

Supporting Stepfamilies

**Workbook with Lessons and
Activities for Parents and Children**

**Kathy R. Bosch, Extension Family Life Education Specialist
Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator**

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Supporting Stepfamilies Workbook

Do any of these questions sound familiar?
Do you ask some of these questions?

- How should we handle discipline?
- How do I set clear boundaries?
- Can I be friends with my stepchildren?
- What should I do when my stepchild does not talk to me?
- How do I interact with my stepchildren's other parent?
- What can I do if I feel my partner is favoring my stepchildren over my children?
- What can I do if I feel my children are more loyal to (or seem to favor) their other parent?
- If I try hard enough, will my new stepfamily be like my original family?
- How will I learn to accept the strengths and weaknesses of other family members?
- How long will it take for us to love each other in my new stepfamily?
- What can I do when things are not going as well as I had hoped for?
- What can I do when I feel downhearted and blue?

How to Use This Curriculum

Stepfamilies face many of the same challenges as two-parent biological families: discipline, financial management, communication, and time management.

Money, housework, and sex are often the three major topics couples fight about. Other major conflict areas are time spent together and issues regarding children. These challenges are often more pronounced when children from previous relationships are brought into a new partnership. These potential challenges, as well as the many benefits of living in a stepfamily, will be discussed in this course.

Supporting Stepfamilies may be used as a learn-at-home course for self-study or may be taught in small groups with a facilitator or teacher.

This material provides information to stimulate your thought processes and help you recognize challenges you may face in your newly formed family. You will be given discussion questions and activities to practice with your partner and children to strengthen your stepfamily relationships.

You may want to share this information with others who have been through a divorce and are contemplating remarriage and merging two families into one stepfamily.

Who Will This Course Benefit?

Couples considering marriage who have children from previous relationships will benefit the most from taking this course. It will help them discuss major issues and make plans for their future family. In addition, stepparents, biological parents, grandparents, child-care providers, and anyone interested in learning more about helping stepfamilies be successful will benefit.

Goal Statement for Course

Participants:

Individuals and families who are successful in marriage relationships and are financially stable will provide a safe and secure future for children and strengthen community viability.

What is a Stepfamily?

There are many types of stepfamilies. For instance, some are legally joined and others are cohabiting; some include minor children, others have grown children; sometimes one partner has children, and sometimes both partners have children. “Blended families” is another term often used for stepfamilies. “Reconstituted families” was a term used in the more recent past. You are a stepfamily if you or your partner has children from a previous relationship.

The process of forming a new family through remarriage has three phases:

1. Entering a new relationship. Before forming a new successful relationship, each individual must be divorced emotionally as well as legally from their first partner. Partners must be ready to deal with the complexity and amount of effort required to make the new relationship successful. They need to work on being open about communication to avoid making an assumption that close communication is taking place when it may be struggling or distant. Some individuals will be entering the relationship as singles who have cohabitated.

An important reminder to those forming new relationships and marriages: Try not to compare the new partner to the former partner or expect that the new partner will behave as the former partner did. It is especially unfair to impose negative thoughts or behaviors onto a new partner. If this occurs often, the person is not emotionally detached from their former partner.

While making the initial decision to enter a relationship and working to nurture it, both people must accept their own fears and those of their new partner and children. As relationships become significant, serious consideration must be given to the children who are being brought into the relationship; however, decisions about whether to form a family are made by the partners alone.

2. Thinking about and planning for the new marriage and family. In this phase, new couples work together to learn more about stepfamilies and how to make them successful. It can be exciting to learn new things and make plans for the future, and this time together will usually strengthen the love relationship that has developed.

It also may be the stage when couples (usually one of the partners) realize they are not meant to be together because they do not have the mutual love, trust, and respect, or a feeling of excited hope for the future that is necessary for a relationship to be successful.

There must be a strong base or foundation on which to build their family if they are to be prepared to meet the challenges they may face over the years. Facing a new relationship with eagerness and a plan on how to face responsibilities and challenges that may occur in a stepfamily will help the stepfamily be successful.

3. Remarrying and reconstituting the family. The stepparent is not so much a new parent in the family as a new adult in the family. Time and patience are needed to help make this new role and

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the realigning relationships that develop work effectively. Parents also will need a lot of energy and a sense of humor. Setting priorities will be an essential part of this phase so parents can devote time to their partner and children while maintaining the time necessary for their jobs and other interests.

Benefits of Counseling

Before forming new relationships, some people might benefit from professional counseling to help them deal with and overcome problems that existed in a former marriage or partnership. Counseling can also help them cope with their feelings and examine their expectations for a new relationship.

Parents must consider their children's well-being, and together with teachers, counselors, and family physicians, determine if counseling might help them. Counselors can be trusted advocates who will listen to personal feelings, concerns, and fears and, through professional advice, will gently guide people and teach them coping skills. Trusted friends and close family are often called upon during difficult times, and may also offer support and assistance.

Dealing With Feelings of Loss and Change

When parents divorce or remarry, the adults and children within the family may experience feelings of insecurity, sadness or anger resulting from the loss of the biological family living together. Both may feel the loss of future plans, reduced income, or loss of familiarity if there has been a

change in housing, schools, church, or even community.

Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the losses and changes you have experienced?
- How does your partner feel about the losses and changes being experienced?
- How have you dealt with your feelings?
- How are your children and stepchildren adapting to the changes?
- In what ways are your children expressing their feelings?

Activity 1a: Feeling Words

To help you identify your feelings about your stepfamily, use the words on the activity sheet and select a few that describe the pleasant and unpleasant feelings you have about your situation.

Activity 1b: Feelings

Children also need to understand their feelings about their family. It is easier for them to use pictures to identify how they feel. Use this activity at home with your children to help them express and understand their feelings about living in a stepfamily.

Remember, in this activity your most important skill as a parent is to encourage them to share their feelings and to listen with your heart and your ears. If you invite them to share their feelings and then discount them or scold them for what they say, they may not talk with you again.

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Activity 1c: How Do I Feel?

On the outline of the face, draw how you feel about your stepfamily experience today. Discuss with another person why you have chosen to draw that face for today.

New Family Expectations

Expectations need to be discussed when forming a new stepfamily. Unrealistic expectations are a stumbling block for any family and may cause unnecessary pressure and stress. When stepfamily life is not what members expect, they may feel inadequate, discouraged, angry, or a mixture of all of these emotions.

The idea of “instant love” can be especially threatening, as it places unrealistic expectations on all stepfamily members. They cannot be pressured into loving each other. They must have time to get acquainted and to build trusting relationships. This process may take at least three to five years, and in some cases there will always be a distance between family members.

When adults and children discuss their expectations with each other and determine which expectations are realistic and possible, stepfamilies may begin to build a strong relationship. Talking about expectations is a difficult task but one that is worth the effort. Expectations may involve issues such as household chores, whether or not teenagers should get a job, spending allowances, teens driving the car, being enrolled in dance or sports, homework, free time, television and computer rules, and communication with parents and extended

family. Underlying resentment and jealousy may occur if individuals are not open to an exchange of dialogue. Openness and caring communication will begin to build trust and respect between family members.

Activity 2a: New Family Expectations

As a new family comes together, family expectations and roles may play an integral part in misunderstandings and conflict. Too often expectations are not shared with each other in clear, simple messages. List some of the expectations you have for each person. What are some expectations you think others have for you and for each other? Expectations must be spoken and shared with each family member, as others cannot read your mind.

Activity 2b: The People Who Live in My House

Have each family member list each person who lives with them in their house. There also might be family members who join in on weekends or holidays. This is a good activity for younger children as it gives them a concrete way to see who lives with them and who may join in, specifically on weekends.

Discussion Questions:

- List some unrealistic expectations.
- What are some of your expectations for your new partner?
- What are some of your expectations for your children and stepchildren?
- Discuss these expectations with your

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partner and, if appropriate, with your children.

- (Children) List some expectations you have for your parents. Are any of these unrealistic?

Family History and Traditions

Stepfamily members bring different traditions and ways of doing things into the new family, as well as their own package of habits, attitudes, values, and rituals.

Each family had its own traditions of holidays, certain events that were celebrated, religious backgrounds, and activities and routines that family members considered important. These individual and family traditions are familiar to those who have become accustomed to living with each other but are unfamiliar to those who have not known or lived with each other before forming a stepfamily. In addition, many memories have already been formed between family members who have shared a life previously. At first these different backgrounds may create confusion and cause the newcomers to feel like outsiders. The lack of familiarity may be threatening and uncomfortable.

It takes considerable time for stepfamilies to learn about each other's histories, negotiate new traditions, and create their own family memories and personal relationships. Stepfamilies have previous memories to deal with, some of which are not always good.

Former spouses, grandparents and other relatives also have an influence on the success of a stepfamily. Just as these family members can support or hinder first-time

marriages, they may also support or hinder a remarriage and stepfamily situation. Other adults often have a lot of influence on what happens with your children and the plans you make and may influence your communication with your new spouse. This may create feelings of uncertainty, jealousy, helplessness, and a lack of control that first marriages usually do not experience. When the spouses love each other, are committed to prioritizing their relationship, and are willing to attempt to work out the best solution, these situations can be resolved.

Activity 3: Traditions to Explore

Write your family name on the crest and then be creative with drawing in your traditions and rituals. Be open to discussion.

Discussion Questions:

- What traditions and rituals do you feel are non-negotiable (you will not change)?
- What traditions and rituals does your family bring to the new stepfamily?
- What traditions and rituals does your partner's family bring to the new stepfamily?
- What traditions and rituals would you like to start as a newly formed family?(If you have older children, you will want to involve them in this discussion.)

Loyalty Issues

The relationship dynamics in stepfamilies are complex. Loyalty issues in stepfamilies are a common concern because the bonds

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children feel with their parents are often stronger than in nuclear families. This is especially true for adolescents who feel greater loyalty to their biological parents than to their stepparent. Although this is a natural expectation for teen behavior, it is difficult for parents to accept and may cause conflict and disruption within the household. The teen's bond in a nuclear family is usually between both parents, but after a parental divorce, it is common for the teen to bond closely with one parent. Theories differ on why this occurs, but the child often bonds with the most needy parent or attaches to the parent who was the primary caretaker. Although not appropriate behavior, in the absence of one parent, the teen may assume a parental role. This makes it difficult for the child's other parent, custodial or noncustodial, and adds to the difficulties of forming bonds with stepparents.

In the nuclear family, rituals and celebrations with extended family often increase bonding and family interaction. However, stepfamily celebrations and interactions may decrease bonding.

Sometimes tension may be high between certain individuals, especially if the relationship is relatively new or if a marriage occurred without everyone's blessings. Parents must use their good judgment when dealing with these types of family activities and interactions. There will be times to use parental authority to have a teen attend a family event, holiday rituals, or family interaction, and, at other times, it will be OK to allow the teen to make that decision. Parents must then honor and respect the decision the teen chooses. As always, it is important that parents try to discuss feelings

with teenagers to determine how teens feel, what they want, and how they might appropriately act on those feelings. Some teenagers will not talk. When silence or withdrawal continues for a week or several weeks, it is time to get intervention from another source for both the teen and the parents. The child needs more help than the parents can give. Parents do not need to handle a situation like this alone.

Discussion Questions

- How do I define "loyalty"?
- How do I build and encourage loyalty in my stepfamily?

Activity 4: Loyalty

Read and react to the stories. Share with your family members how you felt about the people in the situations. Answer some of the questions provided.

Family Transitions

Most stepfamilies must learn to deal with two separate family units overlapping through the children. Children move between two homes, coping with friends and possessions being in two places, two sets of rules and routines, and two different ways of doing things. They are often torn by loyalty to each parent. They may not embrace a new stepparent for fear of upsetting or losing a parent's love.

