

# Ten Steps on the Path to Stepfamily Happiness

Provided with permission from: Leslie Todd, LCSW, ACSW, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

## **1. Educate yourself before you commit**

All stepfamilies are unique. Even if you grew up in a stepfamily, your new stepfamily will be different. Preparing for your new stepfamily will save countless hours of confusion and disappointment for all involved. Understanding the children's positions is as important as understanding the roles the adults will play.

## **2. Talk about money before you commit**

Stepfamily failures are largely attributed to childrearing and money issues. Stepfamily finances are complicated: child support money may be flowing in and/or out of your home. Be very clear with your partner about your prior financial obligations. Talk with your attorney regarding spousal support, child support, or educational fund responsibilities. Figure out how you're going to handle "his, her, and ours" money issues.

## **3. Lower your expectations**

The first marriage is about "us." The next marriages are about "them"—the children, the sets of grandparents, the former spouses' households, maybe even the court. The more people, the more likely that somebody somewhere in the system will be less than happy much of the time. Don't expect to please everyone, or for everyone to please you.

## **4. Respect your unique perspectives**

Empathy and curiosity are the traits that distinguish the best-functioning stepfamilies. Members are genuinely interested in listening and understanding each person's unique perspective. Members do not flinch when their viewpoints differ, but engage in conversation that builds trust and appreciation.

## **5. Have a life outside your family**

Your personal needs for love and validation are normal and good. Rather than overloading your stepfamily with expectations (conscious or unconscious), share yourself with a larger community. It relieves your stepfamily of having to "care too much" and also gives you more outlets for your talents and feelings.

## **6. Do regular stuff together**

Stepfamilies find their way by doing the normal stuff—eating together, doing chores, enjoying sports or a movie. Kids and adults will learn how to interact with one another over time.

## **7. Let the children love their whole family**

This sounds easy, but if it were, family courts wouldn't exist. Children will test out whether it's okay to love their parents in other homes, or may feel they have to "prefer" your new stepfamily in order to make it work. Show your children you are neither competitive nor threatened; help them grow big hearts.

## **8. Get creative: experiment with new rituals**

Rather than competing over whose rituals will win out in an awkward hybrid, try something entirely different now and then. A new vacation destination or a non-traditional holiday menu allows everybody to enjoy creating a new experience together. The experiments that don't turn out well will be one-shots; the others may grow into your new family's cherished rituals.

## **9. Be sure each child has one-on-one time with the biological parent in your home**

Loss of this special time is the number one complaint of children in stepfamilies. Especially in the early phase, don't let your anxiety about "blending" override the need to acknowledge and nourish blood-tie bonds.

## **10. Make time for the new marriage**

Plan some regular date nights and get away from the munchkins. You'll be doing your kids a favour by not focusing on them ALL the time. Your new marriage deserves nurturing, and is the foundation on which your new stepfamily will flourish.