

Family Assets ... Building Blocks for Life



Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet
Family and Consumer Sciences

Nurturing in Stepfamilies

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Stepfamily life is so different from first marriage families because children are present from the very first moment adults marry and only one of these adults has known these children since birth. Stepparents who may know very little about parenting are expected to take on the responsibility of these children even though they may hardly know each other. And there are even some who expect instant love in these families.

Children in all families need nurturing and limit setting but it takes on even greater importance in remarriage families. When a parent remarries, children have to share him/her with a new partner and perhaps other children from that family. They lose that exclusiveness they had with their parent and to most children this is an important loss. It may take years before they can appreciate the new relationships they have gained.

Issues for Children

The issues children face come under three general headings: loss, loyalty and lack of control. Many children still feel the loss of the parent from the first marriage and miss not being able to see both on a regular basis. They may feel “caught in the middle” between the two birth parents and have conflicting feelings of loyalty. In their new family, they have many adjustments to make—new rules, discipline from a stepparent, sharing their parent, sharing a room, different place in the family makeup, and feeling like it’s up to them to make this new family work. It’s no wonder that these children need help to build their assets

and recognize the ones they already have so they can succeed in their new family situations.

What Parents Can Do

One-on-one time is important in any family but takes on an even greater importance in the stepfamily. This is a time when children can feel they haven’t lost all of their time with their parent. Giving them some undivided attention for a few minutes every day lets them know they are still very special even though there are new people in the family. Also, parents and children may need to plan ahead to spend time on the weekend together so they have somewhat longer times together. Stepparents also need to plan for one-on-one time with their stepchildren. Having these special times together can allow new step relationships to form and develop.

Listening to Children

Many times younger children don’t really know what their feelings are and even if they have some idea, they don’t know how to put these feelings into words. That’s why it’s so important to listen not only to children’s words but to watch their behavior too. Unfortunately, this isn’t always easy. If children are angry or upset in some way, they may act out, lessening your desire to listen. Susy Yelh, the founder of Rainbows for All Children, says, “Children need love the most when they deserve it the least.” Remember that children in stepfamilies are dealing with “the 3L’s”—loss, loyalty and lack of control. They’ve gone

through a lot of changes and many of these changes were beyond their control. Help them by being patient—building relationships takes time.

Discipline

Helping children learn to behave in ways that make it possible to live comfortably with others is part of the nurturing process although children don't always see it that way. Until a relationship has developed with stepparents, children will not consider them in the same parental capacity as they do their parents. That means the stepparent will probably not take the active role in discipline. There are very few stepfamily situations where a stepparent can take that discipline role before developing a strong, caring relationship with the children. Trying to take control too soon usually has disastrous results.

As relationships grow and stepchildren develop warm relationships, they will increasingly respect and care more for their stepparent. It is better to take on the parenting role slowly as this relationship improves. As a rule, the younger the children are, the faster the stepparent can take on an active disciplinary role. It is best if the two parents

support each other and decide on household rules together. This makes it easier for everyone and helps the stepparent gain support.

Getting used to the comings and goings of children in stepfamilies can take time, but after awhile, these changes begin to feel "normal." Allow children to enjoy their household and adjust to these household switches. Avoid asking children to be messengers or spies. Respect privacy of all households and plan time and space for all children. Nurturing of other people's children isn't always easy and it is unrealistic to expect the new stepparent to love the children the same way the parent does. Remember that it takes time and teamwork.

References

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