This transition between homes is not easy for children or parents. Parents in both households need to help children develop

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a sense of belonging. Children and adults must be involved in dealing with the issues facing the two household family members. Parents must use consistent businesslike communication with each other if at all possible to avoid putting children in the middle. Adults should not use their children in any way to pry into the life of the other parent. This applies whether children are very young or are older teens. Hurtful comments about the other parent are damaging to all family relationships.

Quite often, with parental support, moving between two households can actually provide children with a richness of experiences which could not be provided in only one household.

Activity 5: Transitions

Try to find a quiet moment with a cup of tea or soda. Get a notepad or pencil. Observe family attitudes and behaviors during times of transitions. Answer the questions in the activity.

Discussion Questions:

- What works for your family when making transitions from one household to another?
- How might you improve communication with your children's other parent to make the transition easier?
- Do you notice behavior changes when your children transition from one home to the other?
- How might you be able to ease transitions?

- What benefits are experienced when children make smooth transitions?

Legal Relationships

Another difference to be noted between the original family and stepfamily is that stepfamily members are not all "legally" related. The original family is usually a legal union which entitles family members the right to inheritance, school records, medical attention, and other benefits. A legal relationship also represents a commitment between the adults and children. Unless the stepparent adopts, which is not always an alternative, the legal relationship within stepfamilies exists only between husband and wife, and not between stepparent and stepchildren.

In some stepfamilies the lack of legal ties may present only minor problems. Some stepparents are fearful of forming too close of a relationship with their stepchildren for several reasons, including uncertainty of financial obligations. One of the partners may be more concerned about financial obligations than the other. Previous losses of family relationships may enhance this fear of losing the new step-relationships if the marriage ends. This fear may also exist for children, who in some cases may have had multiple experiences with their parents remarrying or living with different partners.

Mutual trust and respect is essential for making any plans with a new partner. Even though the lack of legal rights and ties may cause concern and frustration, it is important to take the risk and build a strong relationship between stepparent and stepchild. Even if a second divorce occurs, many former stepparents and stepchildren

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continue their relationship and are lifetime friends.

Activity 6: Legal Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action

Please read and discuss how several of these issues might be influenced by the legal stipulations of the divorce and by your personal attitude communication styles.

Discussion Questions:

- What issues have been discussed regarding legal rights and ties with your new partner?
- What might you do to alleviate any fears either you or your partner have regarding financial obligations or future problems with older children?

Stepfamily Success

Success is not guaranteed, but by working together it may be achieved.

The marriage or partner relationship should be based on mutual love and respect with trust for each other. This adult partnership will be the strong bond that ties the new family together. Being willing to discuss and determine realistic expectations are perhaps the two things you can do to prevent the most conflict in your new marriage.

There are some benefits to being a stepfamily. Children have an expanded network of caring adults to provide for them. Children will likely learn effective coping skills if their parents are happy. There are more people to love. Although there

will be additional challenges, a stepfamily can provide a sense of place and purpose, especially if you felt a significant loss with your divorce and loss of the original family. However, it is important to remember no person or family can replace someone you had in the past. Look forward to the future with anticipation, hope, and joy. Perhaps the easiest way to plan on contributing to stepfamily success is to take a parenting class, talk with other parents, read books, or seek out information on parenting.

Dr. Brett Sparks, psychologist with the National Institute of Marriage Research, studied Dr. Gary Chapman's work, which spanned over 30 years of couple counseling. They found that five primary ways in which partners give and receive love are physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time together, giving gifts, and acts of service. Sparks and Chapman found that hearing words of affirmation (positive truths) followed by physical touch were the primary ways that individuals felt loved. Quality time together was the major way individuals showed their love.

Couples are challenged when working on their new partner relationship and stepfamily success because love languages (see Activity 7) are sometimes inconsistent between how they are shown and felt. This may lead to dissatisfaction in marriage if individuals are expecting something that will not be coming or if they keep showing what they want but the message does not get across. People must examine their own expectations for expressing and receiving love, in addition to understanding their partner. Too often partners assume they know each other and have expectations

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for being treated in a certain way. These words and expectations must be discussed with each other. However, in order to have greater success of experiencing and showing love, understanding one's own love language is essential.

Suggestions for stepfamily success:

- Nurture the couple relationship
- Find personal space and time
- Nourish family relationships
- Maintain close parent-child relationships
- Develop stepparent-stepchild relationships
- Build family trust
- Strengthen stepfamily ties through family discussion
- Work at keeping communication open to the children's other household

Activity 7:

Love Languages

All parents and children have different ways of expressing their love. Family members must be patient and loving toward each other when forming a new family. Some people hug and kiss a lot, others give gifts, some speak or sing kind words. There are no right or wrong ways to express love. But we have our favorite ways that we like to give and our favorite ways that we like to receive love. Read through the list of five love languages and answer the questions.

Discussion Questions:

- How would you describe your love language?
- What is the love language of your partner?
- Do you spend 20 minutes of relaxed time

with your partner each day? If not, how can you make it possible? (Nurture couple relationship.)

- What are some of the additional benefits your children may experience by living in a stepfamily?
- What qualities do you consider part of a successful stepfamily?
- What can you do to help your family be a successful stepfamily?
- What can you say to individual family members that shows appreciation? (Nourish family relationships.)
- What family events did you schedule this month? (Build trust.)

Grown Children

Stepparents of grown children have other issues to deal with. Sometimes adult children can be very difficult, moody, and rude in the creation of a new relationship and marriage, even to the point of refusing to participate in rituals, celebrations, or family interactions. Such behavior and actions may cause conflict between the new couple. Parents of adult children must realize that adult children have lives of their own, and that you can have a happy relationship in spite of their choices.

Partner Intimacy and Closeness

Intimacy and closeness are an important part of any partner relationship, especially as individuals transition from being single to having a new partner. Sexual intimacy shared between two adults encompasses

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passion, love, and respect for each other. Besides attraction to each other, partners will also need friendship, commitment, forgiveness, and patience.

Many nights are likely to be interrupted by young children, and parents of teenagers will have nights when they are concerned for the safety of the teens. It doesn't seem to matter what age the children are, there will be nights with little sleep, and couples must work hard to maintain a healthy sexual relationship even though they are tired or stressed. Since parents will have added responsibilities with stepchildren, new routines, and other activities, it will be best to plan before marriage how to manage occasional time away from the children. This will help the couple nurture and care for their partner relationship and take care of each other's needs. Partners can plan this time to have fun and relaxation with each other. Besides some time away, parents need to have time alone in the evenings when children have gone to bed and are hopefully asleep. Both partners must take responsibility to help make this happen.

Discussion Questions:

- What will you do to help make your sexual life healthy and happy?
- How will you manage some time alone and away with your partner?

Expression of Love

For healthier self-esteem and sexual development, it is important for children to see parents expressing their love and affection to each other in gentle ways, such as hugging and kissing. How love and

intimacy are expressed in families may vary. One partner may be used to hugging their partner openly or kissing in front of the children. Others may feel differently about the expression of love. There may be differences with the expression of love with children. One family may have been used to hugging and embracing and kissing each other often, and another may not have expressed love so openly. These may seem like little things, but when all of these things come together in a new family, they may become a problem.

Discussion Questions:

- What signs of love and affection with your partner do you think are appropriate to show in front of your children? How does your partner feel about expressing affection in front of the children?
- What are some of the ways you express your love with your children? How does your partner express love with the children?

Strong Families

Research findings show there is little difference between children in stepfamilies and children in other families. Since stepfamilies are a common family model, there may be comfort in this finding for parents who want their children to be resilient and capable.

John DeFrain, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension family and community development specialist, conducted research for 30 years with thousands of couples and families. He found that strong families have characteristics that are remarkably similar from culture to culture:

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- **Appreciation and affection.** People in strong families deeply care for one another and regularly let each other know. How do you show appreciation and affection to your family?
- **Commitment.** Members of strong families invest time and energy in family activities.
- **Positive Communication.** Successful families spend time talking with and listening to one another. Meal time can be ideal for this activity.

Activity 8: How Does Your Family Communicate?

List the positive ways your family communicates. Then, list the negative ways you might communicate. Research says it takes about 10 positive comments to make up for every one negative comment.

- **Coping Ability.** Strong families possess the ability to manage both daily stressors and difficult life crises creatively and effectively. They learn how to prevent trouble before it happens.
- **Spiritual Well-Being.** Spiritual well-being can be seen as the caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion.
- **Enjoyable Time Together.** In a study, U.S. schoolchildren said that a happy family is one that does things together and genuinely enjoys the time it shares.

Activity 9: Doing Things Together as a Family

What things do you like to do together as a family? Depending on the age of your children, this may be a difficult activity to complete. As children get older they spend less time with their family and more time with friends and school activities. However, it is an important activity for your family to complete. It is important to find time and activities that the family can enjoy together.

Couples must decide what approach is best for their family. Some choices will depend on your background, culture, economic status, and current environment. Choices also will be influenced by personalities, temperaments, values, and beliefs. Some families will be very spiritual, others will spend a lot of time together or openly show affection with hugs and kisses, and some families have strong coping strategies to encourage each other and share with less fortunate individuals. There are no easy answers for how to maintain a strong family, but there must be a balance of the characteristics listed above in order to keep a family intact, successful, and happy.

Discussion Questions:

- What strengths does your family have?
- Ask your partner to list the strengths your family has.
- Are your lists similar? Why or why not?
- What strengths do you admire about families that appear happy?

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- What areas would you like to strengthen in your family?
- What strength will you work on improving this week?

Parenting Children in a Stepfamily

It is impossible to predict what skills you may need as a parent in a stepfamily because you will need to be flexible in many situations. From the time children are born until they leave your home as young adults, they will be developing and learning something new every day. And so will you. Even when you think you have parenting figured out, when older teenagers are about to leave home, they may “throw you for a loop.” In other words, no child is the same, and every situation is different. That is what makes parenting so exciting and so challenging at the same time. It helps to have a supportive partner and supportive extended network to help with parenting because with support, you’ll be a better parent. If we knew what demands would be made on us before beginning the adventure of parenting, many of us would get scared off from the start. It is an awesome responsibility and also a tremendous adventure that most often brings great joy, although there also may be some tears and sorrow. It is essential to give and receive love and support from your spouse and to also have a supportive network of caring family and friends.

In a stepfamily, you have more people to love, but you cannot expect to be loved in return. Remember that as a parent you do not need to be busy all the time. Your children do not need all the new toys and clothes. They need you and your love. They

need some sense of routine and sameness. Help them spend time with loved ones, including family and friends. They need for you to care about them and help them grow and develop into capable young adults. Give your time and do your best to practice the following:

- Be kind
- Respect differences
- Have patience
- Practice forgiveness
- Take time to listen
- If you can’t listen well at a particular time, say so, and reschedule soon
- Share feelings
- Make sure your children and your stepchildren know they can talk to you
- Have family time
- Have meal time
- Laugh together
- Do fun activities together
- Have a sense of humor
- Be open-minded
- Seek support from other parents

Dr. Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Kansas State University Extension family systems specialist, developed *Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies*. The focus of the program is to build strong couple relationships, maintain strong parent/child relationships, develop stepparent/stepchild relationships, understand financial and legal issues, work with the absent parent and other persons outside the stepfamily, and nourish the stepfamily in everyday living. Dr. Shoup Olsen recommends that parents:

- take their time, and expect love and care to come slowly through shared experiences with their stepchildren.
- consider letting the biological parent take the lead in disciplining, with the stepparent

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for support, until the stepparent/stepchild relationship is stronger.

- expect negotiation and conflict to be part of everyday life.
- give their family permission to try things differently. Find out what works best for their family.
- give children accurate information about what is happening in the new family that is appropriate for their age and stage of development.
- discuss rules and roles, and make them clear so children understand what is expected.
- expect family members to grieve over the loss of their old family. Talk about these feelings.
- share negative statements and feelings about the child's other parent with an adult, not their child.
- assure children that love is not limited.

They can like or love all members of the family, including a stepparent, and still love and care about the absent parent.

