



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #6

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Step-parenting

Stepfamilies are formed whenever parents remarry. Approximately 1.5 million people remarry each year, which is almost one out of two marriages or 4.8 per thousand. Ninety percent of divorced women with children remarry, with even more divorced men remarrying than divorced women. Forty percent of all children will end up in a stepfamily before they reach 18 years of age. There are more than 35 million stepparents in the United States. When a second marriage fails, the break-up is often caused by issues involving children.

Guidelines For Step-parents:

1. Be yourself (your own actions are your best defense)
2. Be a spouse first and step-parent second (your first responsibility is to yourself, then spouse, then stepchildren)
3. Be honest (love and affection take time to develop)
4. Assert yourself (ask for 100% acknowledgment of your role as stepparent)
5. Define your limits (this is the role I play)
6. Risk asserting authority (a joint effort on parenting)
7. Be open to compromise (children need space and freedom)
8. Be honest with yourself before marrying a man with children (if you don't want to be a stepparent don't sign on)
9. Ask for understanding and venting time (you need a sounding board)
10. Learn secret codes (signs of appreciation)
11. Be realistic about the past (accept the past and don't make it an unmentionable subject)
12. Question your reasons for wanting a child (remember a child needs two loving parents with a warm and secure home)



Guidelines For Step-family Planning:

1. Seek professional help (don't hesitate seeking professional help before or during the marriage)
2. Attend step-parenting courses if possible (this promotes cohesive stepfamily relations)
3. Get support (join support groups)

A "couple bond" or strong, healthy relationship must be firmly seeded between a parent and stepparent to avoid family problems or wedges driven between them.

Spouses should discuss blending family perceptions:

1. What was your childhood perception of family? (family systems your parents modeled for you as a child)
2. What types of family systems did you and your ex-spouse create?
3. As a single parent did your ideas of a family change?
4. How will your idea of "family" blend with your new spouses perception of "family"?

Characteristics of a Successful Remarriage:

There is no such thing as instant love. Time is needed to grow and mourn the past family unity. "We are one big happy family" is often the unresolved past loss and a set up for failure and disappointment. Respect one another and take the time to like before loving. These bonds take 2-3 years to establish and stabilize the family.

Allow time for mourning. By the time children enter a stepparents home, the children have been in a third family unity: the first being the biological parents, then the separate or single unity and the third being the new relationship. Children must be given parental permission to mourn the losses before embracing the new family system. If not, anger outbursts and alienation may occur. Step parenting relationships should be more distant at first. Children will eventually respond as they do want their parents happy.

Disciplining a Stepchild:

1. Be specific and give clear, precise directions.
2. Be prepared to follow through to let the children know you really mean what you say.
3. Discuss discipline early in the relationship.

Disciplining the Adolescent Stepchild:

1. Don't discount. Value what the adolescent says and allow him to be wrong. If he is angry, acknowledge it and don't tell him not to be.
2. Be open and honest with feelings and emotions and leave room for disagreement.
3. Respond literally to what is said. Make adolescents think and say what they mean.
4. Be direct and assertive. Use "I want" instead of "you should" messages.
5. Get adolescents to think as adults. Straight and direct questions hook the adult in the adolescent. ie. "How will you solve your problem?"



Absentee Parent should always:

1. Make sure your child can count on you. Visit them often and on time and if you can't be there call them.
2. Be flexible. As children get older there are more demands put on their time. Support them in their activities.
4. Be firm. Don't use money and gifts in place of time with your child.
5. Be creative. Quality of time is more important than quantity of time.
6. Be considerate. The absentee parent can provide, for the relatives, contact with the children.

For Parents of Children in Stepfamilies

1. Be perceptive and consider the child's past and the roles they played in their previous families and single-parent families.
2. Use discretion and don't put down the children's parents or share negative feelings or comments with them unnecessarily.
3. Learn to tune in to your child's feelings rather than just the content of your child's message.
4. Plan how things are to be done in the new stepfamily system instead of waiting until everyone is confused about how things are to be done.
5. Deal effectively with coping mechanisms by first recognizing them and teaching children more appropriate ways of dealing with stress, such as talking, expressing negative and positive feelings and asking for help.
6. Respond to the statement, "if you were a real parent" in a warm and understanding way but be firm. "you are right, I am not your parent and I can't take that place **but** in this house we do it this way.
7. Provide reassurance and be there for them when they need you. Be the consistent, stable parent in the child's life.
8. Form a united front and be a parenting team. If natural and stepparents are together regarding discipline, respect and setting limits, being a stepchild is less complicated.

It takes time to build a warm relationship in a stepfamily. You must have empathy, understanding and be ready to spend time with the children; play with the young ones and talk to the older ones. The most successful families are those who are involved, and cultivate right attitudes and realistic expectations.