

PRESSING ON...

"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:14



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Strengthening Stepfamily

■ by Joy Bocanegra, MA, LCPC



The blended family or stepfamily is the most common type of family in America. 62% of families in America are stepfamilies. And yet when we think of how to parent or how to establish a strong family, most of the models are designed for the first-time family. The stepfamily is different, very complex with many unique challenges. Using a first-family model creates some expectations that can't be met. Our expectations affect our attitude and behavior. Unmet expectations cause us to be disappointed or discouraged.

How realistic are your expectations regarding stepfamilies?

True or false? (Answers below)

1. Stepfamilies blend quickly.
2. Everyone in my stepfamily will love one another.
3. Doing everything as a family is the best way to create closeness.
4. Being a stepparent means biting my tongue a lot.

5. Children adjust better to a new stepfamily if you encourage them to void taking about negative feelings.
6. Stepparents must get close to their stepchildren quickly or a close relationship will not be possible.

Answers: 1. False, it generally takes 5 years 2. False, some members of the family may not even like each other. 3. False, biological parents and children need one on one time. Not allowing for this can cause resentment. 4. True, there are many things that are best left to the biological parent to handle. 5. False, children need to be encouraged to talk about their feelings. 6. False, stepparents need to build relationships slowly.

Creating Connectedness

Building a connected stepfamily involves consideration of all family members, mutual respect, cooperation, flexibility and group effort in working toward common goals. Integrating the following aspects of connectedness can help you strengthen your family.

• Security and Belonging

A sense of belonging and feeling secure are basic human needs.

• Personal Space

Everybody needs some space of their own.

• Flexibility and Creativity

The unique complexities of stepfamilies require creative thinking. Think outside the box! If one thing doesn't work try something else.

• Cooperation and Team Work

Shared goals can create an atmosphere of team work and cooperation.

• Family Meetings

Family Meetings are a good way for stepfamilies to develop and maintain good communication.

• Rituals, Traditions and Holidays

Rituals create family continuity and good memories. They provide a sense of familiarity which is one aspect of connectedness. Friday night pizza, family movies, scheduled bedtimes and after school routines are examples of rituals.

Traditions are important because they express a family's identity. According to stepfamily expert, Elizabeth Einstein, LMFT, one of the most important ways in which stepfamilies build bonds and form a solid identity is by establishing their

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Respect, Love, Care: Even After Divorce

■ by Gregory Rodriguez, MA, LCPC



Divorce. I have experienced it.

I am a father of five - three boys with my first wife and two children with my current wife of almost 19 years. I am also a therapist who has worked with hundreds of parents and children after divorce and can attest to the fact that the way a family "does" divorce determines what longer-lasting effects the divorce will have, especially on the children.

My Divorce Experience

Looking back, I can best describe my divorce experience with a visual. If you can for a moment, imagine being at home with your family. It's nighttime and everyone is getting ready for bed. You become aware that a threat of severe weather is heading your way. You monitor the radar and coverage, but the weather still seems a ways off. After taking some precautions, you surmise that it would be okay to get to bed. A little while later, while everyone is asleep, the severe weather strikes with great force and before you have time to react it's over. You jump out of bed and exit your door to find that

the family home around you is devastated. Your immediate attention goes to your children; they appear to be okay physically, but they are shell-shocked, crying, and visibly upset. You take the time to comfort them, assuring them that everything will be okay. You thank God that nobody was physically hurt. A little while later, you begin assessing the damage and pick up the pieces of what was once your life. It's emotionally overwhelming, but you push forward. That is how I experienced divorce. It was the most difficult experience that I have had to go through in my life.

Setting Aside Our Hurts Is Not Easy

It took everything I had and more to rise above the devastation, the hurt, and sadness to insure that I minimize the damaging effects this would have on my three children. I prayed to God for strength.

Along with divorce comes the emotional baggage that, for a time, can be an

obstacle to the parent's ability to co-parent. The need to set aside those hurts remains critical in one's ability to co-parent in a way that minimizes the emotionality and focus on what's best for the child. Both parents need to filter all their words and actions through the question, "How will this impact/affect my child?"

6 Ways to Respect, Love, and Care: What's Best for your Child

1. Keep the children out of the middle! **Do not** use your child as a messenger in making decisions or plans. **Do not** use your child to get information about the other parent. Even a simple "How's your mom/dad doing?" can be emotionally harmful for some children.

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own unique traditions.

Holidays can be very difficult for stepfamilies. Loyalty conflicts and issues of loss can be obstacles to joyful holidays. Parents need to be sensitive and plan carefully. Be flexible, creative and open to discussing options.

Tools for the Journey

Think of strengthening your family as a journey filled with beautiful places, stretches with pot holes, and of course, construction zones. As you wonder how long it will take "till you get there," remind yourself to live in the present moment looking for the good things sprinkled along the way and **use these tools for the trip.**

- **Anticipate challenges and accept them as part of the package.** Every family has conflict and challenges. Stepfamilies are complex and this complexity brings unique challenges.
- **Don't try to replace a biological parent.** Loyalty to biological parents is normal.

Encouraging a positive relationship with the *other* biological parent is beneficial to everyone involved. When children have permission to love **all** the adults in their lives, their lives can be enriched by the variety and special attributes each person possesses.

- **Let the child set the pace for connecting.** *Don't force it.* Some children are quiet and reserved while others are outgoing and more open to new relationships. Age plays a part too.
- **Don't expect too much of yourself.** Biological parents want their children to like their new spouse and to build a close relationship. Stepparents often feel pressure to become close with their stepkids. Often the children **aren't** looking for a close relationship, especially older kids.
- **Pray** Pray about your concerns. Ask God for wisdom, guidance and strength. Pray **for** your spouse and your children and stepchildren. Pray **with** your spouse and as a family.

