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Stepkids Perspective: What Makes A Family?



- I. Stepmoms want to know what makes a family. How to form one when you are not in charge as the mother or the main woman in the kids' lives?
 - A. Everyone tries to make a family fit into a mold and an ideal of what a family should be; but kids have a lot to say when it comes to their parents remarriages that might help us all understand what the struggles are. Having worked for over 25 years in the field of stepfamily struggles and development, while everything always seems to revolved around "his kids",
 - B. The kids are rarely asked and even if they are, they struggle with such loyalty binds that we as stepmoms, never get the full answer.
 - C. Kids complains to their own moms and dads, but as they don't with us, we are in the dark to try to make everything right for them.
 - D. We know there are obstacles, but can't seem to find our way through them without:
 - a. disagreements with our partners,
 - b. sadness that we don't have total control
 - c. we have to work around another parent and
 - d. confusion about what the kids need.
- II. I think hearing from kids will give us some information to help:
 - A. First of all, understand that in a traditional nuclear family (two parents who share the same kids), the parents have usually established parts of their relationship (who does what) before the first baby and then learn and grow together with their first child.
 - a. Both parents may feel (probably) very protective of their own cubs; these are MINE – and they are!
 - B. Stepmom enters much later.
 - i. She is not the main woman in the lives of the kids she is trying to make a home for.
 - ii. She cannot orchestrate it so her and her husband (partner) have a home where the traditions they want even take precedence.

- iii. If your husband is like many men after a divorce, they want their kids happy in their home all the time, so often real parenting goes out the window.
 - a. how many of you complain that your partners aren't parenting the way you would, how they ignore many of their child's bad behaviors, etc.?).
 - b. Most of us!
 - A. We want to change the kids behaviors and
 - B. try to change how our partners do things.
- C. This is the tug/pull that often happens when a couple first moves in together, but there they are, instant kids!
 - a. They haven't had their formative years with you, you haven't with them and
 - b. most kids (unless their parents were highly abusive or dysfunctional in their eyes) want their initial family home and parents intact.
- D. So there is already a tug away from the new forming family that confuses them.
- E. The main focus for kids is where they:
 - a. feel the most comfortable being themselves;
 - b. know they are loved so they can grow up through their yucky phases,
 - c. feel safe.
 - d. A new house with a new person, who they may or may not like, is a struggle for them and often confusing.
 - e. A new person who they like and who their other parents doesn't like poses a struggle and is often confusing for them
 - f. A new house with a new person who they feel doesn't like them is a struggle and often confusing.
- F. Consider this:
 - a. Kids are highly sensitive to rejection
 - b. The new stepmom is often sensitive to rejection
 - c. The father wants everyone to get along and be happy, so he's sensitive to whatever goes wrong
 - d. Often their Mom at home is sensitive to her kids liking you more
- G. See why it's confusing?

- a. Well, they are not confused if you like them ALL OF THE TIME, but who on earth likes a kid ALL OF THE TIME?
 - i. We love our munchkins with all of our hearts but even then, they get on our nerves, exhaust us, have bad manners, get surly, testy, whiney (my least favorite), overactive, argumentative, forget lots of “thanks you’s (lots of them!)
 - 1. All with expectations of being:
 - a. fed their favorite foods,
 - b. loved in spite of it all and
 - c. kissed goodnight (remember your own childhood and do not even begin to tell me you were perfect!).
 - ii. Even good parents miss a lot of their behaviors because after awhile, you have to pick your battles so your own kids don’t think you hate them.
 - 1. How many parents have said, about their own kids (I know I love him/her, but right now, I can’t wait til we’re out of this phase – or this one...or this one!).
 - a. Child rearing is exhausting with one’s own. With someone else’s? Exhausting, confusing, frustrating.
- H. Whether you like your partners ex or not (most of us don’t and they typically don’t like us being a part of their kid’ lives), Mom sets the tone for most households. The woman sets the tone for the household.
- a. But in your new life, you want to set the tone, but your hands are tied when his kids are there.
 - i. So here you are, happy in your new relationship, met the man (or partner) of your dreams
 - 1. yet you see him as weak when it comes to raising his kids and want to get it into shape, yet there are so many obstacles in store!
- I. Kids who grew up in stepfamilies have told me:
- a. “I could never follow her rules, but I could have followed Dad’s rules. Except he didn’t have any until SHE came along”.
 - b. “She tries too hard. I mean I like her, but she tries to be really nice and it feels fake”.
 - c. “She only pretends to like me because she wants to be with Dad (kids hear this from other kids at school or in many cases, from their own mom – who is jealous and envious and furious that you may have any influence

at all in her kids' lives).

- d. "My Mom gets upset if I like her so I've learned to just tell her things that make her happy like, "Janet and Dad got into a fight today, you know how Janet is when I don't eat her lasagna that she thinks is so good, Janet was mean to me today because she acted mad when I left my backpack in the living room. She's mad at me all the time!) – kids do love to exaggerate!

- J. Now, stepmoms, we all know Janet did a million little things at the beginning to help her new stepkids feel at home and got irritated over one constant thing and it becomes HUGE!!!

- a. "I don't think she likes me".
- b. "Since she had her own baby (or her own kids), I don't feel like I belong there".
- c. From one stepchild who lives away; "I always felt like a guest in Dad's home and never part of the new family. They were always nice to me, but I never felt safe arguing with my siblings because Dad or Janet would come down on me.

- L. Oh! What to do with all of this?

