

by Melinda Blau

The Secrets of Happy Stepfamilies

Forming a new stepfamily is challenging. But these protective principles ensure that everyone's needs are supported and valued.

AT FIRST, Ann Orchard welcomed the "package" that came with her future husband—a divorced father whose son was then 5 and daughter, 7. "I wanted a family, so it was great," says Orchard, 41, a marketing executive in Minneapolis. "I'd bring chocolate chip cookies, and we'd do fun things. The kids liked me, and we all got along well." But when Orchard got married, nothing turned out the way she had imagined. "That first year of marriage was the worst year of my life," she says. "I was tearful and angry most of the time."

The same well-behaved, loving kids who had welcomed their Dad's girlfriend saw their new stepmother as the enemy. "I was a reminder that I wasn't their moth-

er and that they missed her," Orchard says. "Bryan became very obstinate. We got calls almost weekly from his school. And Anne, who was Daddy's girl, felt I had butted in to their relationship." At the end of that first year, Anne announced, "I'm going to fire you from this family!"

"That hurt," Orchard admits. "I was putting in a lot of effort—and for what?"

The Orchards are not alone, experts say. Almost half of all marriages that take place every year are remarriages. In addition, nearly 10 million children live in blended families with a stepparent, half brother, or half sister, according to a new U.S. Census Bureau report. And the Stepfamily Association of America (SAA) in Lincoln, Nebraska, estimates that 1,300 new stepfamilies are formed each day.

For a new stepfamily to get through the often arduous adjustment period, it

THE MERIDAS OF MARYLAND



THE TICHAUERS OF CALIFORNIA



Kevin Merida and Donna Britt of Takoma Park, Maryland, have spent one year as a stepfamily with Hamani, 12, and Darrell, 9. Susan and Larry Tichauer are set to go biking in La Palma, California, with Jeffrey, 14, and Rachel, 5.

takes time, patience, realistic expectations, and communication. With severed relationships to mourn and new ones to foster, old memories to respect and new traditions to create, there's no such thing as an "instant family" or "instant love," says Claire Berman, a New York City-based author of *Making It As a Stepparent*. "That myth places unrealistic demands on all members of the stepfamily." ▶

Children adjust better in blended families when the remarried parent and stepparent acknowledge the absent parent's importance.

Some stepfamilies don't survive the test. In fact, the divorce rate for remarriage is 60 percent, compared to 50 percent for first marriages. Miriam Galper Cohen, L.S.W., a therapist in Philadelphia

THE SULICHES OF CONNECTICUT



and author of *The Joint Custody Handbook*, explains why: "A stepfamily is built on loss—the ending of a previous family. The confusion, sadness, and anger that naturally come with that kind of crisis are carried over into the new family."

The good news is the odds of creating a happy stepfamily are improving. With more stepfamilies now than ever, those traversing this rocky terrain don't feel so alone. Here's how other stepfamilies survive and thrive—and how yours can, too!

1. Give a Child Enough Time to Adjust to a Stepparent.

"After a remarriage, a child and his remarried parent are in very different places," says Patricia Papernow, Ed.D., a Boston therapist and author of *Becoming a*

Susan and Paul Sulich live in New Fairfield, Connecticut, with Melissa, 15, and Paul Jr., 2. Jim, 9, Chris, 12, and J.J., 14, visit Susan and Jack McMahon's home in Newport, Rhode Island, every other weekend and for part of each week.

Stepfamily. "The adult may be thrilled to have a new life and partner. But to a child, the new parent may be an intruder."

Younger children are generally more receptive than older ones. They aren't as set in their daily routines, and they're often more able to accept the new adult as a playmate or pal. Older kids are often

filled with questions: What do I call this new person? What role will she have to play in my life? How will she change the household? And will my stepparent steal my parent's time, attention, and love?