There is power in prayer.

- **Allow for differences** In getting to know one another, differences in background and personal preferences will surface. Be willing to accept differences and look for common ground.
- **Learn what makes your stepchildren unique** Get to know who they are and what they have already experienced in life. Are they: An introvert or extrovert, Serious or silly, A leader or follower, Athletic, intellectual, musical and so on.
- **Practice patience and love**, which are essential to building a strong family.
1 Peter 4:8 says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins." ■



Joy Bocanegra, MA, is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and sees clients in our Orland Park, IL location.

Help! My Family is Driving Me Crazy!

■ by Lynne B. Scherschel, MS, LMFT

Setting Boundaries May Be the Solution

A boundary is the limit a person sets regarding what behavior will be tolerated from others and helps define your identity and your integrity. When someone crosses your boundary, something inside of you will react. The reaction may be subtle or unmistakable, but either way you know something isn't right. This may be especially true of physical boundaries, such as infringing on your personal space or by inappropriate touch.

Examples of Boundary Crossing

- A married man/woman talking about intimate details regarding their spouse.
- A parent doing the same with a child.
- Grandparents who insist on breaking the parents' rules.
- Anyone who won't respect your "no" answer but proceeds to pressure, manipulate, or "guilt trip" you into giving in.
- Relatives who ask personal questions about how much you earn, spent on a purchase, or have in savings.
- Parents or adult children who drop in, when they've been asked to call first.
- Someone who rearranges your furniture while they are babysitting.
- Aunt Susie who insists on asking her single nephew if he is ever going to get married or asks a young married couple when they will have children.
- Uncle Jim, who invariably gives you a sustained hug even though it makes you uncomfortable to the point of wanting to avoid him.
- Grandparents who are very vocal about how their grandchildren should be reared.

And the list goes on!



Never Too Late to Set Boundaries

Setting boundaries – and maintaining them – is often difficult for many people, and it can be especially difficult with parents and other family members. If you didn't learn this art growing up it is highly likely that other relatives didn't either. They may be pushy, manipulative, and controlling people, but it is also possible that they are nice people who interfere because they love you, are concerned about you, and have never learned appropriate boundaries themselves. That doesn't mean, however, that you should allow it to continue.

It's Healthy for Christians to Set Boundaries

Jesus said, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his **heart**, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his **heart**. For the mouth speaks what the **heart** is full of." (Luke 6:4). In 1 John 4:20 we read, "If a man says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" Scripture is very clear that God is primarily concerned about what is in our hearts because that is what prompts our words and our actions.

Smiling and speaking kindly to someone, while inwardly seething with resentment, definitely does not please God, and the risk is that your resentment may erupt in angry words and damage the relationship. So let's be clear that it is healthy for Christians to set boundaries. It is critical for our spiritual as well as our emotional and relational health to maintain clear boundaries with others.

Steps to Setting Healthy Boundaries

1. Decide what behavior you would like from others.
2. Formulate a very clear statement of your expectations.
Example: Instead of "Don't just drop in," say, "Please call first to arrange a time to visit."
3. It is often helpful to write the statement on a piece of paper.
4. Practice saying it in front of a mirror to be sure your facial expression matches your message.
5. If you call to deliver your message, have the paper in front of you.
6. If you are with the person, use only the statement you've written.
7. Continue to restate the message if the other person objects, argues, or tries to put a guilt trip on you.
8. If they persist after a few exchanges, politely excuse yourself and exit the conversation.
9. Don't be surprised if the people in your life don't like your new boundaries.
10. Be prepared to lovingly and firmly maintain them.
11. Occasional push back is quite typical, so be alert!



Lynne Scherschel, MS, LMFT, is a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist and sees clients in our Schererville, IN location.



Toll Free: 800.361.6880

Email: info@chicagochristiancounseling.org

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- Do not** disclose any potentially harmful information to your children in an attempt to negatively influence their feelings towards the other parent. It will come back upon you!
- Do** treat and speak about the other parent respectfully. When possible work together towards compromise and cooperation and flexibility. It's important that your children see those skills and attributes, key life lessons they will learn from you! Your children need to see that in spite of what happened, mom and dad can still work together and be respectful.
- Do** include the other parent in decision making and plans. Doctor visits, making major decisions (i.e. braces), and other things. I have found this to be a big challenge for many of the couples I see. Not including the other parent in these matters builds resentment and animosity, sometimes even leading the

couple back to court for an issue that could have been solved on their own.

- If possible, when dealing with issues that involve the kids, **do** speak with them together **including** how you tell the kids about divorcing - it makes a huge difference. Hearing two different viewpoints is confusing and in a sense falls under the category of being put in the middle. Never put them in a position to have to choose sides.
- A final Do**, it may not be possible to do this together, but if faith is important to you then pray. Pray for the strength to do what is right and fair (that was a prayer I prayed constantly). Pray for your children for strength and courage. Pray for your ex-spouse too!

In summary, divorce is traumatic and WILL

influence your children in many different ways. Children are resilient and will survive, but the quality of their emotional life will depend greatly on how you as their parent "do" divorce. I am grateful that our adult boys and grandchildren can experience my ex-wife and I together at our family gatherings, soccer games, etc. Knowing they sense the respect, love and care we can still have for one another years later in spite of being divorced makes all the work it took to get here worthwhile! ■



Gregory Rodriguez, MA, is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and sees clients in our New Lenox, Orland Park, and Shorewood, IL locations.