

Building Trust

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Many stepfamilies begin life as a fractured group of wounded people. In fact, a defining characteristic of all stepfamilies is that they are born of loss. Changes are happening that make everyone uncomfortable. There is a conspicuous lack of trust. Motives and actions are suspect. Family members are disconnected; sometimes feeling like strangers. Interactions are either superficial or hostile. Members wonder, “Is this a safe place?” “Will my needs be met?” “Will I be able to interact freely with my mom/dad?” “Will I be treated differently?” Successful stepfamilies must develop an atmosphere of safety that promotes personal and family growth. When family members feel safe they will ask hard questions, confront issues and ultimately learn to trust one another.

Sure, each family member brings strengths and many bring a determination to succeed. However, few have an awareness of just how wounded they are or how far away from “family” their new stepfamily really is. Even fewer have a plan to take their new family to a place of cohesion, safety and acceptance.

Adult couples dream of doing “family” again—and doing it right this time. However, more often than not, their children do not share this dream. Most children are still adjusting to earlier changes and grieving earlier losses; many hope their biological parents will re-unite. Adults rarely think through how to include their children in this dream. They assume the children will “come along for the ride” with no need for preparation. Few adults actually allow their children to express their feelings, fears or concerns. The idea that a new stepfamily will function (at least in the first few years) like a cohesive team or family is a dangerous misconception that can place undue pressure on the family. It is dangerous because it can pressure family members, who are often virtual strangers, to “get along” instead of allowing them to go through the slow process of building relationships. False assumptions, unrealistic expectations, and unresolved issues are the trademarks of new stepfamilies. To survive and thrive, the family has to address and resolve the fact that an absence of trust exists between family members. Trust is the foundation of a healthy stepfamily. Without trust, there is no vulnerability; without vulnerability, there is no sharing or growth. Too many families subtly discourage their members from sharing, often because of the risk of conflict. For some adults, particularly those who have been wounded in the past, conflict must be avoided at all costs—even if that means the family will not grow.

For a stepfamily to grow and become healthy, a culture must be created where members can share their needs, concerns, disappointments, and disagreements; in other words, a safe environment to be vulnerable. Healthy trust happens when family members believe they are valued and they learn how to be open with one another. In healthy stepfamilies, dialogue and interaction are welcome.

It takes genuine courage to create an atmosphere where interactions can happen without threat of reprisal. Yes, there must be boundaries and limits. However, adults should not use boundaries as a form of control or to conceal their fears or lack of skills. Skills can be learned and fears can be faced. God's spirit can bring peace, even in the midst of fear.

Lack of interaction among family members is a sign of family dysfunction because trust is built through interaction. Strangers become cohesive friends and family members as they hear each other's stories and learn about each person's needs, priorities, strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears. This happens far too infrequently in most stepfamilies. Incidentally, this kind of sharing and vulnerability must start at the top—with the adults.

Developing trust in a new stepfamily is difficult because most remarrying adults (and children) are emotionally and spiritually wounded and wounded people are extremely self-protective. Vulnerability (opening oneself up to potential pain or hurt) sounds like a really bad idea. However, for the family to grow, family members must allow themselves to be vulnerable. Without healthy interactions families can become stagnant, lifeless and sterile.

How does a stepfamily develop trust? First and foremost, it must be intentional, viewed as a long-term goal and role-modeled by the adults in the family. An attitude that each family member is valued and important, and brings his or her own unique blend of personal strengths to the family needs to be cultivated. Next, interaction and sharing is encouraged, even if it leads to conflict. This normally begins with safe, benign information and grows to include more significant feelings and beliefs. Here are a few ideas:

- Sharing favorite stories
- Sharing favorite traditions
- Best thing that ever happened
- Expectations about the family
- Observations about other family members
- Family experiences: hiking, camping, bowling, miniature golf, etc.
- Family games, such as *The Ungame*, which downplay competition and emphasize disclosure
- Creating some new family traditions

Stepfamily trust is built when family members are encouraged to freely interact with one another—even at the risk of conflict. Sharing and disclosure should always begin with the adult couple. Family members must not be punished for honest disclosure. Developing healthy trust is worth the risk. **Jeff and Judi Parziale actively direct InStep Ministries in Tucson, Arizona.**