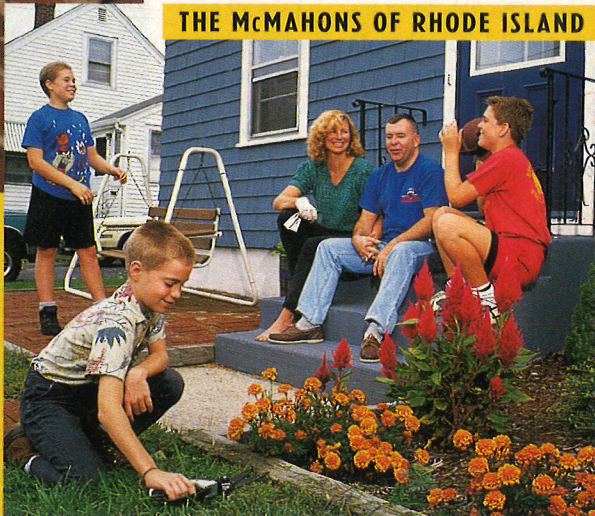
It's best if you begin to lay the groundwork before your remarriage. Bring your child along on some dates, but take it slow. Don't exalt your partner's merits ("Isn't Mary a wonderful cook?") and expect your child to agree.

You'll know you're rushing a young child if he develops sleep disturbances, has behavioral problems at home or at school, or literally tries to wedge himself into conversations in an effort to disrupt your couple intimacy. A school-age child is likely to verbalize his discontent.

2. Don't Expect a Stepparent to Become a Replacement Parent.

Dr. Papernow advises stepparents to make it clear they're not trying to step immediately and firmly into a parental role by telling kids: "I know I'll never replace your mother. You have a very big

THE McMAHONS OF RHODE ISLAND



heart, and she will always have a place in it. And you and I will get to know each other slowly, over time." Consider developing a different type of role, such as a mentor, aunt, loving friend, or confidant, recommends Emily Visser, Ph.D., a psychologist in Lafayette, California, and co-author of *How To Win As a Stepfamily*. ▶

A Small Addition To Your Kitchen



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THE NEW FAMILY

"Don't get caught up in what your stepchild calls you," Berman adds. Offer choices: "I'd be quite comfortable with 'Helen,' 'Mom,' or some kind of nickname. What are you comfortable with?"

As a stepparent you might introduce your stepchild to new experiences. Kevin Merida, 37, a congressional reporter for *The Washington Post*, bonded with his stepsons, Hamani, 12, and Darrell, 9, by going to football and basketball games.

3. Come to grips with your own feelings as a stepparent.

It was quite an adjustment for Susan McMahon, 39, when she married her husband, Jack, 44, last December, and became a stepmother to his three sons, Jim, 9; Chris, 12; and J.J., 14. "I was 38 years old, single, and used to moving forward in my life on my own," McMahon says. "Now, I have a husband and three children. I get overwhelmed. At the same time, it's a wonderful change. I enjoy spending time with them and seeing them grow. It's a happy household."

Helping Stepsiblings Get Along

"In a remarriage, the children may have been raised in different family cultures, and they may also have different visiting schedules, resources, and outside supports," Dr. Visher says. But parents' attitudes and actions can help mediate those differences.

HELP KIDS realize they're all in the same boat, and encourage them to share their common problems with each other. With younger kids, reading books, like Claire Berman's *What Am I Doing in a Stepfamily?* can act as a springboard for discussion.

BE FAIR. During the holidays, for example, don't give your child a stereo and your stepchild a set of checkers!

PUT YOURSELF in the children's place. Often in a stepfamily there's less time, less space, and less money for each child. This feels like a big loss. If you can communicate some understanding, this makes a big difference to children—even if you can't change things.

MAKE SURE each child has something of his own that he doesn't have to share—a drawer for his things, a corner of the

playroom, his own special toys or equipment, a specific time when only he has possession of the TV remote control.

DON'T FORCE togetherness. As much as you'd like to try, you can't make children like each other. The best you can do is create a warm, non-competitive atmosphere at home, provide opportunities for the children to be together, and hope for the best!

