

How to Succeed as a Stepfamily



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In Loving Memory
Kreston Chad Babcock
Son, Brother, Uncle, Friend
1976-2014

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Foreword

Developing a step or blended family that thrives may be one of the most difficult yet rewarding challenges you will ever encounter. Unfortunately, most families take this journey alone with little support from friends, extended family, or the church. We know this is true because it was our story; it is also the story of hundreds of couples we have mentored or counseled. We struggled with most of the issues you will read about in this book. We want you to know, dear stepcouple, that you are not alone on your journey.

Our journey began in 1991 with each of us bringing three children into our marriage. The honeymoon was all we hoped for, but the challenges began the minute we returned home. Who would have thought that those seven days would be the best we would experience in the next seven years!! We were unprepared for the challenges we faced and certainly did not expect it to take seven years for our marriage or family to stabilize. In the midst of crisis and confusion, we sought resources to help us make sense out of the daily chaos. There were very few publications at that time, however, that addressed how to develop a healthy stepfamily. We also discovered that most pastors as well as counselors were ill-informed about the unique realities of stepfamily life. Our personal journey to understand and improve our stepfamily life prompted us to consult God's Word and to study any stepfamily literature and research we could find. We also organized and led a stepfamily support group at our local church. Eventually, our family stabilized as we learned to love each other well. The time had come to help others succeed in their stepfamily journey. In 2000, God called us to launch InStep Ministries for the purpose of encouraging and equipping single parent and stepfamilies. Since then, we have traveled all over the country teaching on stepfamilies, single parenting, marriage, and relationships.

The purpose of this book is to provide you with **practical, Biblical, and experience-based solutions** for the challenges that you may face and to **acknowledge and affirm** your courage to be part of a stepfamily. Like a map of uncharted territory, **How to Succeed as a Stepfamily** will guide you through the complexities of stepfamily life and provide realistic solutions to the issues you may encounter. Along the way, we will unpack our own story and include practical strategies we refer to as *Success Steps*, observations we call *Stepping Stones* and introductory comments for each chapter called *Guideposts*. Our hope is that your family will thrive, not just survive the journey.

You may feel you are alone, but take heart, over one-third of Americans live in stepfamilies. That means thousands of families are attempting to do what you are doing, make a stepfamily work. Many stepfamilies struggle with pain and shame; some feel like second-class citizens. Be assured, however, that God loves stepfamilies. Look through the Bible—***you will not find any perfect families***. You will find a holy God reaching out through our brokenness to love, heal and redeem and a Savior who was raised in a stepfamily. God still blesses broken people. In Philippians 1:6 Paul reminds us of that God, who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion. Our prayer is that you will discover, on your journey, the hope and future that God has for your stepfamily. One request upfront, find others for support and encouragement.

Jeff and Judi Parziale

Loveland, Colorado

2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Psalm 27:13

Introduction

Our Journey

Jeff and I both experienced divorce. It was traumatic for both of us, but especially for our children. For me (Jeff) it was especially difficult because I lost contact with the support network at my church. Reflecting, I realize that neither they nor I knew how to effectively manage the situation. I withdrew due to shame; they disconnected out of ignorance. The net result was that I felt alone and abandoned. It took some time before I got up the courage to reconnect. Thank you, God, for grace.

We met on a hike in early 1991. Looking back, God knew we both needed to grow and change; He provided a wonderful growth opportunity for us called marriage and stepfamily life. I (Judi) moved from Colorado to Tucson, Arizona with my three children in the fall of 1990 to attend graduate school at the University of Arizona. My two boys were 14 and 11, and my daughter was 9. I really missed the mountains, so in the spring of 1991, I decided to participate in a hike sponsored by the church's singles group. I (Jeff) helped plan singles events, but hiking was definitely not one of my favorite activities.

Jeff and I learned that we had a number of things in common (not hiking). We began dating, and enjoyed each other's company, and our children seemed to get along well. Jeff's girls were 17, 11, and 8. Jeff's oldest daughter had been living with him for some time, and the two younger ones visited on weekends. We fell in love, had similar spiritual and life goals, and decided to be married.

Like most of our early decisions, we planned the time to get married around the needs of our children. Originally, we planned to be married at the end of 1991 or early 1992; however, we were both getting ready to purchase houses and we did not want to move our children twice within the same school year. So, after negotiating schedules, we moved up our wedding date to early August, prior to the new school year beginning. We were married August 3, 1991, in a friend's yard – which reminds us that most remarriages do not happen in churches.

For our weeklong honeymoon, we drove the coastal highway from Santa Barbara to San Francisco. Judi had never been to California, and we had a blast! Who would have guessed that those seven days would be the best days we would experience in the next seven years?

While we were on our honeymoon, my mom stayed with my kids and Jeff's girls came over to visit and swim. Both my mom and my children are quiet introverts, and Jeff's girls are loud extroverts. Consequently, Mom was more than surprised by the rambunctious behavior she observed. The day we returned from our honeymoon, Mom met me at the door with a fearful expression that said, "Do you know what you have gotten yourself into?" According to Kubler-Ross, shock is the first stage of grief. The day we returned from our honeymoon; we entered the shock stage!

We learned some vital lessons that day, ones that we did not fully realize until years later. For example, we learned that grief plays a major role in early stepfamily life and that every family member grieves differently. We also learned that grieving family members have a hard time bonding to one another. We learned that most families are not nearly as prepared for remarriage as they imagine and that children are at least a year behind adults in their readiness for

remarriage. Divided loyalties and triangulation are common. Most importantly, however, we learned about an abiding God who never leaves or forsakes, even when you feel all alone.

We were far from ready for this adventure and completely unprepared for all the instant challenges we would face. We had no idea how intensely our children's adjustment issues would affect us.

Most stepfamilies begin with loss, and we were no exception. Every loss, no matter how minor, must be grieved. In fact, every loss will be grieved, even if you choose to ignore it. That's a truth we learned well, the hard way. So, the reality is that grief is a constant companion; it's woven into the fabric of stepfamily life. Every holiday or special event can release it, making those times bittersweet. Each of us was in grief mode, but we didn't know it. Grief affects each person differently. It can cause children to "act out" and prevent adults from responding well to their children's behavior. We personalized our children's "acting out" instead of seeing it as an attempt to adjust to the huge changes in their lives.

To succeed, you must be able to live in the peace God offers and to hold fast to His promises. Throughout the journey of the Israelites, God told them to have courage and to not be afraid. He knew their courage would be tested and that fear would call them to turn back. We experienced this firsthand. For us, courage became moving forward through pain and uncertainty and peace was God's gift as we committed to put Him first, no matter what.

In *The Smart Stepfamily*, Ron Deal shares that stepfamily success (which takes time) has much to offer, including intimate relationships, marital happiness, nurtured children, character forged by challenge, personal growth, flexibility and adaptability, and a strong dependence on God. We can affirm that the trip is worth it. We have mentored and counseled hundreds of couples who have created successful thriving stepfamilies, transformed from a group of total strangers with very different backgrounds and no shared traditions, who have created authentic relationships and are doing life together. Those stepfamilies that work through the obstacles and find the courage and fortitude to complete the journey, create something very special. This was our experience, and **it can also be true for you.**

On our journey, we learned some valuable lessons that we will share throughout the book. We learned, for example, that each family member is carrying excess baggage. This baggage, in the form of pain, fear, fantasy thinking and unrealistic expectations, is burdensome and slows progress. There are many barriers to overcome. We learned that no problem, no matter how complex or seemingly unsolvable, was bigger than God.

Looking back, we realize that we, and particularly our children, were far from being "ready" to remarry. Today, we cannot emphasize enough the value of mentoring and preparing for remarriage. We are here to confirm that the journey is well worth the effort. Our journey taught us that the "honeymoon" for stepcouples often comes at the end. Do not give up hope; God will never give up on you. He stands for you and your stepfamily. Stand firm and watch God work in your life and the life of your family.

Success Principles

Succeeding as a Stepfamily

God rewrote the text of my life when I opened the book of my heart to His eyes. Psalm 18:24

"Successful stepfamilies require more than luck. Usually, they require a lot of hard work, incredible patience, a good listening ear and the ability to laugh a lot at themselves."

-Sally Ratterman

"It is not our judgment of the situation which can show us what is wise, but only the truth of the Word of God."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Guidepost: *We learned how to spell stepfamily success; it is COMMITMENT. Healthy stepfamilies do not happen by magic. Our first few years were tough, but the payoff was great. There were times we wanted to give up, but our commitment to God and to one another helped us to hang in there.*

How do you succeed as a stepfamily? That is certainly what every couple wants, and it is a task every stepfamily must embrace. Creating a healthy stepfamily depends on several factors. Two that have immediate application are *acceptance* and *flexibility*. Stepouples who have a realistic view of stepfamily life and who can remain flexible as members struggle to adapt have much higher success rates. *Acceptance* has several components: understanding that changes are both necessary and inevitable, a readiness to make those changes, and making a point to affirm each family member. Acceptance is a willingness to acknowledge that family members have different expectations, preferences, and routines, even if that is uncomfortable. *Flexibility* refers to the ability to integrate the new and different (there will be a lot of these!) without producing major disruptions.

Reflecting on our own stepfamily journey and the lessons we have learned; five key success principles seem to emerge. Certainly, there is a great deal more to learn about stepfamily life, and we encourage you to read other fine books on the subject. We have chosen these five principles because they are the heart and soul of what it takes to achieve stepfamily success. We will explore each further in subsequent chapters.

The first principle is to learn all you can about stepfamily structure and dynamics. Stepfamilies have some unique features that clearly set them apart from first time families. There are certain realities about how stepfamilies develop that can defy all expectations or wishful thinking. Embracing these realities, such as that the first two years of stepfamily life are turbulent or that stepparents and stepchildren will not bond quickly or easily, can prevent a family from feeling hopeless and discouraged when difficulties arise.

When Judi and I married, we had high hopes that our marriage and family would be successful. Those hopes were quickly dashed. By quickly, I mean, the moment we walked in the door from our honeymoon. As we mentioned earlier, Judi's Mom met her at the door with a "you've made a huge mistake" speech. She had never been around a stepfamily, so having all the children around was a bit overwhelming. Needless to say, that was a sobering moment for both of us.

Our family was anything but successful. Every possible struggle a stepfamily could have – we had. We were fragmented and divided along biological lines. Finding a balance between the needs of our new marriage and the needs of our children seemed impossible. We were wounded and extremely sensitive, making it tough to communicate and solve problems. When our children struggled, all our fears, anxieties and insecurities were triggered. It took several years of “wandering in the desert” to finally grab hold of God and a few good friends. At times, only our commitment to God and a tenacious desire to avoid another divorce kept us together. Today, we are sharing life as true partners.

At first, Judi and I defined success as staying together because there were so many forces inside and outside our marriage pulling us apart. Later, as we identified and embraced those forces and began to understand how they triggered us, we found that success was having a family that was safe and nurturing.

The second principle is to identify and work through any “baggage” you or your children might have. The term “baggage” describes a number of potentially destructive habitual ways of coping that adults *and* children bring into a stepfamily. The most common sources of baggage are unidentified emotional wounds, unrealistic expectations, lack of grieving, and erroneous ideas about how stepfamily life should proceed. Unresolved or “unpacked” baggage can and will easily sabotage a new family. This also includes grieving your losses, and there are many.

The third principle is to learn to manage the key tensions or challenges all stepfamilies will face. In *Surviving and Thriving in a Stepfamily Relationship*, stepfamily expert and therapist Patricia Papernow discusses the key challenges that all stepfamilies must face. Papernow sees each challenge as a function of the unique “architecture” of the stepfamily. Her observations, based on years of research and clinical practice, provide both useful insights and practical solutions to major concerns for stepfamilies.

The fourth principle is to develop a rich and sustainable couple relationship, which includes addressing the stepparent role, managing conflict and parenting. The key is learning to balance the needs the marriage with the needs of the children. In terms of managing conflict, a useful tool is to understand arousal states. Research on stress reveals that living in a constant state of high emotional and physiological arousal (called hyperarousal), which is all too common in stepfamilies, can cause irreparable harm to both adults and children. The couple relationship is the most important, yet most neglected relationship in the stepfamily. Learning how to make the marriage a safe, nurturing place is critical for stepfamily success.

Finally, principle five is to develop a stepfamily that lasts based on a foundation of biblical principles and sound experience from successful stepfamilies just like yours. For example, below are suggestions for creating a healthy stepfamily from stepcouples we have counseled or mentored:

“Don’t try to be perfect, just be yourself.”

“Put God first, always.”

“Allow the relationship with your stepchildren to develop slowly.”

“Take time to be with your partner without the children but also be with your children without your partner.”

“Reassure your stepchildren that you are not trying to replace their mom or dad. Instead, explain that you are an additional adult in their lives they can trust and turn to if they want.”

“Allow children to talk about happy times with their biological parents, as difficult as that may be for you. This will help build their trust in you.”

“Do not pander to every whim. However, loving a child may be, he or she will test the boundaries at some point. If they can get away with misbehaving or stirring up unnecessary trouble, they will. Be firm but fair.”

“Agree with your partner about how you will discipline your children and how much freedom is allowed. Make sure the biological parent is viewed as the disciplinarian to avoid the “wicked stepparent” scenario.”

“Find a great support network; it can be a great source of encouragement during dark times.”

“Keep your faith in God strong. Read in His word how many times He tells us to be courageous and to not be afraid.”

Woven throughout the book will be parts of our own story. We have traveled around the country and shared our experiences, not because we are perfect, or have it all figured out. In fact, we have made every mistake possible, and we are still learning. We want to celebrate and honor the courage of the many families we’ve met along the way, families who’ve done the challenging work of surviving until they thrive, and to give praise to the amazing God of second chances, who will never give up on you and will, if you let Him, call you to a purpose much higher than a successful family.

It takes time for a stepfamily to become a safe place where people are nurtured and affirmed. We are absolutely convinced that the journey is worth every bit of struggle, difficulty, and frustration you will experience. Embrace and enjoy the journey. Keep a sense of humor; have as much fun as possible along the way. Learn to cherish special moments. The family is the crucible of faith for each generation. You are creating a legacy and forming the character of the precious lives God has entrusted to you.

“The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord...it is going to God. In going to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air...fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground. The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore, no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil. ...we believe life is created and shaped by God and that the life of faith is a daily exploration of the constant and countless ways in which God’s grace and love are experienced.”

-Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Success Principle #1

Understand and Embrace Stepfamily Structure

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! 1 Corinthians 12: 4-10 MSG

"Marrying into a blended family can be compared to driving different vehicles. Perhaps I've been used to driving our family car on country roads, puttering along nice and easy, taking the curves with caution and experienced control. Now, all of a sudden, I find myself driving a semi-truck during the Los Angeles rush hour. I may have done quite well before, but I'm not on country roads anymore."

-Tom and Adrienne Frydenger, Resolving Conflict in the Blended Family

Stepfamilies are regarded as the most complex family form, and each family member contributes to that complexity. They do this through their woundedness and emotional state, their expectations, and their capacity and/or willingness to contribute to the success of the family. This array of attitudes and behaviors forms a family member's personal picture of how the family should look and how they might respond. Each person's picture is true for them and quite resistant to change. Different pictures typically result in conflict and disunity, leaving family members feeling disconnected, isolated, angry, unappreciated, or unimportant.

To remedy this disconnect, over time, family members must learn to share their needs and "pictures" and to listen to one another without making judgments as to who is right or wrong. Family identity is the result of blending everyone's pictures. Woven into this process is a God who calls us to be courageous, to love 'til it hurts and to be willing to put the needs of others above our own. In return, He promises us His presence and the fruit of His Spirit. Successful stepfamilies find a way to embrace everyone's ideas about family. Commitment holds the family together during the process, and agape love provides the energy for such a commitment.

The challenge of a stepfamily is to make order out of chaos, realizing that the real issue is the complex architecture of the family itself. In the meantime, family members must learn to be sensitive to each other's expectations and emotional states. Life inside the family will feel awkward, uncomfortable, and even artificial for some time. It is tough to embrace those who really do not want to be there or who do not seem to like you. Preconceived notions about how things should be must be abandoned and room made for adjustments and compromise. Becoming educated about the complexities of stepfamily life and understanding how each member is affected is critical for success.

Becoming a blended family means mixing, mingling, scrambling, and sometimes muddling our way through delicate family issues, complicated relationships, and individual differences, hurts, and fears. But through it all, we are learning to love like a family.

-Tom Frydenger

Stepfamily Beginnings

In the beginning, there were isolated moments of closeness, but no sustained unity or harmony. And there were many, many days when we wondered if we would even become a real family or if we would continue to function as a fragmented unit for the rest of our lives.

-Moe and Paige Becnel, God Breathes on Blended Families

Being part of this unique kind of family situation is a tremendous gift, privilege, and blessing. Do not let anybody tell you otherwise.

-Natalie Gillespie, Stepfamily Success

Guidepost: *We were so confused and overwhelmed when we started our journey. We did not understand the need for a support network, and we underestimated the impact of divorce and remarriage on our children. We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to understand the journey. The first few years are tough. "How could two people so much in love differ on so many issues?" was a recurring thought of ours. There will be many adjustments and many compromises, but in the end, family.*

Most first-time families begin in an atmosphere of bliss as the couple contemplates various choices, such as travel, a career, a home, a car, and children someday. The average stepfamily begins after a period of change, grief, and loss, with little time to ponder the future. A new marriage creates an "instant" family with immediate decisions to be made, relationships to be developed and an overwhelming sense of tension and frustration. Virtual strangers are now living under the same roof with very different ways of doing almost everything and often, a lack of trust or sense of safety.

Mini-families

Learn the term mini-families. We did, the hard way. No, it is not a new reality show. It is who's in charge of the family at first. We missed this and it caused a great deal of frustration. Mini-families will blend eventually but not for at least a year, or more.

A new stepfamily starts by combining two or more *mini-families*. These mini-families are the intact groups that came together when the adults married. The most common mini-family is a mom and her children who have been functioning for some time as an intact single-parent family. Another mini-family is a dad and his children even if he is not the custodial parent. These groups often include other members: former spouses and family members, grandparents, aunts and uncles, even close friends. Therefore, the average stepfamily is the combination of at least two mini-families, each with different rituals and rules for just about everything! The salient point is that *the mini-family is the family, even after the marriage*. The most powerful attachments are inside the mini-family. An important task of the family then is becoming one integrated family.

Our mini-families were very different. Eating habits, celebrating holidays --you name it, we were different. Jeff's children were very active and verbal and used to much less structure. My children were far quieter and more reserved. Our first few holidays were a disaster. We had no idea how much impact different traditions would make. We fell into one of the most common stepfamily traps -- viewing different as wrong. We learned to blend traditions and make new ones along the way. The turning point was when we began to embrace and celebrate our differences and appreciate the value of each family member.

Each mini-family has its own history, traditions, language, rules, roles, and rituals. Taken together, these create a shared understanding or a way the mini-family perceives itself. This shared understanding is very resistant to change. Consequently, in a stepfamily, even the smallest detail or event can provoke conflict. Holidays, for example, which are normally joyous times, can be very stressful because of different expectations about how they should be celebrated. Unfortunately, “different” in a stepfamily is nearly always translated as wrong. This is difficult for an outsider who does not have a codebook to help him or her understand the mini-family’s rules. Suggesting even minor changes in the rules or traditions can easily cause a huge reaction.

Insiders and Outsiders

Stepfamilies begin with the parent-child relationship the strongest attachment in the family. This is instantly confusing and perplexing to the couple and creates immediate conflict. Unknown to the new couple, the parent-child bond and numerous outside interfering relationships (e.g., a former spouse or former in-laws) can actually have more influence on the family than they do. This is a surprise to the parent and a shock to the stepparent who suddenly finds him or herself in an *outsider* position. Outsiders feel excluded, even unwanted, and do not understand the rules or language of the insider family. The family will function this way for the first few years. Turbulence will come when the stepparent and stepchildren struggle with the status quo and the parent gets caught in the crossfire.

Hope and Fantasy

Stepfamilies begin with the family yearning to heal the pain created by divorce or death. Parents hope their new spouse will not only be a better partner but a better parent as well. Stepparents hope to provide what had been missing (and be appreciated for it). Every new relationship comes with fantasies of how things will be. There are visions of everyone living happily ever after in an instant family filled with instant love. In most couples’ fantasies, everyone in the stepfamily is an insider. The stepparent believes, “*I love her, so I’m bound to love her kids (and they’ll love me).*” Or “*They seem difficult now, but I’m sure things will be fine after we are all under one roof.*” Fantasies break down quickly with the realization that stepchildren’s loyalties remain with their parents, and that stepparents are outsiders to their new spouse’s mini-family. At that moment, the couple is likely to feel disappointment, despair, and loneliness more than love. The journey, which just began, seems destined to fail.

The reality of another possible failure releases an explosion of feelings. Some family members feel devastated, hopeless, and helpless; others betrayed or deceived. Still others become numb or drift into denial as if ignoring or pretending will make the pain or confusion go away. The answer to the question, “*What has happened?*” is that stepfamily reality has just entered the picture. All the pre-conceived, mostly un verbalized, myths and expectations carried into marriage have just crashed and burned. Something is wrong; it is just that no one knows exactly what it is or what to do about it.

Immersed and Overwhelmed

In *Becoming a Stepfamily*, Patricia Papernow discusses stages of development. The first stage is Fantasy. My (Jeff) fantasy was one big happy family – everyone getting along. I was oblivious to how much work that would take, or if indeed, that was the fantasy of everyone else in the family – it was not. We were not a family. We were a fractured group of wounded strangers living under the same roof. Everyone had different memories, traditions, needs and expectations and no one knew how to articulate them. We had no language to normalize what we were feeling. No way to console one another. Everyone was stressed and overwhelmed. Papernow's second stage is Immersion, and the key task is to "learn to swim before you sink." Too late; we started drowning the minute we returned from our honeymoon. We still look back and wonder how we could have been so naive.

Early on, the family finds itself immersed in a host of problems. Stepcouples are often so overwhelmed and absorbed in their own feelings that they have difficulty listening to their children or even to each other. This is particularly true for the stepparent, who is feeling more like an outsider. Stepparents find themselves assaulted by unexpectedly strong negative feelings – jealousy, resentment, confusion, and inadequacy – as they are subtly but consistently excluded. They respond by distancing themselves or becoming angry and lashing out. Ironically, the parent, feeling less uncomfortable, may view this response as a lack of commitment – a frightening thought, as it signals another failure and loss.

Family members have no real sense of a family perspective or a common, agreed upon way to communicate or address problems, let alone solve them. There is a pervasive feeling that something is wrong, but they are unable to pinpoint or articulate the problems. The family is not yet cohesive enough to provide a safe place to openly share feelings or concerns. Generally, the insider family is likely to experience less discomfort than the outsider family. Intense emotions are rampant (e.g., jealousy, feeling torn, lost, or invaded, isolated, grieving the absent parent), but no one is clear about exactly why these negative emotions exist or what to do about them.

The key to moving forward lies in grieving losses, letting go of baggage and relinquishing enough of the fantasies, myths and "shoulds" to engage in the work of building a family. Listening non-judgmentally and processing unrealistic expectations in an atmosphere of grace, acceptance and encouragement is a critical task that needs to be modeled by the couple. It is imperative that each family member's story be heard, because each story will contain anger, fear, and sadness in unique proportions and will reveal very different perceptions and expectations of the family. This can be difficult since interacting with strangers that seem very different can trigger personal grief and woundedness, often resulting in strong negative reactions. Reactivity, family members triggering one another, is a common scenario of early stepfamily life.

