

## **LIVING IN STEP-FAMILIES: PRE-MARITAL EXPECTATIONS**

Before any couple "ties the knot" they should talk about what they expect from each other and from their marriage. When the marriage will create a step-family, this is especially important.

People considering marriage often have different ideas of what they expect from each other. Discussing expectations prior to taking that big step will help a couple set realistic goals and make realistic commitments to each other.

This guide, designed specifically for prospective step-families, will aid you and your children in discussing ideas and making plans for a satisfying family life.

Creating a successful step-family environment can have many rewards for its members, but it requires more than love and good intentions. Flexibility, commitment and realistic expectations will all contribute to a successful step-family.

Developing realistic expectations involves understanding and accepting the ways a step-family structure differs from that of a first-time family. An understanding of these differences will help create a satisfying marital relationship and family life.

A remarriage occurs only after a marriage ends, either through death or divorce, and dreams of marrying and living "happily ever after" have been shattered. Because of this, parents and children often must deal with feelings of sadness, anger, hurt and disillusionment. These feelings must be overcome before children and adults can trust and have faith in new relationships. Also, because the parent-child bond originated before the new couple's relationship, stepparents join a family that already has loyalties, traditions, and roles established. Stepparents sometimes feel like outsiders.

## **“STEP-PARENTING”**

Children in step-families have had to cope with the partial or complete loss of a parental relationship. There is a biological parent, in memory or in actuality, who is still important to the child, and who will have an influence on the new step-family. Children remember "how my mom did it when she was alive," or that "Dad always lets me stay up late at his house."

Because children may spend time in two different households with different rules and expectations, they need to learn how to make smooth transitions. They may experience loyalty conflicts not realizing you can love two people (e.g., father and stepfather) in the same role. They may need to learn how to deal with the differences in values and lifestyles between the two homes.

Another structural difference must be considered before forming a step-family. A newly married couple usually has time to get to know one another gradually and make marital adjustments before adding a child with the accompanying new roles and responsibilities of parenthood. With remarriage, one is a new spouse and a parent or step-parent from the start. Because of this added complexity, it is especially important to discuss expectations and make plans for the transitions involved. Such planning has the potential of reducing stress for the couple and their children.

Despite the complexities, (and sometimes because of them), a healthy step-family can provide many rewards and satisfactions for step-family members. For adults, remarriage can provide a new opportunity to develop a satisfying intimate relationship. For children who have witnessed the failure of their biological parents' relationship through divorce or have experienced the pain of a parent's death, witnessing their parent's satisfying remarried relationship can renew their faith in close interpersonal relationships.

## **PRE-MARITAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

The following questions should help you and your partner discuss important issues related to establishing a good foundation for your relationship and your step-family.

You may find it most effective if you each write down your own answers first, then share them with each other at a quiet time free of interruptions and distractions.

Because it will take time to share expectations and negotiate differences, you will probably want to discuss only one or two sections at a sitting. Remember, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, just as there are no perfect solutions or perfect compromises.

After sharing your answers, read the accompanying piece, "Understanding Your Answers." This guide sheet includes suggestions for dealing with particular aspects of step-family life. These suggestions come from other step-families' experiences, and from step-family research.

### **Personal Goals and Expectations**

1. Why do you want to marry/remarry?
2. What is it that you hope to contribute to this marriage relationship?
3. What do you hope to receive from this relationship?
4. What personal qualities in a partner are important to you?
5. What values (religion, politics, education) are important for you to have in common with your partner?
6. Why do you want to marry this particular person?
7. How much time do you expect your partner to spend alone with you each week?
8. How have you managed the strong feelings (anger, hurt, sorrow, guilt) about the loss of your former partner? To what extent do these feelings influence your present relationship with your new partner?
9. How have you seen your new partner managing his/her strong feelings about the loss of his/her former partner? To what extent do you see those feelings affecting the relationship the two of you have?

### **Jobs**

1. Do you plan to work outside the home after your marriage? Will you work full-time or part-time?
2. Will you work at your present job, or will the marriage require a job change for you or your partner?
3. Whose job will have priority when it comes to deciding where to live, whether or not to accept promotions, work overtime, etc.?
4. What potential stresses do you think your jobs will present? How compatible are the demands of your jobs/careers (working hours, overtime required, work taken home, emotional energy needed, etc.)?