Merida, who dated his wife, syndicated columnist Donna Britt, 40, for five years, has had similar experiences. "I wasn't accustomed to children's noise,"

he says. "I remember one of our first brunches together, being amazed at how calm and patient Donna was, even though the kids kept interrupting our conversa-

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tions. They were used to getting their mother's attention, but it was frustrating."

"Stepparents who haven't been around kids aren't used to the interruptions or the lack of privacy," Berman says. "Everyone wants to keep romance in a relationship. When there are kids, you can't keep that fantasy because there's a lot of vying for attention between adult and child."

Merida says his attitude changed slowly. "The more time I spent with them, the less I dwelled on how the kids would infringe on my life or how difficult it would be to take long weekends with Donna," he says. "I began to see the rewards. I could teach them things. I could have an impact on their lives, and they could have an impact on mine."

Susan Sulich, 33, a freelance writer in New Fairfield, Connecticut, who has a 15-year-old stepdaughter, Melissa, and a 2-year-old son, Paul Jr., also stresses the importance of acceptance. "I have to understand that Melissa comes from a different background," she says. "Her dad

and I have different expectations than her mother does. You can't make a stepchild or any child more like you or turn her into the person you want her to be. You have to accept her for who she is."

4. Communicate Openly to Avoid Hassles Over Chores and Discipline.

It's often little things—whether or not a stepchild makes his bed, says "please" and "thank you," or leaves the toilet seat up—that wreak havoc in stepfamilies. "Underneath such disputes are feelings of being hurt, rejected, and unappreciated," Cohen says. Nevertheless, Dr. Papernow advises stepparents not to try to change too much too soon. "You have to figure out what really matters to you," she says.

Family meetings can be a helpful way to air complaints, establish rules, go over schedules, and plan fun activities. These gatherings give children a sense of control over their lives. "For family meetings to work, adults have to be willing to really listen to the children," Dr. Papernow says. "A good way to begin is to ask everyone,

"What is one thing you like about our new family, and what is one thing that you don't think is going too well?"

Given the chance, kids can come up with creative solutions to family dilemmas. Take housecleaning, for instance. "We had tried a lot of suggestions, but nothing was working," says Lorena Bonami*, 42, of San Diego, who has four stepdaughters. "Finally, one of the kids suggested that instead of using the money we had all contributed for our special Friday night treat, we hire someone to clean!"

Susan and Larry Tichauer of La Palma, California, also involve their extended families in meetings. "Whenever we have a problem we can't resolve, we have a family meeting and get everyone's opinion," says Susan, 35, who has a stepson, 15; a stepdaughter, 13; and a daughter she later gave birth to who is now 5. "As a society, we value our parents' knowledge. Sometimes all we need is having them there to air it out. In the end, we listen and then decide what's right for us." ►

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Finding time alone is a challenge when kids shift from part-time to full-time residence or when there are younger children in the household, Sulich says. At first, her stepdaughter was a weekender. "We had been used to having our weekdays to ourselves, so when she moved in full-time, it was an adjustment," she

Tying the Family Knot

When Merida and Britt got married last year, it was truly a family affair. Hamani gave Britt away, and Darrell escorted the flower girl down the aisle. Both boys participated as the couple said their vows. And at one point during the ritual, each of the four lit a large candle, symbolizing their bond as a family. "We were not just coming together as a union of a man and a woman," Merida says. "The kids were part of this marriage."

"A ceremony is a way to concretely share the coming together of the two families' separate histories and separate lives," says Janine Roberts, Ed.D., a family therapist in Amherst,

Massachusetts, and co-author of *Rituals for Our Time*. How a family marks the occasion is a very personal decision, but here are some guidelines to start off on a special note.

INCLUDE SYMBOLS from each family as well as something unique to the new grouping. You might drink from goblets that belonged to the man's family and use jewelry from the woman's. **LET THE CHILDREN** help create the ritual. When Roberts remarried, her stepson, Jesse, then 11, recited "vows" to her 8-year-old daughter: "All these years I've been a good brother to Heather, and now I'm going to try it with Natalya, too!"