Nothing, however, will make the pain or frustrations go away except the hard work of exposing, evaluating, and relinquishing personal misbeliefs. The key is to keep talking and sharing, instead of getting stuck by blaming or attacking. For some, this may take a long time. The very act of creating a successful stepfamily causes stress and anxiety. Only later, when members have bonded, does the family become a source of comfort and identity.

To succeed, family members must stay with the process, share their own experiences, and hear those of others. The danger is that unrealistic expectations, such as instant love or instant family, will move family members to see problems as failures. Getting “stuck” at this point nearly always leads to shame (something’s wrong with me) or blame (something’s wrong with you). When shaming and blaming block effective communication, families can become stuck.

Invisible Land Mines

Individuals bring unspoken beliefs and expectations into the stepfamily. This is no more evident than in unspoken mini-family rules. A problem arises when an unsuspecting new family member (outsider) violates an unspoken rule, role, or way of doing something. There is usually a strong, negative reaction, catching that family member off guard. During the first few years of stepfamily life, rules tend to be *invisible*. Consequently, new family members can step on these emotional land mines quite often.

Susan and Bill were a couple we counseled. They had very different pictures of stepfamily life. Susan had difficulty when Bill’s children came over for the weekend. Little things (to Bill) like the children helping themselves to food without asking or staying up late and watching TV, really upset Susan, and caused conflict between them. Bill felt Susan overreacted to petty issues and that his kids could not do anything right in her eyes. Susan felt disrespected. They learned how to shift expectations and how to blame the system (mini-families) and not each other. Wow, looking back we realized they figured this out way sooner than we did. Stepfamily development is not a perfect science.

When someone violates a rule or suggests a change, tension develops and the tentative truce among family members is jeopardized. This scenario reinforces an important characteristic of early stepfamily life, namely that the strength of the family rests not with the couple but with each parent and his or her children. In well-functioning families the couple relationship offers a sanctuary to which adults can retreat for comfort, understanding, and problem-solving. It also provides a safe forum for struggling through issues, sharing pleasures, and dreaming about the future. In a relatively new stepfamily, the place to retreat is typically the parent-child relationship, *not* the couple relationship.

The dilemma for the new couple is that, in terms of loyalty, the biological mini-family usually wins. This reality creates tremendous strain on the couple and impacts any decisions they must make. Things that can be done with predictable results within the mini-family (playing a game, organizing a day, or choosing menus) require much more effort and produce fewer reliable results when attempted by the new family as a whole. So, the couple, who must function as a strong team in order to bring the family together, begins stepfamily life vulnerable to being interrupted and pulled apart.

Our first Christmas as a stepfamily was a traumatic experience. That may sound unbelievable, after all, how can you ruin Christmas? Jeff loved planning for Christmas and holiday festivities, but one of his unspoken expectations was that the festivities would not start until his children arrived, which was to be sometime Christmas afternoon. I expected that we would open presents early that morning with my children but when Christmas morning arrived, he wanted to wait. I

felt that was unfair to my children, who did not understand why the tradition had changed. I was also hurt that my children and I were not “family” enough for Jeff. The day was uncomfortable and awkward for both of us. Unfortunately, we learned the hard way about the need to discuss blending traditions and defining family.

Combining mini-families is an intentional, lengthy bonding process. Bonding occurs when family members make a genuine effort to care, share, listen and adjust to each other’s needs. Some family members may not want to bond, and they will resist all efforts to do so. During this period, mini-families may continue to function as separate entities. The lengthy bonding process and the tendency to function as a mini-family make the early years of stepfamily life extremely turbulent as family members work to resolve these differences and move to becoming insiders instead of outsiders.

Successful families are flexible, and, over time, adapt well to these changes. Family members begin to learn how to identify and modify expectations and let go of misbeliefs. Stress is reduced when family members can put language to their experience and can perceive that other family members are struggling with the same issues.

Success Steps: Here are some ways to make combining mini-families go smoother. First, make the family a safe place for its members. Nothing happens if family members feel it is not safe to be who they are.

Second, think “shift” not blend. A shift is a small change in attitude or perspective. Begin to see your perspective as just that, your perspective. Identify areas in which you are willing to shift your thinking. Even small shifts can make a huge difference.

Learn to see differences as normal, not as a sign of dysfunction. Different is not wrong. Apply generous portions of love, grace, and acceptance. Be willing to view things through another family member’s eyes.

Next, view the family through a new lens as a rich and diverse tapestry with each family member contributing to the final product.

Finally, cover everything with God’s grace. As we embrace God’s amazing grace, it allows us to see *and love* others from His viewpoint.

One of the great enemies of a blended family is the fact that we live in the age of instant everything. It’s natural for Mom and Dad to assume that they’ll have “instant success” with their new marriage and the new family it creates. Sometimes they naively assume that because they love each other so much and because they’ve found the “right” mate “this time,” marriage is going to be so much more wonderful the second time around, and the kids will gladly come along for the ride. The truth is, however, that the term blended family is a misnomer. It’s much more accurate to say that a step family is blending. It has not become completely blended, a process which may take years – or in some cases, never takes place at all.

-Dr Kevin Leman, Living in a Step Family Without Getting Stepped On”

Stepfamily Characteristics

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Romans 12:9-10 MSG

"All stepfamilies have a complex structure, ambiguous and constantly changing boundaries, and unclear roles."

-Roni Berger Stepfamilies

Guidepost: *We had no idea just how complex stepfamily life would prove to be with so many people with different needs and agendas, it was impossible to make everyone happy. We learned to be flexible, to love the best that we could, and to accept that there are no perfect families.*

Stepfamilies *never* become exactly like first-time families. They are not inferior, but they are different. To restore a sense of normalcy, many couples want their stepfamily to look, feel and work just like a first-time family, immediately. Not only is this goal unrealistic, but it is also dangerous. Too many changes too soon will overwhelm adults and children who are already reeling from the number of adjustments they have had to make.

Judi and I hoped for a re-make of a nuclear family – one where everyone felt like insiders. We had no idea how a healthy stepfamily was supposed to look or function. I (Jeff) had no idea how hard it would be for my children to move between their mom's and my home.

Stepfamilies are the most stress-laden family form. They often exist in a state of emotional overload. Grief reverberates throughout the whole stepfamily lifecycle. Major events, such as births, weddings, graduations, and holidays, can be intense triggers for grief and pain. Stepfamilies begin life with the couple relationship being the weakest relationship in the family. The honeymoon period comes at the end for most couples, seldom at the beginning of the marriage.

Additionally, stepfamilies have relationship dynamics that distinguish them from every other family form. The most common are parent-stepparent disputes over discipline, and children's loyalty conflicts. In terms of discipline, while it is not unusual for parents to have differing parenting styles, in stepfamilies it can become a focal point exacerbated by insider/outsider tension. Typically, the stepparent feels the parent is too soft while the parent sees the stepparent as too harsh and insensitive. Stepparents often feel like outsiders who are left out of significant interactions, events, or decisions. This is particularly true if their role has not been fully developed. When stepparents and stepchildren struggle, parents feel caught in the middle.

Embracing and understanding the architecture of stepfamily life is critical to success. Virtual strangers, with very different lifestyles and values may suddenly be living under the same roof. Typically, these groups or mini-families do not even know how to communicate with one another. Outsiders feel disconnected and isolated. Changing these relationship patterns in the household is critical and takes thought, effort, and patience to accomplish. Change, however, cannot happen unless the key dynamics of stepfamily life are clearly understood. These dynamics define the challenge all

stepfamilies face and serve to mitigate the chance of success. What are these key dynamics and characteristics that make stepfamilies so unique? Below is summary of the most significant of these characteristics.

Loyalty Conflicts

Loyalty issues are a defining trait of stepfamilies. Conflicts occur when children feel they must choose to which parent they would be loyal, or if when relating to a stepparent, they feel they are being disloyal to the absent parent. These conflicts are not necessarily forced by parent figures. Many children report feeling conflicted about staying connected to both parents.

Parent-child Relationships Predate the New Couple Relationship.

Parents enter the stepfamily with pre-existing bonds, experiences, and alliances with their children. These prior relationships come with their own language, history, and preferred ways of doing things. Consequently, the strongest attachment in the family is not the couple, but the parent-child bond. This is clearly a surprise to the stepparent and serves to emphasize his or her outsider status. This characteristic is a seedbed for parent-stepparent conflict over a child both parties view very differently.

Two Households

Soon after we were married, I came to dread weekends when Jeff's children came for visits. They would come in the door fighting, and the weekend chaos began; it felt more like an invasion than a visit. The children were loud and unruly, and Jeff wasn't very responsive. Jeff couldn't wait for visits; he thoroughly enjoyed his time with them. Things improved when we realized that the children were adjusting to moving between two different households and that Jeff had a blind-spot due to his own emotional triggers. I needed to feel safe, and the children needed to feel loved and welcomed, but finding that balance took some time.

Stepcouples tell us that dealing with changes in family composition is a huge challenge. Living in a stepfamily requires extending one's picture of "family" across at least two households, households to which children have strong loyalties. In first-time families, adults have equal history and shared traditions with their children. As noted earlier, the adult couple in a stepfamily begins with one member as an outsider and the other an insider to each child. Ironically, adults outside the house (a former spouse or relative) may be more of an insider than the stepparent. The result is that stepcouples have fundamentally different perceptions about the same child, the parent feeling much more attached and engaged, the stepparent more excluded and ignored. Children also experience parents and stepparents differently. For them, the stepparent is not another caring, nurturing adult but a stranger, even an intruder who threatens to disrupt the close parent-child relationship.

Parents Compete Rather Than Cooperate

Children adjust best when parents cooperate. Even so, many parents remain adversarial long after a divorce and use the children as pawns in their games of power, control, and revenge. They continue to malign one another, speaking negatively of the other parent's home, parenting skills, partner choices, etc. In reality, positive contact between children and parents helps stabilize stepfamilies and increases the likelihood that positive

stepchild-stepparent relationships will occur. Children prosper when parents put the needs of their children above their own.

Continual Transitions

Children may be moving back-and-forth between households. The transitions and adjustments required can prove highly stressful for both children and parents. The result is numerous logistical challenges, which can stretch the limits of tolerance for all adults involved. This is especially true during holidays and vacation periods. Successful stepfamilies develop *fluid boundaries* which allow children to move freely back and forth without guilt or reprisal. Transitions work best when adults are patient and flexible and keep children “out of the loop” in terms of planning or decision making. When children are involved, even as simply messengers, their stress level raises acutely, and transitions become more difficult.

Ambiguous Boundaries

Actual family membership is ambiguous in stepfamilies. Various adults have a different view of who is “in” and who is not. Children transitioning between households create uncertainty around such issues as affiliation and togetherness, making these issues a great source of family stress. Healthy stepfamilies resolve this issue by viewing “family” as extending beyond the walls of their home.

Differing Individual and Family Life Cycles

Remarriages often unite individuals who have large age disparities, meaning one partner may have young children while their partner’s children are grown and gone. Children of different ages have very different developmental needs and interests. Moreover, since remarriages typically occur later in life, there may be differences in career aspirations, finances, retirement, child-rearing practices and living styles. A consequence of crossing developmental phases is that the needs of individual family members may be out of sync with those of other family members.

John was looking forward to early retirement when he met Susan. His children were out of high school and on their own. Susan’s children, however, were preteens, and she wanted to keep them in the private school they had been attending. Consequently, disagreements between John and Susan erupted over free time, travel, and finances. Teaching them to embrace conflict and see it as an opportunity to grow (vs. win) helped them not stay stuck here. Unfortunately, most couples tend to engage in win-lose forms of conflict resolution where everyone loses. Judi and I spent several years of needless “banging our heads against a brick wall” before we learned that some conflicts must be managed not solved.

Children and Adults Have Experiences from Previous Families

Family members have core values and ways of doing things developed from their family of origin and prior relationships. Unfortunately, different ways of doing things can feel *wrong*, resulting in conflict. These differences make communication difficult. A key task for family members is to understand that differences can provide richness and choice and are not right or wrong. Accepting the past does not invalidate the present, or vice versa, and today’s memories can become tomorrow’s traditions.

I (Judi) felt uncomfortable when Jeff and his children talked about the past. It made me feel as though the past was more important than the present. I did not understand that the children brought up the past when they visited to help them feel less awkward and more connected with their dad.

High Levels of Stress

Stepfamilies have more stress than any other family type. Ambiguity, complexity, and the lack of fit with societal norms for the ideal family cause much of the stress. Family members are unsure of their roles, and communication patterns have not been set. Virtual strangers are attempting to look, act and feel like a family. Few rules exist, and those that do exist are continually up for debate. One family member said, "It's like reinventing the wheel every time we talk." Research suggests that prolonged stress, a state of hyperarousal, can lead to the release of *cortisol*, a brain chemical with damaging effects. One key effect is that cortisol diminishes the capacity for compassion.

Pervasive Loss

Stepfamilies exist because of a loss (divorce or death) and the resulting changes create even more loss. Everyone in the family, adults, and children, will be impacted by loss and each deals with loss differently. Children experience the greatest losses, yet they have the least amount of control over their circumstances. The average child of divorce has lost significant contact with a parent, changed residences, schools, and friends, and has less contact with his or her remaining parent. Remarriage brings new changes and therefore new losses. There are new adults and children, new rules, new routines, and a new status in the family. Few children view remarriage as a gain.

Parents have also experienced loss. For some, it is the loss of a dream. For many, it is the loss of daily contact with children, loss of support from family and friends, loss of a job, community, or church, and loss of a familiar role in the family. These losses can quickly overtake any joy surrounding a new marriage. Several years after a remarriage, individuals may still be struggling with these losses.

A Parent Exists in Another Household or in Memory

The influence of another parent outside the home can create a sense of helplessness and lack of control. Children have strong emotional ties to parents even if one of them has died. Adults have difficulty accepting more than two parenting figures in a child's life and may expect children to choose among three or four adults (e.g., parents, grandparents, stepparents). This is unfortunate since it represents a major adjustment difficulty for most children. If children are permitted the time to form good relationships with all the parenting figures in their lives, loyalty conflicts decrease and exposure to important adult relationships is ensured.

Complex Past and No Shared Family History

Intimacy is developed from shared experiences. Stepfamilies, however, begin with total strangers living under the same roof and with no common memories or traditions to draw them together. Each mini-family has its own set of memories and rituals, which while bonding them together, tend to separate them from others. Developing a shared history is a major task, often made difficult by the fact that many children, particularly

teenagers, are simply not interested. For them, making new memories is a form of disloyalty to their former family.

Stepfamily Life Easily Exposes Unresolved Issues, Hurts, Emotions

Like marriage, stepfamily life is a revealer, exposing and exacerbating any undisclosed, hidden or unresolved issues each individual brings into the relationship. This includes control, anger, insecurity or immaturity. Many are childhood issues, which present when we feel hurt, ignored or slighted, reminiscent of similar hurts in childhood. Others are from past relationships, triggering buried but suddenly very clear emotions. These lead to undue stress, rigidity and unproductive conflict. This phenomenon can catch us off guard. Why? Because while single, these are easily buried, ignored or suppressed. However, once in a meaningful relationship, we attach and become vulnerable; old hurts, fears, and other emotions are more easily triggered.

Success Steps: The following suggestions can help change initial, unconstructive relationship patterns of each family member.

- This is very important: expect to be triggered; it's normal. Instead of reacting irrationally, think—this is normal, I was expecting this. Perhaps I wasn't sure what would come up, but it's not about the present, it's about my own past.
- Don't push "group" outings (or group talks), and when they occur, keep them light
- Plan outings with your spouse; you need regular one-on-one time together.
- Provide children with a sense that they still have a special relationship with you. This will help them more easily accept new relationship patterns. Maintain some of the special outings done in the past.
- Build new adult-child relationships by having the stepparent and stepchild do fun activities together.
- Understand that children who cross two households will feel out of place in one of these. They will likely feel like an outsider. Expect it, and comfort that child.
- Plan a few activities for the whole family unit but be sure to keep them simple.
- Develop ways to celebrate faith as a family. Start by demonstrating how faith informs your day-to-day behavior and choices.
- Find support to work through any unresolved emotional issues.

We have learned that successful stepfamilies are long on courage and the willingness to do the work of creating a stepfamily that lasts. In the process, they have also learned how to celebrate and appreciate small victories.

You are going to encounter a whole range of issues that you resist, come into conflict over, and plain just do not understand about the new spouse, the new children, and the new family. Some of them you may not even want to admit to yourself for they seem so small and petty. Trust us — it's the small and petty things that will get you first. Always keep in mind that it's okay to feel these things. (You are human, after all!) What matters is how you handle them.

-John Penton and Shona Welsh, Yours, Mine, and Hours

Success Principle #2

Identify and Resolve Excess Baggage

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Philippians 4:6-7 MSG.

"Even without children as part of the remarriage picture, you will have a complicating factor that extenuates the adjustment period: baggage. The proverbial baggage you bring into this current marriage from your previous one takes time to unpack. Some call this the "invisible partner" of remarriage."

-Les and Leslie Parrott, Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts.

Stepfamilies have their share of challenges. There are challenges involved in making any family work. The challenge we faced instantly was how to function as a team and help our children work through their issues. At first, we were not very effective because we got caught up in our own woundedness and in the "shoulds" of stepfamily life. That is, instead of dealing with the way things were, we focused on how things "should" be – a huge waste to time and energy.

For children, baggage represents the immense losses brought about by huge changes over which they have no control. It is overwhelming fears – fear of never seeing the lost parent, and fear of losing the parent they live with while attempting to adjust to a new stranger, the stepparent (or his or her children). For adults, it is the fear that, just like the last one, this marriage may fail. Baggage symbolizes deep emotional wounds caused by disappointment, abuse, neglect, and betrayal. It is personal beliefs and expectations, most of which are inaccurate and unrealistic. It is a disconnected spiritual life due to guilt and shame. Baggage refers to fears, wounds and beliefs that have not been disclosed, identified, examined, or resolved. In fact, most baggage is never spoken about. Most people choose to bury their feelings to avoid the pain that disclosure causes.

Wounded people cannot sustain the hard work necessary for stepfamily success. Consequently, each person's baggage must be "unpacked" – sorted out, identified, acknowledged, understood, and resolved – if the family is to move from being a collection of strangers to a fully functioning stepfamily. This process can be challenging since each family member's struggles are unique and the interaction of these struggles among family members can trigger a variety of intense emotional responses. It is clear that for some individuals the stresses and endless transitions of stepfamily life are too overwhelming. Finding ways to support those individuals and encouraging them to find helpful resources is critical.

One way to provide support is by creating an atmosphere of safety and care. Long before family members become open and communicative about their struggles, they must perceive the family as a safe place. Trust, which is critical if family members are going to be open and disclosing, is built when individuals feel safe and when they feel their needs have been heard and their differences embraced. Once an atmosphere of trust and acceptance has been achieved (this will take time), authentic family

relationships can begin to develop. For the family to succeed, the couple must model the ability to be disclosing as well as to handle conflict situations with grace.

Success Step: Unpacking Baggage

Baggage has its greatest impact when it is left undisclosed and out of awareness. In *Advice from the Blender*, Susan Hetrick identifies some key types of baggage: spiritual issues, skeletons in the family closet, work and career issues, emotional traumas, finances, conflict management skills and sexuality. Below are some strategies for unpacking baggage in your family.

- See yourself as a loved and valued child of God.
- Identify and acknowledge your own hurts, fears, resentments, etc.
- Solicit and listen to feedback from others.
- Define baggage for your children and explain its importance.
- Let family members know that having baggage is okay.
- Model and encourage healthy disclosure, as well as patience, flexibility, and grace.
- Create a safe non-judgmental environment for people to share.
- Expect differences, objections, and misunderstandings.
- Affirm that everyone's needs are valid.
- If needed, encourage family members to seek professional help.

God is truly the God of second chances (read Jonah 3:1; Hosea 3:1; Joel 2:12-13; Romans 8:1; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 John 2:1; 2 Tim. 2:21). This great truth is never more evident than living in a stepfamily, which features the union of two people (and a supporting cast of children, relatives, etc.) who have experienced the loss and brokenness of a divorce or the death of a spouse. Complex challenges confront those who choose to remarry. Be ready for obstacles. They exist on every pathway. Read these verses together and share the lessons they offer. Proverbs 19:11; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:41; Romans 12:17-21; Eph. 4:29-5:2; James 4:11

Ghosts from Prior Relationships

In *The Smart Stepfamily*, Ron Deal discusses the ghosts of marriage past. He writes, "*What is truly ironic about being haunted by the ghost of marriage past and responding out of fear is that it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy*" p. 115. Ghosts or baggage are leftover fears or memories from past relationships that cause us to over-react to imagined "triggers" from our partner or family member. For example, if a past partner was unfaithful, hid money or was over-controlling, then "suspicious" behaviors in your new partner might trigger a reaction, leading you to become overly cautious, anxious, angry, fearful, or vigilant. Worse-case scenario, we can push our partner away. **The solution:** these ghosts are real, and they can harm your new marriage. They can make you miserable. Acknowledge them but do not justify them. They are normal, but harmful. Talk about them with your partner, ask him or her to provide gentle feedback. Challenge your thoughts and fears, fight them with God's truth.

Misbeliefs and Unrealistic Expectations

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. Philippians 4:8-9 MSG

One of the best ways to set yourself up for failure in a stepfamily is by expecting too much from yourself.
-Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green, **Stepcoupling**

You need to S.U.R.F it together! Surfing is part of survival mode: S=servanthood, U=unity, R=relationship and F=flexibility.
-Gil & Brenda Stuart, *Restored & Remarried*

Guidepost: *We can vouch for the fact that misbeliefs will impact your marriage and family.*

Stepfamily Misbeliefs

There are three important myths that interfere with progress towards satisfactory stepfamily integration: Stepfamilies are the same as first-marriage families, stepfamily adjustment will take only a short time and loving and caring for one another will develop instantaneously.

-Emily & John Visher, *Therapy with Stepfamilies*

We can define misbeliefs as ideas about stepfamily life that do not square with research and experience. Misbeliefs are a product of culture, personality, and past experience. Whereas expectations reflect outcomes we desire, misbeliefs are more fundamental, suggesting a way a person sees the world. In this case, the world of stepfamily life. Beliefs that are inaccurate or unrealistic lead to a form of fantasy thinking; imagining a world that does not and likely cannot exist. Unfortunately, these fantasies are very real to the person and very resistant to change. Giving up these fantasies is the only way to build a stepfamily that lasts. No matter how right your beliefs or expectations may seem, our experience is that they will result in conflict until you create a *shared* vision of stepfamily life.

Our marriage began with high hopes for success. We were so compatible. We seemed to have the same values; the same goals and we liked each other's children. We thought we could re-create a nuclear family because that is all we knew. That myth did not last very long. We discovered quickly that our pictures of family were vastly different. I (Jeff) was raised by a single parent who remarried when I was ten. Judi grew up in a very traditional nuclear family. Jeff was accustomed to a very flexible (and dysfunctional) family structure while I (Judi) was looking for a more structured, consistent environment. We both assumed that the other (and the children) would readily gravitate toward our picture of family life.

Like us, the average couple begins stepfamily life with personal beliefs about remarriage that are guaranteed to produce conflict, if not outright failure. Personal beliefs are shaped by life experiences, but they seldom reflect the realities of life in a stepfamily. These inaccurate beliefs are referred to as myths or misbeliefs. They contain partial truths, and they drive our expectations. For example, if a person believes that starting a stepfamily will be easy, he or she will react very differently when problems occur than a person who anticipates challenges. Below are some common myths about stepfamilies.

The real danger of these misbeliefs is that they create blindspots and set the stage for undue stress, disappointment, and failure.

Love occurs instantly between the child and the stepparent. The notion that a stepparent would simply and immediately embrace a child with the same love and tolerance as a parent and that the child would wish to establish a rapid emotional bond with stepparent is simply unrealistic.

