not make their own rules. Rather, the stepparent enforces the parent’s rules. “Your mom’s rule is no TV before homework.” If there are problems, stepparent reports to the parent, who doles out the consequences.

**[SLIDE 10] [Tip # 6 Protect children from adult tension and conflict.]**

Tip # 6 Protect children from adult tension and conflict. A massive amount of research establishes that adult conflict *significantly* lowers wellbeing for children (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Johnston & Campbell, 1987; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Lutz, 1983). In fact, it is *not* divorce, single parenting, or stepfamilies that creates poorer child outcomes. It is deteriorated parenting practices and adult conflict that predict poor child wellbeing (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Dunn 2002; Dunn et al., 1998; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001;).

**[SLIDE 11] [moderate tension...]**

We are not just talking about loud fighting or violence. Family scholars have found that even *moderate* tension between adults in a non-clinical population significantly diminishes

children's attention, social skills, and immune functioning. (El Sheikh, Buckhalt, Cummings, & Keller, 2007).

**[SLIDE 12]** Conflict is not just toxic for children under 18. Outcomes for *young adults and adults* in highly conflicted, *never-divorced* families, are significantly poorer than for those in *low conflict* divorced families, and especially so for girls (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

**[SLIDE 13]** Parenting is the primary source of conflict between parents and stepparents (Hetherington, et al., 1999; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). It is important that stepcouples handle their inevitable differences in private, out of children's earshot.

**[SLIDE 14] [Tip #7 Practice positive post-divorce co-parenting with ex-spouses]**

Tip Number 7: Practice positive post-divorce co-parenting with ex-spouses.

**[SLIDE 15] [highly cooperative post divorce parenting is best....]**

Research tells us that highly cooperative post-divorce co-parenting is best for children. Low-conflict "parallel parenting" is much more common, and is next best (Hetherington et al., 1998; Pryor, 2004; White & Gilbreth, 2001), especially when combined with nurturing, moderately firm (i.e., *authoritative*) parenting (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). It is important to conduct conversations between ex-spouses about scheduling, money, lost soccer gear, etc., out of children's earshot. If things are tense, communicate with short factual texts, short emails, or short voice mails.

It is very important to keep transition times between houses calm and uneventful. If this is not possible, I suggest choosing a neutral public place to meet, or arrange the schedule so one parent drops children at school and the other picks them up after school.

In a high conflict divorce, rigid detailed parenting plans are much preferable to constant fraught negotiation (Stahl, 1999).

**[SLIDE 16]. [Tip # 8. Loosen children’s loyalty binds.]**

Tip Number 8. The entry of a stepparent often evokes a *loyalty bind* for kids: “If I care for my stepmother, I feel disloyal to my mom.” “If I like my stepdad, I feel disloyal to my dad.” Many children feel these binds, even in cooperative divorces. *However*, parental conflict and badmouthing deepens loyalty binds unbearably.

Even in a friendly divorce, one child may have an especially close relationship with the parent in the other household. For that child, moving towards their stepparent will create an especially tight loyalty bind. Children with more intense loyalty binds will need more distance from their stepparents, and more time alone with their parents.

“**Loyalty bind talks**” can help. I teach everyone who will listen (parents, stepparents, ex-spouses, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, guidance counselors, pediatricians, nurse practitioners, and clergy) to do what I call “loyalty bind talks” (Papernow, 2006, 2013). A dad can say to his young daughter:

*Having a mom and a stepmom can be kind of confusing. I want you to know that your mom will always have a permanent place in your heart. Like the sun. Like the mountains. Always there. Some time, you might come to care about Sally (her stepmom), too. But, even then, Sally’s place in your heart will be in a totally different place from your mom’s place in your heart.”*

Teens like to be “in the know.” For instance, a stepmom can approach a teen with:

*You probably already know this. But just so you know that I know, your mom's place in your heart is permanent. You probably already get this, too, but just so you know that I know, I am your stepmom, not your mom. They're different. We didn't choose each other. We're still getting to know each other. I hope we'll come to care about each other some time. But, that will be a totally different place in your heart than your mom's place.*

Like sex education, loyalty bind talks often need repeating at different developmental stages, and at major transitions in the family (moving in together, stepfamily vacations together, the stepcouple gets engaged or married, etc).

