

STEP-RELATIONSHIPS

Successful stepfamily living largely depends upon the quality of the relationships shared by the members of the stepfamily. Therefore, it may be useful at this time to consider the different relationships within a stepfamily.

- **The Couple Relationship**

Stepfamily experts agree that strengthening their relationship is the most important task for the couple who have embarked upon stepfamily living. This easily can be neglected in the couple's eagerness to create a new home and family life for their respective children. It needs to be given top priority, however, since their new family's continuing existence and well-being is directly related to how the couple fare in this department.

A clear commitment to your relationship is a 'must'. Thinking that you can just split up if things don't work out does not make for a solid foundation.

Intimacy

Intimacy is often the first victim of the step-parenting experience. Children appearing in your bedroom at all hours of the night, little ones demanding your attention before the break of dawn, teenage stepchildren making your night into their day, squabbles and scrapes – every aspect of the exhausting reality of step-parenthood can play havoc with your desire for and feelings of intimacy. Whilst your sex life only represents one aspect of intimacy with your partner, it is usually a rather important one. It may also be the one that suffers most in the initial stage of stepfamily living. All but drowning in the multitude of demands upon your time and energy, lovemaking might be the last thing on your mind. The one with amorous intentions is not usually the one who got up three times throughout the night (to feed the baby, change wet sheets or chase away a child's nightmare).

Some may disagree, but my experience tells me that, although we live in an enlightened age, it is typically the woman who takes care of all these 'little jobs'. It is also the woman who is more inclined to be 'turned off' when feeling cheated, short-changed, ignored or unappreciated, and (dare I say it) the woman who is more inclined to use her sexual availability as a weapon. Although she could defend this as her only means of being 'heard', it is a very unhealthy way of communicating and carries the potential to destroy any chance of achieving the desired state of intimacy. While the man's sexual desire is not normally as readily affected, it can be equally

diminished by feelings of worry, anxiety and stress. If the step-parenting experience causes him to live in a constant state of ‘angst’ it may not be long before your sex life becomes a mere memory and your levels of intimacy are sadly depleted. This is not conducive to the establishment or maintenance of a satisfying couple relationship.

It is important to remember that, whilst lovemaking is a vital expression of intimacy, the state of intimacy entails so much more. Intimacy is the container that holds such treasures as commitment, trust, vulnerability, giving value and worth to your partner, allowing them to be who they are, giving and receiving – in short, an expression of emotional connectedness. As this container is rather fragile (especially at the beginning of a relationship), it needs to be treated as such and should be cherished, protected and nurtured. You cherish it when you put the relationship with your partner before all other relationships. You protect it when you treat your partner with the same consideration and respect with which you desire to be treated. You nurture it when you allow yourself to be open and vulnerable with your partner. Creating and maintaining intimacy in a stepfamily situation requires as much work as all other aspects of the relationship. Accepting that you will come across hurdles, such as mentioned above, will assist you in not allowing them to wreak havoc with your emotional connection. Being open about your feelings, expectations, disappointments, concerns and fears (rather than exploding or withdrawing) will help you pour your energy into seeking solutions to your dilemmas. It will put you both on the same side of the fence (so to speak), strengthen your emotional connection and increase your level of intimacy.

Time out

As a couple, time away from the children, time spent apart from your daily stresses, worries and concerns, time spent in a shared hobby, relaxation time and time for romancing each other, are essential. If the circumstances are such that it may seem impossible to take time out, it is important to find a solution. You may need to enlist the help of grandparents, friends or babysitters to achieve this goal. If you find asking for help difficult, now is a good time to overcome this difficulty. Build time out together into your day, even if it is only for a 15–20-minute period. Make a weekly appointment with each other. You could spend some time having coffee together, share a walk around the block, go to the movies, have dinner at a restaurant or do any one of a number of things that you both might enjoy. Ensure that you have a full day

together on a monthly basis and a holiday alone (without the children) once a year. This holiday can be as long or as short as you can afford and are able to fit into your lifestyle. The important aspect is that it is a childless break and enables you to leave your daily cares behind.

