

Working with Stepfamily Couples

Tabitha A. Sierra

[Hope Project, Regent University](#)

Stepfamily couples are “couples in which one or both partners have been previously married, and one or both had children in their previous marriage” (Bray, 2008, p.500). Approximately 65% of remarriages involve children from one or both spouses, so stepfamilies are very common (NSRC, 2009). With first-married couples, the parents usually have nine months to adjust to the idea of children and when the children are born, they are dependent upon their parents. However with remarriage, the parents do not have time to adjust to the children and the children are often in elementary school or older at the time of their parent’s remarriage so the children come with their own ideas and agendas. Bray (2008) contends that children are the stressor that most affects the remarriage because the children have the power to affect marital happiness. In an extensive literature review, Falke and Larson (2007) determined that a negative stepparent-stepchild relationship reduces marital stability and satisfaction. There are a number of reasons the children stress the marital relationship and decrease marital happiness and these reasons fall under two categories: the children’s issues and the parents’ issues.

Children’s Issues: Some children feel resentment and anger over their parent’s remarriage, so they cause problems in the new marriage.

- First, children live through the **pain** of their parents’ divorce. If the children are older, they may feel guilty for causing the divorce and inadequate to help their parents. Then when one of their parents remarries, the children typically do not have a say in the choice of the new spouse or timing of the introduction of the new parent figure. Research has indicated that quick, or repeated recoupling (either marriage or moving in together), can be particularly difficult on children and their adjustment to a divorce. This can cause the children to be resentful and may even lead to psychological symptoms.
- The second problem is that children of divorced parents typically **dream** about their biological parents remarrying each other (McCubbin & Figley, 1983). When one of their parents marries someone new, this dream has to end. The children believe the new spouse is to blame for the demise of their dreams, so all of their anger may be directed at the new spouse. In addition, many of these children unrealistically believe that if somehow the new spouse left, or is made to leave, then their biological parents would remarry. These unrealistic fantasies can be the driving force behind hostile and mercenary behavior directed at the new spouse.
- The third problem is that the children may be **jealous** of the time the biological parent spends with the new spouse (Harley, 2003). This jealousy will be even more profound if before the new marriage the biological parent came to rely on the child as a confidant to meet emotional needs (Minirth et al., 1991) or were otherwise met the role of friend or helper instead of staying in the roles of parent-child. In this situation, the child begins to nurture the single parent and take on

the role of the spouse. Therefore, children placed in these roles may feel their parents' new spouses are displacing them. This can be particularly painful if the child was building their self-esteem and coping with the divorce by becoming "the man of the house" or a confidant and friend. The jealousy can manifest as covert acts of meanness meant to irritate the new spouse to overt threats trying to make the new spouse leave. If the children's behavior is more covert, the biological parent may not even be aware of the havoc the children are causing in the marital relationship. If the children are adolescents, then the new marriage can be even more disrupted and any threats should be taken seriously (Harley, 2003).

Parents' Issues: The children are not the only ones that come into the step family with unresolved problems. This is a time for adjustment for the whole family and there are common problems to which many new couples succumb.

- The first problem is that the step-parent may try to take on the **role of parent** too quickly, and this creates problems in the family dynamic (Bray, 2008). The children can become resentful that they are expected to have an immediate emotional bond with a person whom they do not really know or love. Most children need time to adjust to a new parent figure. Mills (1984) contends that the age of the child at the remarriage determines the amount of time it will take before the child is comfortable with the step-parent taking on the parental role. Therefore a child who is a six years old at the time of the remarriage will be 12 years old before he or she has adjusted to the step-parent becoming a parent.
- The second problem is **discipline** of the children. Biological parents may feel guilty that their children have gone through the heartache of losing a parent, so the biological parent is more lenient on the children than they should be (Harley, 2003). In this situation, the step-parent may be stricter on the misbehaving children and this could cause triangulation where the biological parent sides with the child against the new spouse (Bray, 2008). Biological parents tend to be afraid to side with the new spouse because if they do then their children's feelings would be hurt. Biological parents have more time invested in the parent-child relationship than the relationship with the new spouse. Therefore, many remarried parents would rather risk the new marriage relationship than the relationship with their children and this can be hurtful to the new spouse. Even if the new spouse is completely fair with the children, the children still tend to "attribute more negative motives to stepparents' behavior than they do to their own parents in identical situations" (Seccombe & Warner, 2004, p.565). In addition, if both spouses have biological children in the relationship, the spouses tend to apply different standards to the children by being lenient on their own children but strict with the step children (Harley, 2003). Oddly, biological parents tend to see that their own children are being mistreated and fail to realize how they mistreat their step-children. This causes resentment all around and can lead to a vicious cycle where each parent becomes even more lenient on their own children and harsher on the step-children.
- The third problem is that some spouses can be **blind** to the fact that their own children are causing problems in the marital relationship by their covert actions but are quick to place the