**[SLIDE 17] [Tip # 9 A step at a time saves nine.]**

Tip # 9 A step at a time saves nine. Stepouples are often understandably eager to establish a new life together. However, becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event.

**[SLIDE 18.] [As the pace of change increases...]**

Furthermore, for children, as the pace of change increases, wellbeing decreases (Amato & Booth, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Jeynes, 2007). Even the friendliest parental split has already profoundly altered the fabric of daily living for kids. And, for many children, the adjustment to stepfamily living is more intense and actually takes longer than the adjustment to divorce (Ahrons, 2007; Hetherington, 1999b).

So, taking things slowly pays off in the long run. Introduce new partners a bit at a time. Start with brief, low-key joint activities. Add over nights slowly. Resist the urge to rush into living together or marriage. Do talk to children about what is changing and what will stay the same (Cartwright, 2010). As time with a new partner increases, it helps to *also* increase parent-child alone time.

**[SLIDE 19.] [Tip # 10]. Do build a new culture, but a little at a time.]**

**Tip # 10.** Continuing on the theme of becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event.-- Developing a sense of “we-ness” takes time. A “fresh start” with a new family can *seem* to be a great time for new furniture, new paint, etc. In addition, for the adults, legislating a whole new slate of “family rules” may *seem* like a good way to create unity, especially in a stepfamily with two sets of children.

However, again, as the pace of change increases, children’s wellbeing decreases. I suggest a couple of changes at a time. That doesn’t mean no change at all. Outsider stepparents *do* need a few changes to feel comfortable. Agree on a couple of changes that are realistic for children, and that matter the most to the stepparent. Where there are two sets of children, begin with rules for safety and respect. Differences are uncomfortable. But, successful resolutions to differences come from really understanding each other. That takes time.

Meanwhile, help children feel grounded by maintaining familiar bedtime rituals, eating favorite foods, keeping familiar pictures and familiar furniture around. In this time of big overwhelming changes, even replacing something like an apparently grungy old bedspread can provoke a surprising meltdown.

All of this means that successful stepfamilies must often leave many differences in place while they get to know each other. This can be especially challenging when there are two sets of kids. For instance, Linda Smith’s kids eat sugar cereal. Bill Brown has always fed his children whole-grain non-sugar cereal. Bill can say to his kids,

*The Smiths and the Browns come from two different cultures! The Smiths eat sugar cereal for breakfast. We eat whole wheat cereal. When you’re grown up you can decide what*



*you think is right. For now, it's Grape Nuts for breakfast. When you're done, you can have a small bowl of sugar cereal.*

Successful stepcouples handle these differences respectfully and calmly, as an interesting cultural difference, *not* an issue of “right and wrong” to do battle over. Linda will also need to ensure that her kids don't flaunt their sugar cereal.

**[SLIDE 20.] [Tip # 11. Require civility, not love.]**

This leads us to our next tip. **Require civility, not love.** We cannot require strangers who did not choose each other to love each other. As much as we wish that our partners would love our kids, and our kids would love our new partners, step relationships must be built over time. Especially for children over nine, and particularly for girls, this can sometimes take many years (Bray, 1991; Bray & Berger, 1993).

