



EXTRA CHALLENGES

Stepfamilies face unique challenges:

- While 45–50% of first marriages end in divorce, 60–75% of remarriages end in divorce.
- The first two years of creating a stepfamily are considered as stressful as the first two years following a divorce.
- Parental influence is often diminished when children have more than one set of parents.
- It is often necessary for stepfamilies to do more negotiating than traditional families (e.g. where children will spend holidays, etc.), and these issues can be emotionally loaded.
- Before marriage, relationship satisfaction is closely related to what is happening in the couple's relationship, but after marriage, relationship satisfaction is closely related to what is happening with other relationships (child, ex-spouses, etc.).

USING PREPARE/ENRICH WITH STEP COUPLES

- When working on communication skills and managing conflict, have your couple choose a stepfamily-related topic to discuss.
- Pay attention to the “Partner Style & Habits” scale as this has been shown to be highly predictive of step couple success. Ask couples to reflect on how they believe these issues may play out in their relationship and how they may play out in the child–stepparent relationship.
- Help your couple discuss and define the stepparent roles (e.g. how will the biological parent make space for the stepparent to be included in the parenting process).
- Help your step couple embrace realistic expectations concerning how long it may take for their family to feel a sense of family identity. You may choose to share with them that the average time to form a new healthy stepfamily identity is seven years.



COUPLE EXERCISE STEPFAMILIES: REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS



CHILDREN AND PARENTING

"After two years, I still feel like an outsider." —a stepparent

STEPFAMILIES: CHOOSING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Read through these common myths, noticing if any of them resonate with you and your partner. Use the questions in the Couple Discussion (below) to guide your discussion.

Myth: Because we love each other, the other family members will also love each other.

Reality: Love and/or good relationships may or may not happen between stepfamily members. It will likely take time for emotional bonds to develop; some will bond quickly, others slowly, and it is possible that some individuals may never bond.

Myth: We'll do marriage better this time around.

Reality: Those who have experienced a breakup or divorce have often learned tough lessons from the past. While a new marriage involves different people and different dynamics, it is not uncommon for individuals to slip into old patterns and routines (e.g., being avoidant during conflict). Be mindful not to repeat mistakes of the past.

Myth: Our children will feel as happy about this new family as we do.

Reality: The truth is children will at best be confused about the new marriage and at worst, they'll resent it. Remarriage is a gain for adults and a challenge for children. Only after much time, when family stability is obtained, does the remarriage also become a gain for children. Be patient with them.

Myth: The stepparent(s) will quickly bond with the children and act like another parent.

Reality: Sometimes stepparents want so badly to be accepted they try to manage the children as a parent would. They may also try to show affection like a biological parent would. Children often need some space initially to build a relationship with the stepparent. It is often a good idea to let the child set the pace and follow their lead.

Myth: We will be able to easily form a new family.

Reality: In most cases, children didn't ask for this new family, they need time to develop a history and sense of family. Don't push to create relationships. It is often better to have minimal expectations of how relationships will develop rather than grand expectations which may fail to materialize.

Adapted from *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* by Ron L. Deal, Bethany House Publishers (2014).

COUPLE DISCUSSION

- Which of these myths have you been tempted to believe?
- How could having these unrealistic expectations set you up for frustration and disappointment?
- How are you going to balance the challenges of a stepfamily and nourishing your couple relationship?