## **“STEP-PARENTING”**

### **Household Arrangements**

1. Where do you want to live after you are married?
2. Which children will live with you? At what times?
3. Will there be space for privacy for you as a couple?
4. Will there be some special place for each child and his or her belongings, even if they live with you for only short periods (weekends, vacations)?
5. Whom do you expect to be responsible for which household chores (grocery shopping, cooking, dishwashing, vacuuming, taking out the trash, cleaning bathrooms, laundry, ironing, taking children to appointments and lessons, mowing lawn, paying bills)?

### **Financial Matters**

1. Who will provide what proportion of support and living expenses?
2. What financial responsibilities do you have to other family members (child support, alimony, care for an elderly parent)?
3. What financial responsibilities does your former spouse have to you? How reliable has he/she been in fulfilling those responsibilities?
4. What style of living, and what kinds of material things, are important to you?
5. Will you have separate or joint checking and savings accounts?
6. In whose names will credit cards be? Car ownership? Home ownership?
7. How will money be allocated to children? Will children receive allowances? If so, how will the amount be decided?
8. Which family members will be covered under whose health insurance policies?
9. Which family members will be covered by life insurance? Who will be stated as the beneficiary?

## **Children**

1. How well do you presently know and relate to your partners children? Specifically, how much time have you spent with the children alone? With your partner and the children together?
2. If you both have children, how much time have the two sets of children spent together?
3. How do you think your remarriage will affect your children? Your partner's children?
4. How do you think your marriage will affect your children's relationship with their other biological parent?
5. What type of custody and visitation arrangements do you currently have?
6. Will your marriage require any changes in custody or visitation arrangements for the children?
7. If circumstances changed (and they often do), how would you feel about your children, or your partner's children, coming to live with you full-time? Or, leaving to live with their other parent most of the time?
8. What will your stepchildren call you? How will this be decided?
9. As a stepparent, what do you want and expect from your stepchildren?
10. Do you expect your stepchildren to love you? Could you accept it if they did not?
11. As a parent, do you expect your spouse and your children to love one another? Could you accept it if they did not?
12. What role do you expect your partner to play with your children (adult friend, breadwinner, substitute parent, other)?
13. What role do you expect to play with your stepchildren?
14. Can you accept the children living under different rules and values in their different homes?
15. What types of rules (for homework, household chores, T.V. watching) do you have for your children?
16. What types of rules does your partner expect?
17. How do you discipline your children?
18. What part do you expect your partner to have in child rearing and disciplining your children?
19. How will you manage rivalry between step siblings?
20. How will you help adolescents manage sexual attraction if it occurs among step siblings? Toward the stepparent?
21. Do you want to have a child(ren) in this marriage? Why or why not?

## **"STEP-PARENTING"**

### **Relationships With Others**

1. How do you presently communicate with your former spouse? How much contact is appropriate?
2. How much contact do your children have with their other parent? With grandparents?
3. How much contact have you had with your partner's parents?
4. How do they see the grandparent/step-grandparent roles?
5. How would you feel about taking an elderly or infirm parent into your home?
6. How will you and your partner make time to enjoy your new marriage?

### **Communication**

1. What feelings are easiest for you to express? Most difficult?
2. What feelings do you see your partner expressing most easily? Which feelings seem difficult for him/her to express?
3. How easily can you ask for what you want and need?
4. How well are your respective children able to communicate their feelings and concerns?
5. How do you manage conflict/differences?
6. How do you and your partner constructively argue?
7. What do each of you do when disagreeing that is unproductive or destructive (get sarcastic, threaten to leave, give unwanted advice, complain without asking for a specific change, jump from one problem to another before resolving the original problem, fight to "win")?

### **Sexual Expectations**

1. How do you want to be approached by your partner to have sex?
2. How would you want to be turned down by your partner when you want to have intercourse and your partner doesn't?
3. What sexual behaviors do you most and least enjoy?
4. How do you feel about just being affectionate together-hugging, holding, but not having intercourse if you or your partner is too tired?
5. Who will be responsible for birth control? What methods of birth control are acceptable to you?
6. What are your values regarding extramarital sex?