Communication

Another important issue in forging a strong couple bond is communication. In order to become artful at this, it is necessary to learn to express your feelings appropriately. This, of course, is a lot easier when your feelings are pleasant and happy ones. When your emotions are those of anger, frustration, resentment or helplessness, however, their expression becomes a much greater challenge. When expressing these, as illustrated in an earlier chapter, it is of particular importance not to blame your partner or their children for your feelings. Accepting responsibility for your feelings helps you to keep your communication open and your partner to hear what you are saying, and it makes problem solving a more likely outcome. It paves the way for you to say what you need, want, don't like and don't want. Remember, your partner is not a mind reader. She or he cannot possibly know what thoughts, feelings, wishes or desires you have without you sharing this information. It is equally important that your partner has the opportunity to communicate with you in the same fashion and that you listen as carefully and as non-defensively as you expect from him or her.

Conflict

Don't shy away from conflict. It is a natural part of togetherness and, handled wisely, will help you and your partner to become more authentic in your relationship. Authenticity involves the free expression of yourself as you really are. The ability of 'being yourself' (rather than wearing masks) with your partner is one of the most important foundations of a healthy and lasting relationship. So, as long as you remember your commitment to the relationship, that you are in this together for better or for worse, that this conflict is not going to drive you apart, that it is not the end of the road but potentially the beginning of a more functional one, then conflict is an important and healthy process.

A few points that will help you deal with conflict:

* Don't deal with the issue causing conflict in the heat of the moment. Only saints are objective at that time. Do yourself a favour and leave some time between the incident and your discussion.

* Deal with the issue at hand. Dredging up everything that has annoyed you about each other during the past five years is not helpful.

* Don't threaten or manipulate, and don't call each other names. Even if you are dying to let something nasty slip from your lips, you will only regret it later.

* Give each other turns to say what you wish to say. When it is the other's turn, listen carefully and seek to understand what they are saying from their point of view.

* Don't be afraid of discovering that you are wrong. If you are, say 'sorry'!

* If your partner is the one who needs to apologise, be gracious in accepting the apology. It's better to bite your tongue than to say, 'I told you so'!

The issue causing conflict may not be a matter of right or wrong – you may need to 'agree to disagree'. There are no rules that you must always be of the same opinion. Accepting your partner's differing views, beliefs, thoughts and feelings attests to a healthy relationship.

* 'Meeting halfway' may be a necessary compromise to achieving resolution of your conflict. This becomes much easier if you remember that partnerships require a lot of 'give and take' in order to be successful.

* Don't let the sun go down without at least being on the way toward a resolution. Some people say that 'making up' is the best part of conflict. Why not give it a try?

* Celebrate the successful resolution of your conflict!

Support

It is a most important aspect of the couple relationship that you stand united before the children. In dealing with them, it is absolutely essential that you support each other. Children, especially in stepfamily situations, sometimes attempt to divide and conquer. Nothing has quite the same potential to cause a step-parent to feel left out, useless and helpless as when their partner sides with their children. This, more than any other difficulty one might encounter, has the power to annihilate the couple relationship. Feelings of guilt, over-protectiveness, the desire to make things up to the children, fear of their partner acting unfairly, or a number of other reasons cause

almost all biological parents in a stepfamily situation to fall into this trap at least once. Whilst understandable, this must be guarded against at all costs. Such a situation not only questions the position of the new step-parent but also diminishes their authority in the eyes of the children. If either of you have overstepped your mark, this certainly needs to be discussed and worked out – but it should be done away from the children’s eyes and ears. In order to avoid such situations, it is important to be clear on the expectations you each have of the children, and to ensure they are realistic and well defined. It also helps to remember that the expectations of children need to be kept age-appropriate and, at least in the early days of the new family’s formation, should be few and flexible. Standing united in this matter helps the step-parent feel valued and respected. and gives the children feelings of stability and security.

Hints

Remember the keys to strengthening your relationship:

1. Invest time, energy and effort to create true intimacy with your partner.
2. Make time spent with your partner a top priority.
3. Practice effective communication skills.
4. Welcome conflict and handle it wisely.
5. Support each other and show your collective children that you are a united front.