

# Building A Stepfamily that Lasts, Part Four

Jeff Parziale Ph.D., M.Div.

We have been exploring six building blocks to creating a stepfamily that lasts. Stepfamilies are the most complex family form. They experience unparalleled levels of stress and relational overload. Virtual strangers, armed with baggage from past disappointments and a great deal of courage, are asked to embark on a perilous journey into the vast unknown called “stepfamily.” If you are in a stepfamily, you know I am not being overly-dramatic. So the task is to survive, knowing that over 60% of those who start this journey never reach their destination. To review, below are the six building blocks to stepfamily success.

1. Develop trust.
2. Develop clear goals.
3. Learn how to do conflict well.
4. Get family members to “buy-in” to the family.
5. Create an atmosphere of mutual accountability.
6. Create a family identity.

We have already discussed the first two. The third step is to create an atmosphere conducive to healthy conflict. All relationships require productive conflict to grow. Many stepfamily members, however, view conflict as “bad” and something to be avoided. The truth is, most of us do not do conflict well. We take one of two extremes—we either hide or attack. Healthy conflict is tough in stepfamilies because most family members bring a great deal of emotional woundedness into the family. These wounds limit their ability to listen, communicate, express needs, and in particular, to solve problems. While there are no easy solutions, families can begin by “blaming” the situation (we are a group of strangers trying to become a family) rather than one another.

How do you create a safe atmosphere that encourages healthy conflict? It is critical to distinguish between healthy conflict and destructive fighting. Violence, name-calling, yelling, etc. will not promote family growth; neither will apathy, stuffing feelings, or passive-aggressive behavior. Healthy conflict is solution-focused; it avoids attacking the character of others. Healthy conflict does not avoid an issue for fear of “hurting” someone’s feelings. Unless issues are addressed and resolved, we are doomed to re-visit them—over and over.

OK, how do we start? First, send the message that conflict is productive and that your family is committed to finding “good-enough” solutions. Conflict must be viewed as an opportunity to grow, not to attack one another’s character. Next, family members must be encouraged to address issues. Healthy conflict happens in a atmosphere that encourages family members to respectfully address (vs. stuff, ignore, pretend) issues. Parents must model being comfortable with conflict, and then allow other family members to engage in productive, but possibly uncomfortable, discussions. This poses a tremendous

challenge for biological parents in stepfamilies, who tend to rush to the aid of their children, thus short-circuiting growth-producing dialog.

Healthy conflict plays vital role in stepfamily development—it helps us focus on finding solutions. It enhances communication, encourages family growth and sets a tone for safety and respect in the family. Become a stepfamily that will deal with issues as they arise; dare to experience the discomfort of healthy conflict. Resist the tendency to avoid issues or overprotect. Model healthy conflict in your family. Next time we will look at family buy-in. Embrace the journey.