

Stepwise

Information for Stepfamilies

Guidelines for Successful Stepfamily Adjustment

Despite the fact that they are increasingly common in our communities many stepfamilies find that there are few norms to aid them in coping with the complicated situations in which they find themselves. The following are some general guidelines, which many families have found helpful.

- Be flexible. Stepfamily relationships are complex and demand creative solutions, along with a willingness to adopt a trial and error approach to problem solving. The same solutions won't work for every-

“Stepfamilies are fundamentally different from biological families and must be judged by a different standard.”

- one.
• Encourage the open expression of a wide range of emotional responses, including those that are difficult and uncomfortable. Attempts to suppress feelings are counterproductive in the long run and

usually intensify the uncomfortable feelings or force them underground.

- Be generous. Everyone in a stepfamily is in a difficult spot; it will take time and patience for these complicated relationships to sort themselves out.
• Keep expectations realistic. Stepfamilies are fundamentally different from

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biological families and must be judged by a different standard. Expectations, including expectations of oneself, must be reasonable and reflect these differences.

- Whenever possible, the adults should encourage and facilitate children's access to both biological parents and other biological relatives. This will decrease loyalty conflicts and will facilitate the child's relationship with stepparents.
- Whenever possible, it is extremely important that former spouses maintain a cooperative coparenting relationship. Continuing anger or non-communication between former spouses will intensify loyalty conflicts and will undermine the stepfamily.
- Children of all ages need appropriate limits and discipline. Bending over backwards in order to compensate for the loss or the original family usually backfires. Initially, the biological parent should take charge of discipline. A stepparent's efforts to discipline a child with whom he/she has a new relationship will be ineffective and will undermine that fragile relationship.
- Devote time and attention to the new couple relationship. Do not allow it to get lost in the press of day-to-day challenges.
- Territory is often a difficult issue in stepfamilies. It is difficult to move

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into the space of someone else, and it is also difficult to share one's own space. Physical space is often fraught with symbolic meanings about who is on the inside or the outside of the family. It is helpful, when possible, for the new stepfamily to have a new home of its own. Similarly, it is important for visiting children to have a space of their own, a space that will be undisturbed by other family members, even if only a closet or a drawer.

- Be willing to seek professional help when appropriate. A willingness to use available resources is a sign of successful coping, not an indication of failure. Problems are easier to solve if they are addressed sooner rather than later.

How to Build Relationships with Stepchildren

- Give children space and respect their need to keep you at a distance. Be patient and remember that all caring relationships take time to develop.
- Teach a skill, or ask the child to teach you a skill. This allows you to interact with the child in a way that is relaxed and non-threatening for both of you. Avoid issues that produce stress for the child. For example, if he/she strug-

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gles in school, helping with homework won't be a good choice.

- Allow the child to talk about the absent parent. Do not express your negative feelings about that parent to the child, even if the child seemingly invites you to do so.
- Be tactful, but always be honest.
- Give a genuine compliment.
- Ask your stepchild about the things going on in his/her life, and listen to the answers.
- Spend time with the child doing mundane things. Relationships are built on day-to-day familiarity with each other.
- Keep the lines of communication open with your spouse. Discuss your expectations of your role in the child's life.

“Be patient and remember that all caring relationships take time to develop.”

Many free resources are also available on SAA's website at

tion with a professional regarding stepfamily questions and concerns; and discounts on the many books available through SAA's catalogue.

www.saafamilies.org. In addition to articles on many topics of interest to stepfamilies, there is a list of books, reviewed and recommended by SAA. They are categorized by topic, author, and title. Stepfamily Association of America can be reached at the web address listed above or at (800) 735-0329.

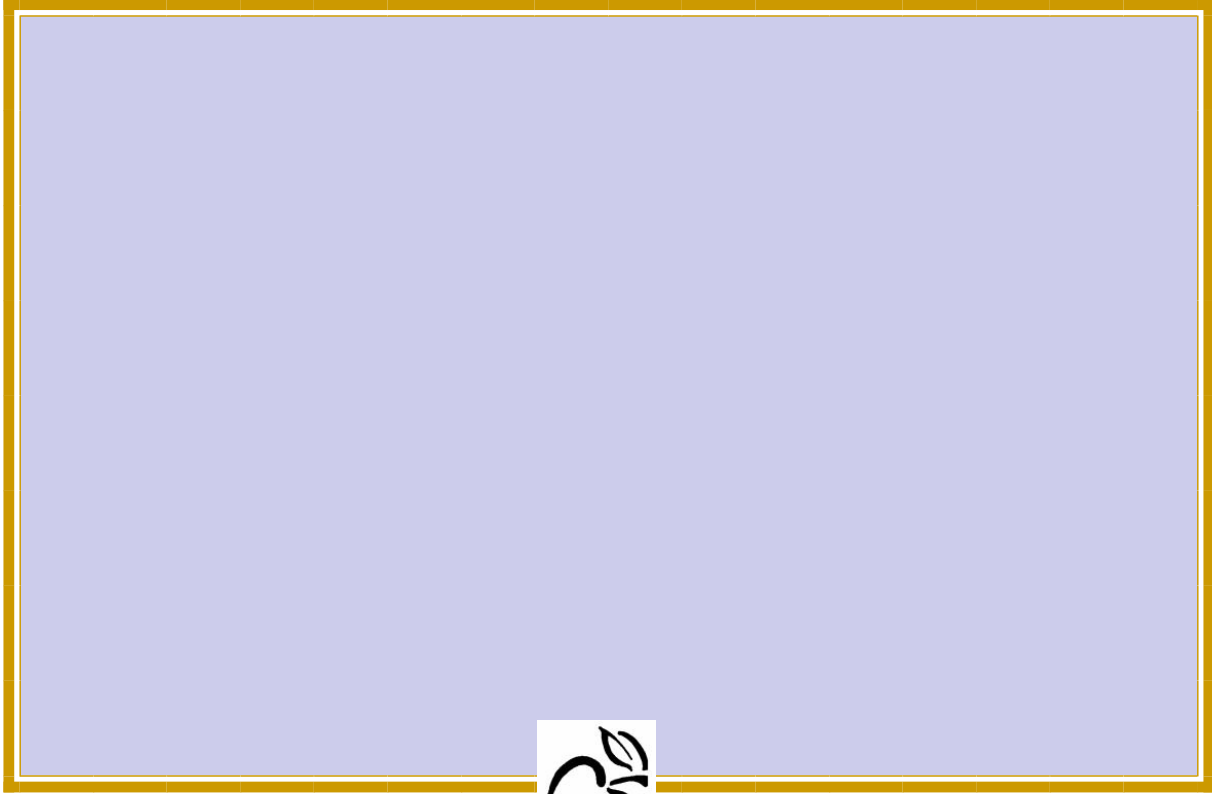
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Resource Review: Stepfamily Association of America

The Stepfamily Association of America is an excellent resource, providing a wealth of information to stepfamily members and to the professionals who work with them. A national, not-for-profit, membership organization, SAA is “dedicated to successful stepfamily living” and accomplishes its mission by providing “information, education, support, and advocacy to stepfamilies and those who work with them.” Annual membership costs \$40. and includes: a copy of *The Stepfamily Handbook*; a subscription to SAA's bimonthly, online magazine; email consulta-

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