Parenting Styles

Another important issue to consider before forming a new stepfamily is the parenting styles that you and your partner have with the children. The main categories of parenting styles are listed here. As you read them, you can see what style you might be.

Democratic Parenting: Parents establish clear rules and expectations and discuss them with the child. Although they consider the child's perspective, they use reason and power to enforce their standards. Children respond to democratic parenting by being

energetic, friendly, self-reliant, and cheerful. They cope well and are more successful in their activities.

Permissive Parenting: Parents let the child's preferences take priority over their ideals and rarely force the child to conform to their standards. The permissive style may be chaotic. Children with permissive parents are often impulsive, aggressive, rebellious, domineering, and underachieving.

Uninvolved Parenting: Parents often ignore the child, letting the child's preferences prevail as long as the preferences do not interfere with what the parents want to do. These families range from being connected to disengaged, and flexible to chaotic. Children with uninvolved parents are often solitary, withdrawn, and underachieving.

Rejecting Parenting: Parents do not pay much attention to the child's needs and seldom have expectations regarding how the child should behave. When the rejecting style becomes extreme, children do not feel cared for and loved even though they are expected to behave and have many rules to follow. Children with rejecting style parenting are often immature and have psychological problems.

Authoritarian Parenting: Parents establish rigid rules and expectations and expect the children to do everything they demand. They expect and demand obedience from a child. This type of parenting is especially difficult for teens, who rebel against strict rules and demands. Children with authoritarian parents tend to be moody, unhappy, vulnerable to stress, and unfriendly.

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Generally, it is best to leave matters of discipline to the biological parent. However, when the stepparent is the primary caretaker or when the biological parent is absent for some time, there are exceptions.

Many discipline techniques and strategies are available to parents. It is helpful for parents to agree on what tools to use before remarriage, but it is often trial and error as each child and each situation is different. Democratic parenting works best as children will become self-reliant, cheerful, and achievement-oriented. There may be times when parents use some of all types of parenting but parents must strive to be fair and use good judgment when disciplining their children. For the most part, it is best to discuss discipline problems about children in private. There may be occasional issues when it is helpful to discuss a situation in front of the child, especially an older child. Avoid putting a child in the middle of a heated discussion or argument.

The main point about discipline is for parents to stand together and be the leaders of the new stepfamily. Children often try to manipulate parents to get them to disagree with each other and side with the child. If allowed to continue, this behavior may start family disagreements that may easily lead to the destruction of the newly merged family. Parents need to examine their own behavior when children misbehave and not allow their behavior to escalate out of control where parents shout, yell, scream, or even spank. Take a deep breath, count to 10, and take a break from the situation if at all possible. Occasionally, parents will disagree with each other and change an opinion or consequence given to the child. It will take some trial and error on the parent's part. No parent is

perfect. They will have a greater chance at making their stepfamily successful and to be happy as a couple, if they stand together, support each other, and not allow children to separate them. (For more information on how to deal with children's misbehavior, read NebFact 152, Why Children Misbehave, online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/nf152, and visit www.unlforfamilies.unl.edu.)

Parents may want to take a parenting class together even if they have taken classes with their former partner. There are many Web-based and learn-at-home courses that parents can take to learn more about parenting techniques to help children be self-sufficient, secure, and to feel accepted and loved.

Activity 10: Parenting Styles

Read through the parenting styles and choose whether you tend to be more uninvolved, permissive, authoritarian, democratic, rejecting, or a combination.

Discussion Questions:

- Do you both agree on discipline techniques to use with your children?
- How is this different from the way you used to discipline your children?
- How do you feel about your partner disciplining your children?
- How does your partner feel about you disciplining your stepchildren?
- What issues might be difficult for you to work through with your new partner?

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- When might you talk with your child's other parent (noncustodial) about discipline?
- Has there been an occasion when a child has tried to separate you with an issue?
- Explain a situation when you may side with your stepchild on an issue.

Activity II: Disciplining Children

Complete the table on the ways you may or may not discipline your children. After completing the table, determine whether you are happy with your discipline method and decide what changes you are going to make.

Making Friends with Children but Being a Parent First

Children want to be played with and want to know you enjoy being with them. They need to have love, affection, and attention. Each child will respond differently to having a stepparent. Some children will warm up quickly or be able to share their feelings. Other children may be shy and withdrawn. Some children may even be clingy after going through the divorce of their parents. Others will be angry and act out in ways that may be surprising. Children need to know they have someone they can trust and that you are a safe and caring parent who loves them regardless of their behavior.

Dating your partner and spending time with your partner's children is different than living together. You may have been more of a godparent or friend to the children before you committed to living together

as a stepfamily. Although being friends is important, you must be a parent first, using love, consistency, and fairness with your parenting style. Parents must set clear boundaries with realistic expectations and consequences for children's misbehavior.

Discussion Questions:

- When do you feel more like a friend to your children?
- When do you feel more like a parent to your children?
- When is it important to be a parent to your children?

Communicating with Children

Begin by letting your children know they are loved and respected and that you care how they feel. Let them know you want to listen and that they can talk to you about anything. They will believe this when they experience this. Be willing to stop what you are doing when they have something to tell you so that you can hear what they are saying and let them know you care about them. Some children may not have had the opportunity to talk about their feelings or may not have been taught how to express their feelings.

Discussion Questions:

- What are your strengths when communicating with children?
- What are your challenges when communicating with children?

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- Why is it that parents sometimes feel that children's silence is better than talking?
- How can you teach children to express their feelings?

Activity 12: **Back-To-Back Activity**

This activity can be done with children. It needs an even number of family members to participate. Try to allow at least 15 minutes for this activity.

Activity 13: **Communicating with Children**

Read through the tips on how to communicate with children, and complete the questions that follow the example with how you might communicate to the child in the situation.

Will We Love Each Other?

It is normal to want your stepchildren to love you and their new siblings, but you cannot force children to love you or anyone else. You can expect stepfamily members to respect each other and be kind to each other. Parents need to establish rules for how family members should talk to each other and respect each others' space and property. Hopefully, the love and respect will come naturally. Consistent role modeling by you and your partner will play a huge part in this. If the partner relationship is strong, the children will most likely grow to love and respect stepfamily members.

Sibling Jealousy and Rivalry

In a stepfamily, children are brought together who are not as familiar with each other and their respective households. The children may vary in age and sometimes there will be a large range of ages, indicating a difference in developmental stages, activities, and interests. Having children who are a larger age span apart from each other may be easier for parents than having children close to the same age who are comparing attention given, discipline techniques used, gifts given, and many other things. It is difficult to treat children exactly the same when each child is different. However, within reason, parents must try to be fair and give children an equal amount of their time and resources. Parents must avoid having favorites, which is detrimental to children's self-esteem, memories, and family bonding experiences. Allow children to solve problems on their own unless someone is getting hurt or they have asked for advice. Use your good judgment to decide when intervention is necessary. Communicate with your partner on how to handle certain issues that arise.

Discussion Questions:

- What effects will the age span of your children have on your stepfamily?
- How will you spend time with all of the children and their activities?
- How will you handle communication on sibling jealousy and rivalry?

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Setting Clear Boundaries

You cannot determine what circumstances might occur while living together and parenting in your newly formed stepfamily. However, your stepfamily will be more successful if you have clear boundaries for parenting techniques and consequences.

Household rules should be set as soon as possible, even before your stepfamily begins living together. When major disagreements come up, discuss them in private, away from the children, to avoid making them feel responsible or involving them as a referee. It is important for parents to unite as one and have a strong front with the children. The stronger the couple relationship is, the stronger the stepfamily.

Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the boundaries you have set for your stepfamily?
- How will your partner be supportive of these boundaries and your parenting role?
- How do you and your partner agree on basic parenting techniques and boundaries?
- Where do you and your partner disagree on parenting and setting boundaries?
- In what ways might you and your partner benefit by attending a parenting class or enrolling in an Internet course?

Work Cooperatively with Extended Family

If the extended family has a history of love and caring, children benefit from having contact with these extended family members as often as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins want to maintain contact with them. In some cases, where bitterness and jealousy have been a part of the relationship and subsequent divorce, children are separated from extended family and not allowed to see their paternal or maternal grandparents. Grandparents offer a view of the world to children that parents cannot offer. Interaction with grandparents who are supportive and positive about the new family relationship gives children potential opportunities to learn and experience life with acceptance and bounteous love.

Allow children to see their extended family and other grandparents unless child abuse or neglect has been a part of the relationship or is suspected. Try to be understanding of alternating holidays and special occasions such as a grandparent's birthday or anniversary. Although many children are resilient, they also hurt and grieve. They need loving interaction and support from extended family members.

Activity 14: Legal Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action

Read the Legal Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action and check to see if any of the rights are difficult to follow. Talk with your children about their rights.

Note: The Legal Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action is repeated here for your convenience.

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Discussion Questions:

- What experiences have you had with extended family?
- What would you have changed about the way you handled or coped with those situations?
- Did you act in the best interest of your children?
- How did your child react?

Be Kind to Your Former Partner

Be kind, or at least be tolerant, of your former partner because that person is also your child's parent. No matter how your former partner treated you or what type of relationship you have now, avoid putting your former partner down in front of the children. This includes your spouse's former partner too. Calling a person names, putting the person down, or belittling them in any way serves no purpose. In fact, if children hear you talking this way, it will only cause them to feel more troubled about the divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily members.

In some cases, it isn't possible for former partners to come face-to-face with each other; therefore, they will need to use other forms of communication, such as the telephone, email, or letters. It is important to avoid putting children in the middle or using them as informants.

Older children may communicate with their noncustodial parent voluntarily and can provide necessary information and details of certain events and activities. Make sure you also share information because receiving

information twice is better than not getting information at all. Sometimes older children may avoid sharing information about an important event because they are embarrassed or fearful to bring two families together, especially if there has been conflict and hard feelings caused by the divorce. Children may experience several celebrations for one event held separately by two families.

Consider how your children feel and what struggles they may be facing because of family changes.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways do you show tolerance to your former partner?
- If you cannot talk to your former partner directly, how do you communicate to share information about the children?
- How do you encourage children to actively plan and participate in family celebrations?

Shared Parenting

Parents with young children hope to achieve some sort of arrangement that is best for the child. There are many types of arrangements in divorce custodies. In joint physical custody, the child will have two homes but may not spend every other week at each home. It may be six months here and six months there. Regardless of the custodial arrangements, it is best when parents strive to achieve what is called shared parenting.

Shared parenting means the adults work out a mutual agreement to keep the child's best interest in mind at all times. They figure out a plan to accommodate everyone's schedule.

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With this type of parenting, the adults have a level of respect for each other because they are willing to communicate in nonthreatening ways, listen to each other, figure out their different schedules, and ultimately do what is best for the child. Divorced parents do not need to be friends but they can be respectful to one another for the child's sake. In many cases, the adults have several children with various schedules of their own. Although more difficult, shared parenting may be accomplished long distance. Through long-distance communication, the noncustodial parent may plan to assist on certain weekends and holidays by positively supporting the custodial parent.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the benefits to children with shared parenting?
- What might be some challenges with shared parenting?

High Conflict Parenting

When parents engage in conflict, children become more fearful. Children of all ages are scared of these exchanges and may isolate themselves in order to avoid confrontations. They feel agitated and may become aggressive. It takes 72 hours after parental confrontations for children to calm down (see NebFact 550, *Successful Transitions For High Conflict Families*, online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/nf550.pdf).

Parents who experience high conflict should arrange to have another adult with them when they transfer children to lessen the possibility of confrontation. Keep telephone calls short and avoid as much conflict and

contact as you can with the noncustodial parent. Be civil to each other for a few brief minutes during the transition and to make necessary arrangements for the children. Even though this may be a difficult situation, your children need your help during this time, so try hard for the children.