## **UNDERSTANDING YOUR ANSWERS**

### **Personal goals and expectations**

The divorce or death of a partner usually involves feelings of intense sadness, anger, hurt or guilt. Allow time for grieving and healing. Remarrying quickly "on the rebound" often makes the adjustment to a new marriage much more difficult for everyone involved. If past memories and resentments interfere with your feelings about yourself or keep you from enjoying your present relationships you may not be ready yet for remarriage. If you have been able to deal with strong feelings (loss, hurt, guilt, anger, loneliness, resentment) so that they no longer overwhelm you, and if you have recovered your own feelings of worth and Self-esteem, you may be ready for remarriage. If not, you may find professional counseling, participating in a support group, or reading books dealing with divorce or death helpful.

### **Jobs**

In addition to financial support, jobs provide friendships, emotional support and self-esteem. When considering all the adjustments a new marriage and family brings, it may be wise to continue in the same job during the initial adjustments to remarriage and step-family life. Changing too many areas of your life at one time can be stressful.

### **Household Arrangements**

Space and "turf" issues are often problems in step-families. As stepparents and family therapists John and Emily Visser point out, "It is difficult to have a new person or persons move into your 'space,' and it is difficult to be the 'new' person or people joining a pre-existing group. For these reasons, it helps to cut down feelings involved with 'territory' if step-families can start out in their own house or apartment." However, this may not be financially feasible or practical for other reasons.

If finding a new place is not possible, families can work together to decide how they can re-apportion the available space so that each family member has a place of their own. This may involve turning a study into a bedroom for a child who will be living with you on the weekends. Or it may mean adding bunk beds and footlockers to a particular room. Involve the children in decisions regarding how to redesign space. They can sometimes offer creative solutions to space problems and will be less likely to resent decisions they have had a part in making.

### **Financial Matters**

Couples should write out a budget together prior to marriage. This gives each partner a realistic idea of costs, expenses, and what the economic lifestyle will be in the marriage. Home Economics guide sheet GH 3507, "Living in Step-families: Financial Decision Making," (Farmer & Coleman, 1986), discusses this area in more detail. It presents strategies that other step-families have found successful in managing finances and discusses the complicated feelings that often accompany decision-making in this area. GH 3507 is available at your local University Extension office.

## **Children**

Perhaps one of the most important things that parents and stepparents need to remember when planning remarriage is that adjustments take time. Moving slowly toward remarriage usually makes adjustments easier. Children will not view the remarriage in the same way as you do. Visser and Visser (1982) remind us: "Following a divorce or death your children had to deal with many changes which they couldn't control. To them the whole of life may have seemed unpredictable and changing every day. Moving slowly and letting your children help you plan ahead can ease their sense of helplessness so that they will be better able to handle the changes that will come along with your remarriage-a new adult, new children, new friends, a new school, a new home. If they feel happy about your remarriage it will certainly make things a lot easier for everyone."

Only adults should make the decision to remarry (children shouldn't have veto power), but you should include children in remarriage planning so that they feel as if they have control over their own lives. Children can have input into decisions regarding household chores, rearranging living space or finding a new home, deciding what to call a stepparent, making family rules, and planning the wedding ceremony and reception.

Don't expect stepparents and stepchildren to have strong positive feelings towards each other. Unlike natural parents and their children, they do not have the history of developing a strong bond over time, and it takes time for mutually respectful relationships to develop. Adolescent stepchildren may particularly resent another adult added to their lives in a parental role. After all, in any family, adolescents usually try to establish independence and make their own decisions. The addition of another adult to make demands on them will seldom be welcomed.

Disciplining stepchildren can be sticky, especially at first. Initially, children often resist a stepparents discipline. "You can't tell me what to do, you're not my father (or mother)" is often heard. Family therapist David Mills (1984) suggests that stepparents should not try to discipline a stepchild as a parent does, but should first try to establish a friendly, respectful relationship with their stepchildren. The "bonding" between stepchildren and stepparent may take one or two years or may never occur.

