

Understanding a Child's Realities¹

Adapted by Millie Ferrer²

Children look at the world differently than adults. Much of what they understand depends on their age. At each age, there are certain feelings and reactions which children will experience.

Being a part of a stepfamily can be very exciting, but scary too. Because of all the changes, children need support to handle the stresses of their new situation.

Forming a stepfamily may feel like a loss. Children who have experienced separation and divorce may hope their parents will get back together. The new stepfamily shatters their hopes and forces them to deal with the divorce being final. This can be difficult.

Even when the children know and like the stepparent and are looking forward to the new family, they cannot forget the loss of their old family.

The relationship between a parent and their children will change. The parent's time, affection, attention and finances will be shared with the new partner. If the stepparent has children, even more sharing will occur.

For some children it is a happy event to have a new family with more brothers and sisters. For others, the many changes and uncertainties are difficult and challenging. Children will experience changes in their routines and responsibilities with the formation of a stepfamily. Prior to the stepfamily, the parent may have involved children in decision-making and expected them to help with household responsibilities. Now he or she turns to the partner.

This change may leave children, especially teenagers, feeling rejected and unimportant. This may also cause tension and resentment to build toward the stepparent. Changes may make the children feel sad or angry. As a parent, you can recognize these feelings. Encourage them to talk about their feelings, rather than act them out.

A counselor or support group can be helpful for children who experience a great deal of difficulty.

Living space becomes an issue. The child may wonder, "Is there room for everyone in our house?" Children may worry about fitting into this new household.

Whether the new household is the primary home, the home where they visit, or the home where they stay for short periods of time, there are many questions and fears that will cause stress.

Children need their own space. Making room for each child's belongings is important and will help the child feel more a part of the family. The space might be:

- a bedroom
- a drawer
- a closet
- a shelf, or even
- the corner of a room.

Personal and private space is especially important for children who visit part-time. They need to feel part of the household and not just a visitor.

Children need to be involved in planning and helping with family chores and daily activities. This too will make them feel more a part of the family.

Roles and rules will be challenged and changed when a stepfamily is formed. The addition of new family members brings confusion and conflict.

Two families with different habits and values must decide how to function. Decisions must be made about everything: schedules, eating routines and even recreational choices.

These decisions do not have to be made all at once.

If differences in styles and values between members of the new family are not discussed and dealt with, they will become constant sources of stress.

Deciding on "names" can be troublesome. Stepchildren often do not know what to call the stepparent.

- What does the stepparent want to be called?
- How does the parent feel about what the stepparent is called?
- Is the stepchild comfortable with the name?

Many names are possible. Sometimes the stepparent is referred to as:

- my other mother or father.
- my second mom or second dad.
- Mom or Dad.
- their first names.

Research shows the name used for the stepparent is no indicator of the quality of the relationship.

If the child seems a bit uncertain, it might be helpful to talk together to help the child decide. Communicating with the child and agreeing on a name comfortable for the stepchild and the stepparent is a positive step in building a new relationship.

Children also want to know what to call this new family. As Lesson 1 indicated, a family discussion and agreement on what to call your new family will be helpful to all family members. This means different persons can use different names and it is okay with everyone. Mutual agreement upon names for stepfamily members and for the family unit builds family unity and identity.

Changes Children Experience in Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies vary greatly when it comes to the number and ages of children. With the addition of other children to the family, a child may experience a change in birth order. For example, the youngest child may become a middle child overnight.

An only child may become the oldest child with younger stepbrothers and stepsisters. This shift in birth order causes many changes for the child.

Sibling rivalry is common to all families, but the stepfamily will likely experience a great deal of conflict during the first 18 to 24 months. It takes time to work out the new relationships.

Children's ages are important in stepfamilies. Children at various ages respond differently to family changes. Research indicates that children ages 9 to 15 have the hardest time adjusting to stepfamily living. Children over 15 are concerned about a growing independence from the family. They might even welcome the thought that their parent will shift attention from them to a new partner.