Setting Rules for Visitation

The courts will often determine visitation, but you may influence this decision. You may also make it easier on your children, your former partner, and yourself by your attitude and assistance. Unless there has been evidence of abuse or neglect (partner or child abuse), help your children to visit their other parent. You may be in contact with the other parent to make clear arrangements for when and where to pick up the child and when and where the child should be returned. As a custodial parent, you can help your child make plans to leave, pack a suitcase, discuss any missed homework or assignments, and unpack and help with laundry upon return. Parents who can focus on the needs of the child can help make the transition from one home to the other more pleasant and less traumatic. There will be a readjustment period when the child may not speak much, may not eat much, or may act out by misbehaving. It takes about 72 hours for the child to adjust to another home routine. Try to understand and make yourself available, with a caring attitude, to the child during this time.

Discussion Questions:

- What was the courts decision on visitation?
- How can you work cooperatively with your children's other parent on visitation?

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Financial Decisions and How Money Will Be Made, Spent, and Saved

Finances are one of the major causes of marital discord and conflict. It is essential that you trust each other with money in this new relationship and that you are satisfied with the financial arrangement you have. Financial decisions and how money will be made, spent, and saved should be talked about in detail before getting married and joining two families. Talking about finances is one of the keys to stepfamily success. You might develop a trial budget. Discuss how you will provide for the children (yours, mine, and ours). This will tend to change as time goes on and children grow. Health insurance and medical bills are an important issue that should be discussed before marriage. Decisions about checking and savings accounts should be discussed, as well as wills, estates, or retirement accounts. Discussion may include who will pay for the house mortgage, repairs, vehicles, utilities, insurance, and groceries. Decisions must be made about how much money will be spent by one person without consulting with the other, how much money, if any, will be spent on adult children, gifts, and donations. Discussions about income, money, how to spend, and how to save are essential planning before marriage and must be regularly communicated during a marriage or partnership.

Activity 15: **Keys to a Successful Budget**

Develop a working budget using the following questions as a model. (For more information, read *Starting on the Road to Financial Security: Setting Financial*

Goals, available online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1765.pdf; and *Budgeting Systems When There Are Two Earners in the Household*, available online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1764.pdf.)

Discussion Questions

- When you are discussing finances, what categories will be in your budget?
- How will you divide expenses?
- How will you manage your savings and retirement plans?
- What will child support pay for and who will be responsible for taking care of those expenditures (the parent or stepparent)?
- Will additional expenses incurred for the child be shared with the noncustodial parent?

Time Management

Your new stepfamily is bound to be busy, but try not to let a busy and hectic life wear you down and prevent your family from spending precious time together relaxing, having fun and enjoying recreation. Time together may have to be scheduled just as you schedule time for a doctor appointment, school meeting, or shopping trip. Work together with your partner and older children to get housework done. Try to turn chores into fun by your joyful attitude, singing songs, or playing games. Sometimes you might celebrate with a pizza or a movie when the work is done. Time together is a priceless gift if it is used properly. Children may complain if they have other plans, but let them know they do not have a choice at

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certain times. Other activities may have to be canceled or postponed to make family time a priority, but soon it will become a habit you will not want to break. (For more information, read *It's About Time: Time Management Simplified*, available online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1771.pdf; and *Thirteen Timely Tips for More Effective Time Management*, available online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1772.pdf.)

Take care of yourself too. It is difficult to find time to do all the expected work and activities. You will need to set realistic expectations for yourself and your stepfamily. Taking care of a family, going to work to help support a family, being with your new partner, and spending time with family and friends leaves little time to care for yourself. It is essential that you care for your physical and emotional well-being so that you will be well and happy. You will need time to rest and do some things you enjoy. Prioritize at least two hours every week to spend on yourself. This may be for a nap, a massage, going for walk, or visiting a friend (for more information, read *NebFact 596, Making Time for Work and Play*, online at www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/nf596.pdf).

Discussion Questions

- How will you prioritize family time to talk with each other?
- How will you care for your physical and mental health every day?
- How will you encourage children to participate who do not want to go along on a family day outing?
- What can you do when you feel downhearted and blue?

Activity 16: Time Management

Try to set aside two hours each week for yourself and do something you like. On the worksheet, list three things you will do for yourself this week. How can you make this work?

Note: After completing Activity 16, if you continue to feel downhearted and blue for several days, go see your doctor. Feelings of depression are normal for someone who cares for children 24 hours a day, works a job and balances a family.

Fitting Into the Fabric of the Community or Society

Now that you are a new couple and stepfamily, you may receive more invitations to attend activities together such as parties, receptions, dinners, or other celebrations. You will need to decide how active and involved you want to be in various activities and commitments. Participating in these activities will take time away from your family, and you will need to find a balance. If you are new to a location it may be easier for you to make an adjustment, but if you stay in the same place as when you were with your former partner, it may be difficult. Certain influences such as family members, church or religious members, and coworkers may make it difficult to begin a new life without experiencing the judgment, blame, or gossip of others. You will need to decide whose community to live in, which organizations or religious groups to be involved in, and what schools the children will attend. Some change will be inevitable. One partner may adjust better

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than the other. The transition may have some difficulties. One partner cannot always give in to the other, thereby being passive and unequal in decision-making. Although some compromise will be necessary to make the relationship work, both partners must be happy with the decisions in the long run.

Discussion Questions:

- Where will you live?
- What school will your children attend? Will you have children in several schools?
- How will you be involved in religious activities? Will you stay in the same religious group?
- How can you both feel comfortable about these decisions?

Take Personal Responsibility

Take personal responsibility and control of the situation. You cannot control others but you can control how you react to others and to certain situations. Remember, too, that you influence others by your behavior, calmness, and attitude. Make sure you are taking care of yourself and getting enough sleep and exercise, in addition to good nutrition. Seek out information. University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension research-based parenting information is available on the UNL For Families Web site at unlforfamilies.unl.edu. Take parenting classes. If necessary, seek assistance from a trained counselor. Many families benefit from the assistance of a trained professional counselor who can help you cope with the changes and transition that are inevitable

when forming a stepfamily.

Discussion Questions:

- What information do you still want to learn about stepfamilies?
- What parenting classes are offered in your community or on the Internet?
- Are there any stepfamily support groups in your community?
- Do you or your partner feel a need for professional counseling?
- Do you feel your children would benefit from professional counseling?
- Who offers professional counseling in your community?

Children May be Abused or Neglected in Stepfamilies

In some cases, partner abuse may be present or may have existed in previous relationships. When partner abuse is present, children are at an increased risk to be physically and sexually abused. Even if children are not touched physically or sexually, they suffer emotional abuse when they witness partner abuse. These scars may last a lifetime. In some cases, abuse may have occurred in the extended family or you may suspect your children will not be safe in someone's care. If this is the case, do not allow your children to be alone with that person. Always use your good judgment. Behavior changes such as bed wetting, withdrawal, aggressiveness, or changed eating habits may indicate child abuse or neglect.

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If child abuse is suspected, call 911 or Health and Human Services (HHS) to make a report and get immediate assistance.

Adults may benefit from getting counseling if any type of abuse was present in their past partner relationships or when they were a child.

If partner abuse is occurring call 911; your local shelter services; the toll-free National Domestic Violence Hotline, (800) 799-SAFE (7233), (TDD for the hearing impaired, (800) 787-3224); or a mental health professional to get information and help.

You and your children may also benefit from professional counseling.

Support Network

When things are not going as well as you had expected, seek help from others. Let them know how you feel. In most cases, people turn to their family and friends when needing help with family or work issues. Can you think of a friend who is in a similar situation as yours? Think of someone who is positive to be around. Your support network is built with people who think you are great and who love and care for you. They want to support you in any way they can, whether emotionally, with information, or physically. They will do what they can when they see a need or when you ask them. Nonsupportive people, on the other hand, will contradict you or undermine your authority as a parent. It is essential to build a support network of family and friends to avoid being isolated during your child rearing years. Other parents are often a good source of knowledge and can offer suggestions.

Family members may also contribute a great deal of support to parents with children. In some cases, grandparents may be key players in helping with children; in others, they are either not available or supportive from a long distance. These connections will strengthen your skills in handling issues with your children more effectively.

Sometimes the problems are too large to be handled by yourself. Asking for professional assistance should not be embarrassing because it shows strength of character and that you really care about your relationships and want to help your stepfamily succeed. Sometimes you need a neutral, trained party who has expertise to help you cope with some issues.

Activity 17 : Plans to be Successful at Stepparenting

Read through the statements on the worksheet. Discuss each of the statements with your spouse or another person. What are your feelings about each statement? Would you change any of them? If yes, how would you change them? Discuss the changes you would make.

Summary

The start of a new stepfamily is an exciting adventure for the couple who has fallen in love. However, the children brought into the new family may not be as thrilled with the changes, or some children may be more accepting than others. Time and patience are needed to build any relationship, and even more so in stepfamilies because of the additional challenges of merging two families with different traditions and routines. Parents must role model and

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encourage acceptance and respect for each other and for the children. Love between stepsiblings and for stepparents cannot be forced. It will take constant work to make your stepfamily a strong and happy family. But with time, open communication, acceptance, respect, and forgiveness, the two families will more successfully merge into one, and may even grow to love each other. Stepfamilies will benefit from positive support given to them from family members, friends, coworkers, and others in the community in order to help them be successful in forming a new family.

Supporting Stepfamilies: What Do the Children Feel?

You have had a chance to look at the stepfamily from the adult's view, now let's take a look at stepfamilies from the children's view.

When a parent remarries, it is the legal and symbolic ending of the child's original family. Remarriage ends the dream that most children have that their parents will reunite as a couple. This realization coupled with the idea of a new, unrelated adult becoming a "parent figure" and a permanent resident of their home is enough to cause even the most well-adjusted child to experience a range of emotions from happiness and anxiety, to confusion, anger, sadness, and even depression.

A new marriage presents new opportunities for children, even though the idealized image of the original family pattern may always be present in their hearts and minds. Although, it might not have been a perfect family, the fantasy image will serve as the yardstick by which the new stepfamily is measured.

Individual role expectations for the new family may not have been discussed with children before the marriage. Misunderstood and unmet expectations may create difficulties for the new couple, for the parent/child relationship, and for sibling relationships. Adults have the misconception that children are so resilient they can recover from any changes. Children are resilient and they are quite able to move on with life if appropriately guided by the adults who love them. The anxieties of living with new people and new routines must be addressed, preferably before the wedding and certainly before the new living arrangement takes place.

It is wise for parents to keep in mind that children may see the losses of divorce and remarriage differently than they do. Children experience loss when the parents divorce and when one or both parents remarry. Children experience loss of control when they acquire stepsiblings, a different house, and perhaps a new school. Children may even experience the loss of family position or birth order if the new stepfamily includes additional children. To an adult these changes may seem solvable, but to many children they seem insurmountable.

Questions such as the following may be asked silently or not so silently:

- "Am I still the oldest?"
- "Who made you my boss?"
- "Am I still the baby in this family?"

This perceived loss of family status is often hard for parents to understand, but family position is a cornerstone of self-identity for children. Honest discussions about feelings need to take place for transitions to go smoothly.

Activity 18: **Who is My Family?**

Adults will complete the worksheet "Who Is My Family?" Children will also complete the worksheet and then both children and adults will compare and discuss their individual ideas of what family means to them. Use this opportunity to have a positive discussion about the importance that all family members nurture and support the children. In some circumstances this may be a difficult activity, so you should be prepared for some difficult discussion.

Supporting Stepfamilies: What Do the Children Feel?

Loss of Power and Control

Self-identity is a critical building block of self-esteem and behavior. Powerlessness often manifests itself in anger and rebellion or pervasive sadness and depression. Signs of these difficulties can vary depending on the age of the child and the family situation. It is common for children to regress, act out, feel insecure, or become dependent, clingy, irritable, demanding, and/or withdrawn when changes occur within the family, or when conflict appears in the stepfamily.

