Active Parenting for Stepfamilies

Often times, starting a new stepfamily uncovers new and unique challenges that traditional families do not face. Parenting can become more difficult as each member of the new stepfamily deals and copes with the significant change and/or loss in their own ways. Family members may be grieving the loss of their old family structure, their home or town, or the other parent. Newly remarried couples may struggle with experiencing unresolved loss, unrealistic expectations for their new life, and a lack of preparation for the new stepfamily. The children in the stepfamily may be wondering where they fit in, uncertain about what to do with all of the changes and transitions.

The first step to take is for all of the family members to heal from their loss. While this is best done before a new stepfamily forms, healing can still take place afterwards. Acknowledging the importance of the grieving process, and allowing self and others to grieve loss and/or change will help to support the grieving process. Stepfamily members should not suppress any sad feelings they may have, but should be open and honest about them and be understanding when others are expressing grief.

The second step to starting a successful stepfamily is to explore each other’s expectations. It is unlikely for two families coming together to have the same expectations about how things should be in a family. Talking about expectations such as responsibilities, appropriate behavior, communication, and roles in the family are important to get everyone on the same page. Sitting down as a family to discuss the expectations and work out new expectations specific to the new stepfamily can help prevent future disagreements or fights.

Finally, understanding two important points can help stepfamilies with adapting to their new lives. First, the development of a well-functioning, unified stepfamily can take years; it is not instantaneous. Second, it is important to understand the structure of the new stepfamily – the gain and/or loss of family members for everyone. Also, stepparents have no legal ties to their stepchildren as biological parents do, and the bond stepparents have with their spouses is not likely to be as strong as the bond parents have with their own children. This new structure can cause tension and conflicts. But if the structure is understood, and rules and roles are implemented, much of the stress can be lifted.

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