It is important, therefore, for parents and stepparents to learn the developmental changes which naturally occur in children. Children of different ages require different approaches. Becoming knowledgeable of these natural changes will help you cope and not feel responsible for all the conflicts that occur.

Young Children

They may experience guilt over the breakup of the first family, fear the loss of a parent, or may spend time thinking about putting Mommy and Daddy back together. To them, nothing is ever final.

Yet, young children adapt to stepfamilies with fewer conflicts and less hassles than older children. They tend to adjust easily to two homes and two sets of rules.

However, it is not unusual for young children to revert to baby-like behaviors. This happens when they are under stress or their schedules are disrupted. They may cry more. They may not sleep through the night. They may cling to a parent. To help young children:

- Talk about what is happening in their lives and what they should expect.
- Use both simple language and explanations.
- Reassure the children that both parents love them.
- Try establishing a routine. Young children need things that are predictable. Prepare children for changes in the routine ahead of time. Talk to them about details. For example, tell your child that a step-sibling will be coming to dinner tonight. Tell your child what your family will do while the step-sibling is there. If the two are both young, talk to your child about sharing toys and playing together.
- Let the child know it is okay to love the stepparent. A child should not be forced to choose between parents, stepparents, or other important people in their lives. This can be very difficult for the child.
- Remember that crying and clinging are normal for young children who are confused and upset. Comfort and reassurance are important in helping them adjust.

School-aged Children 6 to 12

They express their feelings more openly than younger children. School-aged children tend to sense family tensions very easily. The following behaviors may be signs they are having difficulties dealing with the changes:

- Having problems in school.
- Doing poorly in subjects in which they normally do well.
- Isolating themselves from friends.
- Withdrawing from activities.

Encouragement from parents and stepparents will help children talk about their problems and fears.

To help school-aged children:

- Involve them in family discussions and decisions whenever possible. Tell children about plans that affect them.
- Make sure children understand and know they did not cause their biological parents to separate or divorce.
- Let your children know even though you get angry at them for their actions or behavior, you still love them. Help them understand that you will accept their feelings, but not their behavior.
- Keep plans and promises you make with your children. This helps them feel more secure.
- Invite your children to share their thoughts and feelings. Listen to them and reassure them their feelings are okay.

The Teen Years

They can be stressful in any family. Teenagers are learning to break away and become more independent. They often switch back and forth between wanting to be looked after and wanting to be independent.

Conflicts with stepparents are more common with teens than with younger children. Now that there is another adult in the family, teenagers may feel they are being pushed back into childhood. This can cause resentment toward the stepparent.

The parent and stepparent should try to involve teens in many family decisions. When a teenager's responsibilities are changed, it should be discussed.

For instance, if the teenager is no longer expected to babysit their natural brothers and sisters, the parent and stepparent should talk to him or her about the reasons for the change. If teens feel their contributions to the family and opinions on family matters are valued, it will help reduce the number of conflicts.

Teens turn to their peer group for support rather than parents or other family members. Teens may never establish a close relationship with stepparents. This distant relationship does not mean you have failed as a stepparent or as a family.

Resist blaming yourself for the lack of a meaningful relationship with teen stepchildren. This is often a stepfamily reality.

Stepfamilies with teens will benefit if:

- Teens are given the option to be involved or not involved with the step-family. Allow teens the opportunity to help define their role and expectations in certain stepfamily activities. For instance, they may have no interest in going to a school activity for a step-brother or step-sister. Forcing the issue might create more conflict than family unity.
- Teens are included in decision-making and establishing stepfamily roles and rules. This will help them feel important and valued.
- Teens are given time to themselves. Try not to shower them with attention and affection. They will only resent it.
- Teens are given privacy. They can be assured that biological or step-siblings or parents will not bother their things and will honor a closed bedroom or bathroom door.
- Teens are encouraged to share their viewpoints and observations on family issues.

Accepting these views and feelings is important. However, it doesn't mean parents and stepparents have to accept certain behaviors.

Accept the Fact that Parenting Stepchildren is Different

Studies rank child rearing among the highest sources of difficulty in stepfamilies. Conflict and stress will exist regardless of the ages of the children, but they can be reduced by:

- Allowing children the opportunity to vent their frustrations.
- Keeping promises and plans which involve the children.
- Developing consistent expectations for behavior.