blame for these problems on the step-children (Falke & Larson, 2007; Harley, 2003). This misattribution of blame can create bitterness between the couple. Couples will need to address any attributions, but it should be done with care. There are deep and intrapsychic reasons why parents are protective of their biological children compared to any other child.

- The fourth problem is that the remarried couple finds it difficult to have ***time alone***. The guilt many parents feel causes them to want to spend more time with their children and many times this is at the detriment of the relationship with the new spouse (Harley, 2003). Guilt causes other parents to feel that they must be able to meet all of their children's needs even if that means canceling plans with the spouse (Bray, 2008). Continually canceling plans can leave the new spouse resentful. Children who are already jealous of the new spouse may take advantage of their parents' guilt and demand an inordinate amount of attention. Even if the remarried couple has appropriate boundaries in place and the step-family is functioning well, the ex-spouse may fail to take the children as planned and ruin the remarried couple's time alone.

For the Therapist

The therapist should remember that stepfamilies are diverse and will not have all of the problems outlined in this paper. The treatment plan should be tailored to fit the specific needs of each stepfamily. In addition, if the couple is having specific problems related to being remarried, the strategy paper *Working with Remarried Couples* may be helpful. The central issues to address when working with stepfamilies are communication and conflict resolution, roles of step-parents, discipline of children, and time alone for the couple.

- ***Communication and Conflict Resolution:*** Effective communication is imperative for stepfamilies.
 - TANGO and LOVE (as described in the *Hope-Focused Manual* by Ripley et al.) should be emphasized. The couple may especially need help with the E (Evaluate both partner's interest) in the LOVE intervention because they may be polarized over parenting issues and see things as "my kids verses your kids."
 - By the time a stepfamily comes to therapy, they may have little hope for salvaging the marriage. The therapist should reframe the couple's difficulties using 11-3 *Reducing the Couple's Negativity about Having Differences* (found in the *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* book by Worthington). For example, a wife may feel hurt that her husband sides with his children. However, she may have originally been attracted to him because of the love and concern he showed his children. The hurt can also be taken out of this issue by showing the couple that the husband's reactions are common given the experience of the divorce. In addition, it is important for the couple to understand that the difficulties they are experiencing are normal struggles that occur as the new family is created (Bray, 2008).

- Parents become overly emotionally charged when they feel their children are being wronged and arguments between the remarried couple at home can explode with serious consequences. If this has been a problem for the couple, assign 11-4 *Increase Objectivity* (found in the *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* book by Worthington).
- *Roles of Step-Parents:* If the children are elementary school age or older, then the step-parent will not be able to immediately take on the role of parent. Therefore, the step-parent's role needs to be negotiated.
 - The couple should determine together what kind of role the step-parent will take. Some suggestions include mentor or a role like an aunt/uncle.
 - Instruct step-parent to form a strong warm and supportive relationship with step-children. The bond between the step-parent and step-child will help reduce the jealousy and anger the child feels toward the step-parent for crushing dreams and taking the biological parent's time away from the child. Forming a strong emotional bond takes time, so the step-parent should be deliberate in finding ways to strengthen the bond by engaging the child in activities the child enjoys (Mills, 1984).
- *Discipline of Children:*
 - Never instruct step-parents to discipline children as if they were the biological parents because this can harm family dynamics (Bray, 2008).
 - Assign the couple homework of creating a family rules and discipline chart. All children (his and her children if they exist) should have the same rules whether they live in the house full-time or only during visitation. Having different rules for children who visit creates jealousy among the step-siblings and resentment from the spouse whose children are made to follow the stricter rules (Harley, 2003).
 - If the children are in adolescents, they may have had responsibility for running the household while their parent was still single, so it is unjust and will produce anger and resentment to relegate these teens back to having no responsibility and no say in the running of the household (Gamache, 1994). Therefore, the new couple may want to consult with the teens on the family rules. However, this consultation should be done after the couple has agreed on the rules that are non-negotiable.
 - Until the step-parent has earned the right to be called a parent in the eyes of the children, the step-parent should enforce family rules but never create new rules alone. Both parents should be involved in the creating of new rules in order to keep the step-parent from being seen as overbearing.
 - If discipline of children seems to be a problem for the couple, specific treatment focused on co-parenting is suggested and the couple can read some of the books on child discipline listed in the annotated bibliography.
- *Time alone for the couple:* Couples need time alone in order for their relationship to grow and be nurtured.

