

Better Parenting: Strengthening Your Stepfamily

By Sonia Spackman MA, MFT

For a stepfamily, the wedding is not the beginning – it's the middle. There is a honeymoon for couples in stepfamilies – however, it tends to come at the end of the remarriage journey and not always at the beginning. You certainly don't need to be reminded that the remarriage journey always takes some unexpected turns.

#1 Make a plan, begin working on a tentative plan carefully with persistence and you will reap the benefits.

Most stepfamilies have come from the loss of a previous family. A new remarriage family can have both joy and hope with lingering sadness. You may feel down and your kids may seem sad- just when you hoped everyone would be happy. As changes take place try to imagine that everyone is facing loss in some way. Your losses are easy to identify. The hard part is stepping into the shoes of others to experience what is troubling them.

#2 Make a list of each family member and the losses you believe he or she has experienced. Try hard to imagine what it has been like to be that person at each step along the way.

Feelings about loss can be harmful. Eventually the feelings do come out, sometimes in costly, or harmful ways. Children's unresolved feelings may cause illness, underachievement, school rebellion, delinquency or involvement in drugs or alcohol. Try to look behind the feelings you are seeing to see how loss is being

expressed. Children often act mad when deep down they really are sad. Also, spouses can be distant from their mate in order to prevent further hurt from another loss.

#3 Try to understand what is under the surface instead of reacting to what is in front of you.

No one experiences loss more than the children. They had no choice, yet their lives are changed forever. Kids may have lost the daily attention of one parent. They may have lost contact with neighborhood friends and familiar activities, their old house, old room and the other parent. Some kids get used to the "single parent" family and the remarriage threatens the closeness they had or the fantasy that their mom and dad would get back together some day.

#4 If you are very brave, spend one-on-one time with each of the children and ask how they felt at the time of the wedding. Open the door to honest discussions about their mixed feelings. Allow them to have their opinions- remembering, that this is a journey for everyone and feelings change over time.

On visitation weekends the non-custodial parent often spends less time with the stepchildren focusing time and energy on their own children. This is understandable, yet it may hurt the stepchildren and your spouse's feelings. When stepchildren are ignored you can bet that it will have a negative effect sooner or latter.

#5 Make a time for both of you to voice your hurts and to discuss what

you need from each other and then meet again to make agreements and trade offs. It can help everyone understand each other better and work things out.

As the second wife or husband you may feel intimidated when the stepchildren share positive stories about their mother or father. Even if their words are not intended to hurt you, you might find it hard not to feel compared.

#6 This situation provides more opportunities for all to share feelings to understand each other better. Try and make allowances for the children in order to build and strengthen your new family relationships.

A Deceased spouse or parent. It is normal and healthy to experience grief. Yet, how many times are we told to stop grieving and move on? Memories of a deceased spouse or a deceased parent tend to be positive and seen through rose-colored glasses. It's easy to forget the faults and failures of the person we loved. However, the new spouse can feel left out.

#7 Help your mate understand how special he/she is to you.

#8 Listen to your children, acknowledge, and talk to them in a caring way. Tell them what you are hearing. Respond with questions and statements like, "Tell me more. What else do you miss." Some children do better with art or play, use what helps them express their loss.

The non-custodial stepparent. In remarriage, the parent whose children live elsewhere often take on

the responsibility of the new spouse's children which can intensify the pain of losing contact with their own children. This could unintentionally cause holding back to the stepchildren. Yet, the stepchildren who may have already lost much of their faith in adults and themselves really need trust and respect when it is most difficult for the new stepparent.

#9 Have special times for everyone to talk about their losses. This helps children and teens know how to think about loss and gives permission to talk openly. One wise stepparent said, "I wonder if you don't want to go to the game with me because you would rather go with you dad, you miss him huh? Tell me what you are sad about."

A new spouse not previously married. Some become stepparents before they become biological parents. For a few the long-held marriage dream is shattered. They face the loss of the privacy and intimacy they imagined would be a part of their newlywed life. New spouses experience being an outsider to the history and bond between their stepchildren and spouse.

#10 Discuss a plan with your new spouse for your own time together after the kids go to bed. Or plan regular "mini-trips" alone.

#11 Attending a parenting class or group in the community is very helpful for learning and being able to get your questions answered from people who have been where you are.

The biological parent. Alone or between marriages you may continue to experience many losses – your self-esteem may have slipped, your courage may have disappeared as you face the world alone. You may have blamed yourself for the divorce, and had financial loss as you cope with the changes.

#12 Realize that grief cannot be "fixed". You can't just say something to make it go away, so don't try. See a counselor that is familiar with stepfamily issues.

Try to make changes slowly. And try to keep as much stability in the new home as possible. Remember, more change equals more loss.

Resources: "Strengthening Your Stepfamily" by Elizabeth Einstein and Linda Albert, The Smart Step-Family, by Ron L. Deal.

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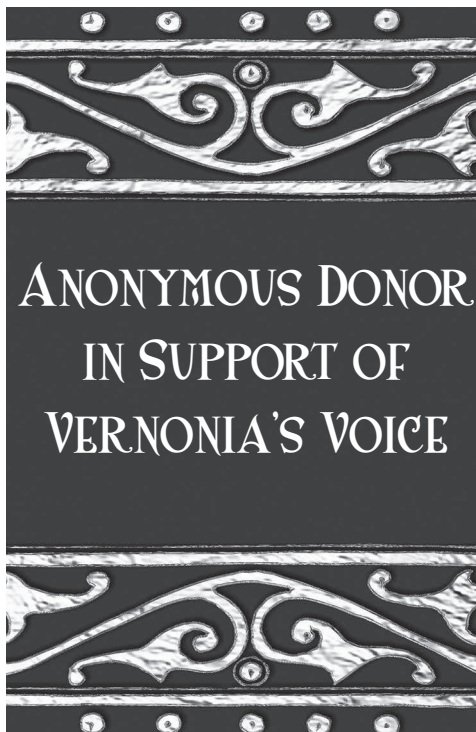
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