



Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

Communicating with the “Other” Family

It's common in stepfamilies for children to spend part of their time living with one parent and part of their time living with or visiting the other. The way this is done varies greatly depending on the families involved and the custody arrangement. If you have a great relationship with your ex-partner or spouse, or the “other family,” that's great! Read no further! If you find arranging pick-ups and drop-offs and co-parenting with the other family is one of the greatest stepfamily struggles you've experienced, you're not alone.

Why is Communicating So Hard?

Communicating with your child or stepchild's other family can be hard for several reasons. First of all, separation or divorce is hard. No matter how happy a person is in a new relationship and stepfamily, pain from the loss of the previous relationship can linger for a long time. Although you love your new spouse or partner

very much, it might not make it any easier to deal with jealousy or anger toward your ex's new partner. These leftover feelings of anger, sadness, and jealousy can get in the way of healthy co-parenting communication.

Jealousy and frustration can also be related to differences in parenting between families. If you run a tight ship in your home with strict bedtimes and veggies on every plate, it can be frustrating to lose control over those things when your child goes to the other home and eats pizza every day or stays up until 11pm!

What Can I Do?

Patricia Papernow is an expert on divorce and stepfamilies and has written a useful book for both therapists and stepfamily members called “Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships.” She recommends something called the “dutch door” method for communicating with “other families”

when cooperative and friendly communication is difficult. Basically, this means like a dutch door, the bottom of the door stays closed, blocking any communication about parents' personal lives and other sensitive issues that are not necessary for successful co-parenting.

Even if you do not have the cooperation of the other co-parent, you put your foot down that you will not talk about anything other than necessary co-parenting issues. The top part of the door stays open, but only for those necessary co-parenting topics, such as deciding pick-up and drop-off details, vacations, and sometimes money-related issues like child support. This method is not a “cure-all” for taking all of the stress out of conversations with “other families”, but when you do it well and stand your ground, it can reduce the unnecessary stress that can come with those conversations.

It is also important during the early years of your stepfamily

Communicating with the “Other” Family (cont’d)

to limit co-parenting communication to the two biological parents. Without effective communication between the child(ren)’s two original parents, it is unlikely that communication between one parent and the other parent’s new partner (stepparent) would go very well.

What if We Can’t Solve Our Problems?

Unfortunately, some ex-partners hold so much anger or resentment toward each other that one or both are not willing to use positive communication strategies. When communication problems continue to get in the way of successful co-parenting, a stepfamily therapist can be the best resource for help.

See the Quick Steps guide for tips on finding a high quality stepfamily therapist (http://www.stepfamilies.info/quick-steps/QS_Finding_A_Therapist_D.pdf)

Therapists that are trained specifically in stepfamily issues can help you and your child’s other parent discuss the more difficult problems you are having in your co-parenting relationship. If both parents are willing, this might include working toward finding closure on problems related to divorce and issues of jealousy related to new spouses.

Stepfamily therapists can also

be mediators, to help parents manage visitation and custody schedules and create rules and guidelines related to raising their mutual child.

References:

Papernow, P. L. (2013). *Surviving and thriving in stepfamily relationships: What works and what doesn’t*. Routledge.

