Coping with Step-Children in Marriage

Stepfamilies have many rewards. Couples who have children from a previous marriage or relationship do not have a leisurely adjustment to (re-) married life, though. There is no honeymoon period. The first two years are the period of greatest challenge.

There is a continuum of complexity and challenge in stepfamily situations. Among the less complex and less challenging and disruptive stepfamily situations is one where the man is the non-custodial parent of the only stepchildren, so they are present only at certain holiday, vacation and other designated periods. Among the more complex, more challenging situations are those with children - especially adolescent children - from multiple previous relationships.

Four key tasks for successfully forming a stepfamily include:

• Creating a satisfying new marriage relationship.
• Gradually integrating the stepparent into the life of the stepchildren.
• Managing change
• Creating rules for dealing with former spouses

The stages of stepfamily transition are:

• Fantasy - The stepfamily will be just like a biological family, maybe better. Denial is operating. The couple must give this up in order to succeed.

• Immersion - The first year or two are challenging with lots of confusion, conflict and feelings of isolation. This is the period when couples need to be very flexible, pragmatic, willing to abandon preconceptions, and persevering - don't give up.

• Adaptation - New relationships formed. Members begin to have a sense of belonging, insider-outsider splits are less prominent and gains outweigh losses.

• Disruption - Children who reach pre-adolescence (ages 11 - 16) can disrupt the stepfamily adaptation and conflict will re-emerge with possible regression to another immersion-like stage.

• Re-adaptation

Going through the initial immersion stage with adolescent children is much more challenging because their normal developmental needs for separation and independence from the family are in conflict with the need of the stepfamily to form new family bonds and relationships.

There are two basic adaptation models for stepfamilies:

• Neo-traditional - Responsibility is shared for parenting. The non-biological parent (s) gradually assume a parental role with all children.

• Matriarchal - The woman has children from a previous relationship. She basically takes all responsibility for parental decisions with her children. The man serves as parenting helper but does not attempt to fill the father role and defers to her in parenting matters. The success of this adaptation depends on the woman being interested in being in charge and on the man being willing to accept a secondary role in parenting.

Major challenges for stepfamilies include: Resolving complex insider and outsider roles and boundaries. Initially, expect bonds between parents and children to be stronger than those between marriage partners. Relations with the outside parent (former spouse(s), etc.) are complicating. Couples must create a boundary around their marriage relationship and (in neo-traditional stepfamilies) become a real parenting team.

Be alert for and manage sexual feelings and impulses between stepchildren of different genders. Don't expect them to be closer to each other than they are comfortable being.

References and Reading:

James H. Bray, Ph.D. and John Kelly, Stepfamilies: Love, Marriage and Parenting in the First Decade. The result of a major research study about stepfamilies, this book gives insight into the issues and challenges for

stepfamilies, what works and doesn't work, along with stories of families from the case studies. Bray finds that successful stepfamilies are different from biological nuclear families, but every bit as able to provide a positive, nurturing environment for both children and adults.

E. Mavis Hetherington, Ph.D. and John Kelly, For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered. Section two, Remarriage and Stepfamily Life, is especially helpful on stepfamily issues. The first section may also be helpful in considering what went wrong in a previous marriage. The overall tone of this book is positive and takes the view that divorce, while stressful and confusing, is an opportunity for personal growth and a better life.

Couples with children from previous relationships find that MST marriage preparation helps to address the special challenges that stepfamilies can pose. MST includes an special optional seminar section to help couples begin to specifically address stepfamily issues.

MST functions as an immunization that boosts your capacity to handle these potential difficulties. It fortifies your marriage immune system by giving you an early alert to potential areas of challenge and providing you with the skills and opportunity to resolve and manage these challenges before stress and conflict emerge.

MST pre-marriage preparation seminars are designed to help couples build the skills and understanding that they will need to succeed in marriages with stepchildren. They'll also get help to overcome all of the other issues that challenge couples in modern marriage. MST is religion-neutral and based on the latest marriage research.

Don't wait for problems to emerge, take preventive action to promote the happiness and success of your marriage.