

Help for Stepfamilies

Avoiding the Pitfalls
and Learning to Love

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Does your family include children from previous marriages? If it does, then you are a member of a unique kind of family—a stepfamily. Maybe you have seen light-hearted portrayals of stepfamilies on television, like the *Brady Bunch* or *Step by Step* where the challenges stepfamilies face are solved in thirty minutes. But if you are actually in a stepfamily, you know how different, and sometimes difficult, stepfamily life can be.

Blending two separate families into one household is rarely an easy process. Family traditions, values, interests, and parenting styles are often poles apart, so simple questions like, “Who does the dishes tonight?” or “Where shall we go for Christmas?” can quickly become flashpoints of conflict.

But whether you are in a stepfamily or about to enter one, don't give up hope. God “sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6), and that includes stepfamilies also. Stepfamilies do face unique challenges, but as you understand what those challenges are and ask God for help, you will find that there are also unique blessings to be found in your new, blended family.

Unique Stepfamily Challenges

The word “step” comes from the Old English word *steop* which means “loss.” In every stepfamily at least some of the members have lost a relationship with a spouse or parent because of death or divorce. Significant loss is a part of the normal landscape of the stepfamily. Husbands have lost wives, wives have lost husbands, and children have lost a family that included two biological parents. Do you know how these losses impact you and your relationships in your stepfamily? Do you know how loss impacts others in your stepfamily?

How are the husband and the wife in a stepfamily affected by loss? When you remarry after the death of your spouse, it’s easy to feel guilty about marrying again. Your guilt can keep you from fully engaging in your new marriage. Or you might form an idealized picture of your deceased spouse that your new spouse can’t live up to. Remarrying after divorce can result in lingering anger or bitterness that affects your relationship with your new spouse. This is especially difficult if your ex-spouse is regularly in the picture.

How are the children in a stepfamily affected by loss? If you are a child who is part of a stepfamily, you are

also dealing with loss. No matter how unhappy your biological parents were, you probably didn't want them to get divorced. Even now you might be secretly hoping that your parents will reunite. It's difficult to let go of this hope and let another parent into your life. Often children in your position are angry at their parents because they gave up on their marriage and resent their new stepparent for making a reunion impossible. Instead of a fresh start for you, stepfamily life means living in multiple households, having new siblings thrust upon you, and learning a new set of rules.

Or it may be that one of your parents has died. You've experienced one of the most terrible losses any child can experience. Now your surviving parent is remarried. You know that no one could ever replace the parent you lost, so it just feels wrong for your mom or dad to marry someone else. Having a stepparent makes you angry, sad, and confused. You want your mom or dad to be happy, but you don't know what to do with your feelings of loss and pain.

How are the parents in a stepfamily affected by loss? Are you a stepparent? You also are facing many challenges. Your stepchildren often will not automatically love you, accept you, or respond to your discipline. It's

also hard to be the biological parent in a stepfamily. It's tempting to try to buffer your own children from the effects of divorce or death, and to deal with your guilt over the breakup of your marriage (or your remarriage after the death of your spouse) by being overly indulgent. As a result, your spouse can feel undermined as he or she tries to parent. If both of you have brought children into your marriage, this can create a corrosive atmosphere of favoritism that splits the family into competing factions.

Expect Difficulties, Think Biblically

You might recognize some of these difficulties in your own stepfamily, and you can probably add your own particular stepfamily problems. But instead of being discouraged, know this: *Difficulties are to be expected in a family living in the wake of loss.* Stepfamilies don't simply represent two people coming together in marriage; each new stepfamily represents two worlds—worlds of hopes, dreams, expectations, habits, traditions, personalities—coming together in a context of loss. Stepfamily difficulties don't mean that you or your family members are somehow deficient or are failures, but they do mean you are going to have