THE NEW FAMILY

5. Build in One-on-One Time With Each Child.

Parents should set aside time to do favorite activities with their child. This may be harder when children are less frequent boarders, Dr. Papernow acknowledges. "If the kids come one weekend a month, a lot of time is spent dealing with the transition and readjustment. And it's especially hard with older children, who often want to see their friends as well."

For stepparents, one-on-one time is essential for forging ties. Ideally, you might want to spend separate time with your future stepchild before your marriage. Robert Wilkens*, 35, a lawyer in New Orleans, knew his wife socially before they began dating. "We were just friends who escorted each other, and that's how I met her daughter, Keisha, who was then 3," he recalls. "She was just another adorable kid who I knew. My relationship with Keisha developed independently. I guess you could say I fell in love with the daughter at the same time I fell in love with the mother. There wasn't a huge adjustment when we got married."

6. Nurture Your Marriage to Help Nurture Your Family.

Nothing works in a stepfamily if the parents don't make time for their relationship, the foundation upon which a successful stepfamily is built. Bonami and her husband learned not only to protect their private time by going out to dinner and spending weekends alone, but they also make time for themselves at home. "We have a rule in the house that after 10 p.m., 'don't come upstairs unless you're bleeding!' The kids have respected that," she says.

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says. "Then when the baby came, forget it!" Sulich and her husband try to take walks together once a day, and they have two "date nights" a month. "I really look forward to those two nights. They give me a sense of reassurance and encouragement!"

7. Leave Discipline in the Parent's Hands—at First.

"You can't have discipline without a foundation of love and trust, and that takes a long time," Cohen says. Dr. Visher adds that a stepparent should be "an adviser from the sidelines with a hand on the parent's shoulder." But, many stepparents wonder, "How do I control the kids when their parent is not around?" First the parent needs to lay out the rules and then tell the kids, "When I'm not here, Mary is in charge," Dr. Papernow recommends.

If a child challenges a stepparent's authority, Dr. Papernow suggests: "Don't threaten. But in a calm, matter-of-fact way, you can say, 'You're right; I'm not your father. But these are the rules

Where to Turn

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of the house, and I'm going to talk about this with your mom." And if the child becomes abusive, tell him: "I don't deserve to be treated like this. I know that you're mad, that you probably don't like that I'm here. You have a right to your feelings, but you don't have the right to call me names." It's also important to look beneath a child's anger. Chances are you'll find other, more vulnerable feelings. That's why it's so important not to take a child's anger personally. "I always try to remember that she's not trying to injure me," Sulich says of her stepdaughter. "She's acting out of a sense of frustration over her situation."

8. Work Toward Developing a Parenting Coalition.

Quentin Kellogg*, 43, a high school teacher in Montclair, New Jersey, admits that he and his ex-wife weren't co-parenting very well at first. "We fought over every little thing," recalls Kellogg, who has a 9-year-old son, a 7-year-old daughter, and a baby that he and his second wife, Tanya, recently adopted. "But then Tanya helped me see that it wasn't worth it. Having the support of a fiancé took pressure off the co-parenting relationship."

Tanya's instincts were on target. When parent and stepparent manage to cooperate with the other parent, a child's loyalty conflicts are minimized and, not surprisingly, the new marriage has a better chance of surviving. In the most successful stepfamilies, there is harmony not only within the household but across households as well. Dr. Visher advocates a "parenting coalition," in which all the adults involved have input and can confer about the kids. This can be extremely helpful when it comes to assisting a child with academic work or addressing school problems.

However, developing a parenting coalition takes time, as McMahon discovered when she and (Continued on page 187)

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Cover: Annie's Antics dress at Born Yesterday, Philadelphia; Marcia's Attic, Fort Lee, New Jersey; Kidz Kloz, West Bloomfield, Michigan; and other department and specialty stores.

