

Easing the Pain of Blended Families

Blending families when divorced or widowed parents remarry can be a challenge. Here are some steps to take to help the process go smoothly.

Stepmom. What word pictures come to mind when you hear that word? Perhaps you are like my young **daughter**, whose first encounter with stepmom went like this: “Mommy, Mommy, Alison has a stepmom! Will she be mean and wicked like the stepmother in Cinderella? We’ve got to help Alison!”

Or maybe you know a boy like Billy—quiet, shy and frightened that his “new” mom will take off like his first. One year ago Billy’s real mother abandoned the family, and now the stepmother is trying to love him. Billy is resisting. From his point of view, one **rejection** is hard enough.

Shari, an unhappy teen-ager, refuses to talk to her stepmom, who became part of the family after an affair with her **dad** that led to divorce and remarriage. Dad has repented of his sin, but Shari has no intention of accepting the “other woman” as her stepmother. She can’t stop thinking about how Mom suffered as a result of her dad’s **infidelity**. The stepmom is a living reminder of the family **pain**.

Such are the stories of **stepchildren** trying to adjust. Hurt and wounded, these kids can be a handful. Often their pain evidences in opposition, **anger** and flat-out rejection of the stepmom. And no one knows how difficult it all can be better than the stepmoms themselves. **Stepparenting** can be summed up by the Spanish phrase about social revolution, La lucha continua: The struggle continues.

The government estimates that by the year 2007, **stepfamilies**, or blended **families** as we sometimes call them, will outnumber

traditional nuclear families. Stepfamilies are an outgrowth of our **divorce** culture, the result of the growing number of failed marriages.

What Kids Face When families blend, everyone experiences change, but from the children's perspective, the world has turned upside down. Suddenly there is a stranger sharing the bathroom, giving directions and checking their homework. Dad is no longer exclusively theirs. Mom's daily presence is lost. Holidays become complicated. And what do they call this new person who shows up at the breakfast table with habits that annoy them?

Their former family has been torn apart and replaced with another. This loss and new arrangement are not by choice. Feelings of anger linger long after the parents' divorce is final. If the child hasn't openly worked through anger and forgiveness toward the original parents, these feelings carry over to the blended family as well.

Even in the best of situations, stepchildren struggle to find ways to honor stepparents without dishonoring biological parents. They experience a constant division of loyalties that evidences in the smallest of issues. It is this division of loyalties that resurfaces throughout the new marriage and serves as an unpleasant reminder of the price children pay for divorce.

And consider this: According to an article in the *American Sociological Review* titled "The Quality and Stability of Remarriages: the Role of Stepchildren," couples with stepchildren are more than twice as likely to divorce again (White and Booth, 1985), and children who live as stepchildren are more likely to move out of the household at an earlier age. Research indicates that families with stepchildren have more rivalry and aggression and less empathy and involvement.

How Stepmoms Can Help But what about the stepmoms, the

unforgotten women who need help overcoming the stigma of their new roles and adjusting to children who may resent their presence? Their challenge is to become accepted as part of the reconstituted family. Doing so takes time and effort. And their husbands, the ones who are supposed to support them through the adjustment, are often in precarious roles dealing with the guilt of divorce and loyalty to the children whom they have hurt.

Stepmoms don't always know what to do. The main problem for reconstituted families is that the original intact family is gone. That first model, no matter how good or how poor, no longer applies to the current situation. Consequently all members struggle with ambivalence, attachment, emotional reactions, reorganization, unresolved issues and spiritual redevelopment.

The stepmom typically has the added frustration of juggling the family's needs—her husband's, her own and their children's. Most times contact regarding visitation and extended family goes through her. And all too often, ex-wives are not eager to cooperate with stepmom's needs and wishes, particularly if stepmom is the woman who broke up the intact family.

When the new couple has a child together (ours), the **parenting** work goes easier because of parental cohesion that develops. Yet the interplay of relationships with "yours" and "mine" can remain stressful.

Keep in mind that remarriage is a complex process, not a one-time event. Remarriage is easier when:

- There is a reasonable interval between marriages, and losses are grieved.
- There is no shift in custody at the time of remarriage.
- Both families approve of the remarriage.

- Children have contact with both their biological parents.
- Acrimony over the children is not present between ex-spouses.
- The stepdaughter is not adolescent. Daughters ages 9 to 15 have more problems adjusting to stepparents.
- Time is taken to adjust (usually between two to five years).
- The problems of stepmoms are recognized and validated.
- Mutual courtesy between stepmom and children, rather than mutual love, is the immediate goal.
- The biological parent handles serious discipline issues well.

Of course, many of you don't have these things going for you. But don't despair! There is still much that can be done to ease the blending of families. If you are a stepmom undergoing family adjustment, consider these strategies:

Continue to resolve all divorce issues. When issues of loss surface (and they will), freely discuss them. Loss is an ongoing process due to celebrations and life transitions such as graduations, weddings, births and so on that will require you to interface with the biological parents.

Give up the idea that you won't have difficulty. The **biblical promise** is that you will overcome problems, not avoid them.

Talk about feelings—guilt, anger, loyalties and so on. Validating feelings and not being afraid to allow others to express them is very important and goes a long way in helping family members feel supported.

Find a way to work with the biological mom. This will require prayer and humility—and may be a test of your Christlike character.

Be aware that problems with ex-spouses usually involve money, jealousy, competition and unresolved divorce issues. Clarify

and resolve these issues.

Negotiate your relationship with the children. Successful discipline occurs after stepfamily integration. When possible, support the biological parent.

Understand that you married your husband because you love him. You may not love the children at first—and may have to work on this. Ask God to put a love in your heart for them.

You have more to cope with than intact families. You should understand this before you remarry. In most cases, children are forever tied to the biological couple.

Keep your relationship with God strong, intimate and growing. You need His strength, love and wisdom.

Pray for the newly constituted family and the biological mother.

Stepmoms often ask in therapy why no one appreciates the load they bear. The answer has to do with the preoccupation of other family members with their own adjustments. In addition, women typically take responsibility for family relationships. Consequently, others expect them to carry the burden and be strong.

You may not always feel strong, and that's OK. Know that you aren't alone in your time of adjustment. God sees your difficulty and has the wisdom necessary to handle family matters.

Approach your loving heavenly Father. Ask for discernment and godly character in order to respond to each situation in a Christlike manner. He will give you what you need to be victorious.

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