

All Together Now

Creating a stepfamily even your children will love.
by Natalie Nichols Gillespie

Stepfamilies aren't something you plan for. When I dreamed of being a mother, I never dreamed I would also one day be someone's stepmother. When I got married, I never dreamed I would allow my life and my marriage to spin out of control and lead me to divorce. My parents never divorced. Their parents never divorced. We didn't even have any family or friends who divorced. Yet at the age of 27 I suddenly found myself broken, repentant—and the single mom of two very young children.

Fast-forward three years, and God beautifully restored me and brought an incredible Christian man into my life. He had three daughters, and the seven of us got along famously. Our wedding invitations asked guests to join in the wedding of "Natalie, Jessica, and Joshua" to "Adam, Lorra, Leigha, and Lydia." Following the ceremony, we rode off into the sunset for a lifetime of marital and familial bliss.

Well, not exactly.

Over the past few years, I've discovered that stepfamilies are kind of like salad dressing. You can shake us up and we blend really well for moments, days, months even.

After a while, though, we have a tendency to settle back into original family lines and loyalties.

Then there are the challenges. We have faced courtrooms, authorities, teen troubles, and new babies. Few stepfamilies come to be because of happy circumstances—there is typically a divorce or death to be dealt with. In the worst cases, there are issues of abuse or abandonment that may never fully heal.

And yet stepfamilies can be a place of indescribable healing for both parents and kids. In our family, the children are growing up with the knowledge and love of Christ. They see firsthand that marriages can stay strong and stable. While our relationships are not perfect, they continue to improve.

It takes a lot of trial and error to find the right disciplinary styles, family activities, and ways to feel like a family. But over the past eight years, we have discovered a few principles that have helped our children adapt to this new family.

Know that it's hard and that's okay

The Bible says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2-3). Notice it doesn't say "if" but "when." When you bring many personalities together under one roof there will inevitably be some clashes.

Children—and adults—in stepfamilies need lots of reassurance that the struggles are normal. That starts with the admission that growing closer will be a long and often very difficult process. Give the kids permission to struggle with this enormous change. Listen patiently as they express frustrations or hurt feelings and be open to their ideas for building bridges between the two families. Do your best to model compassion and flexibility as you settle into your new role.

Remember to pray as a family often, being honest as you bring your challenges and joys to God. And don't forget to pray for your children both in front of them and behind closed doors. It's also helpful to encourage your children to go "Scripture seeking" to get a grip on emotions like grief and anger, and to find the rewards attached to love, joy, and peace. Memorize some of their favorites as a family, or post them on the fridge or the bathroom mirror.

Most of all, give kids time to adjust to the new family. We've found it helpful to tell our children that we expect them to demonstrate respect and good manners, not instant bonding and love. This has helped them build gradual, more natural friendships with each other, rather than feeling forced into relationships they aren't quite ready for.

Lay down a legacy

When children come out of families where there has been divorce or death, their understanding of how life works shifts, sometimes dramatically. Rather than growing up believing that they can just float through life without much trouble, they have a deep sense that life can, and often does, throw zingers at us.

This understanding can be painful, but it also creates an amazing opportunity for stepparents to replace that old naiveté with a profound sense that God can be trusted even in difficult times. Adam and I stepped into this new understanding with our children by creating intentional times of family faith formation.

We knew that would involve more than just taking the kids to church every week, although we did that too. We needed to weave faith into every element of our life as a family—no small task after having doubled in size. With more kids came more activity, making it nearly impossible to stuff family time into our schedule. But I've found that with a little creative "time stacking," we can often hook spiritual lessons onto other activities.

Since we're in our car a lot, our van has become one of our best places for conversation and education. My 14-year-old stepdaughter and I hold some of our deepest theological and ethical discussions there. When we have a vanful, we try to avoid individual cd players and headsets and instead listen together to "Adventures in Odyssey," dramatized Scripture, and Christian biographies and classics on cd. We are a family on the go, but we can put our car time to good use.

