



National Stepfamily  
Resource Center

HELPING CHILDREN IN  
STEPFAMILIES TO THRIVE



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# TIP # 1

- Understand that, while the new couple relationship is a gift for the adults, it often creates losses for children

(See the work of Claire Cartwright and colleagues, summarized in Cartwright, 2008)



# TIP # 2

- Schedule consistent, regular, parent-child one-to-one time.
- Include some vacation time.



# TIP # 3

Practice *authoritative*  
(loving *and* moderately firm) parenting

(Baumrind, 1989; Hetherington, 1993; Isaacs, 2002; Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Heller, & Farleigh, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 1993; Isaacs, 2002; Pruett & Pruett, 2009).



- **Authoritative parenting better predicts positive outcomes for children than family structure (i.e., never-divorced, single-parent, or stepfamily).**

**(Dunn 2002, Dunn et al., 1998; Golish, 2003; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Isaacs, 2002).**



# TIP # 4

- **In successful stepfamilies, the parent remains the disciplinarian.**

(Ganong & Coleman, 2004)



- **Even *authoritative* parenting, too early, by a stepparent can backfire**

(Hetherington & Kelly, 2002)

- ***Authoritarian* parenting by a stepparent is almost always toxic**

(Bray, 1999a; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011)



# TIP # 5

**Stepparents start with connection,  
not correction**





- Stepparents can *sometimes* move *slowly* into *authoritative* parenting.

(Bray,1999a; Bray & Berger, 1993)

- Meanwhile, a good model is: Stepparents have input, parents have final say

(Papernow, 2006, 2008, in press)



# TIP # 6

**Protect children from adult tension and conflict.**

(Fosco & Grych, 2008; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Lutz, 1983)



- Even *moderate tension* between adults is linked to significantly diminished attention, immune functioning, and academic achievement in children.

(El Sheikh, Buckhalt, Cummings, & Keller, 2007)



- Young adults and adults from high-conflict never-divorced families do significantly more poorly than those from low-conflict divorced families

(Amato & Afifi, 2006)



- Parenting is the primary source of conflict in stepcouples

(Hetherington, 1999a; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002)

- Handle differences over parenting in private, out of children's earshot.



# TIP # 7

- Establish positive post-divorce co-parenting practices between ex-spouses.



- Highly collaborative post-divorce co-parenting between ex-spouses is best for children.
- Low-conflict “parallel parenting” is much more common, and is next best for kids.

(Hetherington et al., 1998; Pryor, 2004; White & Gilbreth, 2001)



# TIP # 8

Pro-actively loosen children's loyalty binds.

“Loyalty Bind Talks” can help

(See Papernow, 2006, in press)





# TIP # 9

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

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



- As the pace of change increases, children's wellbeing decreases (Amato & Booth, 1991).
- The adjustment to becoming a stepfamily often takes longer than the adjustment to divorce (Ahrons, 2007).



# TIP # 10

- Do build a new family culture, but a little at a time.



# TIP # 11

- **Require civility, not love.**



# TIP # 12

- **Keep adult physical affection private!**



# TIP # 13

- Empathize with children's challenges.  
(Resist the urge to diminish or "correct" children' feelings.)



- Take a breath.
- Start with what you *do* understand.
- Try to tell the story from the *child's* point of view.
- Stay calm inside. But match the child's energy by half (Hughes, 2008).



# BOTH/AND

Successful stepfamilies  
support both the  
parent-child relationship  
*and* the adult stepcouple relationship.





**Adults can help  
stepchildren thrive**



# Helping Children in Stepfamilies to Thrive

Dr. Patricia L. Papernow



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