Tip. To help children gain some sense of power and control over their lives, encourage them to make some personal choices. Depending on the age of the child, this may be as simple as allowing them to choose what clothing they wish to wear, what they want for breakfast, or how to spend their allowance.

Have a job jar and let children choose which family job they will do for the week. Older children should be included in family discussions about rules, consequences, and family activities. Parents always retain the final vote by reason of authority, but giving children the opportunity to voice concerns and suggestions will strengthen the new family bonds and will lay the foundation for bigger negotiations that are sure to come.

Activity 19: Do Children Have Power?

Read the story on the activity sheet and decide how you can give the child a sense of power and control.

Guilt

Children tend to feel some guilt for the divorce. It is important for parents and stepparents to reinforce that all decisions concerning the divorce and remarriage have been made because of adult relationships, not because of relationships between parents and children. That being said, it is quite normal behavior for any child to manipulate a situation to their advantage. Displays of feelings of guilt and remorse can certainly be real but also may be used as attention-getters. If the parent focuses on the child, he/she cannot focus on the new stepparent. That may be an incentive enough for children to manipulate a situation. To avoid such situations, the biological parent should arrange to have one-on-one time with the child for at least a few minutes every day and one time during the week for a “date” with the child.

Children may feel guilty if they enjoy the company of their stepparent. They may feel as if they are being disloyal to their biological parent. This guilt may cause a child to keep the stepparent at a distance in order to minimize the feelings of guilt. It may also prevent any discussions with the biological parents about the changing family pattern.

Tip. It is extremely important for biological parents and stepparent(s) to have honest discussions with children, letting them know that it is OK to experience new family relationships.

According to the Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minn., one of the most important positive factors for children

Supporting Stepfamilies: What Do the Children Feel?

to succeed is that they have a strong relationship with at least three significant adults who care for them.

Parents, the responsibility is yours to allow and even encourage the building of new relationships without alienating the other parent, stepparent, or most importantly — the child!

Avoid using children as reporters or messengers for either home. This creates a tremendous pressure on children and will create the guilt that you are trying to avoid.

Loyalty Issues

Children struggle with loyalty issues during divorce. “What shall I tell?” “What should I never tell?” These seemingly simple questions cause great stress in children. Children have the right to love both parents. They worry about when to mention the name of the other parent. They worry about whom they should go to first, after they finish their sporting or school event. They worry about with whom they will spend the holidays. They feel that they have to take sides during and after divorce. Adding a stepparent adds another dimension of loyalty. Children think, “Does a stepparent really deserve my loyalty?”

An important piece of self-identity for children is the recognition that they possess a combination of the strengths and weaknesses of both parents. Attachment to both parents is critical for the positive growth of self-esteem and self-identity. A stepparent can become an important ally in this growth process. As such, it is important for the stepparent to resist alienating the children by criticizing either biological parent within

the earshot of the child. However, many children may still reject a stepparent out of loyalty to a biological parent and the fear of alienating that parent.

Activity 20: Ten Greatest Things About You

List 10 characteristics you like about yourself and then list the 10 characteristics you like about your stepchild, your spouse, or your own child. Look for the positive characteristics.

Tip. Honest discussions between child, parents, and stepparents are necessary to help the child experience growth in loyalty. For this discussion to be productive, all of the parents must come to terms with their own fears about loyalty.

Children need to be reassured that having a warm, caring relationship with a stepparent will not endanger the relationship with the biological parent.

A wise and compassionate stepparent will try to understand the child’s struggle and reach out to reassure the child of their desire to listen and be supportive.

One of the kindest things a parent can do is to relieve children of feeling disloyal by allowing them to love, honor, and respect all adults who are providing care for them.

Anger

Anger is a common emotion for both adults and children experiencing divorce. The Stages of the Grief Cycle, originally researched by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, include

Supporting Stepfamilies: What Do the Children Feel?

the following stages: shock and denial, anger, dialogue and bargaining, depression and detachment, and acceptance of the event. A copy of this grief cycle has been provided for you. Parents and children both should take time to discuss where they are on the grief cycle. The grief cycle does not always move forward. It is more like a pendulum that swings back and forth depending on the situation.

Before the children/stepparent relationship can move forward, the anger that children may feel toward the biological parents must be acknowledged. Children may truly believe they didn't cause the divorce and that they could not stop the divorce. However, they often harbor the idea that they can get the parents back together. When a stepparent enters the family, the idea of parental reconciliation dims and anger may explode with little or no direct connection to the stepparent or the event at hand. Unexpressed anger may surface with little correlation to the situation at hand, especially with older youth and teens. The stepparent may become the scapegoat for all of the unresolved anger from the divorce and remarriage.

Children may become angry because they don't see the noncustodial parent enough — or too much as the case may be. They feel the custodial parent spends more time with the new stepparent than with them. They may feel angry that nothing in their life is the same. Teens are often angry because this is the time of life when they are seeking independence (It's all about ME!). But the timing isn't good if their parent is dating or remarrying. The focus is often all about THEM-the parent!

Talking to Adults is an Unlikable Task

Children older than 10 years tend to dislike talking to adults. Adolescents give the appearance that they rarely want to have a conversation with a biological parent, but a stepparent? No way! Parents should find time each day to encourage a conversation with each child. This conversation lets the child or children know that they still occupy a special place. As the bond between family members grows, stepparents can be carefully added to this intimate conversation, first as good listeners and later as advisors.

Tip:

- Plan time every day to check in with your child one-on-one.
- Refrain from making negative comments about the other parent in front of the children or within their hearing. Encourage children to identify feelings when they express anger. "I feel _____ when you _____. Next time will you _____."
- Focus on the reason for the angry feelings first and then focus on more appropriate ways to express anger.

Watch for signs of depression in your children:

- School troubles, lying, stealing
- Trouble sleeping
- Problems with eating
- Frequent fears
- Exaggerating normal responses
- Wildly swinging emotions
- Change in personality and mood
- Change in friendships
- Giving away possessions
- Unexplained accidents

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- Preoccupation with death in TV, movies, books, music
- Increased withdrawal

Depression is often called the “common cold of mental health.” Children are susceptible to these feelings because of the pressure of changing family patterns and the roller-coaster emotions that accompany those changes. It is often difficult to determine if your child is experiencing age appropriate mood swings or depression. In all cases, seek medical and psychiatric counseling. Do not leave any unusual or uncomfortable behaviors unchecked. It is a life and death issue.

What is a Stepparent to do?

- Keep the couple relationship strong.
- Support your spouse on child discipline issues.
- Don't rush the relationship with the children.
- It may take several years to build a strong relationship with the children.
- Practice patience with spouse and children.
- Be a good listener.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Use good business relationship skills until a bond is formed with the children.
- Honor the child's relationship with both biological parents.
- Realize that the only thing the child can control is the relationship with you.
- You can only control your behavior and your choice of interactions with the child.

In summary, although stepfamilies are represented in the general government census more than traditional two-parent families, the stepfamily is still seen as a

disadvantaged family by society. There are many strengths and weaknesses to be found in every type of family unit. The family that concentrates on building family strengths through caring, commitment, spending quality time together, communicating in a positive manner, and coping with crisis in a conscientious way will make quantum leaps toward personal happiness and low-conflict relationships.

Remember, you are the first, best, and most important teacher that your children will ever have. Teach them first to respect by seeing you respect yourself and others. You are always teaching them by your example and they are always internalizing the lessons as they watch you. You can make the difference between high- and low-conflict relationships, loving and not-so-loving encounters. It's a big job but parents who work together with their children, seeking resources as needed, will indeed become Supportive Stepfamilies.

Supporting Stepfamilies Activities

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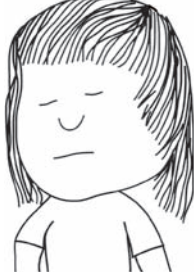
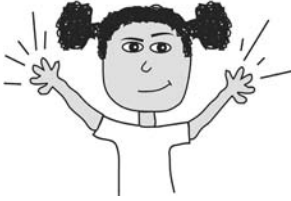
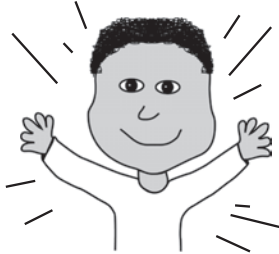




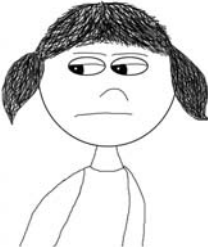




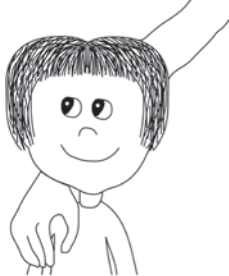
Activity 1a: Feeling Words

Although the English language has hundreds of words that describe specific feelings, most people do not have many in their daily vocabulary. As you practice looking for the right “feeling words,” you will find your feeling word vocabulary increases and the job gets easier. To help with this process, we have included a list of 100 feeling words for you to keep in mind.

Words That Describe Pleasant Feelings		Words That Describe Unpleasant Feelings	
accepted	hopeful	afraid	jealous
adequate	honored	angry	let down
adventurous	important	anxious	lonely
bold	joyful	ashamed	miserable
brilliant	lovely	bashful	nervous
calm	loving	bored	overwhelmed
caring	overjoyed	cautious	pained
cheerful	peaceful	cheated	possessive
comfortable	peppy	concerned	provoked
confident	playful	defeated	pushed
content	pleased	defiant	rejected
caring	proud	disappointed	remorseful
eager	refreshed	discouraged	resentful
elated	relieved	down	shy
encouraged	satisfied	embarrassed	stupid
energetic	secure	envious	suspicious
excited	snappy	fooling	tired
fascinated	successful	frustrated	trapped
free	surprised	guilty	uncomfortable
full	sympathetic	hateful	uneasy
glad	tranquil	hesitant	unhappy
great	understood	hopeless	unloved
gutsy	warm	hurt	unsure
happy	wonderful	impatient	weary
high	zany	irritated	worried

Active Parenting Today, Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D., © 1993, page 129. Used with permission.

