

Bonding with Stepchildren: Mission Impossible?

By Dena Sposato

Bonding between stepparents and stepchildren is a hot topic in most stepfamilies. Although some families find that a bond comes naturally between the stepparent and their stepson or stepdaughter, more often families have to work at building this relationship. Many factors, including the age of the child at the time of marriage, the quality of relationship between the biological parents, the stepparent's expectations and reactions, step-sibling rivalry, and loyalty issues, can influence the stepparent/stepchild relationship. A toddler may bond much more quickly to a stepparent than a 12-year-old usually will. Even under the best of circumstances it is normal for a 16-year-old to develop at most a friendship with their new stepparent, since developmentally they are preparing to leave the family and strike out on their own in life.

First, let's describe what we mean by "bonding". Professor John Bray's study of stepfather/stepchild dynamics revealed an interesting and important fact. Stepfathers and their stepchildren appear to define "affection" differently. Stepchildren in the study were asked to rate how "affectionate" their stepfathers were with them. The stepfathers were then asked to rate themselves on how affectionate they were with their stepchildren. The results didn't match! The children who said their stepdad was not very affectionate often had stepfathers who had rated themselves highly affectionate, and amazingly, the children who said their stepdad was very affectionate had stepfathers who had rated themselves low in affection. On further questioning, it was revealed that the stepchildren, for the most part, interpreted words of affirmation (i.e. "That was nice of you,") as affection; however, physical affection made most of the stepchildren uncomfortable. This study revealed that many stepfathers who had the best intentions were not seen as affectionate by their stepchildren if they were lacking in verbal praise -- even if they hugged the child regularly! Many a stepfather has probably experienced pangs of rejection that could be avoided by simply knowing this helpful piece of info: a kind word is one of the best gifts a stepparent can give to a stepchild. (As a side note: if your stepchild initiates hugs or the like without prompting, it should be perfectly okay to hug back. The key is that physical affection should be at the pace of your stepchild.)

Over the years we have spent in our stepfamily support group, we have noticed several common reasons why the bonding between a stepparent and stepchild is sometimes slow or nonexistent. First, even the friendliest stepparents may face rejection. The child may have been through the divorce of their biological parents, one or both parents remarrying, a new household forming with stepsiblings, and changes in living arrangements and visitation. This may all occur during a time when parents are dating, falling in love, marrying, celebrating, and starting a new and exciting life. Often parents are unaware of the depth of their children's emotions and confusion. Not knowing how to express their emotions clearly, children sometimes act them out through tantrums, sarcasm, silence, or pulling away. If a stepparent sees these actions as a personal rejection, they may become offended and build up resentment against the stepchild.

Another source of division is when the biological parent and the stepparent have very different parenting styles, especially when the stepparent is more disciplinarian. When a stepparent doesn't agree with how discipline of their stepchild is being handled, they may become angry and resentful. The bio-parent often then feels threatened and becomes more protective. They may try to compensate by softening their own discipline. With "parenting differences" cited as the most common reason for divorces among remarried couples, it is obvious that conflict over how, and by whom, children should be disciplined and guided is an important issue to resolve.

Three of the most important pieces of information for any stepparent are:

1. Bonding proceeds at the pace of the child. It may take as many years as the child was old when the marriage occurred, for a "family feeling" to develop between stepparent and stepchild. Children who were in the teen years when the marriage occurred may never bond to a point where the stepparent is a parent figure to them, they may develop only a good friendship. It is important that a stepparent not try to assume a disciplinary role too early in the relationship, before a relationship built on trust and caring has been established with their stepchild. In a stepfamily, the rules and expectations of polite behavior should mainly be voiced by the biological parent to their children. If the stepparent has realistic expectations and leaves the majority of discipline to the biological parent, the time for bonding to occur may be dramatically shortened. **(Tip:** As a stepparent, consider asking for "polite treatment" rather than using the word "respect". Everyone deserves polite treatment, but the definition of "respect" tends to vary and cause conflict.)

2. Become a student of your stepchild. Spend time getting to know your stepchild's likes, dislikes, interests, and talents. Observe them, and then give praise and encouragement. You may experience some rejection, which is perfectly normal for the situation--try not to take it personally, and try again another day, another way. At first, one-on-one time with your stepchild may feel forced and uncomfortable to the child. Try doing daily activities such as grocery shopping or walking the dog together, and over time ease into one-on-one events like ballgames and amusement parks. Participate in activities they enjoy, to the extent they want you to.

3. Strengthen your marriage. If your marriage is neglected, you will have less incentive to put in the time, effort, sacrifice, and emotional vulnerability it takes to build a relationship with your stepchild. If you are building up resentment toward your spouse, it will show in your relationship to their child. Marriage workshops, communication coaching, counseling, prayer and support groups, and a regular date night can do a lot to restore a marriage to health.

If you have vastly different parenting styles, consider attending parenting classes together. This is an area of your relationship that must be handled with careful consideration. The biological parent may have to make the final parenting decision when it pertains to their child, but they can still be understanding of their spouse's frustration. If the biological parent makes sure the stepparent feels heard and understood, the stepparent is more likely to hold off on any urge to take over discipline of the stepchild--and the marriage is more likely to thrive.

I have a saying, "Be nice to my child and it's like you were nice to me twice. Be unkind to my child, and it's like you were unkind to me five times." If you build up enough resentment that you

don't feel like being nice to your spouse, you might find yourself also being unkind to their child. Unfortunately, this is the stuff divorces are made of. It is important for parents and stepparents to have good boundaries, and to not let conflict with their spouse get unleashed on the children. Sometimes family counseling and even a *carefully* planned separation may be necessary to rebuild the marriage relationship, so that the children are not the easy targets of built-up resentment.

The relationship between a stepchild and stepparent can be a very special one. I adore my stepchildren, and I am biased enough to think they are some of the best stepkids in the world! It has helped tremendously that I had good information early on, and support from our stepfamily ministry group. My stepchildren were teenagers when I married their dad, and they live with their mom. I didn't take their early ambivalence toward me too personally because I knew it was normal for a stepfamily. I also didn't try to jump in and parent them. My biological daughter was nine when we married, and lives with my husband and I. My husband handles the discipline or guidance his children need during visitation times, and I handle the vast majority of discipline with my daughter. We consult each other, but even when we disagree, we respect each other's right to make decisions about our own biological children and not force our point of view as a stepparent. We also regularly express gratitude and appreciation for each others' sacrifices in this area. We know this is a major key to the success of our family.

We haven't done everything right, but we have let time run its course without rushing things -- and I'm so glad we did. It left the door open for the warmth we are now beginning to enjoy. With realistic expectations, the right tools, prayer and support, a stepparent and stepchild can have a relationship that grows into a very special, loving bond. I pray my relationships with my stepchildren continue to grow in caring and warmth, and I pray yours do too. May God bless you and your stepfamily!

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