Honor old memories and create new ones

One of the first things I learned as a stepmom is that my stepdaughters find it very important to be able to talk about their former house, their mom and new stepdad, and their half siblings at

their mom's house. They like to remember things their original family did together. I try never to discourage that with words, facial expressions, or a change of subject. The girls need the freedom to be emotionally loyal to all of their family members.

At the same time, we make it a point to create as many new, fun memories as possible to help solidify our stepfamily's identity. My older girls love to shop. Hitting the mall with them is a way for me to connect without conflict. My younger children love to go horseback riding so Adam takes them riding every other weekend. My husband also makes a point of taking each girl out on "a date" with Dad, so they can receive individual attention (a precious commodity in our large family).

Even our daily routines give us opportunities to bond with our children. Adam and I take different configurations of kids on errands in order to have time to talk and see into their hearts. We look at old photo albums to remember our histories, and we are creating new scrapbooks for each child to celebrate the new thing that God has created. We take family vacations each summer, and we tuck the kids into bed with prayers each night (yes, even the teenagers). In and of themselves, these small gestures are no big deal but together, they signal to our kids that we are a family with a unique past and an exciting future.

Practice forgiveness

Unlike other families, stepfamilies often have other adults making decisions for the children. In the best cases, the children might have loving adults who are deeply invested in their lives as co-parents. But if your children's other parent is hostile and bitter, living an immoral lifestyle, adamantly opposed to Christianity, or just downright unstable, their presence can create all kinds of difficulties.

At the same time, children often are fiercely loyal to their birth parents, even a parent who has caused damage in the child's life. If they sense you've rejected their other parent, you might as well be rejecting them. That's a hurt that's not easily healed.

It also can be exceedingly difficult to hand children over to a parent you don't trust. Still you can take comfort in the knowledge that God is watching over your precious children when they are not with you. They are God's children, not just yours.

If you're sowing seeds of God's truth in them, you have to trust that your children are armed with the protection they need when they observe different lifestyles and standards. Keep the conversational door open for your children to speak of anything that troubles them, by refusing to interrogate them about what happens in their other parent's home. Pray without ceasing, for your children and your former spouse. If your children are in real emotional or physical danger, seek help from a professional counselor immediately.

Many times, a former spouse and even your children may try to undermine the stepfamily unit. Determine to pull together, not apart. Ask God how you should pray for the other person and to help you forgive if you still harbor bitterness. Do everything in your power to love your children's other parents with the supernatural love of the Lord.

Seek out support

Early on, my husband and I committed to making our home a place where our children would

grow to know and love God. We have actively sought out ways to help everyone in our family create a support system of who can pray with us and encourage us as we build our family.

Our teens find recreational, emotional, and spiritual outlets in church youth group and spiritual retreats, while our younger ones have plugged into a puppet ministry and vacation Bible school. My husband and I have joined a small group that contains two other stepfamilies, and we make church attendance a priority.

If you can't find a Bible study, small group, or stepfamily support group, start one. Invite eight to ten people over every other week to share, pray, and study together. Your fellow stepfamilies can impact a generation devastated by broken families and turn it into a testimony of God's goodness.

When some of our children experienced the additional trauma of custody litigation, we used Christian counselors and psychologists as sounding boards for our teens and for us. Counselors are trained to provide insights and means of handling conflict that might never occur to you. And make sure you find a Christian counselor to help you and your children work through the spiritual questions that are a natural part of this major transition.

Perhaps the most essential element of creating a stepfamily where your children can thrive is to hold onto the hope of God, who brings good out of even the most painful of circumstances. The God who entrusted his only son, Jesus, to a stepfather named Joseph loves our stepfamilies and all the stepfamilies around us dearly. He can help us get through the worst days and leave our children and stepchildren a legacy of stability and a strong testimony to his grace and redemptive power.

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