Disciplining children is hard. Disciplining stepchildren is even harder. In most stepfamilies, two systems of discipline must be combined and adjusted. This situation is especially true when there are older children or teenagers familiar with one particular approach. Making discipline changes and establishing new roles and rules in a stepfamily is no easy task and will take time.

Stepparents are advised to leave much of the disciplining up to the biological parent at first. The stepparent's role is to support the partner in discipline situations.

Time is needed for children to learn to respect and trust a stepparent before accepting discipline from them. The stepparent and parent also need time to discuss their differences on child discipline. They need to agree on what will work best for them.

However, if a stepparent is left alone with the stepchildren, the stepparent needs to discipline. This will be more effective if the biological parent, prior to leaving, has transferred authority to you with the children present.

For example, "Jan and Scott (children), you know that I will be gone for five days. While I'm gone, we have agreed that Susan (stepparent) will be in charge. If there is a problem while I'm gone, Susan will handle it."

The stepparent should also respond to stepchildren's misbehavior directed at them. If a child makes a mess of the stepfather's personal desk drawer, the stepfather should respond and not wait for, or expect, the parent to discipline.

Present a United Front

Just as in any family, dealing effectively with discipline requires a unified approach. Parents and stepparents must reinforce each other and be consistent with their discipline practices.

Children who are able to use one adult against the other will soon have control of the situation. If the rules and consequences have been agreed upon by everyone, the whole family will feel more secure.

The lives of children in stepfamilies are much like life in any family. The changes that occur when a stepfamily is formed bring opportunities to grow and learn. A parent and stepparent who care and can talk things out together and with the children are taking the necessary first steps for building a strong stepfamily.

Some Activities

1. Sharing Family Chores

Dividing household chores equally among family members helps children to learn responsibility.

This activity makes sure children get to do every chore at least once. This is a fair way to distribute chores and a good way to introduce children to all household tasks.

You will need a cookie jar or screw top jar, red and blue construction paper, and pencils or pens. Schedule a family meeting to:

- Make a list of chores (inside and outside) which family members can help do.
- Mark a "W" next to weekly chores.
- Mark a "D" next to daily chores.
- Cut construction paper into "chore" strips. Write one daily chore on each red strip and one weekly chore on each blue strip. Put chore strips into the jar. Have the family decide how long each chore-duty period should be (one week, two weeks or a month).
- Decide how many slips of each color family members should draw for each chore-duty period. Discuss how the number of individual assignments should reflect the different ages and abilities of family members. Your family may agree to make a separate jar for the very young children filled with easier tasks.
- Have family members draw from the jar at the beginning of each chore-duty period.
- Review each person's chores to make sure the more time-consuming and strenuous chores are distributed fairly.
- At the end of each chore-duty period, evaluate the process and repeat the drawing. You may decide to assign chores for longer periods so that family members develop more expertise on the job.

2. Building a Sense of Belonging

Think about how many people there are in your stepfamily. The actual number may vary as noncustodial children visit and custodial children go to visit the other parent.

- Think about the names of all these people, both first and last names, and what the parents/stepparents are called by the different children. List all of these names on paper.
- Using a large piece of paper and markers or crayons, draw a house with enough spaces for "rooms" to include all the family members listed. If custodial children share rooms with noncustodial children when they visit, put their names in the same room.
- Include noncustodial children's names to show they are sometimes a part of the household. Use whole names of each family member in their "room." In the

parents' room, put in parentheses what they are called by both the noncustodial and custodial children.

- After placing everyone in his or her "room", place the stepfamily name on the roof or under the picture of the house so everyone is included (i.e., "The Brown/Smith Family"). Next, stepfamily members draw in their favorite possessions in their own rooms. The completed picture can be placed on the refrigerator or in a special place.

3. Determining Family Rules

Family rules can be a special challenge in stepfamilies. Rules may have been different in previous families. Some children move back and forth between two households with different rules.

This activity will help stepfamilies clarify family rules and increase the likelihood that all family members will understand them.