- J. A family is built around traditions. But what if

- a. Christmas Eve was always the important tradition in your family but they spend it with their Mom each year and she won't give it up?
- b. What if on Mother's Day after you do soooo much for them, they don't even think to wish you a happy day as you are (definitely) not their mom?
- c. You want a home where you have some say, and you find you do about almost every aspect until the kids are there.
- d. Dad, who wants everyone "happy" (a ridiculously unrealistic but understandable expectation) finds he is failing when he feel he has to protect his kids from your upset with the kids

- K. What to do?

- a. Real relationships form with real feelings, not pretend nice;/nice all the time.
 - i. But the struggle is a parent can give their own kid a scowl or that "look" that conveys that he's upset, not happy with behavior, etc. and while the kids will react to it, they are also secure in that parent's love.

- ii. When steps, no matter how nice and great you went out of your way to make things, give that look of dissatisfaction, it lands much harder. “Daddy, I don’t think Janet likes me”. “Mom, I don’t like it when Janet’s there because she always seems mad at me”.
- iii. Even when Janet shopped for the food for the weekend, made some plans, but got pissed when the backpack was for the umpteenth time left in the living room?
- b. We get discouraged with these things too because then we see that our partners do not “see” all that we have been doing, but tell us “Jeremy doesn’t think you like him. You were mad at him today”. “Well, if you would tell him to pick up his backpack, but you don’t even notice and leave it to me. But what about all the things I did for him? You never notice! (this starts the fight where you’re feeling discouraged and get dejected).
- c. The stepkids and the stepparent are all hypersensitive about being accepted. These fights, misunderstandings, confusions are all commonplace in stepfamilies. People just give up.

J. This is a COUPLES PROBLEM and not just a stepmom problem!!

1. you and your spouse MUST understand these dynamics and try to problem solve these issues as much as possible.

2. Set up House Rules and you and your partner want in your house and let all the kids live by them:

- A. In this house we don’t swear, watch tv after dinner, use screens at mealtime, etc. Pick a few that you all live by.
 - a. It can’t be only the stepkids have to live by them. If there are your children there too and they are there fulltime, these should also be rules that the house lives by. Post them up. (In this house, we all buss the dishes, help with getting the food on the table, make our beds, etc).;
 - b. Don’t make these too big but this way, when the stepkids come over, even stepmom can enforce the rules of the house.
 - c. (the consequences for not following house rules should also be laid out). When consequences are not carried through – make them reasonable – can’t watch your favorite show tonight, not no tv for a month!), kids will break the rules over and over again and you will fight about that!
 - i. Remember, most kids (even good kids) break the rules and try to get away with things. It’s kid nature
- B. Your spouse must follow through on these consequences of house rules and help you by noticing all that you do do for his kids, not just what goes wrong. Support

your wife by enforcing the house rules.

- a. "Jeremy, Janet doesn't hate you. She wouldn't be here if she did, but come on, honey, she likes the living room clean and your backpack on the halltree or by your bed. That's not a big ask.

3. Work to develop new family traditions that the stepkids are part of

- a. (i.e. every summer we take a trip to the beach) and make it one that accommodates the stepkid's schedules.

4. The kids need to be kids;

- a. fight, argue, hate each other... you know, kids. But then talked to about how to get along just like with a sibling.

Over time these "half" relationships can develop into feeling no different than whole relationships ("I still have trouble saying she is my half sister, says 53 y.o. Greg of the sister born when he was 10). They are very close today; brother and sister. Yet that "half" thing still bothers him!

5. The Gottmans, the couple who have studied relationships and what makes them good, talk about filling an emotional bank account with lots of good, to offset bad.

- a. So if we only criticize kids but forget to look at what is good about them, the criticisms hurt more (same with our own love relationships).

b. Positive must outweigh the negative. (you know honey, I really like when you're here. You're such a cool kid (even if they haven't been for awhile). All I want you to do is put your backpack away. I know you know how much it upsets me, so I'm weird that way. I have to get used to your ways and I hope you can get used to some of mine. It's hard getting used to each other, huh? (something that is relational).

6. As stepmoms, we have to learn to be far more flexible than we might otherwise. But so do Dads. We all know you feel in the middle a lot, but wailing about it won't help this situation

1. The adults need a together plan, and it includes supporting one another....

Dad to Jeremy....."you know, it's taken. Me awhile too to understand than Janet likes the living room clean. Remember how before she got here, how messy we would make it? It bugged me at first, but now I like it. I don't know about you, but I think it makes our home look nicer. Help me out, pal, she's trying so hard with both of us I think we can cut her some slack, huh?

In Summary:

House rules

More positives than negatives (very hard sometimes, I know!)

Give kids the benefit of the doubt

Try very hard to see what is good about them and what their strengths are (very hard to do with some kids – but every one has good).

Dads cannot walk in a stepmom's shoes Dad 's also need us to notice when they are struggling in their own bind to try to make everyone happy.

Dad's complain when all they hear from their partners are criticisms of his kids, but Dad's, really listen because maybe you are not hearing when she is positive or trying with them; you need to hear that too!!!

And appreciate her because she is NOT their mother and as much as you love them, they are not the lovable little darlings you think they are. They are also kids –

Raising kids is one of the hardest things we will all ever do. The years with them are filled, busy, frustrating, exhausting, thankless and yet can also be filled with wonderful memories that can go on even after everyone is grown up.

Website: <https://www.stepfamilycenter.com/>