

Building a Stepfamily that Lasts, Part three

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We have been exploring six building blocks to creating a stepfamily that lasts. We know that stepfamilies begin as a group of virtual strangers with little in common. Actually, stepfamilies are the combination of several “mini-families” such as a mom and her children or a dad and his children (even if they do not live with him). Ways of doing things in one mini-family may seem foreign (or weird) to another. So, the task is to combine these families into one. In my experience, this takes about four to seven years to accomplish. Below are the six building blocks to stepfamily success.

1. Develop trust among family members by creating an atmosphere where it is safe to disclose and be vulnerable.
2. Develop clear family goals and identify obstacles to growth.
3. Address the inability to have healthy conflict.
4. Increase buy-in and commitment by family members.
5. Create an atmosphere of mutual accountability.
6. Create a family identity.

Last time we learned that the foundation of a great stepfamily is trust. Why is trust so important? Without trust we cannot truly experience love. Without trust, relationships become shallow and self-serving. Without trust there is no hope or joy.

The next building block is the development of clear family goals and the identification of obstacles to growth. The obstacles are easiest to identify. For example, few families have or even talk about goals. In stepfamilies, the biggest obstacles are unrealistic expectations and competing family systems (the mini-families we mentioned earlier). Expectations create a picture of how the family should look and act. It is unlikely that the various family “pictures” match up. Few stepfamily couples know how to move their family to a place of healthy connection. Many assume that a “nuclear-like family” will somehow emerge and everyone will instantly get along and act like family. Instant family is a myth and stepfamilies never look or act exactly like nuclear families.

What we can do is get everyone talking. Start by asking what each member wants and needs. Listen to their stories. Give permission for frank (not disrespectful) talk. Don't be frustrated if some members are reluctant or resistant. People open up and develop trust in their own time. Ultimately, as family members feel free to share their needs, fears and gripes, and have a sense that these things matter, discussions about family goals will become much easier. Below are a few examples of healthy goals for your family.

- Individual personalities are valued (vs. being clones)

- Mistakes and failures are handled with tolerance and compassion—as growth and teaching opportunities
- There are clear family roles and rules and non-shaming fair consequences
- Personal faith is shared and lived out
- Family is a safe place to share emotions and work out issues
- Care and respect for others is modeled and encouraged
- There are no family secrets
- Members take responsibility for their own choices and actions without blaming, mind-reading, denying or feeling victimized.

The biggest obstacle to developing family goals is the unrealistic expectations of each family member. Take the time to understand and gently confront these expectations. This is a bumpy process, but don't be discouraged. Next time we will tackle how.