

Building Healthy Stepfamilies
by Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

If your family is a "remarried family" or a "step-family" then you're in good company. The experience of building a remarried or stepfamily is a common experience, not only for recovering people, but for the general population as well. There are lots of difficulties involved in putting together a stepfamily. Part of the problem is our tendency to view stepfamilies as something less than desirable. There are some issues that are unique to stepfamilies that must be worked through to develop healthy stepfamilies. That doesn't make stepfamilies necessarily problematic or pathological.

Its time to stop stereotyping remarried families as pathological and take a look at what is really going on. The intact nuclear family (never divorced parents with their children in one household) is no longer statistically representative of the majority of American families. The reality is that half of all couples who marry can be expected to be divorced and that of those divorces, 65% of the women and 70% of the men will remarry. More than half of the kids in divorced families will end up living in a home with a step parent present (Glick & Lin, 1986; Glick, 1984).

When we continue to hang on to the nuclear family as the "Ideal" family that our family must measure up to, we short-change ourselves. Part of the problem in our reluctance to give up the nuclear family as the standard involves the fact that normal processes of forming remarried families haven't formally been defined. Ambiguous boundaries and membership issues defy simple definition. Culturally, we have no established patterns, rituals, or norms to help us negotiate the complex relationships involved in building remarried families.

Lots of couples when remarrying, just put the two families together and hope for the best. Denial of the probability of problems, is part of the difficulty in building remarried families. Other major problems can occur when remarried families hold tight to the roles and rules of the intact nuclear family. For example, some families draw a tight boundary around the new family, like a wagon train circling the wagons for protection against perceived threats from without. In a nuclear family the boundaries are more clear about who is part of the family and who is not. In a stepfamily a child's non-custodial parent is still family to that child, as are all the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins connected to that side of the family. Attempts by remarried families, to cut out biological parents and other extended family members is not only unrealistic but potentially damaging to the kids. Similar potential problems develop when competition between the stepparent and the stepkids occur over affection or importance.

Some helpful solutions are offered by remarried families on the front line, who are negotiating, renegotiating, defining, refining, and constructing remarried family structures that work. They have the expectation that there will not be immediate love between the step-parent and step-kids. These families foster flexibility of family

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boundaries and confusion and divided loyalties from the kids are expected. They understand the importance of adults behaving cooperatively in raising kids. Permeable, flexible boundaries smoothes the transition into "stepfamilyhood". Allowing kids to come and go between the households of the biological parent and step-families as agreed upon in visitation and custody (with minimal conflict) also helps to reduce the divided loyalties that kids naturally have with divorce and remarriage. The sense of "belonging" may take three to five years to develop fully in most of the members of the family and longer if teenagers are involved.

Revision of some gender roles can facilitate a smoother transition. Such gender roles place responsibility for the emotional well-being of the family onto women. This can pit step-mother against step-daughter, and wife against ex-wife. Role revision can involve each parent, along with their ex-spouse taking primary responsibility for raising or disciplining their own kids.

Fully functioning remarried families expect plenty of confusion about questions of kinship, interaction rules, and guidelines like "Who are the real family members?", "Where do the kids belong?", "How much time is to be spent with whom, where, when?", "Who's in charge?". These issues must be continually renegotiated, refined, and redefined. Kids are encouraged to express their full range of feelings and divided loyalties are expected. Decisions concerning custody, visitation, and remarriage are made by the parents, not the kids and all adults.

While developing remarried families is difficult, the transitions can be made smoother by developing realistic expectation, befriending the children before attempting to parent them, and keeping in mind that there's enough love to go around.