

# 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 avoid talking about negative feelings.
6. Stepparents must get close to their stepchildren quickly or a close relationship will not be possible.

## 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 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.

~ article continued on reverse side ~

**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.

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## 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.

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