- Make a copy of the worksheet on Page 8 for each family member, or write out the questions so that each person can independently answer the questions. Follow the directions on the worksheet. (If you have young children, you might want to do the worksheet and discuss it at a level appropriate to the children's understanding.)
- After everyone has finished the worksheet, discuss your answers as a stepfamily. This needs to be done in an accepting and understanding way. Remember that people are sharing the way they see things.
- After each person has an opportunity to share, discuss the differences. If these differences are few, try to agree about what you want the rule to be.
- If there are many differences of understanding, work on only one easy rule now and schedule time to talk about and work out others at later times. Be sure to schedule a specific time and honour that commitment.

It is important that parents let the children know it is acceptable to have one set of rules at one house and another set of rules at another.

Acknowledgements

The activities were taken from *Renew for Strengthening Stepfamilies*, a five-part publication by Stephen F. Duncan and Geneva Brown, Montana State University Extension Service.

Thanks to the following persons who reviewed this lesson: Betsy Bergen, Flo Biehl, Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Deanna Soll.

Thanks to Paula Seele and Karen Hunter for layout assistance and graphic design.

Prepared by M. Gayle Price, Area Specialist, Family and Consumer Sciences, K-State Research and Extension, Kansas State University.

Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies was supported by a grant from the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Hutchison, KS.

References

- Bosch, Geraldine, D. R. Gebeke, and C. M. Meske. *Stepping Together*. Fargo, ND: North Dakota State University Cooperative Extension and The Center for Parents and Children, 1992.
- Burt, Mala. *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead: An Eight-Step Program for Successful Family Living*. Lincoln, NE: Stepfamily Assoc. of America, Inc., 1989.
- Currier, Cecile. *Learning to Step Together, A Course for Stepfamily Adults*. Lincoln, NE: Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., 1982.
- Duffin, Sharyn R. *Step Parenting, Succeeding as a Family*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, HE-398-1, 1993.
- Duncan, Stephen F. *The Remarried Family: Meeting the Challenge*. Auburn University, Alabama: Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, HE 607-a, 607-c, 607-e, 607-f, 607-g, 1992.
- Duncan, Stephen, and Geneva Brown. *Renew for Strengthening Stepfamilies Series*. Bozeman, MT: Montana State University Cooperative Extension Service.
- Einstein, Elizabeth, and Linda Albert. *Stepfamily Living Series (4)*, 1983.
- Einstein, Elizabeth, and L. Albert. *Strengthening Your Stepfamily*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Services, 1986.
- Lewis, Helen Coale. *All About Families the Second Time Around*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 1980.
- Smith, Charles A. *Responsive Discipline*. Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service, 1993.
- Strzok, Bererly J. *Stepfamily Series, 1 through 4*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Service, 1984.
- Visher, Emily. *Stepping Ahead*. The Stepping Ahead Program. Lincoln, NE: Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., 1988.
- Visher, Emily B., and J. S. Visher. *How to Win as a Stepfamily*. New York: Dembner Books, 1982.
- Visher, Emily B., and John S. Visher. *Stepfamilies: Myths and Realities*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1984.
- Winckler, Judith J. *Building Strong Stepfamilies Series, 1, 3, and 7*. Binghamton, NY: Cornell Cooperative Extension Service, Broome County, 1992.

Footnotes

1. This document is FCS2171, one of a series of the Family, Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date October 6, 2000. Reviewed March 2007 by Heidi Radunovich, Assistant Professor, Family, Youth and Community Sciences. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Adapted for use in Florida by Millie Ferrer, Ph.D., associate professor, Human Development, Family, Youth and Community Sciences department, Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611, and Betty Miller, Ph.D, extension agent III, Leon County.

Copyright Information

This document is copyrighted by the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) for the people of the State of Florida. UF/IFAS retains all rights under all conventions, but permits free reproduction by all agents and offices of the Cooperative Extension Service and the people of the State of Florida. Permission is granted to others to use these materials in part or in full for educational purposes, provided that full credit is given to the UF/IFAS, citing the publication, its source, and date of publication.