

Beyond the Brady Bunch: **Real Life Guidance for Real Life Stepfamilies**

Stepfamilies are not so different from intact families.

- **Stepfamilies need healthy parents to lead.** For any group of people to survive and thrive, they need healthy, capable individuals to provide confident, courageous, and caring leadership. Nowhere is this more true than in the family. If families are to be healthy, they need to be led by healthy individuals – parents who are emotionally, relationally, and spiritually healthy.

- **Stepfamilies need strong marriages at the center of the family.** Families work best with team leadership – a man and woman with a strong, healthy marriage. (Many amazing single parents deserve our respect, but married leadership is the ideal for healthy family life.) When the marriage is healthy, the family will function well. When the marriage is unhealthy, the family is in big trouble.

- **Stepfamilies need a climate of love, affection, and appreciation.** Families that are clearly characterized by these active qualities have what it takes to get through the tough times. Family members draw strength from one another and from within themselves during times of both family and individual difficulty.

- **Stepfamilies need clear, effective, positive communication.** Healthy organizations are marked by direct, respectful communication of expectations, questions, and evaluations. The same is true of healthy families. Mind reading, biting sarcasm, explosive anger, name calling, and silent stonewalling are hurtful traps to be avoided if families are to be healthy places of security and strength.

- **Stepfamilies need intentional, consistent structure.** At its best, this includes: couples who are united, parents who lead with authority, expectations that are reasonable and clearly stated, discipline that is loving, firm, and consistent, boundaries that are healthy, and training that is personal and continual.

- **Stepfamilies need reasonable flexibility.** Seasons and circumstances change. Children grow and mature. Life throws curve balls. Healthy families are not locked into a rigid structure, and can adapt to variations in life without compromising who they are and how they normally function.

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Stepfamilies are very different from intact families.

- **Stepfamilies are born of loss.** Stepfamilies are created out of the ashes of the loss of at least one previous relationship – through breakup, death, or divorce. Grief is a complicated and powerful dynamic. Working through it is critical for stepfamilies. This may include reading, therapy, retreats, pastoral counseling etc. For stepfamilies to be at their healthiest today, it is important for parents to lead in the process of healing the hurts of yesterday.

- **Stepfamilies have complex loyalty issues.** Stepfamilies are, by nature, more complicated than other families. One of the most challenging complexities is that of loyalty. Children should be allowed to feel and express love and devotion to all of their family, not just those living in one household. When loyalties are pushed and tested too far, stepfamily life can become a painful and ugly situation for all. As with grief, this is an area where outside guidance can be very useful.

- **Stepfamilies typically include more than one household.** Stepfamilies are also complex from a day-to-day, business operations perspective. It is important that children have their own space and identity in each household. It is also critical for the parents in each household to make every effort to cooperate in creating similar expectations, consequences, and structure. Your “ex” may be a real knothed, but your children need you to cooperate with their best interest in mind. (See Dr. Butner’s other handout on the “ex.”)

- **Stepfamilies include family relationships between members who aren’t related.** Stepparents and stepsiblings are not the same as parents and siblings, and this difference must be respected. A helpful model for stepparents is the camp counselor – someone who strives to befriend and encourage the children in their care with a level of authority granted them by the children’s parents. Stepsiblings should be allowed to build their relationships at their own pace and style. In general, stepfamily relationships should not be forced – respect and patience are key ingredients.

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Stepfamilies are very different from intact families. (continued)

- **Stepfamilies begin with children at various ages and stages.** Stepfamilies begin with one or more children, setting them on a different course from other families at the outset. Stepparents should be willing to learn from one another and from outside resources, to understand how to interact best with their spouse's children. A challenge for all families is for the couple to make their relationship a priority in the midst of parenting demands. This is even more critical for stepfamilies, where children are present from day one of the marriage – children with preconceived expectations and loyalties.

- **Stepfamilies have multiple histories.** The past makes a dramatic impact on the present. Stepfamily members need to know and respect the differences in their family histories. When the hopes, fears, hurts, victories, relationships, struggles, taboos, traditions, and transformations of stepfamily members' pasts are understood and respected, family life in the present is much more likely to be harmonious.

Notes

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www.familyroadgbr.org (Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge)

www.fsgbr.org (Family Service of Greater Baton Rouge)

www.hopeforyourfamily.com (Dr. Roger D. Butner, LMFT)

www.instepministries.com (In Step Ministries)

www.stepfamilies.info (The National Stepfamily Resource Center)

www.successfulstepfamilies.com (Ron Deal, LMFT, LPC)

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