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Stepfamilies Research Paper

by Elktraxx

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This is a final research paper for my English class.

Stepfamilies: Getting them to work and be productive for the children

by
Wendy VonBargen

English 102: English Composition

Dr. M

In the United States alone it is estimated that 43% of marriages no longer last for adults, 65% of those have children and 65-70% of those that have children result in another divorce (Hetrick xiii). Stepfamilies have almost doubled in number these days and in doing so they have sparked interest in finding ways to improve the well-being of the family members, especially the children. Even though I have found evidence that children are worse off in a stepfamily unit than in a nuclear family (Sweeney) they have found that constant change within in



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family (Sweeney), they have found that constant change within a family to be far worse, thus the concern for failed re-marriages (Sweeney). What has been done to help these marriages stay together and how can those new parents help the children's well-being of self?

What research is finding is that most re-marriages are not considered as in depth as they should be. This means that even though a parent has done some communication about the future they haven't discussed important topics that they need to hash out fully. When my husband and I got into a second marriage it was because the boys needed a family setting with a roof over their heads in the house, not once did we take into consideration that they may not be able to pay much of the financial responsibility would come to lie on my husband's shoulders. Financial obligations that each new parent takes on for the their children, how much time is expected by both parents to take care of the children, the other parents children and how much of the household chores are expected by each new parent are things to be considered. Lofas and her colleagues state that prenuptial agreements be formed with attorneys before a marriage. They also state that if you are already married that you consider a post-nuptial agreement. These consist of everything from financial support, housing arrangements, health insurance policies, to stepparent involvement. Even though many people think of prenuptial agreements as preparation of the dissolution of marriage, they will actually release tension within the marriage so that time and energy can be placed on other important issues. Lofas likens the prenuptial agreement to a contractor's blue print of a house plan since it is needed to build a house. It would be foolish to build without one (214).

While wanting to provide a good home and family setting for a child after a divorce the parents need to realize that a remarriage is extremely difficult to maintain if there is only one set of children involved, increasingly so if there are more sets of children that are incorporated into that family. Such as if there is at least one child then the new husband brings in at least one child. It is extremely difficult, adding to the stress for the children is if the husband's child is only on an occasional or if they are there on a daily basis. Yet another situation that adds stress to the children of the family is if the new sets of parents have children of their own. Jeannette Lofas, Ph.D., C.S.W stated that:

The stepchildren may well view the baby as an intruder on their turf. A stepfamily that is in trouble should not decide on having a baby. The baby will provide the badly needed unifying factor. That rarely happens.

Finding that loss of placement within a family, such as if the mother has been switched to being the second oldest now that the new husband is a part of the family, can cause a great deal of self doubt within the children. It is difficult enough, but what if the youngest child is now no longer the youngest? How do they try to fit in with younger step siblings or deals with the fact that now they are the baby with the new guy? These situations for children bring inner conflict. They don't know how to deal with (Sweeney). Research has shown that children in stepfamily units are more likely to have difficulties in school, have more behavioral problems, be more likely to have earlier sexual behaviors even be more apt to have abortions, and be more prone to suicide attempts (Garnefski & Dieks-Bumpass).

The key for the parents is communication in new families such as stepfamilies. Children in the ways of using words and techniques to solve problems. Avoiding negative nonproductive ways (Kolak & Volling). Many children do

communicate well and have watched their biological parent's mother smoke, without little constructive communication (Busby, Holmbeck). Can we as parents instill the correct way of dealing with problems in our children's ways of dealing with theirs?

House rules are essential for the new family structure as it helps to present a combined front for the children to see, to show that the marriage is functional. Jeannette Lotus, in her book, *Stepparenting: Everything You Need to Make It Work*, explained that to make sure that the chores are shared by everyone in the house has equal jobs to do via their age, a walk through every room (126). This should be done by the couple first then with the children so that they can be shown what the couple is talking about and why. Before the time of the family meeting the couple should have also discussed closed doors, what the consequences would be and what the time for each expected chore, curfews, playmates, times spent outside the house, and other pertinent items that the couple needs to have the children know. If the stepparent has all this information already discussed and wrote down it will help the stepparent be able to be respected as an important member of the family when the other parent is away from the house. This unity shows that the biological parent and stepparent have agreed to terms that are necessary for the household function correctly and smoothly. Jeannette Lofas states "..."unpopular even bitterly resented..." but as long as you are together and hold your beliefs for the family you will "...weather the storm" (51).

"Triangulation" is the single most destructive thing that can be done in a family situation that is the parent defending the biological child over the stepparent (Hetrick 88). As Dr. Kalter stated,

The stepfather, in his own mind, is the knight on the white horse who comes to rescue his new bride from the drudgery of single parenting and the rebellious kids who don't help around the house and talk back to her. At the time he feels he's coming down too hard and inserts herself in the middle and says he should back off. Now he feels double-crossed by her and the children's tensions as well as parenting tensions (Nordheimer).

