

Topic: Stages of the Stepfamily

Title: Patterns of Development in Stepfamilies

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In coming together and building a new family unit, a stepfamily follows seven stages of individual and family system development. These include three Early Stages: Fantasy, Immersion and Awareness; two Middle Stages: Mobilization and Action; and two Later Stages: Contact and Resolution.

Early stages

During the early stages, the family stays divided along biological lines, with most nourishment, agreement on rules and rituals and easy connection happening within the biological subsystem(s).

In the Fantasy Stage, the adults yearn to heal the pain created by divorce or death. Both partners may imagine that because they adore each other, stepparents and stepchildren will also. Stepparents may have fantasies about marrying a nurturing parent, and biological parents may imagine that the new adult will ease the load of single parenting. Children, in contrast, often continue to have a powerful and enduring investment in seeing their parents back together or reclaiming an exclusive relationship with their single parent.

In the Immersion Stage, members of the stepfamily are faced with the reality of their new structure. Stepparents encounter unexpectedly strong and negative feelings-jealousy, resentment, confusion and inadequacy-as they are subtly, but consistently, excluded by the spouse and stepchildren. The biological parent is somewhat less uncomfortable, as he has the support and nourishment of the children. The adult has the uneasy feeling that something is amiss, but can't sort out just what it is. Stepparents often conclude, "It must be me."

The Awareness Stage sees stepfamilies beginning to put names on painful feelings. A better understanding about the biological parent-child bond helps stepparents to see patterns ("I'm jealous not because I'm neurotic, but because I'm an outsider!"). Giving up fantasies of an instant family frees the stepparent to accomplish a crucial developmental task: get to know the strangers she has joined.

The developmental tasks of the early stages include bearing the confusion and disappointment of early stepfamily living without giving up; beginning to identify and articulate the very different experience stepfamily structure creates for each individual in the stepfamily; and relinquishing fantasies enough to engage actively in the step-by-step process of building a family out of strangers.

Middle stages

The Mobilization Stage finds the family, particularly the couple, openly airing differences between family members' needs. Often this is a chaotic and intensely embattled period. The fights may appear trivial--which is better, white bread or wheat bread?--and are actually struggles over whether, after a series of losses and changes, family members will be able to make the changes they need to feel comfortable.

The developmental task of the Action Stage is to negotiate new agreements about how the family will function. These actions change the family structure and draw new

boundaries around the family relationships. The family can now start to function without constant attention to step issues.

Later stages

The Contact Stage, gives the family its honeymoon at last. The moves of the action stage have given the stepfamily new areas of agreement within which they can function easily. The marital relationship becomes more of a source of nourishment and support. Stepparents and children begin to forge real relationships. It is only now, after the major structural changes of the middle stages, that a clearly defined stepparent role emerges.

The Resolution Stage finds the family with solid and reliable step relationships. Norms have been established and a history has begun to build. Although some children feel more a part of the family than others, there is acceptance of this fact. Even large differences during stressful times-disagreements about who will handle college costs, shifting of custody arrangements, weddings-no longer threaten the couple or stepparent-stepchild relationship.

How long will it take?

Preliminary data about the amount of time this process takes indicates that faster families complete the entire Stepfamily Cycle in about 4 years. Average-paced families take about 7 years to reach Resolution, and slower families remain in the early stages longer than 4 years, a few for as many as 12 years. Some of the last group end in divorce, others remain stuck in the Early Stages, and a small number move on to complete the Stepfamily Cycle. The largest differences among these three groups lie primarily in the amount of time it takes to negotiate the awareness work of the Early Stages.

Taken from: "Becoming A Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families," by Patricia Papernow, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Book Series, 1998

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