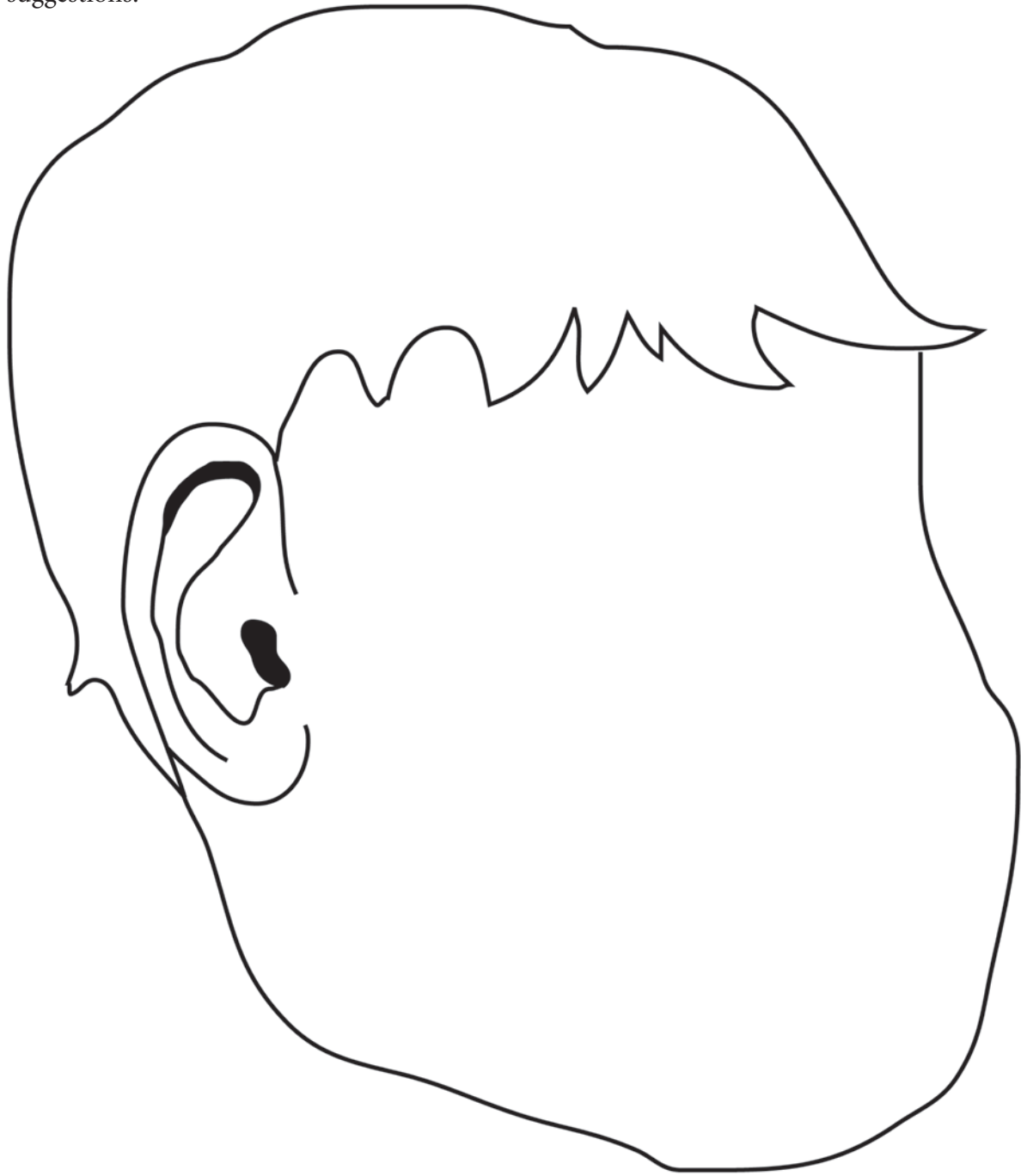
Activity 1b:
Feeling Words

<p>Feelings</p>  <p>SAD</p>	 <p>WORRIED</p>	 <p>SURPRISED</p>	 <p>DISAPPOINTED</p>
 <p>CONFIDENT</p>	 <p>HAPPY</p>	 <p>AFRAID</p>	 <p>TRUST</p>
 <p>BORED</p>	 <p>REJECTED</p>	 <p>JEALOUS</p>	 <p>SAFE</p>
 <p>ANGRY</p>	 <p>IMPORTANT</p>	 <p>PROUD</p>	 <p>LOVED</p>

**Activity 1c:
Feeling Words**

How Do I Feel?

Draw your feeling face and name it. Use the **Feelings** and **Feeling Words** handouts for suggestions.



Activity 2: New Family Expectations

Role expectations are complex. Everyone has expectations for themselves and for others. Examining those expectations a little closer will help you communicate with your new spouse and help your stepfamily be more successful from the start. Expectations will change over time as children grow and become more independent or as situations change such as jobs, demands on time, or health.

Lists some of the expectations you have for each person. What are some of the expectations you think others have for you and for each other?

My Expectations:

Self
Partner
Children

Partner Expectations:

Self
Partner (You)
Children

Children Expectations (or mother/father):

Self
Custodial Parent
Stepparent
Noncustodial Parent

**Activity 2b:
New Family Expectations**

The People Who Live in My House
(This is a good activity for younger children.)

Who are the people who live in my house?

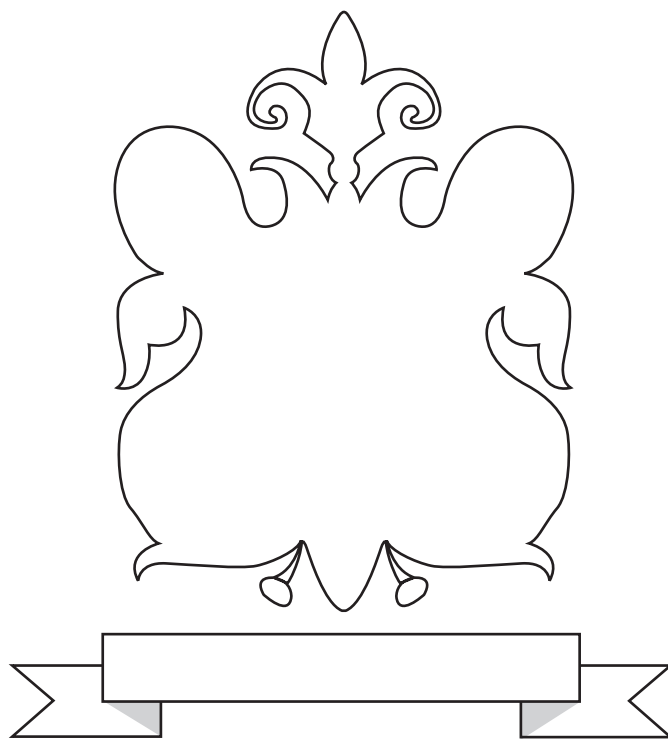
1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Your Family

Activity 3: Traditions to Explore



What traditions and rituals do you feel are non-negotiable (you will not change)?

What traditions and rituals does your family bring to the new stepfamily?

What traditions and rituals does your partner's family bring to the new stepfamily?

What traditions and rituals would you like to start as a newly formed family?
If you have older children, you will want to involve them in this discussion.

Activity 4: Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as being steadfast in allegiance; faithful. Each of the following situations is a loyalty conflict. Work through each situation on your own or with a small group to determine what the best course of action is to avoid family conflict.

Children in stepfamilies are often torn by loyalty to:

- The custodial parent
- The noncustodial parent
- The stepparent

Read and discuss the following situations and offer advice for the families involved.

Sam spent the weekend at Dad's house. When he came home to Mom's he had new clothes and a new skateboard. Dad and his girlfriend also had taken Sam to a skateboard park where he learned some moves by watching older kids.

Arriving home with all his new stuff, he is still very happy from the exciting and lucrative weekend. He carries his new things in with great excitement and says, "Mom, Peter, look what I got! Wait `til you see the moves I can make on my skateboard!"

How will Mom react? Give an example of a response versus a reaction in this situation. (A reaction is usually from the gut — an instinctual protective reply or behavior. A response will take a few minutes longer to think through the situation, but the communication will be much stronger.)

1. How can Sam show loyalty to all of his parents without hurting anyone's feelings?
2. How can Mom and Peter show their loyalty and support to Sam without supporting activities they disapprove of?
3. Speculate on the conversation between Sam, his Dad, and Dad's girlfriend when Sam visits the next time.

Activity 4: Loyalty

Karen had been looking forward to attending the “Nutcracker” ballet with her Dad and stepmom. The tickets were posted on the refrigerator so she saw them every day. She crossed the dates off of the calendar in great anticipation of the ballet. Her stepmom took her shopping for a special outfit to wear to the ballet. She was looking forward to this special time with her family.

Karen’s Mom calls Karen’s Dad and says, “I need Karen to be with me this weekend. It is my folks’ 50th anniversary. They love Karen and want her there for their special day. I’m sure you can understand that!”

1. What is the problem? Whose problem is it?
2. What is the potential for conflict with loyalty? Whose request is most important to Karen? To her parents?
3. List Karen’s choices and tell the consequences of each choice.
4. How will her Mom feel if Karen doesn’t go to the anniversary party?
5. How will Dad and the stepmom feel if Karen chooses to go with Mom?
6. What solution can you suggest so everyone is a winner?

Tom and Margy each have two children from previous marriages. Tom’s boys come every other weekend and alternate holidays. Margy’s girls live with her and Tom. These two children spend two months with their Dad in the summer.

When Tom’s boys come on the weekends, he plays video games with them and takes them to the batting cages. They eat out at burger places and then the boys sleep in the family room with the TV on all night. Tom seems really sad when the boys go home.

In the meantime, Margy’s kids stay at home with her, do their chores, and eat at home. They don’t like the boys because they think Tom treats them better.

1. Why does Tom treat the children differently?
2. Why would Margy’s girls think this was a loyalty issue? What should Margy do?
3. How could this conflict be resolved so everyone wins?

Activity 4: Loyalty

Joan and Jerry are faced with a conflict. Joan married Jerry and moved into his home. She was very eager to be liked when Jerry's kids came on the weekends. She always tried to please them.

Joan redecorated the house, spending a great deal of effort in the children's rooms. She couldn't wait to surprise them. She knew they would see how much she cared for them by the effort that she had put into the decorating project.

Instead when the children arrived and saw the changes, they were rude and shouted at her, "Why can't you just leave things alone? This is not your house! You can't buy us!"

1. What is the real issue in this conflict?
2. Whose problem is it?
3. How can these children overcome the loyalty conflict?

Activity 5: Transitions

Try to find a quiet moment for yourself with a cup of tea or a soda. Get a notepad and pencil.

Observe family attitudes and behaviors during times of transition.

- Do the children seem to put up a wall and withdraw 24 hours or more before the exchange?
- Do you feel tense?
- Can the children sense your tension?
- Do you say things that might be a put down of the other parent?
- Do you keep reminding your kids to deliver messages? “Tell your dad I said...” “Your mom can just...Tell her I said so.” Do you trap them in the middle?

Once you have observed the attitude and behaviors exhibited during transition times, focus attention on when children show the first states of transition anxiety. Reassure your child of your love and commitment without putting the other parent down. Encourage the child to enjoy time with the other parent. Give them some quiet time to get ready for the change before they leave and when they return.

How can you plan successful transitions?

For more information on successful transitions, read *Successful Transitions For High Conflict Families*, available online at: www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/nf550.html

Activity 6: Legal Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action

1. The right to be treated as important beings with unique feelings, ideas, and desires.
2. The right and freedom to receive love from and express love for both parents.
3. The right to express love and affection for each parent with no disapproval from the other parent.
4. The right to know that the parents' decision to divorce is not the children's responsibility.
5. The right to continuing care and guidance from both parents.
6. The right to honest answers to questions about the changing family relationships.
7. The right to know and appreciate what is good in each parent without one parent putting down the other.
8. The right to have a relaxed, secure relationship with both parents; parents cannot pit one parent against the other.
9. The right to visit the noncustodial parent without threats, punishment or other offers of more fun by the custodial parent.
10. The right to be able to experience regular and consistent visitation and the right to know the reason for a canceled visit.
11. The right to visit both sets of grandparents.
12. The right to cancel a visitation that interferes with school or church activities.
13. The right not to carry messages from one parent to the other.
14. The right to talk to a parent by phone as often as the child wants.
15. The right to have both parents attend school and church activities.
16. The right to celebrate birthdays with both parents.
17. The right to have parents talk to each other about how the children are doing.
18. The right to expect no abuse — physical, emotional, verbal or sexual.
19. The right to talk to parents about not wanting to see them.

Activity 7: Love Languages

All children sometimes feel their parents don't love them, but they may feel especially insecure when their parents have a new love relationship. Parents are facing many decisions and experiencing the stress that forming a new family brings and may not realize the insecurity children feel. Although children may think their parents don't love them, it is more likely that parents may not express it in a love language that children understand. All parents and children have different love languages or ways of expressing love.

- What is a love language?
- Do you know what your favorite love language is?
- How would you like to have your parents show love to you?
- How do you express love to your parents?
- Do you express love for your parents in a way they understand?

Using **The Five Love Languages of Teens** handout, parents can help children identify their primary love language. Everyone may enjoy giving and receiving love in each of the five love languages in different situations, but usually there is one primary or preferred way of giving and receiving love. Once children recognize their primary love language, they can communicate this need with others.

Activity 7: Love Languages

The Five Love Languages of Teens

Love Language No. 1: Physical Touch

Hugs, kisses, back rubs, and holding hands are ways to express this love language. What kinds of touch would a teenager most likely include in this category?

