

Parenting and Stepparenting Module

NSFC

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The coordination between a parent and a stepparent is a unique challenge. While the desire to function as unified and equal teammates is understandable, the frequent reality is that the parent is functionally more powerful. In other words, the parent may choose to not flex her muscle (in the case of a stepfather family), but she holds more sway over the children. This often feels wrong to people and they struggle to create a balanced parental unit. In the opinion of this professor, the fact that people don't view others in the same way is good. It is normal. The stepparent is unable to "see" the child as does the parent; it would be absurd to expect that, but people frequently makes unrealistic expectations.

The stepparent and the parent accept the idea that the relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild is simply going to evolve. It is very difficult to predict the final nature of this relationship. In some ways it is like a novel, a whole new story is being created. Research that has looked at both positive and negative stepfamily relationships (Coleman, Ganong, 2011) years after they were formed has clearly established the preferred relationship is supportive. It is patently self-defeating to rush into a discipline role. This does not translate to the stepparent as weak. Often people mistake reserve for weakness. Rather, the reserved stepparent is looking to have an honest and respectful relationship. When the child is rude, then comments about manners are fine. The stepparent is not cowering in the corner, but, in most cases, should not function as a primary disciplinarian.

Clinical stepfamilies have tremendous difficulty finding a way to accept an alternate version of "parenthood." It is important to recognize that the stepparent will not be a copy of a natural parent. The stepparent and stepchild relationship can run a range from deep love and commitment to expressed hatred. However, it is safe to say that the majority of stepparent-stepchild relationships fall in a wide middle-ground between the

two extremes just cited. It is common to see a stepparent and stepchild have a fond, respectful connection that recognizes that they are in the same stepfamily. Relationships, by definition, are complex, due to the multitude of variables that are always present. In this way, step-relationships can represent a “perfect storm” of variables: close proximity, “familial bonds,” jealousy and uncertain expectations.

Research suggests that one factor which may be critical to understand when attempting to ease the pressure of a stepfamily relationship, is mutuality. In other words, if the stepparent and stepchild are looking for an equivalent level of closeness and distance, the resulting relationship is stabilized by meeting mutual expectations. If one person greatly desires closeness to the other, and that request is rejected, then the resulting relationship is understandably tense and unsatisfying. One needs to be aware of the desire one has for the preferred relationship with another. This may involve that each person honestly admit, to themselves, what type of bond they want with the other.

For example, the stepson who is looking for a significant bond with an older male (due to his own father being uninvolved), may be particularly frustrated, and later hurt, when his stepfather shows little interested in bonding. While it is helpful to understand this dynamic in the present, for this is where it is evident to the clinician, it may be that history plays an important role as well. The stepfather in the example just given may have bonded strongly with a girlfriend’s son, and was denied any access to the young man after the breakup with the boy’s mother. So even though he is in a situation which is more stable, the anguish of having been hurt in a similar situation makes bonding with this new young man too painful. However, the current stepson has no idea about the past hurt, and only knows that his advances to his stepfather are rejected, and thus he feels hurt and angry. It is here where the mother/spouse might help pave a clearer relationship, or a clinician may help clarify this issue.

So now we have two levels of relational dynamics to understand, the present dyad and issues from the past, we need to add one additional complexity to the picture, the systemic dynamics. The systemic dynamics need to be understood as well in order to assist the stepfamily in navigating interpersonal relationships. If mom strongly desires that her new husband (the stepfather) bond with her daughter, and the daughter has little interest in that relationship (because she feels she has a father and does not want this new

man to become important), the pressure on the stepfather is intense. He is being asked by his wife to try harder, and each time he does try harder, the stepdaughter makes it clear that she is not welcoming these efforts. While mom is not naïve, and sees that her daughter's response is part of the tension, she still feels that it is her husband's role, as the adult, to make even greater efforts to win his stepdaughter over.

Clinicians will be well-served to assess the relational desires between members of a stepfamily. Since people take great efforts not to be hurt, many will (understandably) avoid putting themselves in a position to be hurt, thus also reducing the possibility of building a close connection. So, the therapist is a matchmaker of sorts; one interested in helping people achieve mutuality. The line of questioning needed to achieve an understanding of each person's interest in forming a relationship will often leave people feeling vulnerable, therefore it is often best to make these inquiries in session wherein the other stepfamily member in question is not present.

Too often in stepfamilies activities occur in groups, often out of a misplaced desire to affirm the stability of the new stepfamily. When possible it is advantageous to create an environment whereby people are together in dyads. To be with another person, and only one other person increases the depth of the relationship. One important move is to encourage all possible sub-groupings of the stepfamily to spend time in dyads. Helping (1) parents and children, (2) couples, and (3) stepparents and stepchildren seek out one-on-one time will frequently increase the level of connection.

While people need to experience some form of affection from stepfamily members, it is important to recognize that what constitutes welcome affection may vary widely from person to person. While the stepfather may feel he deserves a peck on the cheek at night from a stepdaughter, with whom he is close, she may feel that a casual statement of wishing "good night" may feel far more affectionate and welcome. Misinterpreted affection creates an interesting problem in that one takes an action that for all intents and purposes should increase closeness, and unfortunately ends up causing just the opposite.

Since discipline remains a stressful topic in most stepfamilies, it is useful to determine if the couple can agree on rules for all children. The stability derived from clear and reasonable "house rules" allow the stepparent and stepchild to exist in an

environment in which there can be greater comfort. This ease is created because not only do stepparent and child have a sense of order, but importantly, the stepparent and her or his spouse do not become triangulated by the child's behavior.

Remember that relationships need time to grow. Try to avoid expecting that the stepfamily will match the first-union family. Be willing to view children from different vantage points, for this is only honest. Just because a parent and a stepparent view the child differently does not mean that they don't both wish the child to do wonderfully in life.

Many factors come into play in creating an environment whereby parents and stepparents function well together. Some are well with the control of the adults, while other factors have to do with the children themselves, and the systemic dynamics at play in this stepfamily. By communicating, remaining respectful, understanding each person's role, and looking to have a mutually satisfying relationship, the parent and stepparent can function together for the betterment of all involved in the stepfamily.