Reality: Love between a child and a stepparent does not come instantly. In fact, some relationships take years to develop. Expecting “instant” love or an “instant” close-knit family always leads to great disappointment. The first incidence of a stepparent being “too harsh” on their child, can lead a biological parent to question the relationship. Establishing relationships takes time and patience. Most stepchildren are not ready for a relationship with their new stepparent. They are still grieving the loss of their original family. Ironically, a stepparent who is “too nice” may cause loyalty problems for the stepchild who may feel that moving too close to a new stepparent is an act of betrayal toward the parent. The key is to first develop respect and then allow relationships to grow naturally.

Children will be happy about their parent's remarriage. Parents think, “I was unhappy and lonely; therefore, my children must have been unhappy and lonely. They will be happy for me when I marry because it makes me happy. Besides, we can move into a new house, and they can each have their own bedroom.”

Reality: Most children enter new marriages still grieving the loss of their biological family. They may be angry, hurt or confused and uncertain as to the relationship with their now-divorced parents. Consequently, most children are not looking for a new parent. In fact, many children consider remarriage a further loss. Not only have they lost their family and one parent, but now they must share the remaining parent with a new spouse and other children. Many children are uprooted from familiar surroundings such as schools and friends after a remarriage. They may be sharing a bedroom with a total stranger. They may have lost their status in the family (e.g., youngest, oldest, only boy or girl, etc.). For these reasons, children need time to adjust, and they adjust best if change and conflict are minimal.

Children adjust to divorce and remarriage more easily if biological parents disappear (or are kept away). Some parents believe the new family will bond better and faster if children have less contact with the absent parent.

Reality: In reality, children adjust best when non-custodial parents are encouraged to be involved. Children will always have two parents and tend to adjust better if they have access to both. No matter how horrible a former spouse may be, children will still desire a relationship and will see that parent through their own eyes. Children seldom see the other parent as a bad person. Besides, contact with the non-custodial parent enhances a child's ability to form a relationship with the stepparent. The best scenarios are when parents can form parenting partnerships with all adults involved.

The new stepfamily will be better than the children's original family, and the children will be happier living in it. Many parents who have left abusive or dysfunctional marriages believe this.

Reality: Unfortunately, this belief can keep children from a parent that is viewed as “bad.” If indeed, a non-custodial parent does pose a risk to the children, the courts should be involved, and supervised visitation arranged. Children (and adults) should be safe. Children, however, remain attached to their biological parents no matter how former spouses feel about one another. In fact, most children enter a new stepfamily still grieving the loss of their biological family. When questioned, even five or ten years later, most children reported that they would return to their first-time families if they could. Communicating the idea that a new family will be better often makes children feel damaged or inadequate and denies them the right to grieve their losses.

Love is finite. “If I love my stepchildren too much, perhaps I will shortchange my own children.” This myth promotes the idea that a person only has so much love to give or that there is only so much love to go around.

Reality: The idea of love can be very confusing in a stepfamily. Love is not finite, but it does exist in different forms. The belief, for example, that a parent will immediately feel the same toward a stepchild as he or she does toward a biological child is unrealistic. Love in a stepfamily grows slowly, nurtured by care, concern, and quality time. Step-relationships can become very genuine and meaningful. Love grows slowly between a stepparent and a stepchild and should never be forced. God is the author of love. His love is agape—infinite and unconditional. Until a stepparent can experience love toward a stepchild, they can offer respect, friendship, concern, and positive regard.

Unrealistic Expectations

Every person in any form of relationship (or life) has expectations of how things should be or how they will turn out. Many of these are pure fantasy or well-wishing. These come from past experiences and even though unrealistic, they are deeply enriched and guide our behavior. Every member of a stepfamily has expectations. Some are unknown, until triggered by some emotional event. Some are deeply personal, how they will be treated or regarded. Most are un verbalized (fear) and incompatible with those of other family members. Many are unrealistic, that is, they are not consistent with the realities of stepfamily life in general, or with the stepfamily they have joined. The most common expectations are instant love and instant family. Others include children who will be thrilled about your marriage and that will adjust quickly and with no problems. Not all expectations are unrealistic, but the key is always to verbalize them and hold them up to the light of what is going on in your family.

We learned that you must articulate your expectations because those that are not spoken have the most control. To stay on the path, learn to say what you want and need out loud. Jeff and I had expectations that were not only unrealistic, but virtually impossible at first to articulate. Growing up in different families, our expectations were a product of our experience. For example, I (Judi) grew up in a very traditional Christian family. I was looking for structure and simplicity. Adjusting to the natural chaos of early stepfamily life was very difficult.

Rules, roles, and expectations

Whether a first or fifth marriage, everyone has expectations for how life will turn out.

-Ron Deal, The Smart Stepfamily.

As any family forms, ways of doing things (rules and roles) are developed to help the family operate effectively. Rules define how, when and where things are done. Roles define who will perform certain tasks or functions and give status to family members. The personality of the family, and ultimately the individual, is a reflection of the unique way rules and roles are defined. In stepfamilies, people with very different ideas about rules and roles come together and different often translates as "wrong." The values, norms, roles and rules a family member brings come from prior relationships. These ways of doing things have been internalized and now constitute the *right* way to do family. Combining all the rules from merging mini-families and developing new rules for the stepfamily is an ambitious project since family members tend to see their way of doing things as right and others' as wrong. As might be expected, family members are unaware of these learned rules and roles, and they are extremely resistant to change.

Some of the more common family rules include, "Parents know best," "Loyalty to family comes first," "Children should be seen and not heard," "Dad's work, and moms stay home," or "Never tell anyone our family business." Rules will vary depending on the culture and relative health of the family. Again, rules and decisions about rules are most fluid in the mini-family. To combine or merge these rules, use the following guidelines. Ask each family member to articulate the family rules they believe exist. Next, review the list and decide how many of these to keep. Develop future rules as a family. Rules work best when they are clear and tangible. Make changes gradually and be careful to blend the rules of each family system.

Family roles and rules lead to the development of expectations. Expectations define the family and the individual; they provide information about how to act 'correctly' in certain family situations and they determine right and wrong behavior. Many expectations are unique to the individual and not necessarily accepted or even known by the other family members. Everyone has expectations, verbalized or not. However, the expectations individuals bring to a stepfamily seldom reflect the complex nature and structure of stepfamily life. When a new stepfamily begins, the rules, roles and expectations of each family system do not instantly mesh. What seems appropriate or normal to one group will seem extremely abnormal to another. Further, since expectations are seldom verbalized, family members are unaware of each another's expectations. These unspoken expectations create invisible walls and invisible land mines that family members are consistently crashing into or stepping on.

The beliefs that form expectations are derived from past experiences, good and bad. To make matters worse, most of the expectation's family members have are unspoken, sometimes even unknown. The fears of another failure often keep family members from honest disclosure. Most individuals are unaware of the challenges of stepfamily life, so they assume that old ways of creating a family will work. However, since stepfamilies always begin with loss, family members have internalized strong self-protective emotions (fear, anger, guilt) which minimize disclosure. Sharing is an important avenue for feeling safe and building trust in a new relationship, but family members with

conflicting expectations are reluctant to share or disclose, so the stage is set for revisiting the pain and disappointment of the past. Successful stepfamilies find a way to identify and articulate their expectations by working through their fears and insecurities and realizing that authentic sharing is the only path to intimacy and bonding.

Expectations exist at three levels: those known and articulated, those known but unspoken, and those unknown. It is important to note that all three levels may contain unrealistic or blatantly unhealthy expectations. Many are extremely subtle. Some are verbalized and well-articulated, for example, "I will manage the discipline of my own children." Others are un verbalized and out of the person's awareness, such as, "I will never again let anyone close enough to hurt me." Verbalized or not, known, or unknown, expectations apply immense pressure to the stepfamily and create an invisible barrier that makes stepfamily development difficult at best.

Unrealistic spoken expectations are clearly the easiest to deal with. The key is to listen for subtle clues under the words. For example, statements like, "We will not have the problems other stepfamilies have." Or "Your children will treat me like their mother" suggest a lack of stepfamily awareness.

Unspoken expectations often involve hidden agendas and frequently contain assumptions about the way certain things should happen. Most of the unrealistic beliefs couples bring to the stepfamily are in this category. Many unspoken expectations involve plans to make changes or invoke new (better) rules or to prove their worth as a parent. These are typically kept secret during the initial stages of courtship and marriage. Confusion and conflict arise later when they are manifested in a spouse's behavior. Often these expectations are exact opposites of those verbalized earlier. In our experience, couples are reluctant to verbalize these beliefs for fear of rejection. The more unrealistic the belief, the more important that it be addressed since unrealistic expectations can destroy a relationship.

Unknown expectations are the most difficult to address because they are often out of a person's awareness and buried deeply inside. Issues or struggles that prove difficult to resolve or define fall into this category. Many deep, unresolved wounds from childhood or from prior relationships will manifest themselves here. Family members must be gentle and gracious in this area. Examples include, "If you give your child more attention than you give me, I will leave," "I will leave at the first sign of trouble," or "I can never tell you how I really feel."

All unrealistic expectations share some things in common. They are rarely verbalized. There is always an underlying hope or goal that seems positive, but also a setup that guarantees failure. This is important to understand—we make expectations unrealistic. On the surface an expectation may seem reasonable enough but below the surface lays some fatal flaw that makes the expectation almost impossible to fulfill. Primarily, these expectations do not allow for opposing views. The assumption is that you will "obviously see things the way I do." Unrealistic expectations are extremely difficult to define or measure. Who can define "enough support" or "too much" interference? The presence of un verbalized, ill-defined expectations lead to some predictable emotional

reactions – abandonment, rejection, anger, etc. The key is to define terms well and create a realistic time frame for change. Your journey is about progress, not perfection.

Success Step: Get in touch with any unresolved issues from your past. (Hint: Unresolved issues are likely to be connected to memories that make you feel hurt, angry, or extremely sensitive and that you have difficulty talking about.)

Using that list, imagine any personal expectations that you have not articulated. (Hint: Are there hopes, dreams or fantasies about family about which you cannot talk? Are there things you would like to see changed that you are afraid to mention? Are there areas of the relationship that you do not like, but are accepting out of fear?)

Commit to creating healthier expectations that are clearly articulated with no hidden agendas and that are open for discussion. These healthier expectations need to be characterized by love and respect and consistent with God's Word.

Stepping Stone: Everyone has a few misbeliefs and unrealistic expectations. If you do not think *you do*, get a reality check from someone you trust. Denial is a huge problem with remarrying couples because they tend to minimize potential problem issues. Here is the key: get things out in the open as soon as possible. Listen to your partner or accountability person with as open mind and heart, always keeping in mind, "I am probably in some form of denial." Jesus mentioned getting the log out of our own eye before pointing out the speck in another.

Family isn't defined only by last names or by blood; it's defined by commitment and by love. It means showing up when they need it most. It means having each other's backs. It means choosing to love each other even on those days when you struggle to like each other. It means never giving up on each other!"

-Dave Willis

Resolving Emotional Issues

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Hebrews 12:1 ESV

“After all, at one point you invested your entire being into this individual, but for whatever reason the relationship is over. You can’t expect to leave that unscathed. Eventually, you have to admit that you lost a part of yourself when that relationship died. And if you have never fully grieved that loss, you will have all the more baggage to contend with.”

-Les and Leslie Parrott, Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts

Guidepost: We were wounded and unaware, not only of our wounds, but also how they were affecting our ability to parent and to relate well to one another. Wounds create blindspots and boy did we have some of those. Blindspots affect us by making us less insightful, intuitive, and sensitive to others and more prone to self-deception.

Unresolved issues nearly always result in emotional woundedness. Emotional wounds are invisible scars caused by some form of hurt, loss or betrayal. The way wounds manifest themselves in our thoughts, feelings and actions is often invisible to us, although our responses can become quite characteristic, even predictable. Our response to wounds is to develop adaptive forms of self-protection. These develop over time to enable us to cope and survive. The more chronic or traumatic these events are or were, the greater our need for self-protection. At some point, these defenses not only become change-resistant and out of our awareness, but they also become the defining characteristics of our personality. Not only do they define us, but they can also become life-guides. Our choices and decisions are based on needs created by these wounds.

If I am attached to another person because I cannot stand on my own two feet, he or she may be a lifesaver, but the relationship is not one of love.

-Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving

It is no surprise that stepfamilies can feature a collection of wounded adults and children. The capabilities members need in order to form an effective family, such as trust, ability to bond, flexibility, and adaptability, are often absent in wounded people. Emotional woundedness often creates relational “blind spots” making it difficult to see the impact of our behavior on others. Without this insight, our behavior can become self-focused and insensitive, or it can become dependent, insecure, and compliant. Either way it will lack the strength for collaboration. The enormous stress caused by constant change and a lack of relational safety can push wounded family members to the edge, resulting in rage, depression, or thoughts of escape. Spiritually, woundedness can leave us numb, questioning our faith and our ability to move forward. After reviewing thousands of inventories, David Olson, creator of the Prepare© Inventory (Life Innovations), noted that over 50% of remarried couples have not dealt with their emotional wounds.

Emotionally wounded adults pass this woundedness on to their children by modeling unhealthy ways of coping. Wounded parents have difficulty setting healthy boundaries

or providing consistent discipline and often act out of guilt. Wounded former spouses are unable to put the needs of their children above their own. Wounded stepcouples have difficulty tolerating the flaws in one another. Instead, they make unreasonable demands or blame the other for any problems. Wounded stepparents have difficulty being patient and allowing their role to evolve. Their own pain and insecurity push them to strive to be in control, or to gain power or withdraw into isolation. They operate with unrealistic expectations of themselves, their spouses, and their stepchildren, which inevitably create loyalty binds and power struggles. Wounded children have difficulty bridging the gaps between their parents. They become sad and isolated, or they act out and rebel. Either way, they have difficulty adjusting to a new family system. Too many changes and too much stress can leave them overwhelmed, fearful or angry.

Success Step: While every family member brings some degree of emotional woundedness into the family, woundedness does not have to prevent the family from developing into a safe place for people to be loved, affirmed, and nurtured. Below are some suggestions to begin the healing process.

- Normalize woundedness; life wounds all of us. Wounds are consequences, not necessarily character flaws.
- Help give children language for their struggles, with fairness and firmness.
- Begin the process of understanding how your wounds impact your feelings and behavior.
- Acknowledge the possibility of denial.
- Develop a loving and supportive community.
- Improve the level of your self-care.
- Strengthen your boundaries.
- Acknowledge your woundedness to a trusted other.
- Address your fear, guilt, shame, or anger.
- Allow yourself to grieve. Take as much time as you need.
- Work on forgiveness. Start by forgiving yourself; forgiveness is a process.
- Work to resolve your past.
- Strengthen your relationship with God. See yourself as a loved, redeemed, worthy and valued child of God. God reminds us that His Spirit ministers to us in our weakness (Romans 8:26).
- Join a support group or seek out professional help.

How do I deal with my wounds? Don't allow yourself to be a victim. Talk about it, admit your wounds. Identify your wound, give it a name if that helps. Wounds lose their power once you acknowledge them. Allow the truth of Jesus love to heal your deep hurt, pain, and fear. Live life to the fullest, don't hide or settle. Be honest with your partner and yourself, seek help if necessary. Let go of guilt and shame. Forgive. Take responsibility for making your life better. Believe what is true and start making changes. The way out of pain is going through it, not avoiding, repressing, or denying it.

-Drs. Jeff and Judi Parziale, *Marrying With Children*

Grieving Well

You have turned my mourning into dancing Psalm 30:11.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18

Most children do not want their parent to remarry –no matter what they say. Children struggle with the losses and changes resulting from a death or divorce many years after the event. They have **three** common reactions to remarriage: *Grief* over the loss of the family and disruption of established family routines, *fear* of an unknown future with unknown people, and feeling *out-of-control* because their once-predictable world has been turned upside down – again.

-Jeff & Judi Parziale, *Through a Child's Eyes*

Loss is a journey, not a destination. You don't just get over it and move on. It's an ongoing journey with new layers added and persistent undercurrents just below the surface that are always present.

-Ron Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*

Guidepost: *It is normal to grieve, but it amazes us how many people (ourselves included) do not seem to understand the power of grieving, not only for themselves but for their children. The irony is that once we have a "new" partner, we often don't see the need to grieve, which seems counter-intuitive. My (Jeff) lack of grieving really hampered my ability to parent objectively.*

Life brings many losses, and losses require grieving. Loss is a broken emotional or spiritual bond. The natural response is to feel grief. Stepfamilies begin in loss and the associated grief can reverberate throughout the life of the family. Most people do not grieve adequately because they do not know how to grieve, or they are in denial. However, the main reason for inadequate grieving in remarriages is the emotional boost of a new relationship. Inadequate grieving, however, is another hallmark of stepfamilies and can contribute to remarriage failure. Loss has many faces. Every change has loss embedded within it, and stepfamilies experience a great deal of change. Every loss is personally impactful. Too many remarrying couples rush through the grieving process to avoid the pain; something modeled in our culture. However, inadequate grieving can slow down or even stop personal growth and limit the ability to bond to others.

If you and your children do not grieve the losses you have incurred, they will impact every future relationship. Give yourself permission to grieve. Sit with your grief and allow God to minister to you. List your losses. Grieving means acknowledging the loss and mourning the dreams and hopes that can never be realized. Only by healthy grieving can a person close a door and move on. Adequate grieving is critical to healthy relational functioning. Individuals who have not allowed themselves to grieve often become stuck emotionally, limiting their emotional and spiritual growth.

Grieving is the natural way to accept and endure losses. It can take as long as ten years to fully recover from severe loss. Yet successful grieving frees us to form new bonds. Our culture, our wounds and our past often keep us from acknowledging our losses, embracing our feelings, and growing through our grief – we get stuck. God calls us to embrace our losses and grow through them. God allows us to experience loss because it is the natural way of things and because without loss, we would be self-reliant and

never learn to depend on Him. He allows us to grieve because He grieved. He wants us to embrace grief and not be afraid.

Children often experience the greatest amount of loss, and yet their loss and pain are the most minimized. If a child is not allowed to grieve, the resulting emotional state may make bonding with even the kindest stepparent or stepsiblings nearly impossible. Lack of grieving can result in depression, fears and phobias, anxiety, or adjustment problems. Visible signs include poor grades, withdrawal, changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns and acting out behavior. Inadequate grieving on the part of adolescents can lead to depression, isolation, acting out, defiance, unhealthy relationships, sexuality and even substance abuse. Wounded parents can miss this and see the child as simply rebellious.

If parents do not grieve properly, they may experience intense guilt and shame for their children's pain and be unable to provide consistent structure or nurturing. In addition, due to intense loyalty conflicts, they may have difficulty adequately bonding with a new partner. Stepparents who do not complete the grieving process may experience tremendous resentment over their losses in a remarriage. Many report anger over the loss of privacy, the loss of control, the loss of money and the loss of closeness with their new partner. This anger may be vented at the *"inconsiderate or ungrateful"* stepchildren or the parent who is *"too lenient or too busy with his or her children."*

Individuals stuck in the grieving process will display some characteristic symptoms. For example, they may be unable to speak of the loss without re-experiencing intense shock and grief. They may engage in self-defeating behaviors in response to seemingly minor trigger events. They may talk about their loss but deny that it hurts or impacts them, or they may avoid talking about it at all. Other potential symptoms include denial, sleep and/or eating problems, thoughts of suicide, depression, addictions, physical symptoms, impulsive changes or ritualizing or enshrining the loss. Adults and children need clear permission and encouragement to express their deep feelings of grief, hurt, sadness, anger, loneliness, and confusion. What we do not mourn, we carry inside, perhaps forever.

"Good Grieving!"

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross first discussed stages of grieving in her landmark book, *On Death and Dying*. She identified five emotional levels or stages that people pass through when they are experiencing deep grief. These stages are shock or denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Shock and denial often manifest themselves as numbness or disorientation. Anger can be overt and become rage or covert and develop into bitterness. Bargaining can present as magical thinking or pleading. Depression can feel like profound sadness, despair or even apathy. This uneven process finally leads to acceptance and resolution. Not everyone goes through these stages in this order. Grieving is very personal and each of us has our own style. The key is to allow yourself and your children to grieve.

Going through the grieving steps is important, but to be successful the process must include a period of synthesizing and embracing the losses you have personally incurred.

As you come to understand what you have lost (the exercise below will help), you must determine to the best of your ability how this loss happened and why. This is not a fault-finding mission. You must determine your role in the loss and assess what this loss means to you. Drawing meaning from our circumstances is a critical part of our spiritual journey.

The key is to allow each person (adults and children) in the family to adequately grieve. Going through the grieving process is important; to be successful the process must include a period of synthesizing and embracing the losses personally incurred. As each family member comes to understand what they have lost, they must determine how best to process that loss. Drawing meaning from circumstances is a critical part of the spiritual journey.

God desires to be intimately involved in your grief process. However, many individuals are angry with God and feeling that He has abandoned them or let them down. "How could you let this happen to me?" is a familiar question for God. Sometimes we cannot ask God for forgiveness because we have not forgiven ourselves. Sometimes our hurt, anger or shame prevents us from forgiving others, and we continue to hold on to the hurt, often resulting in bitterness.

The deep fear lying behind every loss is that we have been abandoned by God who should have saved us. The transforming moment of conversion comes when we realize that even God has left us. We then discover it was not God, but our image of God that abandoned us. This frees us to discover more of the mystery of God than we knew. Only then is change possible.

-C. Barnes When God Interrupts

Success Steps: Healthy grieving involves the following elements:

- Acknowledging that loss exists.
- Understanding the loss. "What did I lose?" "What does it mean?"
- Talking about your feelings to another person.
- Developing personal faith in your ability to survive the loss.
- Allowing yourself to grieve without guilt, shame, or bitterness.
- Involving a support network of pastors, friends, loved ones and professional helpers if necessary.
- Taking as much time as needed to sort out your feelings.
- Accepting that there is no right way to grieve, only the way that works best for you.
- Refusing to become a victim.
- Partnering with a holy God who "knows our sorrows" and is "acquainted with our grief."

Our first seven years were tough. We are often asked, "How did you get through it?" Our answer is that God walked with us, and along the way, we discovered some truths that, looking back, seem so obvious. You have to admit you are broken and wounded and then allow God to use you in spite of your brokenness. We had to muster the courage to voice our brokenness and not be ashamed. No matter what you feel, brokenness does not mean God has abandoned you. He was with us every step of the way—even when we were far off the path. We discovered God's

incredible faithfulness and His unfailing love, grace, and devotion. He had bigger ideas than our weaknesses could comprehend. We learned to understand and appreciate grace in a whole new dimension. As we felt embraced by God through our failures, we could embrace each other. We humbled ourselves before God in repentance and obedience. I (Jeff) learned that if you are too proud, God will humble you. We got connected. You cannot make it without authentic relationships. The more we struggled, the less willing I (Jeff) was to talk with others about our problems. Most stepcouples go it alone because they are ashamed and believe they will be rejected. Finally, we committed our lives to God and to one another. We embraced each other at the point of our brokenness and committed to journey together – no matter what.

“Where is God when it hurts? He has been there from the beginning, designing a pain system that, even in the midst of a fallen world, still bears the stamp of his genius and equips us for life on this planet. He transforms pain, using it to teach and strengthen us, if we allow it to turn us toward him.”

-Phillip Yancy, Where is God When it Hurts?

Where are you in your grief process? How are you helping your children grieve?

Principle #3

Address Key Challenges of Stepfamily Life

This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us – an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him! Romans 8:15-17 MSG.

