



Building Stepfamilies That Work®

Notion of the Family

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Introduction: In a step relationship, whether married or living together, the couple really needs to find itself. In part, this requires defining what each partner's expectations are for the relationship. Couple relationships are complex; and they become even more complex when children are involved. In stepfamilies, establishing the clarity necessary regarding our relationships is made all the more difficult because, without being aware of it, most of us draw from our experiences in the traditional family as a model for the stepfamily. This sets the stage for frustration because it has the effect of forcing a stepfamily into a traditional family mold—one that doesn't fit—rather than accommodating the uniqueness of the stepfamily.

Your Notion of the Family: When combining with another person to create a new family, it's very helpful to think about what your expectations for the family are. How are your visions of the stepfamily different or the same? The following exercise can help you to understand the similarities and differences between the notions you and your partner hold.

Exercise - Notion of the Family

Instructions: Part A: *Do this portion of this exercise separately. Use separate sheets of paper to answer the questions below. Use point form wherever possible.*

1. What was your notion of the family while you were growing up? What did children do? What did grown-ups do? What did fathers do? What did mothers do? Who made the decisions? What were the major decisions? How were chores handled? How were the issues of discipline, money, anger, family upsets, rituals, religion, etiquette, and meals handled? How was affection shown? How did your parents communicate? How was conflict addressed? What rules did your family abide by? Where there problems that never did get discussed? What did your family do together? Were there any secrets? Add any other recollections that characterized your family experience.
2. If you were married before, what was your notion of the family in your first marriage? Respond to the issues listed in the first question.
3. What is your current perception or the stepfamily: What is it like for you in your current stepfamily situation?
4. How would you want it to be?

Instructions: - Part B: Next, discuss your answer with your partner. On one page, itemize all the areas where your responses are the same or similar. On a separate page itemize all the areas where your responses are different.

Instructions: - Part C: Bring all your completed answers to the next class.

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