



Building Stepfamilies That Work[©]

Expectations

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Our expectations exert a profound influence upon the stepfamily, and upon the experiences that living in a stepfamily provides for us. Many of these expectations are unspoken. Others remain hidden from our awareness until the day-to-day experiences of stepfamily life bring them into clearer view.

Most of us, at least to some degree, enter into a stepfamily expecting that the "new family" will heal the wounds inflicted by the previous failed relationship; and/or provide an opportunity for redemption--the chance to prove that we are good parents, good spouses, and good people.

Common knowledge tells us that stepfamily life may be difficult, at least for the first while. However, rarely do we expect it to be as trying as it turns out to be during the first two turbulent years. It's like we've prepared ourselves for a 10 km road race, but then learn that we are running in a marathon. Being less than well prepared makes the challenges of the first two years of stepfamily life seem insurmountable at times.

Fathers, often wracked with guilt for "abandoning" their biological children financially and/or emotionally, frequently expect that, one day, they will be able to "rescue" their children and bring them into a loving family fold. With this accomplished their hope is then to resume a "real" fathering role and thereby fulfill a deep seated need in themselves.

Women, in contrast, often expect that the new family will be "just us"-- "my kids, my new partner and me". Frequently, their wish is that the spouse's "Ex" and bio kids simply didn't exist--or that they would just go away. Some authorities feel that this "just us" wish or expectation sometimes propels the woman towards driving a wedge between her new spouse and members of his bio family.

Typically, and despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, kids living in a stepfamily expect that their bio parents will eventually get back together and restore the bio family unit--the so-called "eternal wish". Towards this end, their hope is to get rid of the stepparent who stands in the way of this wish. If, however, they have developed a fondness for the stepparent, they may want to bring the stepparent into the reunited biological family too! !

Other frequent expectations operating in stepfamilies are:

- **"instant love and harmony"**--expecting that because you love your spouse, that you will love his/her children, and they will love you too--and, given this, that "we'll all get along wonderfully",
- **"better than"**—expecting that everything will be bigger, better, and happier than things were in the former union,
- **"egalitarianism"**—expecting that your opinions, thoughts, and feelings will be valued and respected as highly as those held by others in the household (i.e. the bioparent and his/her kids), and

- **"good relationships all the way around"**--expecting that with time and effort everyone in the family will have a close relationship with everyone else in the family.

Expectations such as these, particularly when they are operating in the background of our awareness, are very likely to put stepfamily members on a collision course and pave the way for disappointment, frustration, and discouragement.

Your assignment:

This exercise is to get you thinking and talking about each other's expectations and, where necessary, working to transform any idealistic expectations into realistic ones, that you can both embrace.

Part 1: Set aside some time as a couple to explore your own and your partner's explicit and implicit expectations. Together, work to develop realistic expectations for:

- your relationship,
- your family,
- for the children, and
- for the extended family members.

It is important to recognize that ***your expectations probably don't need to be lowered-- but they may need to be different.***

Part 2: As a couple, figure out how you can address the topic of expectations with the children. Then do it.

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