



Building Stepfamilies That Work®

Job Descriptions: The Stepparent Role

© Dr. Bill Nodrick 2005

INTRODUCTION: When the results for the SSI are combined for all of the people attending the course, they show that the most problematic area, in general, is Role Ambiguity—a lack of clarity in expectations about how the “job” is to be done. How can anyone fulfill a role successfully if they are unclear regarding what is expected of them? How likely is your partner to be satisfied with the way you are fulfilling your role if they have never made clear to you what their expectations are?

As you know, a job description includes many components. We will address each of them as the course proceeds. In this exercise we want to focus explicitly on the stepparent’s role in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Research shows that clarifying the stepparent role is a critical component for stepfamily success. Simply jumping into the role “both feet first”; or naively assuming that because you love and respect your partner that his/her kids will love, respect and behave for you, are typically recipes for major difficulties of one form or another. Being clear in your expectations with one another regarding the stepparent role is essential.

Part 1 - An in-class exercise: Often, new stepparents are told: “Develop a friendship with your stepchild”. Think about this for a second.... How would you react if an adult came to you and said: “I want to be your child’s friend”? How do you think your child would react if an adult came up to them and said: “ I want to be your friend”? How would you want them to react to such an individual?

The fact is that many, many people (and ideally those who are of a similar age to your child) could be your child’s friend. A stepparent needs to be something different—something more.

The Exercise: Link up with someone of the opposite gender (other than your partner) to discuss and figure out exactly what the stepparent role should be. Keep in mind that the child’s needs, not the needs of the adult are at issue. Consider the following:

- a) What should a stepparent’s relationship with a stepchild be like?
- b) What is the child likely to want, not want, and need in such a relationship?
- c) How should the relationship develop? What would foster it? What are the likely barriers to such a relationship developing?
- d) How would you know if the relationship were developing successfully? What are three “sure-fire” signs that it is on track?
- e) What character from the movies embodies all (or most) of the attributes the stepparent needs to show in such a relationship?

Finally, what will you be doing differently when you see this kind of a relationship flourishing?

Make point form notes of your answers. You will have a total of 15 minutes to complete this exercise.

PART 2 - Your homework assignment:

1. Reserve a good chunk of time with your partner to discuss your expectations of each other as stepparents.
2. In your discussion, consider the following points (and any others you feel are pertinent):
 - The role you want as a stepparent
 - The role you want your spouse to have in parenting your kids
 - The kind of a stepparent-child relationship you feel will fit best for the child(ren) at this point in time
 - Whether you want to nurture a close, intimate bond between the stepparent and child(ren), or something other
 - How you would like to be addressed (e.g., Kelly, “mom”, stepmother, etc.); and what terms the children would be comfortable using. (Keep in mind that for most children, the titles “mother” and “father” are a) hallowed, and b) they typically see them as belonging to their biological parents.)
 - What you can do, as a couple, to nurture the kind of stepparent-child relationship(s) you desire.
 - What are the signs that you will see that will tell you that you are succeeding?
3. Keep in mind that, often, children don't want another “parent”; and it may take several years before they can embrace the idea of having one. In general, it is better: to “go slow”, to leave discipline to the bio parent, and to work on developing a relationship with the child before assuming a position of authority over them.
4. Together, write a stepparent job description that addresses the above points. It is OK if you each need a different “stepparent job description”—but it is important that you write them out together, and that you fully agree on the terms.

Job Descriptions-Stepparent Role Parts 1& 2.rtf Feb 2008

All rights reserved. The reproduction, use, distribution or storage of this work, in whole or in part, by any and all means, without the express written permission of the author, is strictly prohibited.