When an incident occurs the spouses need to work together in dealing with it. Hetrick reminds us that, "...hurting people tend to hurt other people" and can be the start of the crumbling of the marriage if it is not handled in a fair, honest, non-hurtful way (88). White and Gilbreth have also stated that with good intentions...many stepfathers experience sufficient rebuffs from the children and sometimes from their spouse that they eventually withdraw. They should take some counseling to help out but if there is love to be saved it will be for (Hetrick 88).

Many researchers have found that the more involved the stepfather is with the stepchildren the better adjusted they are (Menning, Holtzman, & Gilbreth) (Marsiglio). They need to feel connected and loved, to have someone that they can come to to discuss their daily life with. The research has found that teenagers don't like to spend time with their parents so stepparents shouldn't feel like they are not getting any attention when they, the children, want nothing to do with them (Nordheimer). Nordheimer found that a stepparent who guides the child warmly through a difficult situation is more likely to demand ultimate obedience will be trusted and even loved (Nordheimer). "Calm purposefulness," is how Jeannette Lofas explains how stepparents need to be with stepchildren to consistently handle the

stepchildren need to be with stepchildren to consistently handle conflict and kindness (31).

This is where the communication of parents comes in; if they can together and act as a single unit they are more apt to work through troubles with their children. When families come together for the holidays and stirring their children, pets, furniture and personal spaces that is more than not explosions about who's is what and who needs to be where. Remembering that love for others is not an instant awakening in so that you may never have love for your stepchildren or stepparents. Needs to be realized and dealt with (Lofas 51). Knowing that is so hard that thing that will get you through the adjustment period that lay ahead. You may never find love for one another but at least find that they respect each other. Research has estimated that it can take seven years for stepfamilies to get together, although they have also stated that it takes only four years for stepfamilies to dissolve (Lofas 229).

Some of the best ways to help relieve tension is using humor, in fact, as stated in her writings that during a Thanksgiving holiday their blood was beginning to boil over with what was going to be served for the dinner. The family had different traditional dinners and weren't budging. She walked her mother who stated that all was good that they would have dinner for dinner and that she was going to serve "Slug stew and some turkey" (63). Needless to say there erupted a loud roar of laughter that allayed the anger, calm down and work things out. By using humor in your communication with family members, at least humor that is neither degrading nor mean, you can know that there is a fun way of getting along and not everything is so serious (Hetrick 64).

Other ways that have helped our family get over some humps in the road are things that I have learned from counselors and read in books by many out there and one that we have used so that my husband and I get through things is called Fight Fair. This sounds easy but it takes practice to do correctly. Jeannette Lofas explains how the technique starts and ends without children present.

The two adults (to start with then it can be taught to the older children) sit at a table each other allowing the first to speak without interruption then the second indicates that they are done at that time the listener responds with "I heard you hearing...". The speaker then responds with a "Yes that is what you said" that is not what I said." To which the listener then asks for them to repeat the way to help clarify. This is done until an agreement with respect is established.

One of the other techniques she talks about is referred to as Send Them Away. I find it a very interesting concept. With this one the couple communicates through a telephone system such as a cell phone or a public phone. When a conflict is needed instead of a conflict in front of the children one of the adults leaves the house now this can be just to the car or to a park or even the mall, it just needs to be somewhere that the person who left can call the other person that is needed. The whole purpose of this is to be in an area that you can communicate in a respectful and calm manner. As Lofas has noted as long as you have a phone for you, it is done respectfully, and not in front of the children you can communicate anyway you choose. Even if calling a Time Out you can what is needed then - do it (Lofas, 107).

Again, if the marriage is worth it you will have to work at it.

Once the communication is being worked on the couple needs to be constructive. There are no ex-parents there are only co-parents learning to work with constructive ways helps the children's well-being. Having made it known that there are ex-spouses out there that make it extremely difficult to deal with. On these occasions families might have to get counseling as an obstacle. I have dealt with an ex-spouse who is a lousy parent but his researchers say that this is very typical of how divorce children are (Gilbreth). This can also be extremely maddening to a stepparent. The realization is that they just need to find some type of niche in the life of the child that someone when the child needs love (Marsiglio). No matter how biological absent, parent is the child will almost always defend them. They can be angry or feel like they are pushed into defense mode which can be frustrating for the stepparent who is trying to over adjust for that parent (White & Gilbreth).

With all the failed marriages, along with the eruption of stepfamilies in the United States we do need to keep our eyes on our children. Since we have someone with them to help them have a productive life of their own. If the parents are feeling productive they are able to share that feeling with their children. Many things need to be thought about when considering a second marriage. What should be done but how they will live in harmony together. It is important to have the knowledge and put in the hard work that it takes every day. Remembering that people have to heal after a divorce and that communication with your loved ones is a great start to the family healing processes through stepparenting. Just as Susan Hetrick explained if there is love to be fought for (89). And are not our children supposed to be our most important? Their well-being in life is what we should measure as successful parent, biological, step, custodial or noncustodial.

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