

# Smart Stepparenting

**Research indicates it can take three years or more for a stepfamily to evolve as a unit, because the process of merging two families is so complicated. Each family has evolved over a period of time, developing a set of routines and traditions to fit their specific needs. Stepparents must deal with this challenge in their unique way.**

Integrating children into a healthy stepfamily may be difficult, because they have coped with the loss of a two-parent family and the inevitable upheavals. Hopefully, the children will come to accept and adjust to the “new normal.” Not surprisingly, youngsters often experience ambivalence, anger, or resentment when a parent remarries, signifying a new set of losses and changes.

This article will focus on two of the many significant themes that need to be addressed in forming a successful stepfamily: one is the issue of transitions, and the other is that of establishing and solidifying new relationships. The following case example will highlight these issues:\*

Sarah and Eli have been remarried for two years. Eli has three children- two boys, ages 12 and 10, and a girl aged 8. Eli's late wife, Dina, had been ill for several years, but she was home and available for the children most of the time. At one point, her condition seemed to stabilize, so when her death came, it shocked the entire family.

Sarah has two children- a boy aged 12 and a daughter aged 7. She has been divorced since her daughter was born and has full custody of the children. Her husband remarried two years after the divorce and visits his children sporadically and infrequently. Sarah had been dating for many years, and her children were quite excited when they learned of her engagement. Eli's children, on other hand, were not aware that he was planning to remarry and in fact, believed that he never would.

Sarah and Eli were enthusiastic and optimistic about this new beginning, hoping the children would be thrilled to be part of a normal and expanded family. In fact, the remarriage provided them with a two- parent situation, but also presented many changes which translated into losses. Sarah's children lost their home, their school, their friends and most of all, the proximity of their grandparents. In addition, Sarah's son lost his position as older child - having to share that with his stepbrother of the same age. Eli's children on the other hand, felt their privacy had been invaded and no longer felt comfortable in their own home. Each of them also felt displaced and angry for having to share their father with two other children, particularly his daughter who now had a younger sister. The most painful part was having another woman come into their mother's domain and try to make it her own. As a result of these dynamics, Eli's sons withdrew from their step siblings, although they were respectful to Sarah. Sarah's children felt resentful, because after facing the dramatic challenge of leaving all that was familiar to them, their step siblings seemed to reject them and be insensitive to their discomfort.

Sarah and Eli's relationship was dramatically affected by their children's struggles. Overwhelmed by their children's various needs, they disagreed on how to help them. Although Sarah understood the trauma Eli's children had suffered, she was hurt by their treatment of her own offspring and their unspoken anger at her intrusion into their home. Eli was shocked and disappointed by his children's response to his remarriage. Their complaints, coupled with his new wife's obvious unhappiness, drained him emotionally. He worried about the stability of the marriage, but the fear of jeopardizing his relationship with his children immobilized him.

## **The following are guidelines which can be helpful to the newly formed stepfamily:**

When two families merge, the individuality of each member must be respected. Moreover, the two families should merge in a way that ensures the integrity of each family. When former family alliances are respected, new relationships will develop over time.

- 1.** Psychoeducation and counseling can provide newly remarried couples the insight and tools to address the challenges presented by the stepfamily.
- 2.** In some cases, children can benefit from short-term counseling.
- 3.** Parents should be aware that in order to help their children, the couple needs to solidify their own relationship through effective communication and taking meaningful time for themselves.
- 4.** It is crucial for parents be aware of the transitions which children are experiencing, and the time they need to mourn their losses. In order to facilitate this process, each parent should spend time alone with his/her children, validating and encouraging emotional expression. When children are allowed to express themselves, they will gradually become more open to establishing relationships with their “steps.” As couples learn about the evolving stepfamily unit and gain realistic expectations, they become empowered and optimistic about the process.

*With a combination of courage and determination, stepparents create an atmosphere of love, trust and stability in which children thrive!*