Mills recommends that during the first year or two the biological parent take the responsibility for setting and enforcing limits. He suggests that stepparents address any requests for limit setting to the parent by saying, "Would you ask your children to . . . ?" He also suggests that "when the parent is planning to be temporarily absent, he or she may ask the stepparent to act as a babysitter. This should be set up exactly as one does with a sitter-the parent gives the children explicit rules to follow and so instructs the sitter. The stepparent, in setting limits, must learn to use the form, 'Your parent said you should.' "

Handling discipline in this way enables the stepparent to concentrate on developing positive relationships with stepchildren, and at the same time maintains limits that children need.



## **Relationships With Others**

Children benefit from consistent, caring contact with both biological parents. Both parents should maintain positive relationships with their children. It is detrimental to children's emotional health and well-being to be caught between two adults who continually express their anger towards each other.

Continued hostility also makes it easy for children to play parents against each other. Courteous relationships between the ex-spouses benefit the whole family. Many former spouses maintain strained, but courteous relationships by keeping their focus on their mutual concern for their children's welfare.

Maintain contact between the children and their grandparents and other extended family members. Because these relationships are often strained at the time of remarriage, it is important to let grandparents and other relatives know that you recognize their importance in the children's lives, and will respect their continued involvement.

## **Communication**

Satisfying step-family living requires a great deal of communication. Because your roles and relationships differ within the family, you will often have different feelings and views, no matter how similar your personalities and values. Listen carefully to each other, try to understand the feelings of your partner and children without judging those feelings.

For instance, don't tell your spouse "You shouldn't feel lonely and left out when my kids are here." Instead, show that you accept the feeling, and would like to understand it, by saying, "I didn't realize you felt lonely and left out when the kids were here. What makes you feel that way? Can I do something to help you feel more included?"

Be clear and direct in communication. Do not assume that your spouse or the children will know what you want or need. Tell them what you think and feel, and ask specifically for what you want. For example, a stepmother who wants to spend some time alone with her husband (whose two children visit every weekend), should say, "I realize that you want to spend as much time as possible with the kids when they visit, but I would really like for just the two of us to go out alone together at least one Saturday night a month. Would you do that with me?", rather than just complaining, "We never get to do anything by ourselves!"

Stick to one issue at a time in discussions and disagreements. Otherwise, you may skip back and forth, evade the hard issues, and never really solve the issue at hand. Also, sticking to one issue at a time helps the problem seem solvable. Trying to address too many issues at one time may overwhelm you and your partner, making things seem hopeless. For example, a stepfather who thinks his adolescent stepchildren should help more around the house with chores could discuss this with his wife by saying, "I think Joe and Susan should have more responsibility for the housework and cooking. How about putting them in charge of cleaning the bathrooms and den, in addition to their bedrooms, and assigning them each one night a week to cook dinner?" When his wife replies "Well, I think you could spend less time at the office in the evenings and more time at home with us, if Joe should stick to the original issue by saying, "Can we discuss my time spent with the family later. Right now, we're discussing the kids' household responsibilities."

## **“STEP-PARENTING”**

Children often need help in understanding and coping with their conflicting and uncomfortable feelings, and the new situations that arise in step-family living. Advise children to:

- ◆ Try out different names for the stepparent until they find one that fits (the stepparent's first name, or calling the biological father "dad" and the stepfather papa Joe," or making up a nickname that is acceptable to the stepparent such as "Mr. M.");
- ◆ Tell their stepparent what they want to call him/her;
- ◆ Say "thank you" to the stepparent when they do nice things for them;
- ◆ Tell their stepparent what foods they like;
- ◆ Try out different ways to introduce the stepparent, ("This is my stepmother Elizabeth," or "This is my mother's husband, Mr. Jones,");
- ◆ Talk directly to the stepparent rather than using the parent as an intermediary;
- ◆ Tell "love-dovey" adults to stop public displays if such behavior is embarrassing;
- ◆ Express anger in a polite way and before it grows;
- ◆ Ask stepparents things they want to know about them;
- ◆ Make their expectations clear;
- ◆ Inform new family members of sore spots to avoid;
- ◆ Sit down with step siblings and set up rules about sharing;
- ◆ Discuss the new stepparent's role in disciplining;
- ◆ Ask for what they want and need when visiting the other household or when step siblings visit;
- ◆ Tell someone if physical abuse occurs.