Every stepfamily brings its own set of complex interlocking relationships and its own distinctive strengths and vulnerabilities.

-Patricia Papernow, Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships

Guidepost: *Challenges? You bet. They come in every shape and size imaginable. Some are relatively easy to solve; some are nearly impossible. Be patient. Choose your battles wisely. Learn to solve the things you can solve and to manage the things you cannot.*

In her landmark book, *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships*, Patricia Papernow talks about five key challenges all stepfamilies must face. While stepfamilies face many challenges, Papernow suggests that these five are the most salient and widespread. The failure to manage these certainly makes it difficult for a stepfamily to succeed.

Briefly, the five key challenges are dealing with the insider/outsider dilemma, children struggling with loss and change, parenting issues that polarize the parent and stepparent, crafting a stepfamily identity out of the chaos created by immense differences, and coping with a former spouse who has immeasurable influence on the new family.

Papernow maintains that these challenges are endemic to the "architecture" or structure of the stepfamily. In each case, these challenges cannot be avoided or easily resolved. Like any tension, they must be managed. Successful stepfamilies find a way to not only manage these tensions well, but they refuse to blame one another (or the children) and see these issues correctly as inherent in the structure and dynamics of life in a stepfamily.

Success Step: Taking on these five challenges

As you work through his material, remember that these challenges are true for nearly every stepfamily. Many families have successfully learned to manage these challenges. Speaking of managing, these cannot be fixed or "cured" in the traditional sense, they can only be managed through numerous conversations, compromise, empathy, prayer, and grace. This will take time and patience. So, keep talking, keep listening and keep loving.

First Challenge: The Stuck Insider / Outsider Dilemma

Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything. Colossians 2:9-10 MSG

In stepfamilies, insider and outsider positions start out painfully stuck. Agreements about every day issues lie within the parent-child unit, not between the adult couple. And single parent families usually have become a very tight unit. All of this makes stepparents outsiders in their new families. This outsider position often leaves stepparents feeling invisible, powerless, rejected, and lonely. (AAMFT website)

Guidepost: *Being an outsider is tough. Talks about the past or the “old days” reinforce just how much of an outsider you are. Realizing that it will be a long time before you are part of another person’s memories makes it even tougher.*

This is the core challenge for the stepcouple and one of a few characteristics unique to stepfamilies. This challenge emerges very early on and weaves it ways through every other challenge. In most stepfamilies, it never goes away completely. About the time a new stepcouple is hoping for intimacy and some semblance of family closeness, stepfamily structure places the parent and stepparent on opposite sides of a relational divide.

In a perfect world, there are only insiders, those who feel and are treated like they belong. Belonging is such a critical need; its core to our emotional/relational makeup. God created us as relational beings, and the need to belong is a result. Family is the strongest crucible for belonging, so when our image of family is shattered, our sense of belonging is damaged as well. That is why remarrying couples are so anxious to re-create family; they want the feelings engendered in first-time families.

In a first-time family, children tend to feel closer to mom or dad at different times during their development, which, although painful for the parent, is lessened by the fact of a pre-existing relationship and shared history with the child. In a stepfamily there is no shared history between child and stepparent, no bonding that draws them together. Consequently, roles are stuck, not fluid. Typically, any time a child has a problem, he or she would naturally move toward the parent. Even if the couple is in the midst of a serious discussion, when a child bursts in crying, the parent will naturally switch attention from stepparent to child. This happens because attachment is strongest between the parent and the child and leaves stepparents feeling abandoned and even disconnected from their partner.

To compensate for this dilemma, some couples try to hasten the blending process by spending lots of time together as family. The hope is that stepparent and stepchild will bond sooner. Research, however, suggests that spending too much time together too soon can be extremely stressful. Typical stepfamily challenges are the most intense when the whole family is together. Another form of compensation is putting all the emphasis on the couple relationship or on the children, neglecting one or the other. The reality is

that the insider/outsider challenge is really a tension that family members must learn to manage, not a problem to be solved. With patience, tolerance and willingness to dialogue, the impact of this challenge can be diminished.

Successful stepcouples find empathy for each other and work together to support one another. They recognize that both are in a painful position and know it has nothing to do with their spouse's feelings for them. They understand that being stuck is the real issue, not each other and certainly not the children. The parent recognizes that it is normal for the stepparent outsider to feel jealous, invisible, or left out. To begin to deal with this, couples focus on shifting outsiders to insiders rather than blending. For example, lots of one-on-one time is carved out to support all the relationships in the family. The couple strives to take advantage of intimate moments and demonstrates small signs of caring around the children such as a hug or a kiss.

Being an outsider is both frustrating and exhausting. To prevent burnout, successful stepcouples find activities for the stepparent that are replenishing and that offer insider-like experiences. Lastly, successful stepcouples are adept at offering empathy even when they are not in total agreement. Research suggests that empathy and compassion promote the release of *oxytocin*, which soothes pain, generates well-being, and lowers hyperarousal. Intimacy and connection come through creating small moments of caring during conflict.

In *Stepfamilies*, researcher James Bray discusses how to bridge the insider/outsider gap. *"The principal bridge across this gap is made up of mutually agreed upon compromises"* (p.137). These compromises are shaped by ongoing back and forth negotiating until families arrive at workable solutions. He goes on to say that two qualities accounted for the success of families that bridged this gap, frankness and a pattern of sharing feelings, acceptance, and the ability to state a complaint in a way that evokes empathy. One of the qualities Bray considers critical to frankness is mapping. The purpose of mapping is to identify all the subtle and not-so-subtle beliefs, expectations and rituals that need to be bridged in order to transform insider/outsider into a unified family. The power of mapping comes from an insatiable curiosity that wants to know how every family member is feeling about life in the stepfamily. The goal of mapping is to identify those areas Bray calls "hot spots." These are areas where differences regularly cause conflict and division.

Identifying "hot spots" alone will not resolve the insider/outsider dilemma. Once identified, it will take the capacity to share these with compassion and empathy. Marriage expert John Gottman refers to using complaints as opposed to criticism. A complaint states the issue in non-adversarial language, with the goal of resolving it. On the other hand, a criticism attacks the person, uses provocative language, and seeks to be right and to win. Unfortunately, criticisms are utilized most often, with less than desirable results.

Second Challenge:

Children Struggle with Loss, Loyalty Issues and Too Much Change

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
Deut. 6:6-7

The initial loss of the intact family has been experienced as a volcanic upheaval, bringing deep grief and fears of abandonment in its wake. Furthermore, the new marriage is highly likely to bring guilty feelings that harboring liking – or even loving – feelings for the “replacement” parent is a betrayal of the “real,” biological parent (in reality or in memory if that parent is deceased).

-Maggie Scarf, The Remarriage Blueprint

Guidepost: *Our children were far more wounded than we imagined. When we realized this, we became more attentive to their situation and needs. They had no language for what they were feeling, so they acted out. Some closed down and withdrew, while others reacted with anger. Generally, children take at least a year longer than adults to adjust to change.*

Children function best in a stable, predictable environment. In terms of stepfamily life, more than anything, they want to know that certain things will happen (playing with friends, visiting the other parent) on a regular basis. They thrive in an atmosphere of consistency. Unfortunately, children experience more change and loss than anyone else in the family. For this reason, children take longer to adjust to divorce and remarriage. What this means is that long after a remarriage, children may still be struggling with the prior divorce. Commenting on the impact of divorce and remarriage on children, Judith Wallerstein writes, "From the viewpoint of children, and counter to what happens to their parents, divorce is a cumulative experience. Its impact increases over time and rises to a crescendo in adulthood. At each developmental stage, divorce is experienced in new and diverse ways. In adulthood, it affects personality, the ability to trust, expectations about relationships, and ability to cope with change" (*The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* p. 298).

Children struggle with a new marriage since it represents numerous losses and changes over which they have no control. This is in sharp contrast to the couple's experience of joy and excitement over a second chance to be happy. This difference is often a surprise to a parent who assumes the child will be as happy as they are. However, since the child is still deeply attached to the parent, remarriage signals a loss of that attachment and the need to adjust to a new system. Research suggests that an “empathy gap” often exists wherein children feel their parents are less in tune with their needs. Interestingly, most parents sense no such gap and feel very tuned in to their children.

A consequence of a child's struggle is the tendency to distance from or reject the stepparent. There is no attachment, nor does the stepparent feel like a safe person. This adds to the stepcouples insider/outsider divide. Since parent-child relationships predate the couple, parents typically feel pressured to choose between their new spouse and the perceived needs of their children. Successful stepcouples find ways to nurture both without placing undue pressure on the marriage. An important key to stepfamily success is the ability of the couple to be sensitive to the needs of the children without neglecting the couple relationship. “Children of divorce feel like divided selves. They

say: I had to be a different person with each of my parents. I had a whole different life with each one. There is only a certain set of memories I talk to my dad about and only a certain set I talk to my mom about.” (E. Marquardt, March 2006 *Christianity Today* Interview)

Loss

Children experience a multitude of losses over which they have no control. They lose regular daily contact with one parent. They often lose things that are very familiar such as their pets, home, church, neighborhood, or friends. When a parent remarries, children often fear losing that parent too. Many children hang on to the hope that their biological parents will re-unite; remarriage forces them to give up this dream.

Simultaneous to children dealing with loss and lack of control, adults are changing the basic structure of the family. These changes, while necessary to bridge different expectations, create more intense stress for children, resulting in a form of “culture shock.” Home in our culture is a very powerful image that suggests a place of safety and comfort, a place where one belongs. As adults make changes to “home,” children feel increasingly out of place. With greater changes, the sense of belonging and safety diminishes and leaves children feeling like outsiders in their own home. Older children tend to feel loss more strongly. They have set ideas about what their families should be like. Children with little or no contact with a biological parent may feel a greater loss than those who maintain contact with both parents. Biological parents and stepparents may feel frustrated if children react to a remarriage by withdrawing or by acting out, but it is best if parents give children time, understanding and patience.

We were far from ready for our journey and unprepared for all the instant challenges we would face. We didn't realize how much our children's adjustment issues would affect us. We were unaware that children are at least a year behind their parents in processing through a divorce.

During my (Judi) three years as a single parent, I was constantly aware of my grief over the loss of our family. All I had ever wanted was a healthy family, and I saw remarriage as my chance to recapture my dream. Even though the kids and I had time to process through the divorce, we were still in grief. I was not aware that moving my kids away from extended family and friends would have such an impact on them. In fact, my oldest son had opted to move back to Colorado with his dad several months after we'd moved to Tucson.

Some studies show that remarried couples experience more happiness and satisfaction than first-time couples. However, for children, becoming a stepfamily can launch a cascade of loss and change, particularly if the relationship has moved quickly. This is a critical issue for the new couple to appreciate and understand.

For children remarriage brings a dramatic shift in family roles, routines, and relationships. The new couple relationship represents a huge loss. Even under the best (divorce) circumstances, children are dealing with extreme losses and grieving (often with little help from parents). For some children, this loss is profound. They feel they have lost a parent, their lifestyle, social position (“child of a divorced family”) or a sense of stability and security. Parent-child relationships are most fragile early in a remarriage.

At a time when children need caring connection, parents are often unaware of a child's feelings, confused by their behavior, and at a loss about how to respond. The transition into a stepfamily is more challenging for children than divorce, partly because it compromises the parent-child relationship.

Loyalty Binds

"You're not my mother!" is what Judi often heard from my seventeen-year-old daughter. She was very rebellious and expressed no interest in being a part of our new family. We recognized, in hindsight, that she was struggling with feeling like she had been replaced. I did not prepare her adequately for the changes in her role. As a result, she had a tough time seeing our new family as anything positive. Unfortunately, she soon moved out of our home, a behavior that is rather common with adolescents.

Loyalty binds are a hallmark of stepfamilies. The most common is when a child feels pulled between two parents or between a parent and a stepparent. To say that such binds are excruciating to a child would be an understatement. A loyalty bind exists when an individual feels caught between two or more people to whom they are emotionally invested and who each want that person's attention or loyalty. At their core, loyalty binds are intensely personal. Conflicts occur when two people who hold different beliefs or priorities collide over some concept or activity, such as holidays, discipline, visitation, or quality time. Embedded in every bind, no matter how minor, is the underlying theme, "How important am I to you?" This need to know where we stand is sustained by the ambiguity of stepfamily relationships and the fear of more loss. There are few solid role definitions in stepfamilies, so no one is quite sure how he or she is supposed to behave.

"If I care for my stepmother, I have betrayed my mother." This statement alone easily explains a child's conflicted, aloof, or even "acrimonious" behavior toward an outsider stepparent. The entry of a stepparent creates both loss and a loyalty bind. A new stepcouple pulls a parent's attention away from their children. For many children, even attempting to connect with a stepparent feels like betraying their other parent. This is most common when a child has a particularly close relationship with the parent in the other household.

Children can become torn between warring parents, and when they do, they erupt in symptoms--like acting out, withdrawal, anxiety, or depression. The resulting behavior is often a desperate attempt to draw attention away from the unresolvable conflict between the parents. Whatever the source of divided loyalties, once children feel them, symptoms develop. Feeling caught in the middle is very frightening, especially when children are manipulated to declare loyalty. This "no-win" scenario is very stressful and harms the child's physical and emotional well-being. Children should be encouraged to freely love and respond to both parents without repercussions. Parents can help by placing the needs of the child above their own and by making an intentional commitment to love their children more than they dislike one another.

According to Patricia Papernow, loyalty binds seem to have a "genetic code." Even children from friendly divorces report feeling guilty or disloyal at the entry of a

stepparent. Parental conflict only tightens these binds unbearably. Binds increase the need for some children to distance themselves from their stepparent, adding yet another layer to the “insider/outsider dilemma. Children have no language to describe these binds, so adults must deduce their presence. If this becomes repetitive, a very unhealthy “dance” can occur. Children become more distant, so stepparents re-double their efforts only to be pushed away more firmly.

Key Issues Children Will Encounter

Besides change and loss, there are several characteristic areas of adjustment for children. Ironically, not only do children experience a lack of control over the things happening to them, but the people doing these “things” to them are the people they love and trust the most—their parents. They typically react to this dilemma with sadness, depression, or anger, and act out these feelings with negative behaviors such as, crying, running away, rebelling, regressing, breaking things, or failing school. To combat this effect, they need normalcy and constancy and certainty of access to both parents. Parents can help by providing one-on-one time, listening without judging and providing details about future changes well in advance.

A child’s characteristic responses to stepfamily adjustment are summarized below. These patterns represent common reactions and can be very resistant to change. These patterns are acted out, not verbalized, or expressed directly.

Trust Issues: Children’s lack of trust will manifest itself in several ways. They will fear being abandoned; they will have difficulty bonding or building new relationships, and they will present very low confidence and esteem.

Grief Issues: Children will be overly anxious, display unfocused and displaced anger, as well as extreme sadness and depression.

Change Issues: Children will have difficulty tolerating changes or being willing to be held accountable. They will demonstrate a lack of connectedness and be more likely to suffer health problems as well as personality and conduct disorders.

Disconnected Thought Patterns: Safety is a big issue—these children do not feel safe. They experience a continual feeling of confusion. They may become attached and hypervigilant about their “stuff.” Hoarding and other compulsive behaviors may occur. These children learn by doing rather than by observing others. They have difficulty with cause-and-effect reasoning.

These patterns are not learned in the traditional sense; rather they come from the traumatic experiences of the child and the resultant view of the world. The most fundamental thought may be, “I am all alone in the world. Because I’m not certain who will always be there to take care of me, I’ll take care of myself.” *Jeff asked a five-year-old boy whose parents had divorced to draw a picture of his family. After a moment's thought, he said, "I have a small family. In fact, I'm the only one in it. So, I'll draw a picture of myself."*

All the ways of thinking and behaving that seem so strange to adult observers make sense when seen through the eyes of a child. The child develops a value system centered

on the need to take care of him or herself. Thus, lying, cheating, stealing, manipulation and all the other behaviors grow out of that value system. Long after remarriage, many children feel as if they are still on their own.

Additionally, many children feel trapped by their feelings of love and identification with the absent biological parent and the growing, yet confusing attachment to the stepparent. The absent father may add to this distress by encouraging negative feelings toward the stepparent. Children may harbor resentment against the absent parent for abandoning or not visiting them, or the most common, breaking promises. They may also show hostility toward the stepparent as a defense mechanism against feelings of betrayal. Further, more children must endure a barrage of negative comments made against the absent parent. This barrage deeply wounds the child, who still identifies with and idealizes the lost parent

Joseph was 6 years old. His mom often missed scheduled visits, typically with no phone call. His dad and stepmom reported that for several days after an incident, Joseph would soil his pants.

Billy, age seven, would fantasize about imagined outings with his dad, who seldom actually showed up for visits.

Success Steps: There are several ways to help a child adjust. Let children know what will stay the same and what will change. Let them know that you understand how upsetting it is to have so many changes, about which they have no say, going on in their lives. At the same time, teach them how to control the behavior they are displaying. Feelings and behavior are two separate things, and it is the behavior, not the feelings, which must be controlled. Help them find nondestructive ways to express the physical and emotional energy caused by angry feelings. Be patient. Give them reassurance, time to talk and straight answers to their questions. Since children live by feelings, not words, be sensitive to subtleties in expression. Help them explore their feelings without influencing them.

Plan regular time alone with your child, reliable one-on-one, not multitasking time. This is a bond that stepparents cannot share. Make good use of “in-between” times, before or after an event, down time, or a day off from school. Children need to hear things like, “I know this has been a tough ride for you. I know it is not your favorite thing to have a new stepfather.” “I am betting all these changes are hard. Tell me more.” “It does change things when I am with (new partner) on the weekends. Say some more about what that is like for you.” An empathic connection with a parent helps children feel less alone. Adults need to help children (and each other) ride each wave of feeling until it comes to a soft place. Deeply listening, without defensiveness, to your children’s upset about your divorce and/or remarriage can be challenging. Pay attention to your emotional responses so you do not shame or blame your child.

Have a loyalty bind talk. Let your child know that lots of kids feel confused when they have a parent and a stepparent. Be clear with your child that stepparents do not replace parents. Answer questions and frame new relationships.

Stepparent and child also need time to get to know each other, without the parent being present. Idea: Engage in side-by-side activities, such as baking, making lunch, or working in the yard, things that are less intense than sitting face-to-face together. Stepparents can teach stepkids new skills. When trying to bond with stepkids, create rituals that are new and different. Stepparents also can have this talk by reiterating that they are not trying to replace the parent. When trying to bond with stepkids, create rituals that are new and different, such a special place or time. Ideas might include a favorite restaurant or park or perhaps meeting for lunch at school every other week. Any activity a child enjoys can represent an opportunity to bond.

Make changes gradually and involve the children in the process as much as possible after giving them plenty of advanced notice before changes are implemented. Children should never be punished for not being excited about changes in the family. They are most likely still grieving and adjusting to changes over which they have no control. Family changes are overwhelming for most children, so they need ample time and space to adjust. Do not assume children are fine because they are not acting out. Ask them and be a good observer. Age appropriately, give children as many choices as possible, and involve them in planning activities. These opportunities can help them feel they have control, which often decreases uncooperativeness, acting out and depression.

Be aware that time together as a family can be stressful. If family time is tense, keep it short.

Do not demean the other parent's living situation or personal choices. Do not let them manipulate you or play one parent against the other.

Keep life simple and predictable. Keep your promises. Pray with your children. Be a strong role model of love, acceptance, and forgiveness. Be strong, supportive, and confident while modeling a Godly servant-leader spirit.

Children need to see Christ's love modeled. Ways of relating, discipline, and the manner in which stressful situations are managed provide valuable *life lessons* to a child. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses gives important instructions from God. He admonishes the Israelites to bury God's Word deep inside them and then teach it to their children. The purpose was to keep the Word alive from generation to generation. The language of verses 6 and 7 suggest that in everyday life, standing, sitting, walking, etc., parents are to impress upon their children the vital truths of God's word. Children need to see God at work in everyday life, including frustrating phone calls from a former spouse or gut-wrenching conflicts with a current spouse.

In *Parenting From the Inside*, Dan Siegel has developed an approach called PLACE, emphasizing two key elements, empathy, and presence. PLACE stands for Playful, Loving, Accepting, Curious and Empathic. It helps children "feel safe" and allows a parent to hear their story.

For more information about the impact of divorce and remarriage on children, please refer to InStep's workbook, *Through a Child's Eyes*.

Third Challenge: Polarized Parenting

Children, do what your parents tell you. This is only right. "Honor your father and mother" is the first commandment that has a promise attached to it, namely, "so you will live well and have a long life." Fathers do not exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master. Ephesians 6:1-4 MSG

Stepfamilies need time to adjust to new parenting styles. Some parents rule with an iron fist, others with a cashmere glove.

-Gil & Brenda Stuart, Restored & Remarried

Guidepost: *We discovered that our parenting styles were different, and it took several years to iron this out. During that time, we learned to be patient and respectful of one another and not make the other wrong. Respect is very important.*

One of the most difficult aspects of stepfamily life is parenting. Stepfamily structure tends to pull the stepcouple to opposite parenting styles. Since every household has its own rules, and every parent has his or her own way of disciplining children, seemingly insignificant things like sugary cereals can become points of contention. Parenting issues are further complicated by certain stepfamily realities. For one, couples often feel torn between the demands of their children and the needs of their partner. Another is that stepfamilies often feature the merging of children at very different developmental levels. Young children, for example, may feel a sense of abandonment or competition as their parent devotes more time and energy to the new spouse. Adolescents often prefer to separate from the family as they form their own identities. They are at a developmental stage where they are more sensitive to expressions of affection and sexuality and may be disturbed by an active romance in their family. Younger adolescents (age 10-14) who are beginning the individuation process seem to have the most challenging time adjusting to a stepfamily. Older adolescents (age 15 and older) need less parenting and have less investment in the family, while younger children (under age 10) are usually more accepting of a new adult, particularly when the adult is a positive influence.

It is impossible to talk about parenting in a stepfamily without eventually coming to the heart of the matter, discipline. Discipline is a sticky point, primarily because stepcouples have very different parenting styles as well as vastly different perspectives of the children. These unique styles and perspectives yield some characteristic scenarios. The **most common** scenario is the stepparent feeling the parent is too easy and the parent feeling the stepparent is too harsh. In many ways, this is a classic triangle, with the parent feeling in the middle between his or her spouse and child. Parents often feel pressured to change their discipline style or defend the behavior of their child. Stepparents want to be acknowledged for their observations and may feel angry if their spouse does not respond favorably. Children may feel they are the cause of fighting and become anxious, fearful, or angry. Each party feels resentful if the parent chooses the other.

When Judi tried to point out some areas where my children were struggling, I immediately became defensive, thinking she was attacking them and maligning my parenting skills. We had to learn to trust each other and believe that we wanted the best for our children. We also had to

blend our very different parenting styles. Respect for each other and for the way we parented was the foundation. Only then could we begin to dialogue about how to effectively parent our children together. It took some time before we could talk as a team and focus on the well-being of our children.

Over thirty years ago, Diana Baumrind and her colleagues began researching primary styles of parenting. Her parenting styles were based on two important aspects of parenting, "Parental Responsiveness", the degree to which a parent responds to the child's needs, and "Parental Demandingness", the extent to which the parent expects more mature and responsible behavior from a child. Using these two dimensions, four distinct parenting styles emerged: The authoritarian parenting style characterized by high demandingness with low responsiveness; the permissive parenting style characterized by low demandingness with high responsiveness; the uninvolved or disengaged style characterized by few demands, low responsiveness and little communication, and the authoritative parenting style characterized by high demandingness with huge responsiveness. Baumrind clearly favored the latter style.