- Teach the couple to guard their relationship by setting boundaries for children. The biological parent should enforce the boundaries in order to keep the step-parent from being viewed as overbearing. If the couple is having difficulty setting or maintaining boundaries, refer them to the book *Boundaries with Kids* in the annotated bibliography. There are two areas the couple needs to learn how to guard: their relationship and their intimacy.
 - *Guarding the Relationship:* The couple must not allow the children to come between them physically. For instance, when the couple is sitting together on the couch, children should not be allowed to squeeze between them. Also, when the couple is having a private conversation and a child walks in, the child should be asked to come back soon (barring urgent situations) instead of the conversation stopping.
 - *Guarding Intimacy:* Difficult children may try to keep their parents from being alone together. Some boundaries to enforce are having children sleep in their own beds, go to bed at a set time, and having the couple lock their bedroom door in order to ensure privacy. In addition, remarried couples must guard their alone time from jealous children who have “needs” or “emergencies” as soon as the couple shuts the bedroom door.
- Have the couple make a rule that they do not break their date night because of the children unless it is a true emergency—Helping children finish last minute school projects are not emergencies.
- If the couple had a date scheduled and the ex-spouse failed to take the kids as planned, ask the couple to try to do something alone after the children go to bed. Give them the handout *Date and Babysitting Ideas for Couples with Children*.

Annotated Bibliography

For the Clinician:

Bray, J. H. (2008). Couple therapy with remarried partners. In A. S. Gurman (Ed.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (4th ed., pp. 459-477). New York: The Guilford Press.

This is a thorough article that examines the recent research and condenses it into a manageable form. The author explains unique stressors to remarried couples and gives advice on how to address these problems. The article also includes an extensive case study where the author explains his methods.

National Stepfamily Resource Center (NSRC, 2009). Retrieved May 6, 2009, from www.stepfamilies.info

This website gives an abundance of information on remarried couples and step-families including research findings and frequently asked questions. The site also has links to numerous articles that give advice to the therapist on how to provide counseling to this population and articles geared for the couple themselves. In addition, the site lists support groups by state.

For the Couple:

Cline, F., & Fay, J. (2006). *Parenting with love and logic*. Menasha, WI: NavPress Publishing.

This book explains parenting styles and teaches parents how to use natural consequences to help their children to learn to obey. It gives tips and practical advice on how to implement consequences without becoming emotional or angry.

Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2001). *Boundaries with kids*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The authors explain to parents how they can be loving parents and still set limits with their children. This book will help parents take control of their lives and give them practical advice on how to teach their children responsibility.

Phelan, T. W. (2004). *1-2-3 magic: Effective discipline for children 2-12*. Glen Ellyn, IL: Parentmagic, Inc.

Dr. Phelan outlines a three part plan of reducing unwanted behavior, encouraging desired behavior, and strengthening the relationship between children and their parents. He also identifies and gives parents tips on handling the six methods children use to test and manipulate their parents. In addition, he gives advice on how to prevent children from having public temper-tantrums.

Additional References

Falke, S. I., & Larson, J. H. (2007). Premarital predictors of remarital quality: Implications for clinicians. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 29*, 9-23.

Gamache, S. (1994). New perspectives on stepfamilies: Step is not a four letter word. *Stepfamilies*, 14, 7-9.

Harley Jr., W. F. (2003). *His needs, her needs for parents: Keeping romance alive*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell.

McCubbin, H. I., & Figley, C. R. (1983). *Stress and the family: Coping with normative transitions (Vol. 1)*. New York: Brunner Mazel Publishers.

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Minirth, F., Minirth, A., Newman, B., Newman, D., Hemfelt, R., & Hemfelt, S. (1991). *Passages of marriage*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Secombe, K., & Warner, R. L. (2004). *Marriages and families: Relationships in social context*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.