Some self-help books, such as Bradley's (1982) *“Where Do I Belong?”* provide children with specific examples of ways to word questions, such as "Do I have to do as he says?" and statements such as "I want you to spend more time with me. I'm lonely" (Such examples are helpful to children and adolescents who may have difficulty comprehending admonitions to "communicate feelings" to stepparents and parents.)

Establishing a "family council" increases opportunities for communicating effectively and develops a cooperative way of making decisions that affect all family members. Home Economics guide sheet GH 6641, "Family Councils: The Key is Communication," gives specific information on starting a family council. This publication is available at your local University Extension office.

## **Sexual Expectations**

Sometimes finding the time, energy, and privacy for developing a satisfying sexual relationship can be a challenge. Children who are used to walking unannounced into a parent's bedroom need to learn to respect closed doors and to knock first.

Sexuality is usually more apparent in step-families because of the new-couple relationship and because children and adolescents may be living with others with whom they have not grown up. Because of this, Visher and Visher (1982) remind us that "It is important for the children to receive affection and to be aware of tenderness between the couple, but it may also be important for the couple to minimize to some extent the sexual aspects of the household and to help the children understand and accept their sexual attractions to one another or to the adults."

## THE CHILDREN

Tell children directly that you plan to remarry; don't let them find out from their other parent or mutual friends. This gives you the opportunity to address questions or fears your children may have. Visher and Visher (1982) outline some of these questions or concerns:

- ◆ Will they continue to see their other biological parent as often as before the wedding?
- ◆ Will they have more or less time alone with the parent getting remarried?
- ◆ This wedding means that their biological parents won't be getting back together again the way they'd been dreaming.
- ◆ How can they ever live in the same house with so many other people they don't really know or like very much?
- ◆ Will their new stepparent play with them so they
- ◆ How will they get to scouts next week, to ballet class on Thursday, to see their friends from their former school?
- ◆ The divorce was bad enough and now all this upheaval again. It isn't fair.
- ◆ How will Boots the cat and Rusty the dog get along together, and who is going to feed them?

Children may also worry that the new marriage will break up like the other marriage did, so they may hesitate to invest their emotions and time into new relationships. Adolescents, who may have shouldered adult responsibilities while living in the single parent family, may resent being relegated to a "child" position again. Children may feel that their parent expects them to love the stepparent and step siblings, and feel guilty when they don't develop those feelings quickly. Feeling confused and caught by divided loyalties between their two homes is also a problem for some children.

Talk frankly with children about their feelings and fears. They need to know that you care about their concerns, and that other children experience similar feelings and fears. Sometimes children benefit from reading stories about other children in step-families.

By reading with them, you can offer them the opportunity to discuss their feelings and concerns with you. Self-help books that are particularly good for children, adolescents, and their parents and stepparents are Bradley's *Where Do I Belong? A Kid's Guide to Step-families* (for children), Craven's *Step-families: New Patterns of Harmony* (adolescents), Gardner's *The Boys and Girl,; Book about Step-families* (older children and adolescents) and Visher and Visher's *How to Win as a Step-family* (adults).

Include the children in decisions regarding household chores, rearranging living space or finding a new home, deciding what to call a stepparent, and making family rules. They are much less likely to feel angry or "left out," and more likely to enjoy their new family relationships if they have had some say in these decisions.

## **“STEP-PARENTING”**

Step-family life can be enriching and satisfying. It can offer family members the opportunities to grow, to share, and to love.

By carefully considering your hopes, expectations, and feelings, you can enrich your possibilities for creating a satisfying marriage and family life. Although there are challenges to meet and problems to solve as a part of step-family living, it is important to concentrate on the strengths that can be found in step-family life. For adults, remarriage provides a new opportunity to develop a satisfying intimate relationship. For their children, seeing a positive model of adult intimacy and marriage can rekindle their own faith in intimate relationships and marriage.

Step-family living can also provide children opportunities to participate in family life in two households, which can result in learning flexibility and tolerance of differences in other people's values and beliefs. In addition, stepchildren usually have access on a regular basis to more adult role models because they have stepparents, stepgrandparents, and step siblings. This can give children and adolescents more opportunities for supportive relationships, and more options to choose from in developing their own personalities and values.

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