Love Language No. 2: Words of Affirmation

Children and teens love praise. They want to be recognized for being special. What kinds of words or praise do teens like to hear?

Love Language No. 3: Quality Time

Time together with each parent is important for many children. How do teens like to spend time with their families?

Love Language No. 4: Gifts

Who doesn't like gifts? What kind of gifts can a parent give to a child to show their love other than material objects?

Love Language No. 5: Acts of Service

The ultimate goal of acts of service is to help teens become responsible to themselves and to others. How can parents show love to a teen through acts of service?

- What is your primary love language?
- What makes you feel happy and secure?
- What is your greatest enjoyment?
- Is it possible to have more than one love language? Observe how you express love to others.
- How do you best like to have love expressed to you?
- What requests do you most often make of your parents?
- What do you complain about most often?

Answering these questions will help you identify not only your primary love language, but also the love language of each of your parents.

Strasheim, C., 2005, Adapted with permission from *The Five Languages of Love*, Gary Chapman, Ph.D., and Ross Campbell, M.D., Northfield Publishing: Chicago, 1997.

Activity 8: How Does Your Family Communicate?

Families often communicate in ways that cause conflict to escalate into full warfare. Think about the communication patterns that your family members use every day and also during times of stress, loss or grief. Do they use the same kind of communication patterns with your friends? Why or why not?

List all the patterns of communication that your family uses under the two headings, Positive Communication and Negative Communication. Once you have listed all the ways that your family communicates, look over your list and place a letter after the communication listed to indicate whether it is Often used (O), Sometimes used (S), or Never used (N).

Examples:

Talking calmly (S)

Listening without interrupting (S)

1. *Yelling (O)*

2. *Talking while another person talks (N)*

Positive Communication

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Negative Communication

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

- Look at your list of family communication patterns.
- What would you say about your family's ability to communicate messages?
- What things are really good?
- What things could be improved?
- Have you learned any skills to help your family with good communication?
- What skills would you suggest?

**Activity 9:
Doing Things Together as a Family**

In a survey conducted by Stinnett and DeFrain in 1985, 1,500 schoolchildren were asked, “What do you think makes a happy family?” Children often surprised researchers with their wisdom. They did not say money, cars, fine homes, or TVs. The answer they gave the most frequently was “doing things together.”

Doing Together
Now

Want to do Together
in the Future

The Plan to Make
It Happen

Activity 10: Parenting Styles

Uninvolved Parenting

Permissive Parenting

Democratic Parenting

Rejecting Parenting

Authoritarian Parenting

Uninvolved: Parents often ignore the child, letting the child's preferences prevail as long as the preferences do not interfere with what the parents want to do. These families range from being connected to disengaged, and flexible to chaotic. Children with uninvolved parents are often solitary, withdrawn, and underachieving.

Rejecting: Parents do not pay much attention to the child's needs and seldom have expectations regarding how the child should behave. When the rejecting style becomes extreme, children do not feel cared for and loved even though they are expected to behave and have many rules to follow. Children with rejecting style parenting are often immature and have psychological problems.

Democratic: Parents establish clear rules and expectations and discuss them with the child. Although they consider the child's perspective, they use reason and self-empowerment to enforce their standards. Children respond to democratic parenting by being energetic, friendly, self-reliant, and cheerful. They cope well and are more successful in their activities.

Permissive: Parents let the child's preferences take priority over their ideals and rarely force the child to conform to their standards. The permissive style may be chaotic. Children with permissive parents are often impulsive-aggressive, rebellious, domineering, and underachieving.

Authoritarian: Parents establish rigid rules and expectations and expect the children to do everything they demand. They expect and demand obedience from a child. This type of parenting is especially difficult for teens, who rebel against strict rules and demands. Children with authoritarian parents tend to be moody, unhappy, vulnerable to stress, and unfriendly.

- What type of parenting style do you usually use?
- How is your parenting style best for your children?
- What changes might you want to make?
- Does your parenting style complement your spouse's?

Activity II: Disciplining Children

Being a parent is one of the hardest jobs in the world. Many quick decisions must be made to guide and discipline children. When parents look at their own ideas about parenting it may become easier to make some positive changes. Parents may look at how they correct their children's misbehavior and how they feel afterward.

The way I usually correct my children is to:

	Yes	Sometimes	No
Yell and scream			
Spank			
Show disapproval			
Ignore bad behavior			
Scold			
Separate from others			
Make children feel ashamed			
Let children suffer whatever happens			
Threaten, but do not follow through			
Distract			
Take away privileges			
Allow children to tell me what happened			
Guide them to appropriate behavior			
Show them what I expect			
Get away for a while to cool down			
Set appropriate consequences for misbehavior			
Talk with children about rules			
Constantly remind children about bad behavior			
Ridicule and call them bad names			

Activity 11: Disciplining Children

When I correct my children I feel:

- Terrible! Everything I do seems wrong and makes our family life miserable.
- So-so. Sometimes I feel OK, and sometimes I make mistakes, but I would like to do better.
- I'm a good parent but would like to do even better at preventing misbehavior and disciplining my children in a positive way.
- Great! I'm a perfect parent and nothing I do can be improved.

If you are not happy with the discipline method you use, try a new one. When you make changes, expect your children to test you for a while as they try to figure out whether you are serious and mean what you say. Usually, if you stay calm and continue to use positive techniques, their behavior will improve. Discipline means to guide and teach. It takes time and patience.

Changes I plan to make with discipline techniques:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Discuss these plans with your spouse. How are they similar to yours? How are they different? Maybe the relationships with your children and your discipline techniques are working well. If not, how can you compromise and come to a decision on how to discipline your children? Think through how you will handle any difficult situations or decisions that come up with your children.

Activity 12: Back-To-Back Activity

Each person will need a hard surface such as a desk or table to work on for this activity. Have one copy of the **Back-to-Back** handout for each person. Have them cut the puzzle pieces apart. Pair people so one person is Person A and one person is Person B. Six identical puzzle pieces are given to each person. For the first “Back-to-Back” experience, Person A will receive instructions and Person B will give the instructions. Have the pairs sit back to back so each person’s puzzle pieces cannot be seen by the partner. The goal is for Person B to give clear instructions so Person A can assemble the puzzle pieces in exactly the same configuration as Person B has done. Person A may not ask questions and neither partner may look at the other partner’s puzzle pieces. Once all pieces have been laid on the table, have the pair check to see how closely they configured the puzzle pieces. Switch roles so Person A will give instructions and Person B will receive instructions and assemble the puzzle accordingly.

Process the Activity:

How many of your puzzle pieces are exactly the same?

How many of them were similar?

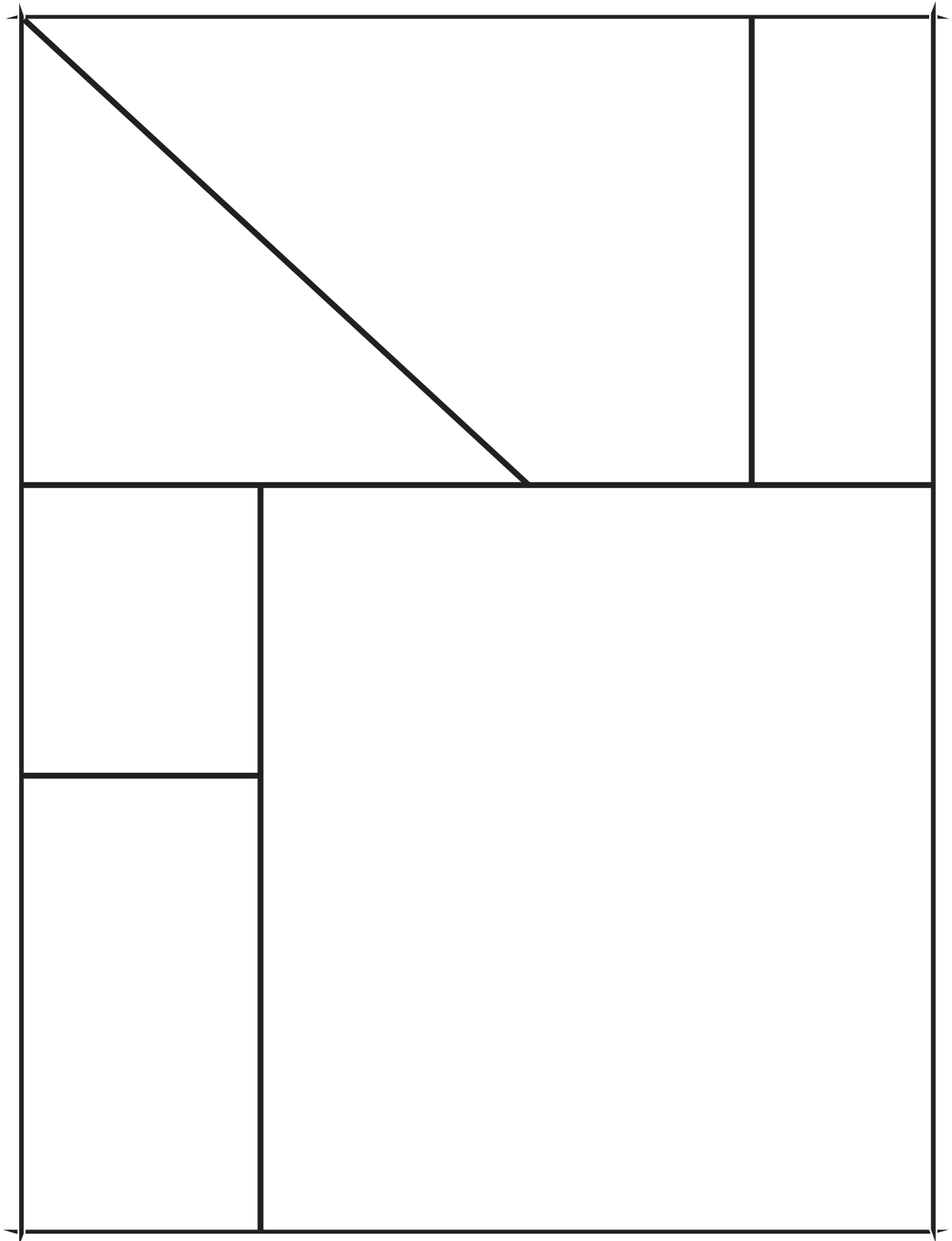
Why did some of you have a hard time with this activity? (Possible reasons: *Person B didn’t give good instructions. I couldn’t see what Person B meant. Person B used words that I didn’t know. I was frustrated and couldn’t concentrate.*)

What did you learn from this activity?

Summarize This Activity:

Communication depends on the use of words that are commonly understood and a conflict-free environment for the message to be clearly communicated. The tone of voice and the opportunity to ask questions to check to see if the message is correctly understood is important. To clearly communicate your message without triggering conflict, listen first and imagine what the other person is trying to say before responding. Once a message has been communicated, check to see if the message has been correctly understood. Only 7 percent of a communicated message are the words; 93 percent of the message are nonverbal cues and tone of voice.

**Activity 12:
Back-To-Back Activity**



Activity 13: Communicating With Children

- Be at their eye level
- Sit close together
- Use friendly posture
- Listen without interrupting
- Have a pleasant tone of voice
- Acknowledge their feelings
- Empathize with their feelings
- Help them give feelings a name
- Be an emotional coach
- Read their expressions

Jacqueline begins to cry during quiet time because her hamster died yesterday.

Example of what NOT to say:

“You’ll feel better tomorrow.” This is not acknowledging or empathizing with the child.

Example of what you might say as you sit close to her:

“You feel sad because your hamster died. After quiet time, I would like for you to tell me about your hamster.”

What might you say if Manuel says he is frightened of a spider in the bathroom?

What might you say if Maria comes indoors crying because she scraped her knee?

What might you go say when two upset children come running into the kitchen telling you the other hit first as they got into a fist fight?