The **authoritarian parent** is rigid, harsh, and demanding. Abusive parents typically fall in this category. This parent attempts to shape and control the behavior and attitudes of the child. They value obedience as a virtue and favor punitive, forceful measures to curb self-will when the child's actions or beliefs conflict with what parent thinks is right conduct. They believe in keeping children "in their place," restricting autonomy, and assigning household tasks in order to instill respect for work. They regard preservation of order and traditional structure as a highly valued end in itself. They seldom encourage verbal give and take, believing the child should accept her word for what is right. This style leads to children who are obedient and proficient, but rank lower in happiness, social competence, and self-esteem.

The **permissive parent** is overly responsive to the child's demands, seldom enforcing consistent rules. They behave in a non-punitive, accepting, and affirmative manner towards the child's behavior. Parenting decisions are often made after consulting with the child. These parents make few demands for household responsibility and orderly behavior. They present themselves as resource for child to use as he or she wishes, neither as ideal to emulate, nor as an active agent responsible for shaping or altering behavior. They allow the child to regulate own activities as much as possible and seldom encourage the child to obey externally defined standards. This type of parenting often results in children who rank low in happiness and self-regulation. These children are more likely to experience problems with authority and tend to perform poorly in school.

The **authoritative parent** is firm but not rigid, willing to make an exception when the situation warrants. They are responsive to the child's needs but not indulgent. They attempt to direct the child's activities but in a rational, issue-oriented manner. They encourage verbal give and take and share the reasoning behind a policy with the child. They solicit objections when child refuses to conform and exert firm control at points of parent-child divergence in ways that do not hem the child in with restrictions. They enforce their own perspective as an adult but recognize the child's individual interests and special ways. They affirm the child's present qualities but also set standards for

future conduct. They do not base decisions on group consensus or the individual child's desires. They seldom regard themselves as infallible. This approach tends to result in children who are happy, capable, and successful.

The **uninvolved parent** makes few to no demands of their children and they are often indifferent, dismissive, or even completely neglectful. While these parents fulfill the child's basic needs, they are generally detached from their child's life. In extreme cases, these parents may even reject or neglect the needs of their children. These parents are emotionally distant from their children and provide little warmth or discipline. These parents rarely attend school events and parent-teacher conferences, often because they are too overwhelmed by their own problems to deal with their children. They typically operate at extremely low levels of arousal, likely due to depression, or some other debilitating disease or habit. Children in this scenario are often left alone and on their own, so they must learn how to fend for themselves. They rate lower on many emotional-social-behavioral indices.

Stepfamily structure easily pulls stepparents toward a more authoritarian parenting style and pushes parents toward more permissiveness. Stepparents tend toward the "Boss" parent, while parents tend toward the "Pal" parent. Neither style serves children's needs, nor often leads to increased distancing of the couple.

Again, the structure of the stepfamily plays a huge role. In this case parents and stepparents come to child issues from very different perspectives. The parent has insider knowledge, long history, and strong attachment to the child. Behavior is contextualized and responded to based on this intimate knowledge. The stepparent has virtually no attachment to the child and little knowledge, context, or heart connection. The vast difference in point of view between the parent and stepparent invariably leads to conflict over not only how to respond to a certain behavior, but the meaning of that behavior. Stepfamilies are replete with attribution errors and assign motives (often incorrectly) to a child's behavior. Because of low stepparent-stepchild attachment and the presence of the insider-outsider phenomenon, parents and stepparents can wage endless war over the "intended" meaning of a child's behavior and how to respond to it. Interestingly, both feel their view is the most accurate and objective.

This is common dynamic: the parent feels personally attacked and maligned as a parent and also feels his or her children are being unjustly attacked. *She just doesn't understand what my children have been through. If he had children of his own, he would see that these behaviors are normal.* The stepparent, on the other hand, is trying to find a position in the family and establish the new family as different from the last. To do so, a stepparent may insist on certain rules and discipline changes. If the parent "buys in" to this, the stepparent feels important and valued, while the children may feel betrayed or confused. If the parent does not, the stepparent may feel rejected, angry, hurt, and unaccepted.

This dynamic puts tremendous strain on the family, since change is so difficult, and the mini-family already has well-established rules. The risk is that the family will become polarized between insiders (biologically connected) and outsiders (not biologically

connected). As counter-intuitive as it might seem, the reality is that this process must occur if the family is to succeed. As trust builds, the capacity to function as a team also builds. The parent must allow the stepparent to influence his or her discipline regimen, believing the stepparent truly cares for the children. The stepparent must move from outsider to insider and believe he or she has a real voice in the new family.

What is needed is an appreciation of how stepfamily structure creates this problem and a willingness to consider the other's position fairly. Stepparents need empathy and understanding from their partner. They want more structure and clearer boundaries. They perceive the parent to be too permissive and inconsistent. Parents want children to be loved and supported. They are often alarmed by the stepparents seeming lack of sensitivity toward their child and a perceived rush to mete out punishment.

Successful stepcouples treat differences as items to calmly explore and be curious about. Stuck couples argue over "right" and "wrong." Consequently, differences are seldom resolved. Successful couples dialogue and collaborate to support the parent's authoritative (loving and firm) parenting. For some period of time, the parent retains the disciplinary role while the stepparent concentrates on getting to know the stepchildren. In that time period, the stepparent role is akin to an uncle or monitor, present and involved but not the disciplinarian. When things go poorly, couples get caught up in increasingly entrenched cycles of polarization as stepparents seek firmer boundaries and a greater role in discipline, and parents strive to protect their children.

Families work best when the parent remains the disciplinarian and adopts an authoritative parenting style. When the parent is absent, the stepparent enforces "rules of the house" set primarily by the parent. If a child says, *"You're not my Dad"* the stepparent responds with, *"You are right, you have a dad." I am the adult in charge tonight. We both know your mom's rules."* Until stepparents can take on more parenting responsibilities, they can monitor the children's behavior and activities and keep the parent informed. Over time, stepparents can move into authoritative parenting.

Because parenting is a sensitive subject, it is important to raise issues privately and with sensitivity and care. It is also important that the child is never present during conflict. If conflict does arise, a "soft, hard, soft" approach (from John Gottman) is the best when bringing up parenting issues. This approach can eliminate criticizing, blaming, and labeling. Start the conversation without criticism or contempt. Be clear, polite, and non-judgmental. Say something caring such as "I know your kids aren't used to this, and they're doing their best." Then, say the hard thing but with the same soft energy, followed by another "soft" comment.

Successful parenting exists in a healthy environment that includes Christ-centered values, stability, forgiveness, personal boundaries, respect for privacy, clear rules and roles, fairness, acceptance of differences and social support. The keys to effective stepfamily parenting are patience, tolerance, and focus. Effective parenting stays focused on the task—raising healthy, Godly children, even if the environment is, at times, chaotic. The couple must remain flexible and tolerant to succeed, especially in the first few years, when tension and chaos are particularly intense.

Success Step: Keep the ratio of positive to negative interactions with children at 5-1; that is the optimal level John Gottman recommends for keeping a relationship healthy. Keep life as simple and predictable as possible. Become authoritative parents. Finally, be a strong role model of love, grace, acceptance, and forgiveness. The purpose of discipline is to build Godly character (Proverbs 3:11-12).

Parenting at any level is tough. Marriage often brings two parents with different values, styles, personalities, sensitivities, quirks, and preferences together. The difference? In stepfamilies, there is little (no) time to work out those differences. The children are there now, and some are not ready to be parented. They are angry, hurt, grieving, suspicious or apathetic.

In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of happy family life, leading to more positive parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed. Establishing some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren and resolving their conflicts may be the key to a happy second marriage and to successful functioning in stepfamilies.

-Hetherington and Kelly, *For Better or for Worse*

Fourth Challenge:

Former Spouses are Part of the Family

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them! Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst, our Father is kind; you be kind. Luke 6:27-28, 31, 35-36 MSG

Much of your personal readiness for marriage depends on the state of your relationship with your former spouse, whether they are deceased, or you are divorced. What lessons from your first marriage will you bring into your second marriage? Is there unresolved pain in relation to your first spouse that you still need to work through? The point is that before reentering marriage, you need to carefully examine the baggage you are bringing with you.

-Les and Leslie Parrott, Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts

Guidepost: *There are no ex-parents, only ex-spouses.*

Former spouses are a symbol of stepfamilies. They can affect everything from vacations and holidays to mood changes after a tense call, to whether a child's graduation is a celebration or a nightmare. This is true even if they are deceased. Learning to deal with them in an effective, Godly manner is critical to success. Individuals marry unfinished business from their last relationship. This "unfinished business" manifests itself in several ways. Many still have anger or resentment toward a former spouse that can translate into vindictiveness, judgmentalism and a critical spirit. Unfaithfulness, for example, on the part of a former spouse, can lead to extreme insecurity and hypervigilance. Feelings of rejection can become shame, codependency, or a need for approval.

Some individuals cannot disconnect from a former spouse because they still want to be needed or vindicated. Some marry individuals who are the "exact opposite" of their former spouse (as if that is possible) hoping for a better outcome. Others have not let go of the memory of a deceased spouse. The reality is that former spouses exist (even in memory), and they will play a role in the stepfamily. Therefore, a civil relationship between adults' benefits everyone. Children do best when they have access to all "parenting" adults and when relationships with all parents are well defined. When managed well, children feel centered and safe in relationships with all the important people in their lives. When managed poorly, children are caught in the middle of adult tension and conflict, with devastating results. Whether dead or alive, good, or bad, ex-spouses are part of the family.

Judi and I committed to maintaining a good relationship with our former spouses; we felt it was the best gift we could give our children. It certainly was not easy; we were far from perfect. However, today we can truly say that we have come to respect our former spouses and to accept them as they are. We have celebrated births and birthdays, weddings, and graduations together. Our advice is to hammer out the best relationship possible and then work hard to maintain it.

Research tells us that the most stressful issue for children is not divorce; it is the conflict between parents. Hyperarousal, from prolonged ongoing conflict, compromises a child's ability to regulate their own arousal systems. Conflict is the number one predictor of negative post-divorce outcomes for children. Even tense, quiet conversations between ex-spouses affect kids profoundly. Research shows that moderate tension increases kids' cortisol levels and affects sleep, attention, and school functioning. Other direct effects include lower levels of self-esteem, lower academic achievement, diminished social and cognitive competency, poorer relational skills, and lower levels of well-being.

Relating to a Former Spouse Well

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Col. 3:12-14 MSG.

Finding a way to have a positive relationship with your former spouse is one of the best gifts you can give your children. We made this a priority. Let go of your pride (anger, bitterness, etc.); your kids will be blessed.

Next to the new couple relationship, the stability of the stepfamily hinges on the couples' relationships to their former spouses. Since people divorce each other and not their children, former spouses will nearly always be a part of the stepfamily's relationship network. A former spouse, unless deceased or intentionally out of the picture, will always be someone with whom the spouse and children will continue to interact. Making peace with this reality is a critical first step since a former spouse will probably not go away. Next, it is essential to create a collaborative co-parenting relationship. This allows all parents to work together for the best interests of the child. This relationship includes workable rules to protect children from unnecessary tension and conflict. These workable rules cover things such as respecting each other, keeping children out of the middle, and allowing parents to form their own relationship with the child, without attempting to interfere or control. There are few one-to-one correlations in psychology, but one is that an attack on a parent is perceived by the child as an attack on them.

Honor your current spouse; talk over everything together. Be clear about expectations. Resolve any emotional ties with your former spouse. Respect your current spouse's wishes in terms of interactions with your former spouse. Never make secret contacts. Keep contacts focused on the welfare of the children. Finally, maintain your boundaries.

Tips for Communicating and Interacting Effectively With Your Former Spouse

Keep the topic of conversation on the children. Try to remember that, as far as the children are concerned, you are all on the same team. Work toward cooperation and mutual respect.

Communicate that you function as a team with your current spouse. Do not respond to unreasonable demands. Learn the gentle art of saying, "Let me get back to you on that."

Be clear about your boundaries, what you will or will not do. If you find it difficult to talk to a former spouse, try writing letters or emails, or find a neutral party to exchange information. Use “I” statements rather than “you” statements. Never relay messages through children. Keep your word; “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” Share information in a forthright manner, and do not withhold information out of spite. If there is a significant event, inform your former spouse. Do not expect the other parent to meet your expectations for your children. Never say negative things about your former spouse in front of your children, no matter what your former spouse says or does. If your former spouse is unreliable, have a backup plan. Keep a journal and write down all your feelings. Do not give up. “Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:21

Stepping Stone: God’s view of relationships with former spouses

As much as it is up to you, attempt to be on a friendly, cordial basis with your former spouse (I John 2:7-9, 3:11-24; Romans 12:9-21; I Cor. 7:15; Eph. 4: 1-3, 25-32; Phil. 2:3-5; James 3:13-16). Forgive and let go of the past. Solve problems openly and honestly. Have firm boundaries. Make requests. Clarify issues. Keep each other informed. Seek mediation from a pastor or counselor if communication breaks down. Keep the welfare of your children at the forefront of any interaction. You can respect your former spouse without violating your boundaries or dishonoring your current spouse. Anger, contempt, disdain, and disrespect are not necessary to keep a boundary between you and your former spouse. Keep your current spouse informed of all contacts and interactions. Keep your word and honor your obligations.

Don’t talk about the shortcomings of the other mom or dad. Rather, point out in a positive way because you parent differently than they does. Not that she or he is doing it wrong, but what you hope to teach them even though you don’t agree with them.

-Lynn Peterson

Fifth Challenge

Creating a New Stepfamily Culture

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 ESV

God wants your stepfamily to be a supportive unit that nourishes and encourages every individual member. He is willing to lead you in making that become a reality. Even the journey toward that end is exciting when we acknowledge that God is in control. Relax in that confidence. God is with you. You are not alone.

-Richard Dunn, New Faces in the Frame

Guidepost: *Change happens, a lot. Be prepared and be flexible.*

New stepfamilies encounter a multitude of differences over everything from bedtimes, cereals, screen time to the cost of tennis shoes. Both research and clinical experience suggest that surviving well with the onslaught of differences while moving to a sense of family represents the major challenge for stepfamilies. In *Stepfamily Therapy*, Scott Browning suggests that a big challenge for stepfamilies is adjusting to a vast number of transitions. He observed that some individuals do not seem to possess the emotional ability to manage the stress of constant change.

Herein lies the challenge, how does a group of loosely connected people, now drawn together under the umbrella called “stepfamily” even begin to create a workable, unified culture out of the chaos created by vast differences and emotionally traumatized individuals? Simple answer, slowly and carefully.

Adults enter new relationships looking for “home” and a place to belong. They are hoping for a better life, filled with whatever was missing or lost, things like love security, appreciation, stability, fidelity, or safety. Unfortunately, for many, the new family feels like anything but home or better. “It seemed so promising in the beginning, everyone seemed to be getting along so well,” is a common phrase we have heard from couples feeling stuck. What seemed so possible in the beginning now feels mired in the vast differences between mini-family cultures.

Navigating differences can be difficult and feel less like blending and more like living with a family from a foreign country. A common characteristic of stepfamilies is diversity, more so than any other family form. Differences can be as small as how a person organizes silverware or the choice of music they enjoy, and as large as diverse cultures or faiths. Successful stepfamilies engage differences with respect and curiosity while moving a step at a time toward a sense of “we-ness.” There is a pervasive desire on the part of family members to become aware of each other’s experience. The formula is to think “shifting” as opposed to blending. Small shifts, fostered by safety and non-judgmental listening, provide openings for family members to begin verbalizing their experiences and understanding the experiences of others. In many ways it is like learning a new language. Family ultimately becomes a tapestry of various stories and traditions. Individuals in stuck families are unable to get past differences, unwilling to trust one another and exert little effort to understand the experience of another. Instead,

they try to force a new set of rules for everyone to follow, or they attempt to co-exist in separate mini-families. Both methods often fail.

Adults and children often suffer severe shame and embarrassment over being a stepfamily, as if it means they are not in a real family. Some become “closet stepfamilies,” choosing to hide who they are. Sharing that they are part of a stepfamily reminds them of their own sense of failure. Peter Gerlach (*Stepfamily inFormation* website) likens admitting you are in a stepfamily to wearing a neon sign that says, “I am really messed up and my kids are too. I could not make it in a real family.” It may be helpful to know that God is not ashamed of stepfamilies. The lineage of Christ runs through many stepfamilies, including the one in which Jesus himself grew up.

Many family members bring hopes, dreams and expectations to their marriages that are unfulfilled. They can become discouraged, angry, disappointed, or deeply hurt. Developing a strong sense of identity takes time and energy, but it is also tremendously healing. The presence of intense emotions can make this task seem overwhelming. Members must process through immense grief and loss and learn how to contribute to the family’s identity. Some family members will resist this process; their level of pain may be too high to work through the layers of personal and relational issues. They should be allowed to process at their own pace and be loved and accepted where they are. The couple must lead in this endeavor. Other family members will take their cue from them. Children, for example, who are far more sensitive than adults, will sense and internalize the feelings of the adult leaders, such as shame, ambivalence, and avoidance or courage, determination, family pride, restoration, and commitment.

Success Steps: Successful stepfamilies are able to experiment with various methods for creating a unified identity. They realistically expect differences and are not afraid to make mistakes along the way. One thing they do well is to leave familiar routines and traditions in place, avoiding needless changes. They are adept at negotiating notable events to be sure everyone is honored. Instead of quickly making new rules to force togetherness, they develop new rules slowly, taking everyone’s needs into account.

The good news is that many stepfamilies are not just surviving but thriving. God is a God of second chances and there are no second-class people or families in God’s kingdom. All must take the same path to God, the path of brokenness, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and restoration.

Stepping Stone: Children desperately need to see authentic adults who have failed or have experienced deep loss that are working through their brokenness and being restored. The real story of stepfamilies is the story of Peter, Jonah, David or Jacob, individuals who were broken and restored. Pray for courage and God’s leadership. Commit your family to Him. Making a stepfamily work is about servanthood and mutual submission (Eph. 5:21). God wants to heal and strengthen your family and help it to grow and reflect His character. Ultimately, He wants you to discover your family mission and to impact your culture for Christ. God is truly a God of second chances. Read Jonah 3:1; Hosea 3:1; Rev. 12:10; Proverbs 14:12; I John 2:1; I Cor. 6:9-11; II Tim. 2:21.

Success Principle #4

Develop a Healthy Couple Relationship

The man who finds a wife finds a good thing; she is blessing to him from the Lord. Proverbs 18:22

In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of a happy family life, leading to more positive parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed.

-E. Mavis Hetherington, Divorce Reconsidered: For Better or For Worse

Every family, including the stepfamily, is founded on the marital relationship. Yet the complexity of stepfamily life makes nurturing the marital relationship a tremendous challenge.

-Ron Deal, The Smart Stepfamily

Guidepost: *It took us a while to become a team. We were so different, and there were so many issues to resolve. We discovered that working as a team and fighting for quality time together had to become a priority. You can never know enough about your own feelings, values, beliefs, and expectations or those of your partner. Marriage is a perpetual test of character.*

Stepcouples face stresses that first-time couples do not: instant family, financial strain due to supporting two or more households, custody and legal issues, and parents outside the home. Value conflicts and different parenting styles turn up the heat. The eventual success of the new family hinges on the quality and strength of the stepcouple's relationship. And the success of the stepcouple hinges on their capacity to put each other first and to nurture their relationship as they care for their children. To do this, they must be willing to grapple with personal and family issues as they find a balance between the needs of the marriage and the needs of the children. Few understand at the outset how complex and demanding this will be.

In the beginning, Jeff and I and our children reeled from the effects of divorce. Looking back, the only reason we made it through the early part of our stepfamily was because we were determined to not go through another divorce. We had lots of problems. All of us were in pain. We had to learn how to talk to each other, love each other, and stay together even when things got tough, especially when things got tough. I wish we could say that happened quickly, but it did not. It took years to build enough trust and relational equity to become sources of nurturing to one another.

Creating a healthy stepfamily is like building a house. The stepcouple forms the foundation. If the relationship between partners is strong, the house makes it through the storms undamaged. If there are cracks in the foundation, the whole structure is in danger of collapse. The stepcouple must find ways to strengthen that foundation on a daily basis. Each must commit to the importance of "us" by setting aside regular time for sharing, solving conflict, laughing, and dreaming. Special times are important but are not a substitute daily connection. Simple moments can renew and strengthen the love that first drew a couple together.

The Challenge

The combination of woundedness, personality differences, and almost zero ability to function as a team was like the perfect storm. We were so tuned-in to our own and our children's pain that we could not nurture one another. Our marriage was not a safe place. I did not trust Jeff

or feel protected, and therefore, it was really hard for me to interact positively with his kids. We were like many stepfamilies; we functioned as separate mini-families. I couldn't protect Judi because I kept personalizing how I perceived she was treating my kids, which set up instant triangulation. I was so triggered by my children's struggles that I could not separate out their needs and hers. I didn't get why Judi didn't see everything my way. We had completely different world views. Even though I grew up in a stepfamily, it was extremely dysfunctional; so, I assumed I could do it differently. Boy, was I in for a surprise. Ultimately, we did do it differently; we found a way to create a safe place to nurture each other.

The most important, *yet most neglected*, relationship in a stepfamily is the marital relationship. This is true because parent-child relationships predate the marriage and put tremendous pressure on the couple. Ironically, the reasons couples marry—companionship, closeness, shared dreams—soon fade into the background as other family issues surge to the forefront. There are numerous sources of stress the couple will encounter; these include merging rules and roles, negotiating stepparent-stepchild relationships, visitation issues, behaviors of the noncustodial parent (such as broken promises or late arrivals) and competition between current and former spouses. The stress inherent in these challenges can leave a stepcouple feeling overwhelmed and disenchanting. The reality is that these issues can be resolved, but not immediately.

Finding time to build a great relationship is the real challenge facing a couple. The reality is that the marriage is in jeopardy almost instantly. Ask the average stepcouple about quality time, and you will hear about managing visitation schedules, differences in child-rearing philosophies and handling stepsibling disputes. Couples can spend a great deal of time putting out fires. Too many fires or too much intensity and the couple relationship will become strained or neglected, and the vital role of refreshing and sustaining one another will be damaged. Yet it is critical for a couple to build a relationship that works—one that is mutually satisfying. Why? The survival of a stepfamily hinges on the strength of the marriage, and children desperately need to see a marriage that works.

Some couples are not adept at nurturing relationships. Trauma and wounds from previous relationships can render them incapable of even receiving nurturing. Some simply cannot balance the needs of the marriage with those of their children. Watching their children struggle triggers strong emotional responses that can make them oblivious to the needs of a partner. Stresses such as tight budgets, parenting obligations, visitation, and former spouses, can distract a couple from paying attention to each other. Daily concerns such as the demands of children, careers, aging parents, and household responsibilities, also compete for time.

Regardless of distraction, nurturing the couple relationship *must* come first. It is the most effective way to ensure the health and survival of the stepfamily. Successful stepcouples strike a balance among caring for their individual needs, their relationship, and the requirements of the whole family. Marital satisfaction determines stepfamily stability. If satisfaction is high, tolerance for the normal conflicts of stepfamily life is also high. If satisfaction is low, tolerance and flexibility may be so low that divorce occurs. It is critical that the couple devote time to building their relationship. While this may seem

obvious, in our experience few couples spend any real quality time together in the first two or three years. In *How to Win as a Stepfamily*, Visher and Visher share some reasons for this: "Parent-child relationships have preceded the new couple relationship. Because of this, many parents feel that it is a betrayal of the earlier parent-child bond to form a primary relationship with their new partner. A primary couple relationship, however, is usually crucial for the continuing existence of the stepfamily. A strong adult bond can protect the children from another family loss, and it also can provide the children with a positive role model for their own eventual marriage relationship. The adults often need to arrange time alone to help nourish this important couple relationship" (p. 77).

