

## Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



### Fact Sheet

## Before You Say "I Do" Again

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Most people today want a marriage that will last a lifetime. A couple's expectations of marriage are often influenced by their past—they either want their own marriage to be like the family they remember growing up with or they want it to be different. If they have been married before, the first marriage may not have lived up to their expectations so they may be expecting this new remarriage to be the one they always dreamed of.

Unfortunately, couples entering their first marriage have approximately a 50% chance of getting divorced. Remarriage carries an even greater risk—nearly a 60% divorce rate, with the greatest risk of divorce for remarried couples with stepchildren. Why is there such a risk for these remarried couples?

- Compared to first marriages, studies show that remarriages tend to include more individuals who may have certain personality characteristics that increase their likelihood for divorce (e.g., impulsivity, neuroticism).
- Remarriages often lack the social support that first time marriages receive.
- More remarried people often see divorce as an option for ending marital problems than do couples from first marriages.
- Many remarried couples have not learned to successfully resolve their marital disagreements.

It's not all doom and gloom though. Some researchers feel that "ignoring strengths and illuminating the problems that remarriage families face may create a negative self-fulfilling prophesy"

(Duncan & Brown, 1992). Remarriages are often successful. Couples need to keep in mind that marriage takes work. It's not just how much they love each other, but how they communicate and handle conflicts and disagreements. Although problems will most certainly arise, it's important to remember that remarriages need the same effective and consistent nurturing as first marriages.

### Characteristics of Successful Remarried Families

If new marriages are to succeed, couples must realize that remarriage is different from a first marriage. Recognizing that there are differences is the first step to creating a successful remarriage. Here are some characteristics of successful remarried families.

**Successful remarried couples have mourned their losses.** When couples remarry, they may have already dealt with many changes. Adults may grieve the loss of a previous marriage, the loss of a partner, the loss of a dream, or the loss involved by changes that happen because of death or divorce. People grieve these losses because it is difficult to separate from what is familiar and comfortable. When grief is resolved, there is less hostility with former partners, and children are more likely to be encouraged to build a strong relationship with a stepparent.

**Successful remarried couples have realistic expectations.** When couples remarry, they may know more about what to expect from marriage.

Many partners make a stronger commitment to this new marriage and work harder to make sure it works. Couples with realistic expectations realize there isn't necessarily an "instant love" for the new family members. If there are stepchildren, they expect and accept different parent/stepparent-child feelings. They know it takes time and patience to build new relationships.

**Successful remarried couples have a strong couple bond.** Couples realize that love alone is not enough. They nurture their relationship by taking care of their own needs for fun and relaxation as a couple. They plan for time alone together without the children and decide things together as a couple.

**Successful remarried couples establish new family traditions.** When two families come together, it's hard not to feel that one way of doing something is right and the other way is wrong. Successful remarried families compare notes about traditions, rituals, and routines and recognize that each person's preferences are just different, not better or worse. Family meetings are used for discussions and problem solving. Starting new traditions or combining routines and old traditions from both households to meet everyone's needs can enrich the new family.

**Successful remarried couples deal positively with past relationships.** Research has shown that most people do not have extremely positive feelings toward a former spouse. When couples work to reduce hostilities between former spouses, it may also enhance the marital quality of the remarriage.

**Successful remarried families accept the changes in their household composition.** Many remarriages involve children. Getting used to stepchildren can take time. "Stepparenting is usually more successful if stepparents carve out a role for themselves that is different from and does not compete with the biological parents" (Visher &

Visher, 1991). Remarried stepfamilies acknowledge that relationships with stepchildren are just forming and shouldn't be rushed or forced. Remarried couples also recognize that stepchildren are different from their own and have grown up in a different environment. They don't try to make them over, but work together to agree on a set of rules so everyone can cooperate together.

**Successful remarried couples are flexible.** They take time for themselves, but work around kids' needs as well as their own. They talk about their expectations and work together on discipline. When something doesn't work as planned, they work with each other to think of and try new options.

Remarriage doesn't guarantee "happily ever after." Just like any marriage, a remarriage takes time, communication, and commitment. If children are involved, there are additional challenges, complications, and potential stresses that families must deal with. Couples in successful remarriages make sure they communicate well and show their love daily to each other, keeping their commitment fresh and strong.

## References

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