



UPPER ISLAND ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE SERVICE

Step and Blended Families

Definitions:

Stepfamily: A stepfamily is any committed relationship where at least one of the partners has a child, or children from a previous relationship.

Blended Family: A blended family is a union where in addition to one or both partners bringing children to the situation (as in a stepfamily), the new couple have had at least one child together.

Relationships on the Road to "Step": Single, separated or divorced individuals with children, who are contemplating a new relationship; also, individuals without children who are considering a relationship with someone who has children from a previous relationship; two individuals both with children who are contemplating a partnership together. Even at the dating stage, the issues of "Step" are real and playing out and need to be thoughtfully considered and planned for.

Blended Family and Stepfamily Facts and Statistics

Step and Blended Families: "The Silent Majority"

The family of the new millennium is a stepfamily. There will soon be more stepfamilies and blended families than intact, original, or nuclear families.

- Close to 40% of all marriages end in divorce (in Canada); the rate is higher, approximately 50% in the US
- 75% remarry or re-couple
- 66% of these unions (stepfamilies) break up when children are involved
- Children suffer the loss of family once again when step/blended families break down.
- The impacts of family breakdown on children are varied and serious; many children experience persistent academic, social, emotional, financial and relationship difficulties as a result. (Read: *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* by Judith Wallerstein)
- Partnership skills are crucial but are usually not adequate to the enormous task of building a stepfamily or blended family.
- Family members often remain in denial and/or suffer in silence. Few families seek outside help. Some refer to stepfamilies and blended families as "the last group in the closet."
- Traditional therapy that focuses on the nuclear model of the family is limited in its ability to help step and blended families with different and very complex issues. We utilize a model and approach specifically tailored to stepfamily dynamics and issues.
- Society fails to acknowledge the extent and impact of these issues and as a result, families remain under- resourced.

(Facts and statistics provided by The Stepfamily Foundation Inc. www.stepfamily.org)

Differences That Make a Difference

We can't stress it enough, original families are completely different than stepfamilies and blended families. We simply cannot apply what we know about living in a biological family, to living in a stepfamily and be successful. We've outlined some of the ways in which the two are very different and why expectations that a stepfamily should operate the same as biological family lead to frustration, disappointment, conflict and often failure.

(Lists of Differences developed by [The Stepfamily Foundation, Inc.](#))

Original/Biological Family

- Related by blood
- Biological father - mother plus
- Parents work for the good of their mutual children
- The pattern for the family is normal
- There is time to form norms and structure, even before children are part of the picture
- A similar point of view on marriage and life evolves and/or is reconciled
- Couple comes first
- Parents predate the children with an established relationship and structure
- Positions in the family are generally known and understood
- Legal relationship and obligations exist with both parents
- Only one house for the family
- Parents demand respect of the other parent; more opportunity for parents to back each other up
- Sex and Blood Bonds are not in conflict
- Children are bonded to both parents and want to please both
- Less opportunity to pit parent against parent
- No ugly myths or fairytales surrounding parenthood

Stepfamily or Blended Family

- Related by marriage or living together
- One biological parent plus one stepparent
- Parent and stepparent work to meet the often conflicting needs of his/her/their children
- Little / no time for the development of forms and norms; children are already part of the picture
- Different backgrounds and ways of seeing the world often conflict. Not enough time for these to evolve and be reconciled
- Couple never came first before the children
- Couple must come together almost immediately to establish new rules, routines, structures for all involved
- Positions in family are widely misunderstood and hold tremendous potential for conflict
- CONFLICT: What is my position? Place? Power? Influence?
- The child has no legal relationship with the stepparent
- At least two, perhaps more homes for the family
- Sex and Blood Bonds are in conflict; the pull between the bonds of parent-child-couple conflict
- Children are torn; don't know how to act or who to please

- Children are often subjected to fights between parents who live in separate homes, and the parent and stepparent; ample opportunity to pit parents against each other
- Myths abound especially re: "The Wicked Stepmother"
- Stepfamily is formed from losses ie. death, divorce or separation
- Startling, unexpected behaviors often stem from misunderstood, underlying dynamics and unresolved issues and feelings
- Unrealistic expectations of healing that needs to take place and of how the new family will make up for the hurts of the past
- Children mourn the loss of the original family and may be more vulnerable; they may be fearful of yet another separation or break up of their new family, which the statistics tell us is more likely than not.

Full acknowledgement is given to **Jeanette Lofas, Ph.D, LCSW, Founder and President of the Stepfamily Foundation Inc, headquartered in New York City.** www.stepfamily.org

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