It *is* important, however, to immediately establish clear guidelines for basic civility and safety between children and stepparents, and between stepsiblings. Monitor and enforce them. This is not the time to “let the kids work it out.” A mom says to her son,

*I do not expect you and Tony (his stepbrother) to love each other, or even like each other. You didn't chose each other. You're really different in lots of ways.*

*But being rude or mean to each other is not OK. I expect you both to be respectful. I get that it can be irritating to have Tony around. But it is not OK to hit him or call him names when he takes your toys. Ask him nicely. If he doesn't listen, or you need help, come to me.*

**[SLIDE 21.] [Tip # 12. Keep adult physical affection private.]**

Tip # 12. Stepcouples can be very loving and physical. Parents often want to model a healthy affectionate relationship for their kids. Demonstrating respect and kindness is important.

However, for children in a stepfamily, adult snuggling and hand-holding intensifies losses and increases loyalty binds. *Do be affectionate, but keep it private!*

**[SLIDE 22] [Tip #13 Empathize with children’s challenges]**

Parental empathy is a powerful soothing and regulating force for children. It actually grows neural connections between the upset part of kids’ brains and the regulating part of their brains. Empathic attunement also helps create the secure attachment that makes for the most calm, confident, and resilient children (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).

Attuned parents help their children “feel felt.” They can tell the story *from the child’s point of view* (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003; Siegel & Brayson, 2011). However, this can be harder for a parent in a stepfamily than it sounds! The *parent’s* story is, “I’m in love and my new partner is wonderful.” The *child’s* story is, “I hate this. This is too much change.” A child says to her dad, “I hate Claire (her stepmother).” How is Dad pulled to respond? Dad says, quickly, “Nonsense! She’s a nice person!” Or, “That’s ridiculous!” The child now feels even more alone. Some kids get depressed. Others get mad. Some give up and leave home early.

**[SLIDE 23] [Some concrete ways to practice attunement.]**

**Here are some concrete ways to practice attunement:**

Especially if your child says something upsetting...

- Before you speak, *slow down*. Take a breath.
- Before you respond, take time to find what you DO understand (“joining” see Papernow, 2013). Then begin by telling the story from the *child’s* point of view. “It feels *really* hard that Claire is living with us now.” (Again, see Faber & Mazlish, 1980/2012).

- Stay calm inside, but match the child's energy by about half (Hughes, 2008)..("You are *really* mad about all this!")

**[SLIDE 24. Take care of both the parent-child relationship and the couple relationship]**

Finally a word to stepcouples. Children's challenges easily divide parents and stepparents. Struggling children need their parents, but they often need distance from their stepparents. When a child enters the room, or the conversation, the child is oriented to the parent, and vice versa. The parent feels cared about and engaged. The stepparents are often left out and ignored. When the stepparent speaks up about this, the parent often feels torn between the people they love.

For stepcouples, staying connected does *not* come from feeling the same way. It *is* much easier to feel connected when you feel the same way. But stepfamily structure makes one member of the couple, the parent, the stuck insider. The other, the stepparent, is the stuck outsider.

Connection in a stepcouple comes from finding your empathy, holding on to your caring, and trying to learn about each other's experience. Parents can help stepparents by offering comfort and compassion when stepparents are left out. Feeling invisible is hard, no matter how well you understand the reasons for it!

Stepparents can help parents by understanding that the stuck insider position is hard, too. Feeling torn is painful. I encourage both parents and stepparents to reach out to each other ("I could use a hug") (in private) rather than criticizing or blaming.

Again, successful stepcouples take care of both the parent-child relationship *and* the adult stepcouple relationship. Do schedule adult couple alone time. Establishing little private rituals

of connection can help: A moment of snuggling in the morning; a private hug at regular intervals during the day; parents remembering to look the stepparent in the eyes, sending quick texts expressing caring or appreciation; regular time outs for a walk or dinner alone together. Stepfamilies are intense places to live. It takes extra muscle to keep these things in place. They can make a big difference in stepcouple wellbeing.

**[SLIDE 25.] [adults can help]**

Stepfamily living can be very challenging for kids, and for stepcouples. There really are things that help. When adults step up to the challenge, children, and their parents and stepparents, can thrive.

**[SLIDE 26.][title slide]**