Finding a healthy role for the stepparent is another important stepcouple task. The stepparent-stepchild relationship is tentative and fragile and a key determinant in stepfamily success. The importance of finding an effective role underlies a key difference between first-time families and stepfamilies. In first-time families, a troubled child has relatively little impact on a marriage, but a troubled marriage greatly affects the child. In a stepfamily, the marriage has little effect because children have limited emotional investment in their parent's marriage. However, the child's emotional state has an enormous impact on the emotional wellbeing of the stepcouple. This is because eventually the child's behavior will divide the stepparent, who is increasingly verbal and critical, and the parent, who is defensive and increasingly annoyed with the stepparent's criticism of his or her child. This potential rift between parent and stepparent can easily sabotage the marriage. Both partners begin to feel misunderstood, threatened, and unsupported by the other. Since the majority of couples spend little time thinking through the stepparent role, they are guided by pre-existing unrealistic expectations. Both experience shock when they realize the other does not share their views. Resolving this issue well will determine the quality the marriage and family. The couple must determine the role the stepparent will play and when and how this role will be implemented. What makes this difficult is that couples normally do not deal with this topic until they are in crisis – not the best time to solve problems.

Managing Conflict

Dealing with conflict is another important couple task. Nationally known stepfamily expert Judith Wallerstein writes, "*A conflict-free marriage is an oxymoron. You have to face the issue squarely, contain the anger and the disappointment that follows, and solve it peaceably to maintain the marriage. And you have to face the fact that this or another conflict will reappear*" (*The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, p. 55). Successful couples learn how to manage conflict well. Left unresolved, conflict can erupt into arguing, blaming and gridlock. Signs of gridlock include feeling rejected by a partner, emotional disengagement and the realization that talking about the issue just makes it worse.

Conflict happens. We learned to respect each other's "way" of doing conflict, but not at first. It takes time to understand your partner and it takes love and grace to not use what you know about them to win.

To manage conflict well, an atmosphere of trust, acceptance and safety must be developed. The great paradox of relationships is that true acceptance is the most fertile environment for change. Acceptance leads to growth. This flies against our beliefs. Vast

amounts of energy can be expended trying to change a spouse, usually to no avail. Before you ask partner to change, they must feel understood and accepted, or else they will resist, and gridlock will occur.

Managing conflict well begins with understanding that the majority of issues that create conflict are unresolvable. Successful couples deal with solvable conflicts and offer grace, acceptance and understanding for those not readily solvable. They do this by not focusing on right or wrong and by building positive affect, particularly during times of conflict. John Gottman offers a five-step model to resolving conflict.

First, soften the startup. This means starting a conversation without criticism or contempt because when these toxic elements are present, arguments become gridlocked, with no movement or resolution. Soft start-ups are characterized by the use of complaints or requests instead of blame or criticism. They feature “I” as opposed to “you” statements. Soft start-ups describe what is happening without evaluation or judgment. They are clear, polite, and appreciative.

Next, learn to make and receive “repair attempts.” A repair is any action or statement that deescalates tension. Repairs work best when the statements used are positive versus tension inducing. Phrases to avoid include, “You always...” or “You never...” and “There you go again.” Below are examples of positive statements.

“I feel” (I am feeling sad, scared, unappreciated or defensive.)

“I need to calm down” (Can you make things safe for me, I need your support right now, tell me you love me)

“Sorry” (I really blew it; I can see my part in this)

“Get to yes” (Let’s compromise, your point of view makes sense)

“Stop action” (I might be wrong here, please stop; I am feeling flooded)

“I appreciate” (I see your point, I understand, thank you for...)

Next, soothe yourself and then your partner. When becoming heated (flooded) during a conversation, let your partner know that you are overwhelmed and need to take a 20-minute break (research has found that is about how long it takes to recover from hyperarousal). Try closing your eyes, taking slow, deep breaths, relaxing your muscles, and visualizing a calm place. After you have calmed down, help soothe your partner. Ask each other what is most comforting and use that to self-soothe. Research has found that men have a much harder time calming down.

To minimize flooding and gridlock, Gottman suggests that couples have “flooding conversations” to help each better understand the others. Potential questions include, “What makes you feel flooded?” “How could I bring up tough issues better?” “Do I store up things?” “What can I do to soothe you?” and “What signals can we use?”

Gottman’s fourth step is compromise. The steps above done well will prime couples for compromise because they create positivity. When conflicts arise, it is important to find common ground by taking your partner’s thoughts and feelings into consideration. An exercise that can be helpful here is called “two circles.” Each person draws two circles, a

smaller one inside a larger one. In the smaller circle, make a list of your nonnegotiable points. In bigger one, make a list of what you can compromise on. Share each other's lists and look for areas of common ground. Consider what you agree on, what your common goals are and how you can accomplish these goals.

Finally, remember to be tolerant of each other's faults. Successful couples focus on acceptance rather than trying to change one another. Without acceptance, compromise is nearly impossible.

Covenant Love

Jeff tells the story of a stepcouple presenting their list of complaints. "She doesn't like my kids." "He never comes home on time and never helps with the children. After a lively exchange, he asked them, "How are you going to be okay even if your spouse never changes?" "If your spouse stays the way they are, is it possible for you to be a happy person?"

There really is a love that allows a person to move toward their partner even if they never change. It is called *agape*, and it only happens through God's Spirit. Jesus modeled this love during his life and especially during his death. Agape love empowers couples to love out of their fullness. It is not based on a partner meeting all their expectations, but rather on their identity in Christ. Agape love is a deliberate choice of the will; partners choose to love one another no matter what differences must be addressed. Agape forgives whether or not there is repentance. Agape is given expecting nothing in return and keeps no accounting of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13). Jesus asks stepcouples to *agape* one another, which is no small task considering that many couples enter the stepfamily with deep hurts. Agape can restore damaged feelings and keep couples connected and committed during the first few years when the relationship is fragile and vulnerable.

Agape is at the heart of a covenant. A covenant is a binding agreement between two people. We see this type of relationship demonstrated in the life of Ruth; a covenant broken only by death. Unlike a contract, a covenant is not broken by the non-performance of one of the parties. Marriage is such a covenant (Ephesians 5) modeled after the covenant between God and His people. Jesus made it clear in his interactions with the Pharisees that God's intent was for couples to become "one flesh," literally one family, and to be married for a lifetime. When this covenant is broken, there are consequences. Some believe that once a covenant is broken (i.e., divorce), another covenant relationship can never be formed. The Bible does not support that. However, the scripture is clear that all must come to Jesus broken and repentant before they can be restored.

You may be thinking, "I was the innocent party. I did nothing wrong. My partner did..... and I left." Or "My partner left me and the children for...." You may be the one who left your family and wonder if God can restore His covenant in your new marriage. The answer is yes, if you have come before God broken, with a contrite heart and repented of your sin. You do not have to live in guilt or shame. Romans 8:1 reminds us that no condemnation or blame exists for those who are in Christ Jesus.

God is the covenant maker. The goal is to have a clean heart before God. Anything not brought before God will become baggage, the fuel for problems in a new marriage. God stands for remarriage. A person's true value and identity must be drawn from a loving and life-giving God, or relationships will be conditional and based on fear, dependency, or control.

In the midst of turmoil and frustration, many couples wonder if having a successful, nurturing stepfamily is even possible; we certainly did. Our commitment was constantly tested during the first few years. We had so many differences: ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits, and even simple little daily routines. The strength of our belief in family kept us moving forward. Sometimes the progress was barely perceptible, but we stayed on the path.

Commitment to stand together is critical for stepcouple survival. Christian family scholars Scott Stanley and Howard Markman (1992) identify two fundamental concepts that underlie commitment. The first concept is having a long-term view of marriage; this allows partners to weather the inevitable difficulties in marital satisfaction. The second is making a choice to give up choices. This flies against our cultures' mandate to always keep our options open. This sense of commitment is buried deeply within the covenant love of God.

What happens then when the struggles of stepfamily life cause couples to question their love (and it will)? *"Why does she always criticize my kids I can't take it?" "She makes me miserable." "He stresses me out, and I can't trust him." "It's her fault that I feel/act/think this way." "He loves his kids more than he loves me."* Ultimately, every stepcouple will experience some form of hurt, disillusionment or disappointment. The initial response is to blame the other. The typical scenario is: *"All my hopes and dreams for the future are in you." "All my fears are on your shoulders." "Therefore, all our problems must be your fault."* You may be wondering, *"How is it possible to do it differently?"*

The solution is agape love and the commitment to keep a long view of marriage and family and choosing to respond with empathy instead of blame or retaliation. In *Love and Respect*, Emerson Eggerich explores this in detail. Eggerich says that we have a tendency to stand back with our emotional arms crossed as if to say, *"Show me love and I will show you respect."* He suggests that respect empowers a husband and love empowers a wife. Successful couples keep turning toward one another, they refuse to become entangled in fruitless arguments, they *"remember"* the love they have for one another when becoming upset and they find ways to quickly repair the damage of unfortunate and hurtful statements or actions.

Judi and I learned this principle, and it made an enormous difference in our marriage. We learned what each needed and committed to provide it unconditionally and to the best of our ability. Before, we were afraid to love each other unconditionally, but that just kept us stuck in our own fear and in our flesh. Incidentally, we also learned that obedience to God is the only path to real peace.

How does a stepcouple build a healthy, solid marriage that reflects God's covenant? Healthy couples come to realize that the goal is not just to have a great marriage but to

become the presence of Christ in their families and to impact their children, family, friends, and culture for Christ. Building a strong couple bond follows the First Corinthians 13 model of agape love: *Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always me first, doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, loves God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end* (MSG. v. 4-7).

In *Becoming a Stepfamily*, Patricia Papernow talks about the qualities that make a marriage satisfying. Her list includes shared values and spiritual beliefs, shared rituals and gestures, a common problem-solving style, a similar way of looking at the world, and also small daily acts of self-sacrifice that signal an individual's willingness to put "we" above "me." These elements create a sense of "oneness" for the couple. Papernow refers to this as "middle ground." "Stepfamilies often begin their lives together with deep cracks in their foundation, created by thin middle ground in the adult couple relationship. Fundamental and highly charged differences in understanding must be bridged for the new "executive team" to succeed in the primary task of integrating stepfamily and biological subsystems" (p 41). A sense of oneness comes from strong commitment, building trust, sharing life together, placing more emphasis on positive than negative events and from continually looking for ways to nurture and serve one another.

Healthy stepcouples create an environment of safety, openness, and intimacy. They make regular deposits into one another's "love bank." Love bank deposits are acts such as spending quality time together or demonstrating kindness and consideration. Healthy couples know a great deal of intimate information about one another. They view their relationship as positive and uplifting. Fulfilling marriages are based on deep friendships. Committed partners listen to and are influenced by one another. Healthy relationships create an atmosphere where authentic sharing can happen. Needs are addressed openly, and the couple can move fluidly *from my needs to your needs to our needs*. In strong marriages, couples share a deep sense of meaning and purpose. They search for ways to fulfill each other's hopes and dreams.

Success Steps: Commit to keeping your marriage healthy, safe, and strong. Below are a few observations and suggestions.

Be crystal clear on the fact that your partner is a flawed, broken imperfect person who is just as committed as you are, who wants to love and be loved and who is doing the very best he or she can make your marriage work.

Make God a partner in your marriage. Understand the covenant relationship to which God is calling you. Discover that stepfamily success is not God's ultimate goal for you; it is joining Him in His mission to change the world. Engage in authentic community through a local church committed to making a difference.

Commit together to not allow *anything or anyone* to come between you. Make your marriage a safe, grace-filled place. Work to create an open, accepting, non-judgmental marital environment that encourages frank disclosures and provides a safe place to air differences and plan solutions. Focus on the positives. Nurture your friendship, stay connected, practice forgiveness, encourage one another, and trust God in all things. (Matt. 19:26; Phil. 4:13; Rom. 8:28; John 15:7)

Decide together how much time will be spent each week discussing “emotionally charged” issues such as parenting or former spouses. Set aside a specific time each week to discuss these issues. Keep in mind that there are no perfect solutions. Commit to keep “shifting” beliefs and expectations “toward” one another.

Build your marriage on the pillars of care, covenant, and consensus. Nurture the relationship. Know your partner’s needs and work hard to meet them. Support each other’s emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Develop effective communication and critical thinking skills. Tailor your expectations of your spouse and children. Know and maintain your boundaries. Cultivate traits such as flexibility, tolerance, forgiveness, and openness. The most crucial factor in the success of a stepfamily family is the emotional and spiritual health of the adults. Pray together. Think romance. Become an expert on the needs of your partner (Romans 12-14; Phil. 2:3-11; I Cor. 13).

Work hard to build a rock-solid commitment to one another. Develop a shared vision for your marriage and family. Agree on a definition of a healthy, Godly marriage. Look for new ways to strengthen and enjoy your relationship. Fight for quality time. Make certain times together “sacred.” Find time to laugh, love, talk and pray. Be clear about your goals, values, and priorities. Finally, learn to work together to become co-parents. Be patient with each other; neither you nor your spouse can change overnight.

Happy marriages are based on a deep friendship--a mutual respect and enjoyment of each other's company. A couple that keeps their friendship strong despite the inevitable disagreements and irritations of married life experiences what I call 'positive sentiment over-ride.' Their positive thoughts about each other & their marriage are so pervasive that they tend to supersede their negative feelings.

-Dr. John Gottman

The Role of the Stepparent

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12

"You can come in as a visiting professor of anthropology, getting to know the people and appreciate how they live run their lives. Or you can come as a colonialist, ready to condescend; feeling that the people you're visiting are doing everything the wrong way and you can set it right."

-Kelly and Burg, The Second Time Around

Guidepost: Stepparenting is one of the best ways to learn how to agape – to love, expecting nothing in return. Be flexible, find your niche, and build relationships. Don't come on too strong, too fast.

*"It is far more difficult to create a second marriage than a first marriage when children are involved – and it is more important to succeed. The stakes are higher. The risks are greater. And everybody involved knows it" (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, **Second Chances**). Stepparenting has never been seen in a favorable light. The images of a wicked, evil stepmother, plotting new and devious ways to make a poor, defenseless stepchild's life more miserable are forever etched on our psyches. No wonder being a stepparent is so tough; every child in America has seen Cinderella, and most adults have read Hamlet. Stepparenting is a challenging task, and certainly one of the least appreciated.*

A key to success

Not only were we poorly prepared for marriage, but we were also certainly not ready for stepparenting. I was completely unaware that Jeff's oldest daughter would see me as the "other woman" and the "evil Stepmom." She was accustomed to having her Dad to herself. Within the first month, the phone calls from her school began, followed by calls from her employer wanting to know if she was coming to work. Once I relayed the messages, the battle began, and I soon realized that the toughest role for a Stepmom is dealing with the father/daughter relationship.

The stepparent role is a good indicator of stepfamily development. The degree to which all family members have contributed to and accept this role is a key determinant of family functioning. This is a difficult role to define under the best of circumstances, made even more so by the fact that so many individuals contribute to how it will be defined, even those outside the home. Many stepparents feel like unwanted outsiders in their families. A further complication is that of all family roles, the stepparent role evokes the most ambivalence from children, who alternately express a desire for closeness and a need for distance.

The dilemma is that there are no rules or even agreed-upon norms for how a stepparent should act. Even the spouse, who invited him or her into the family, is often uncertain about the role. The parent can feel caught in the middle or change loyalties when the stepparent and his or her children do not get along. In *Stepfamilies*, James Bray discusses a discovery one of the families in his research made. He refers to it as the "goalie problem." The parent is the goalie and if the goalie is stationed in front of a child's heart, the stepparent has little chance of building a relationship with that child. Bray refers to this phenomenon as a "biological force field" which is largely unconscious, acting out an

old habit to protect the child from hurt. The challenge is that the parent must “see” this and then work to diminish its affect. In our experience, it is tough for a parent to back away from “protective” mode. As a parent begins to soften in this area, the stepparent must stay friendly and initiating toward the child while encouraging the parent to become aware of this behavior pattern. Bray says one approach is to point out times or situations where the parent themselves feels excluded or left out.

This uncertainty about roles leaves many stepparents feeling confused, frustrated, and unappreciated. Even so, finding an effective role does not have to be an insurmountable task. Stepparents need to clarify with their spouses what is expected of them. This information is best (but seldom) learned in advance. Stepparents, who enter the family as strangers, must understand that they cannot immediately assume the role of parent. If they push too hard, the child will react, causing a backlash from the parent. When and how the stepparent role is implemented should be a topic that every couple discusses upfront. Finding an effective role for the stepparent is a critical family task. The effectiveness of the leadership a couple provides hinges on developing this role. A positive image is to view the stepparent role as a tapestry, with each family member contributing to the final product.

“Stepparenting is like working at a late-night convenience store – all of the responsibility and none of the authority”

-Valerie Coleman, *Blended Families: An Anthology*.

Stepparents enter the stepfamily with very little parental status. Consequently, it is critical to allow the stepparent role to develop gradually, from someone who observes and monitors activities, to functioning as an aunt or uncle to finally becoming a full authoritative co-parent. Effective stepparents allow their role to evolve and develop. Children as well as parents adjust best when they participate in the shaping of this role. Stepparents are most effective when the role they play is a natural one for them, utilizing their strengths and gifts in the family. The steps outlined below will help define an effective stepparent role.

Take great care of yourself

Being a somewhat thankless job (at least at first), stepparents must be careful to find ways to nourish and nurture themselves in ways not dependents on how their stepchildren act or feel.

Start small

Effective stepparents invest in building a relationship with a child long before they take on a parenting role. This approach allows the child time to see the stepparent as someone who can be trusted. Families function best when the stepparent is sensitive to the needs of the children.

Timing is everything

The temptation to parent too soon is common in stepfamilies. The consequences, however, have been fully researched, and they point to a tremendously negative impact on children. Effectiveness as a parental figure is in direct proportion to the quality of the

relationship with the child. Instant parenting is a myth. Being patient and allowing a role to develop gradually is one of the hardest, but most important, things a stepparent will do. Generally speaking, the younger the child, the more readily the stepparent will be accepted.

Do not usurp the role of the same sex parent

Children need acknowledgement of their special relationship to the absent parent, whether that parent is dead or alive, loving, or abusive. Pressure to abandon, demean, or ignore the existence of a parent places the child in an intense loyalty bind that will inhibit his or her ability to form a relationship with the new stepparent. The stepparent role should complement, not replace that of the noncustodial parent.

Support the role of the parent

Stepparents can become an important neutral sounding board for their spouse, someone who can listen objectively. They can also provide input and observation to the parent. Sometimes a stepparent will spot problems that the parent does not see is not ready to acknowledge or deal with. In such cases, the stepparent must give the parent time to move through the issues. Forcing views on the parent or openly disagreeing with them will inevitably bring conflict.

Allow the role to reflect your unique strengths

The stepparent's role is an expression of his or her personal style and strengths and can complement the style of the other parent. It is not unusual for the strengths of a stepparent to be appreciated several years later; strengths that earlier may have been regarded as detrimental.

Get 'buy-in' from the parent

Developing an effective stepparent role is not the individual task of the stepparent, but a task of the entire family. This is a key task for the parent, who must assume leadership in the development and implementation of the stepparent role. Effective stepparenting is not simply an extra activity that takes place in an unused corner of the family. It is critical for the new family's survival. The parent must gradually shift the stepparent from outsider to authoritative co-parent, and the children need to be made aware of this gradual shift. This transfer of parental status from marginally involved outsider to full co-parent is certainly not a smooth transition, but it is critical if the couple is to ever parent effectively.

More than discipline

Discipline and punishment have little in common, and parenting is much more than discipline or punishment; it is about relationships and building character. Stepparents can be significant role models to their stepchildren. Because of the outsider role however, discipline and punishment can easily become the focus. Without developing a relationship, discipline inevitably leads to rebellion and discouragement on the part of the child. Unfortunately, some stepparents wrongfully focus on this activity and thereby narrowly define their role. The stepparent should enter the area of discipline very slowly. Most children need 1-2 years before they are ready to accept discipline from a stepparent. At first, the parent should administer any discipline. Gradually, as the child

sees the stepparent as a trusted adult, the couple can begin to co-parent. In the meantime, the stepparent can be a friend, mentor, or coach.

Let Christ be your role model

Jesus was a great friend. He was secure, kind, and compassionate. He was generous with his love. He looked deep inside and saw the best in others. He came to serve not to be served. He never took advantage of others because of his status. He forgave completely. God's love enables stepparents to move toward their stepchildren with love. With time and patience, stepparents can make a real difference in the life of their stepchildren and play a valuable role that the parent cannot play.

The ultimate goal of stepparenting is to become a co-parent, someone with an objective view, who deeply cares for the child and family. Key traits include tolerance, patience, flexibility, and adaptability. Stepparents may never view or love the child exactly as the parent does, but they can invest in their lives. Agape love is a wonderful metaphor for stepparenting – unconditional love from a pure heart.

Success Steps: Guidelines for Stepchild-Stepparent Relationships

- Allow new relationships to grow slowly. Caring relationships take time to evolve. Do not expect love or intimacy immediately; in fact, one should expect ambivalence or apathy.
- See each child as a unique individual, with his or her own temperament, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Find out what your stepchildren like and, if possible, see that those things are available.
- Accept that you will feel differently about your own children than you will your stepchildren.
- Treat the non-custodial parent as a co-parent; never say negative things about him or her in front of your stepchildren.
- When in doubt, ask, "How would you like me to treat you?" "What do you think my part in the family is?" "What can I do to be your friend?"
- Feel compassion for your stepchildren, but do not allow compassion to mask spinelessness. Do not allow yourself to be abused or walked over. (James 3:17-18)
- Let your stepchildren know how you feel about their behavior. For example, if a stepchild leaves out some tools, tell him or her how that feels. If children sense that nothing they do matters to you, they will assume you really do not care about them. Be open about your feelings and encourage your stepchildren to do the same.
- Be a good role model by living by the values you espouse. Remember that you are a volunteer, not a victim. Above all, practice grace (James 2:12-13) and love (Eph. 5:1-2).

Stepparent-stepchild relationships are usually not a given. However, with patience, a partner's support, some flexibility, and a child's readiness, even very distant stepparents and stepchildren can sometimes find their way to each other.

-Patricia Papernow, Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships

Success principle #5

Build a Stepfamily that Lasts

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stands guard in vain. . . . Psalm 127:1

Your relatives and friends might mistakenly expect your new household and kin to feel and act like a biological family. They also may not approve of either the prior divorce(s) or the remarriage. Yet, when well run by confident stepfamily adult teams (not simply couples), this modern version of an ancient family form can provide the warmth, comfort, inspiration, support, security--and often (not always) the love--that adults and kids long for.

-Gloria Lintereman, Secrets to Stepfamily Success.

Guidepost: Creating a stepfamily that lasts is a process; "instant family" is a destructive myth. It took us several years to feel comfortable enough to consider ourselves family.

The experience of becoming a family is incredibly rewarding, but also incredibly stressful. At first, basic emotional needs can be left unmet. Gradually, unrealistic expectations, even strongly held ones, are reluctantly abandoned, leaving immense grief or anger in its wake. Even months or years later, many family members remain wounded and disconnected, making bonding very difficult. In addition, a strong grief response may be occurring in children who had hoped that their biological parents might reconcile. Children still grieving have few resources for adjusting to a new family. Stepouples, in a rush to create a new family, miss the fact that it takes at least two years for family members to adjust to one another. Part of this "rush" is because they have bought into the myths of instant love and instant family; partly it is to ward off their own fears and insecurities. The result is that few parents adequately prepare themselves or their children for the changes that stepfamily life will bring. In *Blended Families*, Maxine Marsolini describes her own stepfamily experience: "*Families like ours bear a resemblance to a favorite nursery rhyme. Like Humpty Dumpty, we've had a great fall. Divorce has left us with lots of broken relationships. And sometimes all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put us back together again*" (p.263). Becoming family is a process. Stepfamilies do not really blend, however, with patience, love and grace and a willingness to keep moving forward, they can truly become family. We know because that is our story.

