

Holy Help for Handling the Holidays as a Blended Family

“My mom refuses to treat my stepchildren the same as her grandchildren,” the dad attending my stepfamily event lamented. “My wife is hurt and furious, and I don’t blame her. I’m caught in the middle between my parents and my spouse. I’m starting to dread the entire holiday season. ”

After 26 years as a stepmom, I’ve experienced a number of stressful holidays. The collision of various traditions and visitation schedules in the multiple-home, multiple-parent, multiple grandparent and in-laws of stepfamily living often produce tension.

I remember more than one Christmas when I wanted to walk out to the nativity scene in my front yard and ask Baby Jesus to move over so I could squeeze in beside Him. It didn’t matter that I was in New York and it was 10 degrees outside. All I wanted was that “heavenly peace” the Christmas carols were depicting.

This dad is experiencing a common stepfamily problem. He feels torn between loyalty to his biological family and his newly formed stepfamily. There are practical suggestions available for coping with stepfamily holiday hassles. Here are a few:

▪ **Communication**

When a remarriage occurs, extended family members typically do not understand the unique dynamics associated with stepfamily living. Therefore, it’s wise for someone like this dad to clearly explain to his mother why favoritism cannot be tolerated. The parent needs to share with his/her family how hurtful it is for stepchildren when they feel they are “less than” the biological children. When the family recognizes the injury they are causing, they often are willing to embrace the

changes.

▪ **Acknowledge the Loss**

All stepfamilies are formed out of loss. A death or divorce has occurred, and that means grief—for everyone. One way to help a family member accept the stepfamily situation is to acknowledge their wound. If this son verbalizes and admits the pain and loss his mother experienced during his divorce, there is a much greater chance of mending the situation. It's when a family member believes no one comprehends their pain that they tend to lash out. After the holidays, if the grandchildren are given special time alone with Grandma, it might also help to ease her loss.

▪ **Set Boundaries**

A person cannot force another person, including a family member, to love—or even like—the newly formed stepfamily. However, it must be made clear that respect toward stepfamily members is mandatory. When this dad stood at the altar, he vowed before God that he would love, cherish and honor his wife and her children. If he allows his mother to disrespect them, he is breaking his marriage vow to God and to his spouse.

If the mother refuses to abide by her son's boundary, and she continues to blatantly injure the stepchildren by showing favoritism, then the dad must implement a consequence. Her repetitious and harmful decisions, along with the disregard of her son's request, warrant a negative outcome. Determining what that his response should be is complex and unique for each situation. There are no "cookie cutter" stepfamily formulas for setting boundaries. One option might be to refrain from visiting the mom on Christmas next year.

With time, communication, compassion and prayer, it is possible to have harmony in a stepfamily. Your holiday table might not look like a Norman Rockwell painting. But that's all

right; neither does mine. {eo}

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