

ParenTalk: Preserving Identities in Stepfamilies

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One of the primary issues that makes life in a stepfamily so challenging is that each person belongs to more than one family constellation: there are biological connections and those created through remarriage. A nine year old girl who lives with her divorced mother and visits her remarried father whose new wife has two children from her previous marriage is constantly shifting roles. Even when home with her mother, it's not the intact family she knew through her early years and her relationship with her mother may be altered into part confidante, part daughter. Plus if her mother is in a relationship, that adds to the complexity.

When she visits her father, she has a biological parent relationship mixed with the stepmother relationship as well as relating to the two of them as "parents." Then there is the shift from being an only child in one home to having stepsiblings in the other - and if one of the stepsibs is older, she has to adjust to a different sibling position. Of course we need to throw in a new set of stepgrandparents and the remainder of that extended family. Now if her mother remarries and if either or both of the parents have children of their own, the complexities multiply geometrically.

It is easy for any member of such a complex family structure to feel lost, left out, displaced, hurt, angry. Most stepfamilies need assistance to navigate such complex waters in order to achieve stability and healthy relationships. In working with these families, I stress the importance of four recommendations to help preserve each person's core identity which they need in order to cope with the fluidity and the transitions that are a routine part of life in a stepfamily.

First, everybody, meaning both children AND adults, needs a space of their own, regardless of how much time each spends in a home. Certainly each child needs their own bed, dresser, and shelves, with certain clothes, toys, and other possessions that remain there and are respected by everyone else. This is done in most families. But what is often missed is the same need for the adults, especially when frequently one spouse has moved into the home of the other spouse and has difficulty (often unstated) feeling like it is really their home as well. So each spouse should have, to whatever degree space allows, anything from a nook to a room where they can set up some special things that tie their present life to their past and help to maintain a sense of continuity about who they are.

Second, the biologically-related family members need to spend some time alone during visitations. All the relationships are not equal and attempts to make them so denies reality and creates hurts and jealousies. Children know the reality and will accept honest and logical behavior. So when our nine-year-old visits her father, they should go off and do some things alone. This doesn't preclude the integration of this girl into the family as a whole or the support for developing strong ties with her stepfamily, but that will take time and is best when not hurried. In the meantime, experiencing the entire family's support for her and her father to have their special time reduces her fears of "losing" him to everybody else and reaffirms her primary identity as his natural daughter.

Third, it is very important to share with everyone the narratives that define the history of each branch of the family. Time should be spent telling stories and looking at old picture albums and creating drawings of family trees so everyone can know not only who they are but who each other is.

Fourth, the remarried couple is the key relationship if a stepfamily is to be a successful place to live and flourish. It forms the stable core in the midst of all these fluid boundaries and identities that I've been referring to and must be a priority. Yet, it is much more challenging to do this because there are so many special issues and needs within the family that the marriage is often pushed to the background.

Remember that most remarriages involve pre-existing families and, therefore, the couple does not get a period of time to just be a couple. They are instantly challenged to adjust to being parents before they have solidified their own relationship. So they must find ways to keep making time to work on that process for years into their marriage.

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