

Researchers estimate that nearly 50 percent of all first marriages end in divorce. This high rate has led to a boom in the number of stepfamilies. But their success rate doesn't appear any better — roughly 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce.

Therapists who work with stepfamilies say the trend can be reversed if stepfamily parents place greater emphasis on three main areas — communication, discipline and couplehood.

### **Communication**

Open, honest communication is the backbone of a successful stepfamily. Unfortunately for many stepfamilies, communicating effectively may be difficult. Children, especially older ones, may not be enthusiastic about their mom or dad's remarriage, so they may conceal their feelings out of loyalty to the noncustodial parent. Parents in the stepfamily may have problems communicating, fearing they may hurt the other's feelings and jeopardize the marriage.

Therapists advise that stepfamilies hold formal, weekly family meetings to facilitate talking about feelings, successes and problems. Meeting attendance should be mandatory, so hold them when it's convenient for everyone. Post a permanent meeting agenda where everyone can see it.

Here's a sample:

- *Good things that happened during the past week* — Talking about how a child did on a test or how much fun the family had raking

leaves together starts the meeting on a positive note. Everyone should contribute.

- *Areas that need improvement* — This is a time to talk freely about arguments or difficulties that occurred with a focus on preventing them from happening again. Use basic conflict resolution principles: state what happened, accept responsibility, commit to improve. Because no one can assume what someone else thinks or feels, family members should speak only from their experience, such as "I felt 'x' when you did 'y.'"

- *The week ahead* — Go over everyone's schedules to avoid conflicts. Draw up meeting ground rules during the first family meeting, making certain that everyone, including the children, has input. Mutual respect and good manners should be the guide. Ground rules may include: "Because everyone's comments are important, everyone should speak freely and openly without interruption." "No one can leave the meeting before it's over, and it's not over until everyone agrees it is." "Because everyone's feelings are important, no family member should dismiss or ridicule what someone else says."

### **Discipline**

Disciplining children is a difficult issue for many couples in a stepfamily. The biological parent may believe his/her partner is too strict or nitpicky. Or the stepparent may not discipline enough, fearing it may jeopardize his/her relationship with the children. If one

partner doesn't have children, s/he may be unclear as to how and when to discipline. For whatever reason, the children also may resent the stepparent to the point that they only listen to the biological parent.

For these reasons, it's imperative that the couple approach discipline issues as a team. Decide as a couple how the children should be raised. Chores, homework, allowance, bedtime, TV and dating privileges, acceptable and unacceptable behavior and consequences for bad behavior — agree to how each should be handled. Because children (especially older ones) respond best to their biological parent, it will be easiest to have that parent discipline his/her children until the stepparent/child relationship develops more fully. It's also important that both parents support each other's actions. If there is disagreement, talk about it when the children aren't around. Fighting or disagreeing in front of the children may alienate the stepparent, undermine his/her role in the stepfamily and compromise the child's respect for the stepparent.

### **Couplehood**

The couple's bond is the only established relationship in a stepfamily. The children won't feel "instant love" for the stepparent; it can take years for that bond to develop, if at all. Also, children may not care for the idea of having a stepsibling. A stepsibling may take time and attention away from their biological parent, which will likely lead to control issues.

## **Differences Between Stepfamilies and Biological Families**

<b>BIOLOGICAL FAMILIES</b>	<b>STEPFAMILIES</b>
Marriage created anew — traditions and history evolve.	Marriage is a merger of two families with different sets of traditions and no shared history.
Couple relationship predates parent/child relationship.	Biological parent/child relationship predates relationship of the remarried couple.
Family lives in the same house.	Parents live in the same house, but children may divide time between two homes.
Couple acquires parenting skills gradually.	Couple (if both have children) bring their ideas and values about parenting to the new relationship.

For these and other reasons, it's critical that the couple's bond be strong. And because most biological families end due to family or relationship dysfunction, the stepfamily is the next best hope to show children just how joyous and powerful a loving relationship between two adults can be.

Be a role model to the children. Show love for your partner. Work out differences in appropriate ways. Communicate in positive, supportive ways.

### **Other tips for success**

**Establish traditions.** Where you vacation, how holidays and birthdays are celebrated, what happens during weekends, how the individual achievements of family members are celebrated — these are traditions that make a family special. When two families merge to form a stepfamily, their traditions don't have to be abandoned. You may decide as a family to keep some of them in the new stepfamily, or to blend the two sets of traditions into a format that contains elements of each family's traditions.

**Expect problems.** If there's one thing all stepfamily members share it's this: Everyone will underestimate just how difficult it is to create a family. It takes years, not weeks or months, and there will be problems along the way. When problems do arise, communicate and confront them appropriately, then move on. Not to do so may only lead to resentment, which could lead to further problems later on.

### **Consider counseling or a support group.**

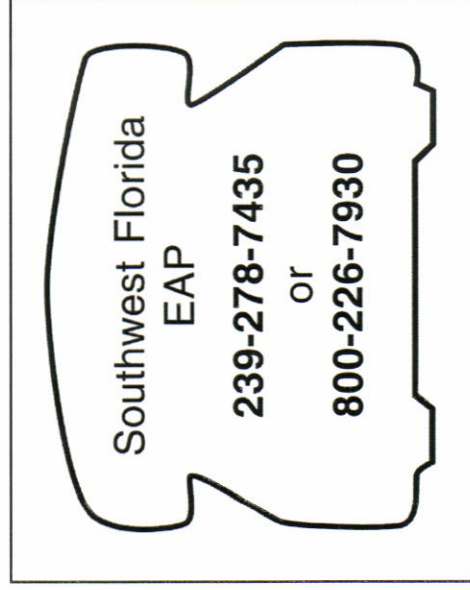
Children may experience unresolved grief issues over the breakup of their family of origin. They may also have control issues regarding stepsiblings, and their loyalty to the noncustodial parent may lead them to

act out toward the stepparent. Either parent in the stepfamily may also be experiencing issues with grief and control. A counselor with a full understanding of the challenges of stepfamilies can help resolve these issues.

Support groups are another source of help. At a stepparent support group, members share their experiences and offer each other support and inspiration. Many of these groups are held in churches and hospitals.

### **Help is available**

Just talking about your problems sometimes leads to new solutions. If you or someone you know needs information, guidance or help, contact the resource and number listed on the back of this pamphlet or look online for local professionals who can help.



# SUCCESSFUL STEPFAMILIES