

family for a while and got used to their role and the expectations in that family.



Now, with remarriage, their family has changed once again. Children may wonder where they fit in, how to relate to this new adult in their lives, and what will happen to them. This mixture of past and present loss and change may confuse your children and stepchildren—and even contribute to their misbehavior.

Stages of Grief

While recovering from an important loss, sometimes called “grief work,” a person moves through at least three separate stages: shock, pain (plus denial), and acceptance.

The first stage, **shock**, is characterized by a sense of disbelief that this is really happening. “I can’t believe they are really getting a divorce. How can this be happening to us?” There may be an accompanying sense of panic about what the future will bring and how one will cope.

As reality sinks in and the person begins to experience the **pain** of stage two (sadness, anger, guilt, fear, and other hurtful emotions), a **denial** mechanism is often triggered. The child or adult may tell himself and others that he is okay and has accepted the divorce (or death) and moved on.

Denial can appear in several forms:

Denying the importance of grieving loss and change. Some people deny to themselves the importance of grieving and accepting the losses experienced with their former families. They may find it appealing to remarry without completing the grieving process. Beware of this temptation. When you suppress the great sadness of saying goodbye to your family as it once was, unresolved grief may rear its head in your new family as anger, depression, or guilt. If you unconsciously direct these

into troublesome behavior. For example, kids might not be able to relate appropriately to new stepparents because they are consumed by worries such as... *If I learn to like my new stepmother, will my own mother be sad? Hurt? Jealous? Angry with me?*

Stepfamily Challenge #2: Exploring Expectations

All of us hold expectations about how things should be in our families as well as in our relationships, our careers, and elsewhere. Expectations are especially important in stepfamilies, because there are so many new roles—stepsister, half brother, step-grandmother, non-custodial father—with which family members have little experience. But unless family members talk with each other about what they expect regarding responsibility, behaviors, choices, communication, or how to fulfill individual and family needs, expectations may remain unmet, leading to frustration, anger, and conflict between family members.

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Expectations can cause serious trouble in new stepfamilies because everyone and everything is new to one another. Just putting two families in the same household doesn't mean everyone's going to think or behave the way you've come to expect in a former family. New mates need to clarify and agree on their long-range personal, marital, and family priorities. This is the basis for starting out strongly as a stepfamily, and it's best done during courtship, but if you did not make time for it before the wedding, "as soon as possible" is better than "not at all."



Stepfamily Challenge #3: Adapting to Change

As you've learned, unresolved grief and unrealistic expectations can get your stepfamily off to a rough start. So can a third issue: the experience of rapid change that your family has undergone. Adults and children often lack information about how stepfamilies differ, so they jump into the challenge of stepfamily living unprepared, and they encounter problems that could have been avoided. It's never too late to learn. Above all, you need to understand and adapt to the fact that your new stepfamily is different in two major ways: in its development and in its structure.

- 1. Development** The process of developing a cohesive, well-functioning stepfamily takes *years*. While your wedding ceremony created an "instant family," there's nothing "instant" about building good relationships and a sense of unity within that family. It's important that you accept this reality so that you don't give up too soon.
- 2. Structure** This refers to your family's make-up—its shape—and how it works within that context. The shape of the once-familiar traditional family included one mother, one father, and their children all living in the same household, maybe with a pet or two. There were two sets of grandparents. Everyone understood the roles and rules. But your new stepfamily shape looks very different. There may be two sets of parents with new partners who become stepparents, at least four sets of grandparents, and all of the children living in multiple households.

Other structural differences make a stepfamily unlike traditional families, as well: no legal relationships exist between stepparents and stepchildren; children often move between their biological parents' houses; the new family has to face many loss issues early on; and finally, the strength of your new couple bond isn't nearly as powerful as the bond between biological parents and their children. This last difference alone can cause many loyalty conflicts.

Responding to these three challenges—healing from loss, exploring expectations, and adapting to change—requires clear



THE PROBLEM-HANDLING MODEL

Anticipate and prevent problems through Problem-Prevention Talks and Family Meetings



If a problem does occur, determine who owns the problem:
(adult, child, or both)

Adult-owned

Shared

Child-owned



**Provide
discipline.**

**Provide discipline
and support.**

**Provide
support.**



**Less Structured Discipline
Approaches:**

- Polite requests
- "I" messages
- Firm directions

**More Structured Discipline
Approaches:**

- Logical Consequences
- Active problem-solving
- FLAC method



If appropriate, allow natural
consequences to teach.



Let the child handle the
problem, but offer support
through active communication.



Refer the problem to a Family Meeting



And no matter who owns the problem: encourage, encourage, encourage!