



NATIONAL STEPFAMILY DAY – TIPS FOR MAKING A BLENDED FAMILY THRIVE

The inaugural National Stepfamily Day was celebrated on September 16, 1997 and has been celebrated every year since. The purpose is to recognize and show appreciation for the importance and value of stepparents and extended families. Today, the U.S. Census estimates about 50% of families are some form of stepfamily. The stepfamily has become the modern family.

Jeannette Lofas, PhD, LCSW has dedicated her life to helping stepfamilies blend together into a single unit. She was one of the first professionals to examine the dynamic of blended families, and in 1975 founded the Stepfamily Foundation, Inc.

Dr. Lofas spells it out in five steps to help a blended family thrive.

1. Build "Couple Strength." Almost everything you do builds or takes away from couple strength. Know that you come from different points of view about many ways of doing things. Honor your differences and create new norms and forms together. The couple comes first (after you are married). A strong, supportive couple relationship sets the cornerstone and helps children build self-esteem. The couple recognizes that the family is a blended/stepfamily and knows how stepfamilies function and does not expect this family to act like biological family. Remember you are partners. It cannot and will not. He is the male head of the household. She is the female head of the household. You are partners in creating a stepfamily. Creating a stepfamily that works looks like the couple deciding on how they are going to manage all aspects of their household. Partners decide on rules, regulations, discipline styles, job descriptions, use of time, energy and money, etc.

2. **Establish concrete house rules and structure.** Rules need to be written in the positive form. The couple must decide on the rules and define job descriptions themselves and of each member with positive and negative consequences. The biological parent disciplines his/her children and the stepparent says, "As you know your Dad/Mom and I have decided, in this house we..." The stepparent disciplines based on rules agreed and presented to kids as a couple. And the couple must make sure the children treat the stepparent with respect. The couple must maintain their positions as male and female heads of the family. They cannot allow the children to dominate. The male and female heads of the household teach the children the models, forms and norms as to how we live and act with each other within the stepfamily.

3. **The couple is in charge.** The couple in the stepfamily takes responsibility for creating a predictable structure of events, manners and responsibilities for in house and visiting stepchildren. The couple agrees with each other and backs the other up so the children have consistency, which is a necessary foundation for creating intimacy and closeness.

4. **Plan visitation as good co-parents (exes), parents and stepparent.** Avoid allowing visitation to become a chaotic episode where the child is caught in the cross fire between ex-spouses. The bad-mouthing of the prior spouse. When we bad-mouth and put down the other parent of our children we are bad-mouthing and disparaging half of that child's identity. Less than half of divorced parents today realize that bad mouthing their ex lowers the self-esteem of their child.

5. **Ask for counseling from professionals trained to treat stepfamilies.** The dynamics of stepfamilies are crucially different from the biologically connected family. The stepfamilies are now the majority of families, but not all professionals are taught about their specific behaviors in graduate school.

Dr. Lofas says stresses that couples manage expectations when entering this type of relationship.

1. You won't be one big happy family at the outset.
2. Everyone will want your attention and time and all at the same moment.
3. Unrealistic expectations can cause difficult disappointments.
4. Stepparenting can be hazardous to your sex life.

The Stepfamily Foundation, Inc., a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) foundation, was founded on forty-plus years of experience and research focused exclusively on the stepfamily. The foundation also hosts Stepfamily Certification Seminars, certifying counselors and coaches across the globe. Their mission is to assist in diminishing the high divorce rate of stepfamilies and alleviate the after affects of divorce on children through research and counsel. They also strive to continuously expand the network of stepfamily counselors and coaches by providing stepfamily certification seminars.

For more information, visit: <http://www.stepfamily.org>