

10 Steps for Building Couple Strength

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Step 1. Schedule time to go out alone, to dine alone. Don't talk about step. Talk about the movie you have just seen, Russia and the United States, the latest gossip, poetry, anything but step. Talk about the things you used to talk about when you first fell in love.

Step 2. Strong leadership provides stability for the new relationships forming in the stepfamily. Discipline is dealt with authority and unity from the couple. Anger and dissension between the couple over discipline and other issues are better discussed privately. Learn to agree and learn to disagree. Table negative issues. Resolve them with a counselor.

Step 3. Use the Time, Energy and Money grid described in Jeannette Lofas' book Stepparenting to structure the household. All members will know their role and duties in the family. There will be rewards for completing chores and consequences for not competing duties. All are spelled out and known to family members.

Step 4. Clearly sort out discipline and guidance methods and styles as a couple. Couples decide on discipline and bio-parent generally directs behavior. In the absence of the bio-parent, the stepparent reminds the child of household rules. He/she might begin "in this house we . . .". An effective parent or stepparent disciplines the action and the behaviors and does not put down the child, thereby keeping the child's self-esteem intact.

Step 5. Don't take kid's negative behavior as a personal insult. Speak to the children about feelings, fears and concerns. When you notice 'acting out behavior' the need to act out diminishes in direct proportion to the child's feelings of being acknowledged.

Step 6. "Make wrongs" don't work in good relationships. "I" messages work. "You" messages make wrong. Being righteous and right allows one to feel good only for moments.

Step 7. Know the dynamics of step. Know when to attribute (blame) the step situation and know when it is something that you as a couple must sort out.

Step 8. Love is respecting and dealing with each other's neuroses. Love entails going above the negative data, without blame, and going for the desired outcome as an individual, a couple and as a stepfamily.

Step 9. Learn how to work the A-B reality described in Stepparenting. [Recognize that what you see as reality stands to be quite different from what your partner may see as "reality".]

Step 10. The couple presents themselves as male and female heads of the household. Remember, there is no sense of family or stepfamily without the couple strength.

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