At our youngest daughter's twenty-third birthday, she requested that we watch videos of them as children. Everyone enjoyed the videos except our oldest daughter, who is still processing some pain from the early years. It reminded us that some family members take longer to process than others. Despite this, Judi and I felt that we had grown together and formed a family. It was humbling to realize that through all the mistakes and chaos, we were people who genuinely cared for and loved one another.

Simply put, a successful stepfamily has learned to survive until it can truly thrive. The key is a healthy stepcouple relationship that is able to balance the needs of children *and* the marriage. Happy children in stepfamilies contribute to a happy marriage. Successful couples have learned to embrace the unique realities of life in a stepfamily. They are able to discard unrealistic expectations and replace them with positive realism. Both partners understand and accept that stepfamily integration and adjustment take time. Both do

whatever it takes to resolve any leftover issues from previous relationships. Even in times of pain, they move to nourish and nurture one another.

Successful stepparents give themselves and their stepchildren time and space to adjust to new circumstances. They do not feel threatened by their partner's relationship with a former spouse. Stepparents understand and are not threatened by the parent/child bond. They do not compete with their stepchildren's other parent.

Former spouses have adjusted to their new relationship, set aside any left-over hurt, and developed co-operative ways that support the welfare of their children. Both partners have established appropriate roles in the stepfamily. Parents accept that they are responsible for their children and for supporting their partner. Boundaries are clear and firm, but also flexible. Individuals in the stepfamily are willing to connect with a support network and seek professional help whenever necessary.

After years of not knowing what to expect, we were both exhausted. We were both broken, and we couldn't fix one another. God brought us to a moment of decision; we had to decide if we were going to stay. Flesh wanted out. Everything seemed too hard. Our struggles had drained the life out of us. We were isolated and hadn't found anyone that understood stepfamilies. It was at our point of deepest frustration that God met us. He opened our eyes, and for the first time we could see what we hadn't seen in each other and in ourselves. The decisive moment was when we asked ourselves if we would stay and let God lead us on that journey, or not? It was the moment we came closest to breaking apart.

I knew I had to let go of some things keeping me from truly loving Judi. I didn't really trust her or anyone, and I blamed her instead of owning my passivity. We had to get rid of our expectations for each other and our expectations of God. I had to deal with my own woundedness. Since year seven there has been a lot of challenging work on our woundedness. I was letting go of my brokenness which I had held on to as self-protection. I felt scared, but hopeful. We both promised to work on our issues and to support each other through the process. We had to learn to trust each other. As I saw Jeff working through his issues and getting healthier, I became hopeful and encouraged. He made me want to be a better person. We learned that we could "agree to disagree" and respect each other's point of view. It took us seven years to fully recognize that our relationship was more important than the problems.

Successful stepfamilies find ways to combine both the tangibles and intangibles of multiple mini-families. They talk through issues thoroughly and acknowledge the value of each person's preferences and possessions. Family members bring a host of things they must merge, for example, material things such as furniture, dishes, tools, clothing, books, pictures, cars, houses, times shares, bank accounts, or camping gear, or traditions and routines like birthdays, saying grace, paying bills, time for dinner, celebrating holidays, weekends, privacy, sports, opening Christmas presents, vacations, or visiting relatives. There are values and priorities to combine such as shopping, clothes, education, honesty, church attendance, jobs, grades, accountability, or curfews.

Communication and problem-solving strategies offer some unique challenges. For example, do we talk it all out or never talk, do we argue and yell or be quiet and

peaceful? Do we talk right now or tomorrow, privately or in front of everyone, and finally, does everyone talk at once or do we take turns? Other candidates for merging include family rules, such as snacks, phone use, TV, chores, bedtimes, activities, curfews, privacy issues like sharing a room, sharing a bathroom, car usage, sharing TV, game, and sports equipment. Family goals such as retirement or college should be considered. Finally, and importantly, issues of faith and how faith will be expressed in your household must be discussed.

Grace loves and protects; it finds the best in others. Our family grew healthier as we learned to accept and trust one another; that took a good deal of time. Merging, which took us years, could have been shorter and less traumatic if we actually understood that's what we were doing. At first it was win or lose, which unnecessarily created tons of hard feelings.

How does a stepfamily become a place of safety where authentic relationships are developed in an atmosphere of grace and acceptance? The short, simple answer is to be intentional. To start, family members must be committed to the process. Only later does that commitment become personal as family members learn to embrace differences and accept, respect, and value each other. Sounds impossible, but it can be done—over time. True, many stepfamilies never become as cohesive as nuclear families. Some family members never seem to “buy-in” to the new family, preferring instead to remain aloof and disconnected. Still many stepfamilies become safe places that nurture and encourage its members.

Stepfamily researcher Dawn Braithwaite (Braithwaite et al, 2001) has identified five “trajectories” or paths that stepfamilies take in the first several years of development. The first two, *accelerated* and *prolonged* (representing nearly 60% of the families), find the stepfamily functioning well by year four. In the *accelerated* pathway, family members adopt new roles quickly and without undue conflict. Through all four years, they demonstrate a high level of family closeness. Of the five trajectories, accelerated families were the most adaptable and contained the healthiest family members. The key distinctive of the *prolonged* group was that they started out with a low sense of family, which built gradually over time.

The last three paths led to less than desirable outcomes. The *declining* pathway (6%) found families beginning with a high degree of closeness that decreased to zero by year four. Those families were characterized as idealized, with highly unrealistic expectations. The *stagnated* pathway (13%) featured families that began and ended the study with a very low degree of family closeness. Many in this group spoke of feeling thrown together in an “instant” family, unable to negotiate changes in rules or roles. The final trajectory, *high-amplitude turbulent* (21%) had families experiencing the greatest fluctuations in family closeness, ultimately ending the study at zero. The authors describe this pattern as being on a roller coaster. In addition to unrealistic expectations, this path featured the least bonded stepcouple relationships.

If your stepfamily is going to survive and thrive, a strategy must be developed to move family members from a disconnected collection to a healthy, fully functioning unit. Six inter-related processes need to be addressed and resolved: First, trust

among family members must be built in an atmosphere where it is safe to disclose and be vulnerable. Second, clearly articulated, workable family goals and roles must be established. Next, healthy, productive conflict must be modeled and enabled. Family solidarity must be encouraged. An atmosphere of mutual accountability is required. Finally, a sustainable family identity must be developed that is rooted in Christ.

Trust

Trust is the foundation of a healthy stepfamily, although it is often conspicuously absent early in stepfamily development. Without trust, there is no vulnerability; without vulnerability, there is no sharing or honest disclosure. In the absence of honest disclosure, healthy growth and intimacy producing communication and conflict seldom occurs (although there is still plenty of unhealthy conflict). Without trust we cannot truly experience love or intimacy, and relationships stay shallow and self-serving. Too many families subtly or not so subtly discourage their members from sharing, under the guise of “being nice” or because sharing is just too painful. To be sure, sharing is risky and painful. Answering the question of how trust develops is daunting. Clearly, it starts with the couple being healthy enough to encourage honest sharing and to tolerate necessary conflict.

To resolve the absence of trust, a family culture must be created where members feel safe. Later, they can be encouraged to share their needs, concerns, disappointments, and disagreements. What does it take to create a safe place? First, adults must be emotionally ready to listen non-judgmentally to the things family members may share, since they can lead to strong emotional reactions. If that is not the case, consider group support or professional care. Reacting emotionally to hard or sensitive topics being shared is guaranteed to end fruitful communication. Second, be realistic about how open your family will be. Expecting lots of sharing and transparency is a set up for failure. Next, allow grieving to take place. Grief does not always present as sadness, often it looks more like anger. Finally, start small and slow and be patient. Allow sharing to evolve naturally. Do not be discouraged with non-participation. Cohesion in stepfamilies takes time, sometimes years. Healthy trust happens when family members believe they are valued, and they learn how to understand and be open with one another. In successful stepfamilies, dialogue and interaction are welcome.

It takes courage to create an atmosphere where interactions can happen without threat of reprisal. Yes, there must be boundaries, but too often adults use boundaries as a form of control or to cover the fact that they are clueless about how to help their family become healthier and more cohesive. Lack of interaction among family members is a sure sign of family dysfunction because trust is built through interaction. Strangers become cohesive friends and family members as they struggle with divergent needs, listen to one another's stories, and learn about each person's priorities, strengths, and weaknesses, hopes and fears. This happens far too infrequently in most stepfamilies mostly because of fear, shame and woundedness. Ironically, the one thing that can help a family move to a healthier place is the thing

they most avoid. Incidentally, this kind of sharing and vulnerability must start at the top – with the couple.

Developing trust in a new stepfamily is difficult because most remarrying adults (and children) are emotionally and spiritually wounded, and wounded people are extremely self-protective. Vulnerability (opening oneself up to more potential pain or hurt) sounds like a really bad idea. However, for the family to grow, family members must allow themselves to be vulnerable. Without the healthy interactions that evolve from people who learn to trust and be vulnerable with one another, families become stagnant, lifeless, and sterile.

How does a stepfamily develop trust? First and foremost, it must be intentional and modeled by the adults in the family. A pervasive attitude that each family member is valued and important and brings his or her own unique blend of personal traits to the family needs to be cultivated. Next, sharing feelings and concerns is encouraged, even if it leads to conflict. Sharing can be both natural and planned. The focus should be on personal sharing. This normally begins with safe, benign information and grows to include more significant feelings and beliefs.

To facilitate sharing as a way to build trust, it is best to start with simple things such as sharing favorite stories or traditions.

- Best thing that ever happened
- Expectations about the family
- Observations about other family members
- Family experiences: hiking, camping, bowling, miniature golf, etc.
- Family games, such as *The Ungame*, which downplay competition and emphasize disclosure
- Create new family traditions to compliment, not replace, old traditions

Stepping Stone: A key to progress is to learn to “name” the situation instead of blaming one another. Naming the situation is acknowledging that a particular struggle is inherent to creating a healthy stepfamily and not the result of a flaw in someone’s character. Building a stepfamily that lasts is challenging work. Virtual strangers do not become “family” overnight, but God promises to be with us every step of the journey. A wonderful promise is contained in Psalm 37. We call it the Commit-Trust-Delight-Rest cycle. Commit your family to the Lord. Trust Him with your lives. Delight in His love and goodness; rest in His grace and mercy and arms of love.

Clearly Articulated Goals and Roles

Develop clear family goals and then identify obstacles to growth. The obstacles are easiest to identify, but few families have or even talk about goals. In stepfamilies, the biggest obstacles are unrealistic expectations and competing family systems. Expectations create a picture of how the family should look and act. It is unlikely that the various family “pictures” match up. Few stepcouples know how to move their family to a place of healthy connection. Many assume that a “nuclear-like family” will somehow emerge, and everyone will instantly get along and act like family.

Instant family is a myth, and stepfamilies never look or act exactly like nuclear families.

What stepcouples can do is get family members talking, even though this will initially create discomfort. They can start by inquiring about each member's wants and needs. As family members share stories, permission is given to be frank and disclosing. Family members open up and develop trust in their own time. As members feel free to share their needs, fears, and gripes, and have a sense that these things matter, discussions about family goals will become much easier. Below are examples of healthy family goals and roles.

- Individual personalities are valued (vs. being clones)
- Mistakes and failures are managed with tolerance and compassion – as growth and teaching opportunities
- There are clear family roles and rules and non-shaming fair consequences
- Personal faith is shared and lived out
- Family is a safe place to share emotions and work out issues
- Care and respect for others is modeled and encouraged
- There are no family secrets
- Members take responsibility for their own choices and actions without blaming, mind-reading, denying or feeling victimized.

The biggest obstacle to developing healthy roles and goals is the unrealistic expectations of each family member. It is critical to set aside the time to understand and gently confront these expectations.

Healthy Conflict

An atmosphere conducive to healthy conflict must be created. All relationships require productive conflict to grow. Many stepfamily members, however, view conflict negatively as something to be avoided. In fact, most families manage conflict poorly. Individuals respond with one of two extremes; they either hide or attack. Healthy conflict is difficult in stepfamilies because most family members are emotionally wounded. These wounds limit their ability to listen, communicate, express needs, and in particular, to solve problems. While there are no easy solutions, families can begin by “blaming” the situation (“we are a group of strangers trying to become a family”) rather than one another.

A safe atmosphere that encourages healthy conflict is created by distinguishing between healthy conflict and destructive fighting. Violence, name-calling, yelling, etc. will not promote family growth, nor will apathy, stuffing feelings, or passive-aggressive behavior. Healthy conflict is purposeful; it avoids attacking the character of others. Healthy conflict involves respectfully dealing with issues, with clearly defined goals. Unless issues are addressed and resolved, they will be a consistent and constant source of conflict.

Success Steps: Here are simple steps to get started. First, start seeing conflict is an opportunity to develop clarity and intimacy. Then send the message that conflict is productive and that you are committed to helping the family find “good-enough”

solutions. “De-mythologize” conflict by defining it as a signal of divergent needs or methods rather than as a sign that the sky is falling. Conflict can then be viewed as an opportunity to grow, not as an attack on one another’s character. Next, family members must be encouraged to address issues. Healthy conflict happens in an atmosphere that encourages family members to respectfully address (vs. stuff, ignore, pretend) issues. Parents must model being comfortable with conflict and then allow other family members to engage in productive, but uncomfortable, discussions.

Healthy conflict plays vital role in stepfamily development—it places the focus on finding solutions. It enhances communication, encourages family growth, and sets a tone for safety and respect in the family. Become a stepfamily that will deal with issues as they arise; dare to experience the discomfort of healthy conflict. Resist the tendency to avoid issues or overprotect. To succeed, the stepcouple must be willing to model and encourage healthy conflict. As with every one of the six processes, every couple brings a certain capacity to change and grow. If dealing with conflict is difficult, find some help. Model a willingness to admit areas of weakness and to learn new skills.

Strong Family Solidarity and Commitment

Commitment to the family must be encouraged and supported. To be successful, family members need to “buy-in” to the family and the family-making process. This is no easy task and happens only when every member feels that their concerns, issues, and needs will be heard and acknowledged. Resistance occurs because family members are not close, communication is awkward, rules and roles are ambiguous, and some members are uncertain if they even want to be part of the new family. Teenagers are the most difficult to get on board.

Ways to increase family solidarity:

- Emphasize family values.
- Build new traditions (but honor old ones).
- Become a “listening” family. Really hear the concerns and needs of others.
- Model a healthy marriage.
- Reduce ambiguity: make rules, roles, expectations etc. crystal clear.
- Give everyone a chance to have input.
- Be tolerant and patient.

Affirming and Establishing Traditions

Traditions bind groups together and provide anticipation, enjoyment, and warm memories. Stepfamily members have memories from former families, but no shared traditions or collective memories. It is important therefore, for the stepcouple to guide the family through the process of understanding and accepting traditions and deciding how to combine them to begin the process of building a shared history. Meaningful traditions from any member's past need to be maintained whenever possible. This is necessary to demonstrate respect for individual members' preferred way of doing things and to affirm the value of each family member. As traditions blend and new memories are forged, the walls between mini-families come down.

Success Step: Strategies for affirming traditions

- Spend time listening to everyone's favorite traditions.
- Encourage family members to tell their stories.
- Never demean someone's way of doing things.
- Discuss holidays or major events and determine who will be involved and how the event will be celebrated; affirm every person's feedback.
- Make changes slowly and respectfully.
- Find creative ways to blend traditions.
- Launch new traditions and intentionally begin to build new memories. For example, start a new photo album, record key events, or plan special outings.
- Buy some new items such as a piece of furniture that can represent and symbolize the new family.
- Allow children to stay connected to extended family members.

Mutual Accountability

Clear expectations and buy-in from family members lead to mutually accountable interactions. Accountability is the willingness to be respectfully confronted. Accountability allows family members to speak into each other's lives and create the possibility for real change and growth. Members enter a stepfamily with closely-held unrealistic expectations that must be respectfully exposed if the family is going to survive and thrive. Again, this must be a top-down process. The stepcouple must work to resolve interpersonal discomfort, but they must also model a willingness to have difficult conversations. The stepcouple must continue to emphasize the value and benefits of commitment. Suggestions for increasing accountability:

- Be intentional: One person defined accountability as "allowing someone to take us, kicking and screaming, to a place we really want to go."
- Expose and re-define expectations; identify and challenge blatantly unrealistic expectations.
- Become more comfortable with conflict; see conflict as growth-producing vs. destructive.
- Believe that accountability and mutual respect lead to healthier family relationships.
- Continue to emphasize the value of family buy-in.
- Continue to make rules and roles clear.
- Embrace change and encourage adaptability.

Healthy Family Identity

The merging of differing family cultures is characterized by tremendous change and change in any form normally creates anxiety and stress as well as resistance from family members. Every habit, attitude and tradition are scrutinized as the family develops its own distinct identity. Healthy stepfamilies actually exist across two or more households. Families that accept this reality seem to thrive; those that insist on loyalty to "one family only" do not. This is no easy task. Family identity can be confusing in a stepfamily when boundaries are not clear or distinct. Forming a healthy identity is accomplished as family members share memories of the past and combine traditions. As the family shares, past issues are resolved and placed in the context of the present situation. Finally, as memories are shared and validated and past issues resolved, the families'

own inner resources are activated. As the issues that have been avoided are addressed, family members' feelings of being trapped by one another yield to a sense of connection and hopefulness. Instead of reducing each other to roles, family members now become real, whole persons, and through that transformation they can begin to work together to create a common culture. Along the way, three activities are key to success: the merging of the families, establishing new traditions and laying a solid spiritual foundation.

Below are several ways to enhance family identity.

- Family members are valued, even those who are part of more than one family.
- Other households are respected and never demeaned.
- Adults build “parenting coalitions” to effectively parent.
- Individual and family needs are met.
- Members draw value from being a part of the family.
- Individuals are rooted in Christ and are collectively part of a community we call family.

Success Step: Read Romans: 12:9-21 and I Corinthians 13 and ask the question, “How do we become authentic in our stepfamily? For example, do we:

- Address issues and problems in a healthy fashion.
- Listen non-judgmentally to one another, avoiding shaming and blaming?
- Allow one another to grieve past losses?
- Accept one another?
- Desire the best for one another?
- Hold one another in high esteem, even when we disagree?
- Accept unchangeables (The Serenity Prayer)?
- Confront emotions and expectations in an atmosphere of love?
- Go to God’s word for guidance and direction?
- Seek Godly counsel?
- Receive encouragement and guidance from a support network?

Developing the Family’s Spiritual Foundation

Many adults and children enter the stepfamily with broken spirits in need of healing. Restoration out of brokenness is God’s specialty. The real strength of a family is their level of commitment to serve one another. A strong commitment to love and serve one another can help a stepfamily survive. An attitude of love and service will be critical during the first few years when little positive is happening and relationships are far from nurturing. Praying together as a couple and honoring Christ by submitting to one another is foundational. Unfortunately, many couples do not bring a strong sense of commitment. Instead, they bring unrealistic expectations of how much better this marriage should be. When struggles come, they are ready to abandon ship. Many couples will express a desire to leave the marriage within the first two years.

Many stepfamilies see themselves as second-class citizens, not only in society but also in the church. However, as these families experience grace, acceptance, and forgiveness in a local, caring church, they can begin to develop an identity that is

based in Christ and his unconditional love for them. A family's strong spiritual foundation is based on love, forgiveness, and servanthood (I Cor. 13; Matt. 7:33; Col. 2:6). There is a growing commitment to accept and serve one another, which is critical when little positive is happening and relationships are far from nurturing. In a sense, this is the true spirit of agape love, loving people who are hard to love who do not necessarily love us.

Success Steps: Strategies for developing your family's spiritual foundation.

- Develop a servant model of leadership (Mk. 10:45; Luke 14: 7-11)
- Practice forgiveness and acceptance (Matt. 6:14)
- Discuss basic needs: belonging, love and control (Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3)
- Work together to find a family identity based in Christ (Eph. 3:14-21)
- Attend a solid, Bible-teaching church (Heb. 10:25)
- Join a small group for support and encouragement (Acts 2: 42-47)
- Pray for one another (Eph. 3:12)
- Get family members involved in ministry (I Tim. 4: 9-16)
- Model patience, gentleness, and humility in your family (Phil. 2:5)
- Read *God Breathes on Blended Families* by Moe and Paige Becnel.

Support Network

Stepcouples are busy people and are often vitally disconnected from others. Many live isolated lives, with few friends or family members available to offer support. Family members struggle with guilt, shame, hurt and loss. Some are ashamed to talk about their struggles. Some are still angry and bitter. No one should struggle alone. Couples need encouragement, practical information, and validation. One important source is a support network of friends, family, and fellow stepfamily members. A significant reason that many stepcouples divorce is that they did not build an effective support network.

There were no stepfamily ministries or groups in our community, so we started a support group out of our own need for connection. It was one of the wisest things we ever did. We agreed to study a book, but a year later, we hadn't passed the second chapter. People wanted to share and listen. We helped each other through tough times, and years later, many of us are still close friends. Don't take this journey alone. We did at first because of our own embarrassment, but it was a huge mistake.

We believe in doing life with others; it has made a huge difference in our family. If no life group exists in your church or community, start one. Life groups can provide vital community to isolated stepcouples. They can also provide needed insight from those who are a little further down the stepfamily road. Listening to the stories of others helps develop a sense of perspective and an understanding of the process. Some stories will provide positive encouragement ("We'll try that"); some contain valuable, but hard-fought, life lessons (We'll be sure not to do that"). Both have tremendous value. We need safe places to share stories, lighten burdens, and build healthy relationships.

Mentoring

We have mentored numerous couples. Amazingly, each looked healthier at year three than we did at year seven. Mentoring works no matter what stage of family life you are in. A great mentor couple will walk with you and be authentic. They are not perfect and not therapists, just mature and experienced.

Stepping Stone: Most stepcouples believe their struggles are unique to them (a function of their isolation and shame). It is welcome relief when they discover they are not alone and that others feel the same way they do. A great mentor couple or a well-functioning life group can offer a rare and precious gift: a powerful authentic message that someone cares and that they are not alone.

Traits of Successful Stepfamilies

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV

The theological question is not whether divorce is good or whether divorced people are moral. Instead, it is whether families created by remarriage after divorce can be vehicles of grace and redemption for children, adults, and extended families.

-Loren Townsend, Pastoral Care with Stepfamilies

Guidepost: The keys to a healthy stepfamily are grace, acceptance, and flexibility. Our family grew closer when each person felt loved and accepted for who they were.

We have demonstrated that healthy successful stepfamilies take years to develop, and yet, the seeds of healthiness must be planted early. Healthy stepfamilies grow in an atmosphere rich with trust, grace, flexibility, and acceptance. This atmosphere must be initiated, cultivated, and modeled by the couple. However, if either member of the couple is emotionally or spiritually wounded, what is modeled is more likely to be control, anger, jealousy, or fear. Living and loving well in a stepfamily demands that we come to grips with our own pasts and woundedness.