Activity 14: Legal Bill of Rights for Children in Divorce Action

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2. The right and freedom to receive love from and express love for both parents.
3. The right to express love and affection for each parent with no disapproval from the other parent.
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15. The right to have both parents attend school and church activities.
16. The right to celebrate birthdays with both parents.
17. The right to have parents talk to each other about how the children are doing.
18. The right to expect no abuse — physical, emotional, verbal or sexual.
19. The right to talk to parents about not wanting to see them.

Activity 15: Keys to a Successful Budget

Develop a working budget using the questions below as a model:

- When you are discussing finances, what categories will be in your budget?
- How will you divide expenses?
- How will you manage your savings and retirement plans?
- What will child support pay for and who will be responsible for taking care of those expenditures (the parent or stepparent)?
- Will additional expenses that are incurred for the child be shared with the noncustodial parent?

Activity 16: Time Management

Try to set aside two hours a week for yourself and do something you like.
List three things you will do for yourself this week.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

How can you make this work?

Activity 17: Plans to be Successful at Stepparenting

The following statements are backed by research and findings from many stepfamilies throughout the nation who have experienced and are currently experiencing stepfamily situations. Discuss each of the following statements with your spouse or another person. What are your feelings about each statement? Would you change any of them? If yes, how would you change them? Discuss these changes with your spouse.

- Take your time, and expect love and care to come slowly through shared experiences with stepchildren
- Discipline may work better if the biological parent takes the lead with the stepparent's support until the stepparent/stepchild relationship is stronger.
- Expect negotiation and conflict to be part of everyday life.
- Give your family and yourself permission to try things differently. Find out what works best for your family.
- Give children accurate information about what is happening in the new family that is appropriate for their age and stage of development.
- Discuss rules and roles, and make them clear so children understand what is expected.
- Expect family members to grieve over the loss of their old family. Talk about these feelings.
- Share negative statements and feelings about the child's other parent with an adult, not your child.
- Assure children that love is not limited. They may like or love all members of the family, including a stepparent, and still love and care about the absent parent.
- The new partner relationship must be nurtured and maintained. It is a relationship that will be stressed under many circumstances.

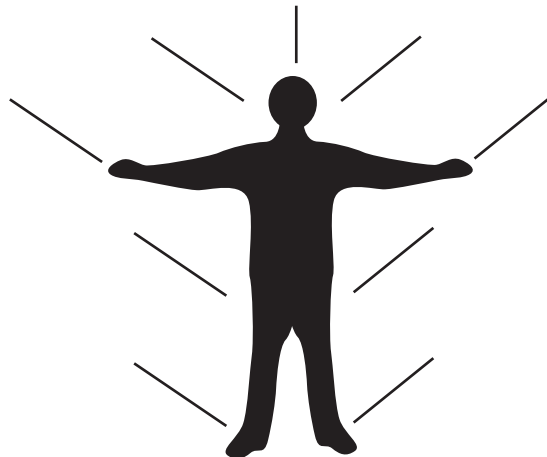
Activity 18: Who is My Family?

Define your family. Often children and adults differ on who they include in their definition of family. This is an important discussion for all families but especially for stepfamilies. Use the diagram of the child below and write names of “family” on each of the lines connecting to the child. Give a copy of this diagram to the child and compare your definitions of family. This exercise will be a helpful tool if every member of the stepfamily completes the diagram and then discusses “their family” members.

The definition of “family” often allows us to include or exclude people who love us and care for us. In stepfamilies “family business” is often a cause for conflict. Communication is the key to all relationships. Be sure to communicate who can be involved in “family business” and who should not be involved. Have this open discussion with all of the children and the adults who reside in your house for any period of time without name calling or pointing fingers at the people named in the diagram.

Questions to ask:

- Why should _____ be included as family?
- What are the important reasons to include _____ in our definition of family?
- How do you accept someone as family when you really don’t want them to be a part of your family?
- How do you respond when someone doesn’t want to include you in their definition of family?



For Example: If Kathy is 3 years old, she will not be involved in decision-making compared to 16 year old Ricardo. If grandma is overbearing, making the new stepmother uncomfortable, discussion will need to take place between the new couple and children. Grandma is an important member of the family but is not involved in “family business.”

Activity 19: Do Children Have Power?

In the accompanying story, what was Adam feeling?

How can you help Adam recognize that he is feeling powerless and a little bit jealous of his stepfamily?

Adam was hiding in his bedroom. He was so mad at everyone. He hated them all! **The Stepfamily Sicko's**. They always made all the decisions. They always did everything together. They always left him out of everything!!

THEY were his Stepmom, his two stepsisters, and **HIS** Dad!

“Even Dad seems to like doing things with them more than me,” sulked Adam. I don’t even want to come spend time with Dad anymore. It’s like he isn’t my Dad and he doesn’t even make me feel like I’m special when it’s my weekend to visit.

Everyone deserves to have a sense of power in their personal decisions and in their family life as a family member. Often, a simple shift in family plans will give all family members a sense of belonging and being able to make a difference. Being a part of the planning is important. The family could engage in some anticipatory planning for the next weekend that Adam comes to stay. Anticipatory planning is no more than planning activities together to build positive anticipation of the time together.

Example: At the family meal before Adam goes back to his Mom’s house, Dad says, “Let’s plan something to do as a family for the next weekend that Adam comes to stay. Adam, what would you like to do?” From this point in the conversation, Adam has been given power and all of the other family members have equal power in suggesting what to do. Everyone has a part of the planning and everyone gets a job to do to make sure that the event happens when Adam returns. Children can use negative behavior to get power and control or they can be invited to be a part of the age-appropriate power structure, which is a positive way to gain a sense of power as a family member.

Activity 20: Ten Greatest Things About You

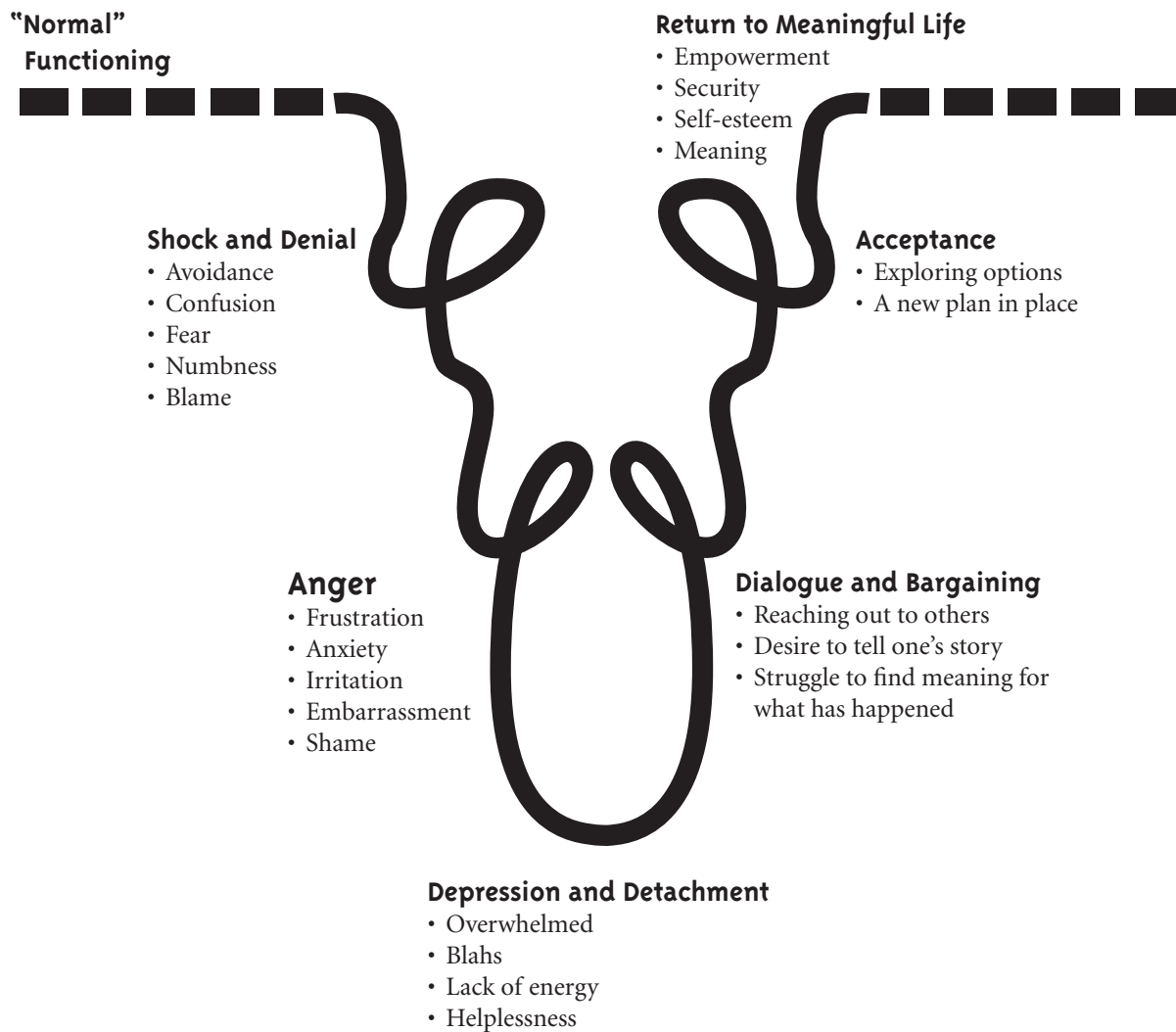
At the bottom of this worksheet, list 10 characteristics that you like about: your stepchild, your spouse, or your own child. Think very carefully of the many positive attributes of that family member. There are some characteristics that will come to mind very quickly, and they might not be positive. Can you look for the positive in that characteristic? Then, rename the characteristic and write it on the list. (example: mouthy or bold self-expressions?)

Use this activity as a one-on-one opportunity to communicate with your child, spouse, or stepchild. Once you replace the negative images with positive words, you will be able to respond differently to the behaviors and attitudes that do not necessarily please you.

An alternative plan is to use one of the boxes to list the ten greatest things about yourself before you begin the process with others. This also will allow you time to think about some of your characteristics that might not be seen as positive by members of your family. Once you clarify those less than positive characteristics, what can you do to re-name and re-shape them positively?

You		

Five Stages of Grief Cycle



Adapted with permission from Kubler-Ross, E (1973)
On Death & Dying, Routledge, London

Supporting Stepfamilies Evaluation

Scale:

- 1 = not at all
- 2 = somewhat
- 3 = about half the time
- 4 = often
- 5 = always

Please circle the appropriate number.

1. Before this lesson, I knew about stepfamilies and the challenges they face.

1 2 3 4 5

2. After this lesson, I knew about stepfamilies and the challenges they face.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Before this lesson, I knew about the impact of divorce and stepfamily realignment on children.

1 2 3 4 5

4. After this lesson, I knew about the impact of divorce and stepfamily realignment on children.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Before this lesson, I sought positive support from others to help me be a capable parent.

1 2 3 4 5

6. After this lesson, I will seek positive support from others to help me be a capable parent.

1 2 3 4 5

7. As a result of this lesson, I will discuss this information with my own Stepfamily or a stepfamily I know.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I intend to use the information in the following ways: (Please list)

1.

2.

3.

9. The resources and information provided will help my family and other families increase their strengths.

1 2 3 4 5

10. An example of information I will use with my family is _____.

11. The workbook format with information is helpful to learn and practice stepparenting skills.

1 2 3 4 5

12. One way I will use this workbook is _____
_____.

Supporting Stepfamilies Evaluation

13. I would like to learn more information about divorce and stepfamilies.

Yes No Maybe

14. Other information I would like to learn about through University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension?

(Please list) _____

Please return this evaluation to:
Cynthia Strasheim
Extension Family Life Educator
111 West Fairfield
Clay Center, NE 68933-1499