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CONNECTING WITH A STEPCHILD by Janet Frank, Ph.D.

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The prospect of a stepparent joining the family can ignite fire in a child's eyes. The prospects of trying to connect with a less than receptive child can also be overwhelming for a new stepparent. This article will offer practical suggestions for how to connect with stepchildren and how to facilitate adjustment of new stepsiblings.

Few people are naive enough to believe that love brews instantly between all members of a stepfamily. Adjustment to stepfamily life rarely happens quickly. In fact, some experts estimate estimated that it may take between two and four years for a new family to adjust. There are some practical suggestions that can make this less stressful for all involved.

Consider the perspective of the child. A child in a stepfamily may still be coping with issues of loss related to the family of origin. In some cases a remarriage represents the final slam of the door on his or her hope for parental reunification. Children sometimes feel that the world center around themselves. Some may experience an unrealistic sense of responsibility for a parental divorce or sometimes even for the loss of a parent. Children sometimes act out this guilt through anger or misbehavior. A divorce may shaken his or her trust, and a child may feel afraid of establishing new bonds. They may engage in behaviors to "test" the new parents commitment to them. Sometimes children feel hurt and have a need to have someone to blame. A stepparent is often a convenient target. It is helpful to keep in mind that a child's pain can be greater than yours. With time, encouragement and support, most children will come around if you continue to be steady, friendly and supportive.

Allow children some latitude in what they decide to call you. Since some stepchildren feel they have lost control over many aspects of their lives, giving them some basic choices may help provide them with some reassurance. Children will often try to find a name or title that feels right. Some children choose to use a person's first name, but there are many possibilities. Nicknames can imply a sense of intimacy.

Try to stick to routines and rules the child is accustomed to. Try not to make too many new household rules in the first year.

Do not attempt to take over discipline too soon. Leave time outs and reminders to your partner until you have been a part of your stepchild's life for quite a while—at least a year. At the same time, time don't bribe. Even if it works, it establishes a pattern that is very hard to break. A future article will address the issue of discipline further.

Work hard to strengthen your new marriage. A child needs stability. Adults will need each other's support and comfort in dealing with the potential emotional ups and downs of stepchildren. Spend some time alone with your partner at least once a week.

Let the child know you want to be friends. It may be helpful for reluctant stepchildren to hear that you do not want to immediately replace the other biological parent. Be patient and give it time. Try not to compete with the other biological parent. Sometimes children may resist getting close to a stepparent because they feel as if they are betraying their other biological parent. Do not take it personally if the child initially seems not to like you. Don't rush the child. Understand that this may be a huge adjustment that takes time. Don't give up too easily! Do not be critical of your partner's ex in front of the stepchildren. For example, if the children's parent misses an appointment with them, say, "It made me sad to see that you were disappointed today." This is supportive and focused on the child rather than the other parent.

Try to connect through the child's interests. If a young child loves dinosaurs, ask if he or she will draw you a picture. If the child is older, invite them to teach you something, such as how to play their favorite video game. Let your partner talk you up. If a stepson wants to go to a race, a mother may say, "John knows a lot about cars. How about going with John? I will meet you there for lunch."

Support children having some alone time with their biological parent. Eventually, you can join them more often. If you take it slowly enough, the child will realize that he or she has not lost a parent, but has instead gained a new family member.

Do not intrude too often when a child is spending time with the biological parent. Give the child some opportunity to invite you in. At the same time, do not ignore your own needs. It is natural for a stepparent to feel left out sometimes. Discuss these feelings openly with your partner. While it is important to be firm and consistent, let the child win on occasion. This can help relieve some of the stress of their concerns about control and competition. It can also help them feel that it is safe to assert themselves. For example, if the child insists on sitting between you and your partner, let them, but not always. Tell the child you know how they feel, but that sometimes you'd like to sit next to your spouse.

Blended families involve two sets of children. This poses additional challenges and complexity for a new family's adjustment. Many children consider new stepsiblings to be an intrusion or competition. Turf wars are likely to result when one child encroaches on another's space—their room, the bathroom, play area, even a seat at the dinner table.

Children in new stepfamilies very often do not bond right away. This may take up to a year or longer. Set aside time to be with your respective children and to do something fun together. Concentrate on disciplining your own children, not your spouse's, at least during the first year. Let trust and respect develop first.

The first few months can be especially combative while everyone adjusts to a new role. A child who's used to being at the top of the pecking order may feel hurt and disoriented if an older stepsibling is introduced. One who is proud of his or her athletic accomplishments may feel overshadowed by the stepsibling who comes in with a wall full of medals and trophies.

While fighting is an obvious sign of tension, parents should also be alert for more subtle signs of problems. This can include excluding each other from games or constant tattling. Watch for persistent withdrawal from the rest of the family, a personality change, or a drop in school performance.

It is important not to compare your children with each other or with an absent parent. This only results in increased competition and hostility. It is important to encourage each child's own sense of identity. When faced with an invasion of children, many children need to establish their own space and boundaries. If children must share a room, try to create some way for each to have some privacy, such as a folding screen or curtains that can be used as a divider. Give stepsiblings jobs to do together, such as cleaning the garage, to facilitate working as a team. Create mutual goals and rewards. Likewise, if there is conflict and fighting create mutual consequences to reduce retaliation and encourage a sense that the children have a mutual responsibility for getting along.

With some patience and team-building skills parenting step-children can be a rewarding success. The Stepfamily Association of America (www.stepfam.org) provides a wealth of information and helpful tips. If you need professional guidance talk to your family doctor. They can guide you to licensed psychologists or licensed marriage and family therapists that have experience dealing with often complex stepfamily issues.

Above all, keep perspective and a sense of humor. A smile and the sense that you can overcome obstacles is often one of the most important things to convey to a child who is unsure of what is about to unfold.

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