Creating a Healthy Stepfamily

Becoming spiritually and emotionally healthy and living authentically is the necessary foundation for a healthy stepfamily. Without it, the house would be built on sand, not solid rock. Couples lead their family to a place of emotional and spiritual health by talking about their own fear and pain and by adequately grieving their losses, and in the process, help their children grieve. They also lead by actively demonstrating their process of healing, in areas such as forgiveness, resolving past hurts and owning past mistakes. As they verbalize their trust in God and reveal their own struggles, the rest of the family is encouraged to acknowledge their own wounds. Being strong for the children is counterproductive and often prevents children from admitting their own fear, anger, or grief. Below are several other traits of stepfamilies committed to growth.

They know what it takes to be successful

Success means that all family members are valued and have a place in the family. The unique dynamics and challenges of stepfamily life are understood and embraced.

The family has a strong spiritual foundation.

Value and worth are drawn from God. Family members love out of their fullness in Christ—a love that can give without fear or control. Healthy spirituality emerges as family members shed their false self and live lives surrendered to Christ.

An atmosphere of grace and trust is initiated and modeled by the couple.

Home is a safe place where family members can identify, share, negotiate and merge their needs, concerns, disappointments, and disagreements, without judgments, put-downs, or repercussions. Effective organization and stability in family interactions is supported by the process of building and maintaining trust and predictability. Authentic

relationships are built as family members feel safe, protected, valued, and trusted. Values are based on Jesus, who loved powerfully and called people to be their very best.

Life is viewed through a new lens

Negative or unrealistic myths and expectations are replaced with positive, realistic ones. Unrealistic expectations, such as “instant” love or “instant” family are set-ups for failure. Stepfamilies can become just as nurturing as nuclear families but not for several years. The new lens sees family as a combination of two distinct cultures that consistently strive to understand and respect one another.

The couple relationship is nurtured.

The marital relationship nourishes and nurtures the couple yet can flex with conflict. Each partner has an adequate capacity to meet their own needs and to tolerate displays of negative affect. There is equitable sharing, respect, and support between spouses, supported by the process of fairness experienced in the couple’s relationship.

The needs of children are addressed with sensitivity and balance.

Successful nurturance, protection and guidance of children is provided by effective authoritative parental leadership. Children face unique challenges and adjustments, because most of them are not ready, and certainly not prepared, for stepfamily life. They will display behaviors (versus talking) in an attempt to communicate their anger or fear. These behaviors can range from blatant rebellion and acting out, to sadness, withdrawal, and depression. Children need safe boundaries and assistance in processing their feelings.

A realistic, workable role for the stepparent is identified.

The stepparent role is developed gradually as parental status increases. The stepcouple understands that discipline without relationship nearly always results in rebellion and resistance. Stepparents begin by building a relationship of trust and friendship before taking on a disciplinary role. Parent and stepparent support and encourage one another. Stepsiblings are not forced to get along; they are free to develop a relationship that works for them

Strong family values are emphasized.

The family provides for the basic physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental needs of all members. This includes providing a place where each family member can feel consistently accepted, valued, appreciated, safe, supported, encouraged, and loved and where children are prepared to become healthy, self-sufficient adults. Family members are free to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions without fear of being ridiculed, ignored, attacked, or shamed. Problems are discussed openly and honestly and are usually resolved rather than denied, ignored minimized or endlessly rehashed. Family members feel valued, listened to, and respected by one another, even during times of conflict or disagreement. The family is characterized by mutual love and respect.

Authentic relationships among family members are encouraged.

The family learns how to trust, communicate, and solve problems in a grace-based environment where it is safe to be real and disclosing. There is more listening and a

genuine interest in understanding other family member's needs and concerns. Healthy problem solving exists because problems are not catastrophized but seen as growth and intimacy opportunities. Creative coping skills are utilized. Problem solving skills are developed and modeled that allow family members to name and claim feelings, without blame or shame, and to distinguish between solvable problems and those that must be managed. Family members are encouraged to give input, and their contributions are valued.

A vital support network is in place

Adequate resources for social, emotional, and spiritual support are obtained through the process of networking with family, friends, and community. Personal spiritual transformation happens best in community. The same is true for successful stepfamilies. Stepfamilies tend to isolate, often due to guilt or shame, while successful stepfamilies connect with others, develop honest, authentic relationships, and reach out for support during stressful times.

The family demonstrates tolerance and flexibility.

Successful families are adept at "flexing" during times of conflict and crisis. The stepcouple realizes that stepfamily roles require flexibility. Family members understand that "family" does not happen overnight. They are tolerant with each other and realize that each family member grows at a different pace. Adaptability is supported as family members "flex" to meet the internal and external demands of family life

Family members are encouraged to mourn their losses.

There is encouragement to acknowledge and grieve losses without shame, guilt, impatience, or anxiety. Family members feel comfortable talking about their losses, crying, sharing sadness and despair or anger as appropriate. Parents and children alike are free to mourn their losses with no time limits. Family members are not punished or shamed for feeling sad or angry about the past. Grief counseling for any individual or the whole family is sought when appropriate.

Old and new traditions are consistently blended.

Past traditions are honored and respected. Ways of celebrating are not labeled right or wrong. Everyone shares in adopting some new rituals or celebrations. Each family member's memories are cherished and seen as contributing to the family's identity, much like a tapestry or quilt.

Healthy and appropriate sharing of feelings, thoughts and behaviors is encouraged.

Communication is difficult in stepfamilies. Because of past hurts, stepfamily members are often extremely sensitive to criticism and reactive to conflict. Healthy sharing is modeled by the stepcouple. Family members learn how to be "truth-tellers" and encouragers. Trust is nurtured in an atmosphere of grace where it is safe to be flawed and imperfect. Appropriate sharing of feelings is taught by the giving and receiving of respect. Every family member is valued.

Relationship development is encouraged.

There is an ongoing commitment to the well-being of all members. Family members accept and respect individual differences. Open communication is supported by the process of understanding between family members. A shared belief system is developed through the process of teaching and passing on traditions and life values.

Cooperative co-parenting exists.

Well-functioning stepfamilies have hammered out adequate and effective working relationships between households. This may take some time, but the motivation is to cooperate rather than to compete. In these families, children are never forced to declare allegiance to one household. Anger, resentment, judgments, and criticisms, are acknowledged, addressed, and resolved. There are no unhealthy co-dependencies between adults or adults and children and no secret alliances. Adults are direct and honest with one another. Values, beliefs, and rituals in each household are respected. Each household is seen as autonomous where boundaries, rules and roles are mutually respected. Problems are dealt with promptly, respectfully, and maturely.

Stress is viewed as normal

Stepfamilies experience more stress than any other family form. Most of the stress and anxiety is produced by change and loss. Healthy stepfamilies expect change and accept it as a normal part of life. Stressful situations are never seen as failures but as opportunities to grow, learn from the situation or develop new and better coping strategies. Mistakes are also anticipated as families “stumble” through the maze created by combining families. Successful families often develop a “learn by goofing up” mentality.

Stepping Stone: Success is a mindset and a process, not a point in time. In her seminal research on how people learn, Carol Dweck discovered that most of us adopt one of two mindsets about who we are and how we function in life, fixed or growth, and that these mindsets guide our decision making as well as our self-perceptions. In a fixed mindset, people believe all their basic qualities are simply fixed traits. Mistakes or failures are not seen as growth opportunities, but as symbols of their limitations. In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work and that mistakes or failures are opportunities to learn new approaches or skills.

So how does this apply to stepfamily success? The mindset a family member adopts profoundly affects his or her ability to adapt and grow. It can determine the quality of their experience and their capacity to adapt to the challenge’s stepfamily life presents. Believing that one’s qualities and abilities are carved in stone—the fixed mindset—creates a sense of uncertainty, intense fear, and reluctance to try anything new for fear of failure. The growth mindset on the other hand, allows a person to explore and experiment, and to learn from mistakes rather than personalizing them. Trial and error are critical to stepfamily development. So, fear of making a mistake inhibits both family and personal growth. The passion for stretching and sticking to it, even (or especially) when things are not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.

Success Guidelines

For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2: 8-9 ES

Yes, they are more complicated. But they are also richer. Stepfamilies turn out to be living laboratories for what it takes to create successful relationships.

-Psychology Today

In *Stepfamilies*, researcher James Bray, reporting on a ten-year study of stepfamilies, found that stepcouples with a realistic view of the challenges of stepfamily life had a far better rate of survival. In contrast, couples that had not addressed any key issues prior to marriage had difficulties almost immediately. He also discovered that stepchildren adapt much better if they have access to the noncustodial parent. He noted that most stepfamilies do not think, feel, or act like a family until at least year three. Many of the stepfamilies he studied did not survive. When asked if anything would have made a difference, one of the most common answers was—a map, some form of guide to help them understand what was going on in their family. The guidelines in this chapter will help form that map.

Successful stepfamilies do not “just happen,” they are carefully crafted by real families, just like yours, who are committed to success. When feeling confused or overwhelmed by living with a group of virtual strangers, it helps to refer to the “map,” which states that the first two years of stepfamily life are always turbulent. The map will explain that it is common for stepparents to feel like outsiders and that loyalty binds and power struggles are typical. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses,” those that have gone before us. Many wonderful stepfamilies have helped create the guideless below.

Success Guidelines

Do not change too much too fast.

The pace of change and the number of change agents is greater in stepfamilies than in any other family form. Control over these changes and the transitions that result is extremely limited. Change creates periods of uncertainty and disorganization. Critical success factors include flexibility, tolerance, and acceptance. Establishing too many new rules and expectations creates too much instability for children. However, no changes in family rules can leave stepparents feeling frustrated and hopeless. Do not expect parenting styles, family rules and values to “shift” right away. Instead, the couple should work out two or three initial changes in rules and expectations. Changes should be “telegraphed” to kids and woven into the existing system as much as possible. Every person (adult and child) reacts differently to change. It takes 2-3 years for even the healthiest couples to understand their differences enough to begin to forge some new agreements that work for everyone.

Success strategies

- Read books such as *Who Moved My Cheese* or *Transitions*.
- Make changes gradually; understand that no one likes “being changed.”
- Keep children in the change loop. Involve everyone is discussing the changes that need to happen now and those that can come later.
- Learn to view change as normal and that readiness for change can minimize potential disruption.

Discipline stays with parent at first.

Children adjust best when the parent remains in charge of discipline. Research suggests that when a stepparent attempts to directly discipline their stepchildren, it often backfires and creates undue (often long-lasting) stress in children. The “new sheriff in town” approach seldom works; in fact, it causes undue stress to parents and children.

Compartmentalizing and shifting versus blending

Blending implies that the best way to make a stepfamily work is to throw everyone in the deep end, “we all sink or swim together.” Research and the experience of countless stepfamilies suggest that this approach is not the best. In fact, the opposite may be true. Too much time together, especially at first, can be counterproductive to stepfamily success, because family times can be awkward and tense and feel unsafe. Stepfamilies develop best when families carve out one-to-one time throughout the family. This is not an indictment, just a reality of life in a stepfamily. The adult couple needs regular time alone without children. Children need reliable time alone with their parent but without the stepparent. Stepparents and stepchildren need low-key time alone together to gradually get to know each other.

Minimize conflict

Children do best when all parent figures cooperate and collaborate. Even moderate conflict can have a long-term negative effect. When adults’ tension goes up, levels of cortisol rise with potentially damaging results. Recent studies have revealed that a child’s cortisol levels will rise to the same level as a parent. Children always feel and react to their parents’ stress. Adults must utilize their best skills to avoid conflict, and if differences arise, keep them private and protect children from harmful stress.

Adopt a “conversion” (growth) mindset

In *Stepfamily Therapy*, Scott Browning and Elise Artelt introduce the concept of conversion. Conversion is a process by which a parent and stepparent can begin to share understanding of a child by gradually shifting their beliefs of that child. In first-time families there is a depth of understanding about each child. This understanding comes from history together and creates a context for a child’s behavior. Stepparents have no such context; consequently, their view of the child is based primarily on immediate history and their own set of expectations. These differing views of a child set up the couple for substantial conflict. Since each is entrenched in their own view, finding common ground is difficult. A parent feels the stepparent sees only negatives while the stepparent feels his or her view is objective and typically sees the parent as soft or permissive. The parent thinks, “If only my partner understood my child.” According to Browning and Artelt, couples have one of three choices, fight and exist in a constant

state of arousal and anxiety, agree to disagree, or move toward conversion. "In a state of calmness, one can hold a dilemma in mind without a strong urge to resolve it. It is this capacity that leads to a healthy position for the couple, the position of mutual conversion" (p.61). An example might be a stepparent seeing a stepchild's obnoxious behavior as emanating from embarrassment rather than disrespect or a parent agreeing with the stepparent that a child is lax about doing homework or cleaning his or her room. Shifting seldom happens uniformly, but every shift, no matter how slight, creates gratitude and intimacy between the couple.

Stepping Stone: Success has been described as a moving target. That concept may be most true in stepfamilies. As you think about success, consider the developmental stage of your family. If you are a new family, surviving and abandoning unrealistic and frankly toxic beliefs and expectations may be a good goal. Later, being able to communicate and share feelings with relative ease and moderate conflict could be a goal. After year five, functioning as a co-parent or establishing lasting family traditions may be goals to attain. In all cases, the key is the ability to check your spiritual and emotional pulse. Your family will seldom become healthier than you.

Family isn't defined only by last names or by blood; it's defined by commitment and by love. It means showing up when they need it most. It means having each other's backs. It means choosing to love each other even on those days when you struggle to like each other. It means never giving up on each other!"

- Dave Willis

Lessons

Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight ahead. Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed. To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is! Proverbs 15:21-3.

There is one soil that usually withers pride. It is brokenness. Brokenness molds our character closer to the character of God than anything else. To experience defeat, disappointment, loss – the raw ingredients of brokenness – moves us closer to being like God than victory and gain and fulfillment ever can.

-Mark Buchanan, Your God is Too Safe

Guidepost: *We affirm the truth of the quote above. Along the way, we've learned some incredible lessons on our journey, particularly that "blending" may be too nice a word. The most important lesson was that God is faithful (imagine that!). He never let us down. When our faith wavered, He still blessed us. We are humbled by His grace and mercy.*

Looking back, we are awed by the power of God to sustain us. We have come to realize that the ability to stay committed while each partner works through his or her wounds is critical to finishing the journey. Many times, neither of us were able to meet the other's needs. The greatest gift Judi gave me was the gift of patience. She loved me as I worked through my woundedness, even though I was not always loving and supportive towards her. I hope I gave her that gift too.

When couples see their family as an opportunity to grow and change, they too will prevail and build a family that will last. There is no instant love or bonding in a stepfamily. There is, however, incredible joy for the journey (Phil. 4:4-5).

We know personally that there can be joy in the journey, especially if the journey is shared with others, which is a lesson we wish we had learned much earlier. We have been awed by the ability of some families to rise above tremendous obstacles to genuinely love and care for one another. Stepfamilies serve as a wonderful metaphor for God's great gift, the Church, the Body of Christ – unity from diversity. Total strangers, sharing life together, grow to accept, respect and ultimately to love one another. In that sense, the challenges facing stepfamilies are similar to those facing every family. Authentic relationships, the kind that bring light and life, do not happen by accident but by intentionally moving toward one another in real acceptance and disclosure. Life, the way God intended, is lived out in the imperfect arena of stepfamily life so that His hand is readily apparent.

In *Becoming a Stepfamily*, Virginia Papernow suggests that nuclear families can get by with less conscious attention to the basic issues of relationships. Stepfamilies simply require more awareness of things that are essential to a satisfying relationship. What are these actions and ways of thinking that are essential for stepfamilies to succeed and thrive?

- They relinquish fantasies of what could or should be and attending to *what is*.
- They are able to say, "Tell me more" rather than "What's wrong with you?" or "What's wrong with me?" when confronted with a misunderstanding.
- They are willing to ask questions and to remain open and curious in the face of inexplicable or even seemingly irreconcilable differences.

- They make an effort to treat one's own and others' feelings with respect and empathy.
- They have developed the capacity to be interested in, to find words for, and to accept a wide range of feelings, both negative and positive.
- They attend to the needs of those who are strangers as well as those who are very familiar, finding ways to live respectfully with diverse traditions, and thinking inventively about meeting diverse needs.
- They search hard for common ground where none seems available.
- They form a realistic picture of what must be lived with for now and what will change over time, as well as a realistic sense of what is unlikely to change ever or only with considerable effort.
- They are open to learning from experience—viewing minor and major disasters as the consequence of gaps in understanding rather than evidence of betrayal.
- They find ways to love and forgive others even when they seem unlovable or unforgivable.
- They are constantly amazed by what God can teach us and do through us when we allow Him.
- They have developed a servant's heart that moves us toward others, even when we are in pain.
- They never cease to be in awe of the courage of the human spirit that longs for love and community and overcomes incredible obstacles to find it.

Personal lessons

On our journey, we discovered some vital life lessons. These lessons came out of our own pain as we finally reached out to a holy God (and a few others). We discovered that some children would appreciate your influence only after they leave home and start their own life. We also found that children can love more than one set of parents and that former spouses really can become friends and work together for the benefit of their children. We know there is no such thing as "instant" family, and that this myth is hurting stepfamilies all over America. We have become huge champions of remarriage preparation. The couples we have shared life with and mentored are healthier at year three than we were at year seven.

These and the lessons below have become our safe steps and now we offer them to you. Some of these may seem obvious, but sixteen years ago, we were clueless. Our prayer is that you will embrace each other and hold tight to God's promises. He never failed us, not once.

In *Families Where Grace is in Place*, pastor and counselor Jeff VanVonderen describes the qualities of a "Grace-Full" family. He states, "By God's design, the primary channel for learning one's identity, for having needs met, for understanding who God is, and for developing relationships—is the family. Relationships, especially those in families, are powerful. In families we can acquire a deeply ingrained sense of defectiveness and never measuring up—or we can develop inner strength and outside skills to fully function as healthy human beings" (p. 140). He lists ten traits that characterize a grace-full family.

1. There is out loud affirming of family members. Family members are told they are loved, accepted, valuable and capable.

2. The family is people-oriented. Family members are affirmed for who they are, not for what they do.
3. Rules and expectations are clearly articulated. Rules exist to serve people, not the other way around. Rules are always stated, never hidden or covert.
4. Communication is clear and straight. Family members are encouraged to speak truth to one another. Requests (vs. demands) are made and family members are free to respond.
5. God is the source of value and shared love. He is our 'need-meeter.' Our fullness and ability to love one another come from Him. Perfect behavior, following the rules, looking good or having stuff do not make us okay, God does.
6. Children are enjoyed. It is okay for kids to act like kids. Parents are not threatened when kids are not perfect. They do not have to control kids to make them look good. Parents do not feel less valued if their children are not perfect.
7. Responsibility and accountability are emphasized. Family members are allowed to be responsible for their behavior. Members hold each other accountable. People are not shamed for mistakes. Consequences for choices made are clear, fair, and consistent.
8. 'Head skills' are used for learning. Thinking is used for learning and growing, not for trying to defend oneself against other family members. Family members are encouraged to have their own ideas.
9. Feelings are considered valid and useful. It is OK to have feelings; they are not wrong, and family members are not shamed for having them. Feelings are signals. Feelings are seen as a way for family members to connect with one another, to work on relationships and to encourage one another. How we choose to act on our feelings is more a measure of right or wrong than the mere fact that we have feelings.
10. It is always okay for outsides to match insides. What is real is more important than how things look. The family is a safe, accepting place. Family members are allowed to be sad, hurt, or mad. Life is seen as a process. Family members do not have to "fix" one another.

Below are some of the lessons we learned, mostly the hard way.

Put first things first.

Faith is like the foundation of a house, the more solid, the more stable are the things built upon it. Make no mistake, your faith will be tested; to survive, it must be rock-solid. Challenges will quickly reveal the depth of your trust in God. We both had

emotional and spiritual wounds that distorted our faith and expectations. For me (Jeff), growing up without a dad, I had trust issues with God as Father. I had learned to be self-sufficient and being part of a stepfamily forced me to realize my limitations. Ultimately, we learned to draw our value and worth from God, not from each other or our children. This freed us up to love out of our fullness in Christ, not out of our woundedness. Only in your fullness can you love without fear or the need to control.

Create an atmosphere of grace and trust in your home.

Allow your home to become a safe place where family members can identify, share, negotiate and blend their needs, concerns, disappointments, and disagreements, without judgments, put-downs, or repercussions. Authentic relationships are built as family members feel safe, protected, valued, and trusted. Build values in your home that reflect the character of Jesus, who loved powerfully and saw the very best in others.

No matter what, nurture your marriage.

More than anything else, learn to nurture and nourish each other. Your children desperately need to see a real marriage that works. Be flexible and learn to balance the needs of your marriage with the needs of your children. Then you can be a safe haven for each other yet still be able to flex with conflict and with the needs of the children. Develop the capacity to meet your own needs, and to tolerate displays of negative emotion.

Have a rock-solid commitment to your marriage and family.

Commitment transcends feelings and circumstances; it will get you through the tough times, especially in the first several years when you want to run. Commitment is a decision, not a feeling. It bolts the doors and locks the windows. It allows us to quickly repair the damage caused by callous or insensitive remarks, and it minimizes the impact of differences.

Put the past in the past.

Address and heal past emotional and relational issues and develop a working relationship with your former spouse. Practice radical forgiveness, for yourself as well as others. Letting go of the past is critical to the survival of your family.

Work through your emotional and spiritual wounds.

Aware or not, most of us limp into remarriage and stepfamily life. Let go of the negative emotions that keep you from giving and receiving love. Give yourself (and your children) permission to grieve your losses.

Learn to be patient and flexible.

Adaptability may be the single most important stepfamily life skill. There will be plenty of opportunities to practice.

Be sure your expectations are realistic, if not, fix them immediately.

Most remarrying couples have expectations that are not consistent with the realities of stepfamily life. Be aware of misbeliefs. The most common are “instant love” or “instant family.”

Get and stay connected.

We really do need each other. Do not isolate yourselves. Develop a network of family and friends who can pray with you, and provide guidance, encouragement, and accountability. Become involved in ministry. The goal of family is not just to be healthy but to join God's greater mission to redeem the world.

Below are some lessons from folks we have mentored or counseled.

- Children can meaningfully care about more than two adults. Adults seldom "get" this. Children rarely completely lose their desire to bond with the non-custodial parent, no matter how absent or abusive he or she has been. No matter how terrible a spouse this person was, your child will still love and identify with this person.
- Many children feel excluded from the stepfamily. They feel like strangers or aliens. They do not know where they fit in. There may come a time when children want to go live with their other parent.
- Caring relationships take time to evolve. Make the goal the development of respect rather than love and affection. This is very much in keeping with *agape* love (I Corinthians 13).
- The answer most often given to the question, "What do you wish you knew before becoming a stepparent?" is, "That it was okay not to love my stepchildren right away. I felt so guilty, like there was something wrong with me."
- Differences between people are normal and natural; learning to accept and live with these differences takes time, patience, and effort. Also, learning to solve problems and confront challenges can raise self-esteem.
- Difficult, stressful times will happen, especially during the first two years. An issue or situation that can create instant turmoil for the family is just around the corner.

One thing we affirm is that every day, with commitment and hard work, stepfamilies are surviving and thriving. Our story is about broken people that God healed and restored. It's about two families that were joined together and still experience growing pains to this day. So, we keep working at it. Start building the milestones of your journey. Begin some new traditions while you embrace old ones. Value and protect one another because the journey is tough on everyone. Finally, sometime in the future, be courageous enough to share your story with others. God bless you on your stepfamily journey.

Stepping Stone: God's great promise is that He will never leave us or forsake us. *Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without His unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming of good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us (2 Cor. 4:16-17, MSG.).*

Thanks for allowing us to share our journey with you. If you have questions or just want to share your story, email us anytime. Contact us at jeffparziale@gmail.com. God bless you, Jeff & Judi

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