25 SUPER STOCKING STUFFERS Page 51: Etch-A-Sketch keychain from Basic Fun at (800) 662-3380. Gund rattle at (908) 248-1500. The Body Shop bath mittens at (800) 541-2535. Gund bears at (908) 248-1500. Fuji camera at (800) 659-3854, Ext. 2571 (East Coast) or (800) 326-0800, Ext. 4223 (West Coast). Playmobil motorbike at specialty toy stores. My Little Brown Book from Dorling Kindersley at (800) 225-3362. Brain Quest from Workman Publishing at (800) 722-7202. Matchbox Super Fast Model "T" at (800) FOR-TYCO. Rubberband ball from South Bay Corp. at (315) 458-6352. Gund nursery chime at (908) 248-1500. Top from The Nature Company at (800) 227-1114. Crayola Markers from Binney & Smith at (800) CRAYOLA. Boo-Boo Bunnies from Hand in Hand at (800) 872-9745. Express Monopoly from Parker Brothers at (508) 921-3500. Footprints Stamps from Club Earth at specialty toy stores. Ant Trails Game from Great American Puzzle Factory at (800) 922-1194. Mini-Mates from EPI at (800) FOREST-1. Sealife twister from Club Earth at specialty toy stores. Dollhouse piano from Aztec Imports at (800) 624-4601. Playskool Play-Doh at (800) PLAYSKL. Dress-up shoes from Hand in Hand at (800) 872-9745. Crazy Paints from Schylling at (800) 541-2929. Puppets from B. Shackman & Co. at (212) 989-5162. Pentominoes from Discovery Toys at (800) 426-4777.

WINTER WHITE Page 93: Cardigans by Sara Rose and Beth Shaefer from Natalie & Friends at (212) 947-2995; Flapdoodles leggings at (800) 220-FLAP. Annie's Antics dress (see cover credits above). Ralph Lauren Infants and Toddlers romper at Bloomingdale's, Neiman Marcus, Parisian, and Macy's. Shanie Jacobs angora sweater at (212) 877-1909.

THE PAJAMA GAME Pages 138 to 139: Carter's pajamas at (800) 828-0384. Trio gown at better department and specialty stores. Tom & Jerry pajamas at better department and specialty stores. Joe Boxer Girlfriend shirt at better department and specialty stores. Lanz gown at (800) 421-0731. Maxou robe from Natalie & Friends at (212) 947-2995. **Pages 140 to 141:** Little Characters playwear at (212) 629-9500. Skaliwag tank top and boxer shorts at (212) 387-0077. Frou-Frou jumpsuit at White Flowers, Birmingham, Alabama; Jones & Jones, McAllen, Texas; and other department and specialty stores. Sara's Prints underwear at (212) 967-1600. Skaliwag union suit at (212) 387-0077.

her husband decided to get married and she began having contact with his first wife. "Jack had 14 years of trying to deal with her; I had three months," McMahon recalls. And as Dr. Visher notes, "You have to have some experience working together as a couple first."

Holidays can also be a challenge for stepfamilies. New traditions and different groupings of people may feel uncomfortable. There may be hassles with an ex-spouse over who gets the kids or loneliness if the kids aren't around. The Tichauers haven't had a problem because they worked out an agreement to take turns spending major holidays with the kids.

9. Stepparents Must Come to Grips With Being "Second Banana."

Some stepparents always feel what Orchard calls the pain of never being the "real" parent. "I now feel like I have a good relationship with the kids," she says. "We've all worked hard on it. But there's also an unspoken boundary. I'm not their mother." One remedy is to have a life of your own, separate from family life. Don't quit your job or drop your old friends, Dr. Papernow cautions. "You need places outside the family where you have some mastery, where you are seen and heard, and where there's satisfaction," she says.

Keisha was 8 when her biological father decided he wanted to be in her life again. Because Wilkens thought it was important for Keisha to know her natural father, he encouraged the visits. "It hasn't been easy for me," Wilkens admits. "Because her father had been out of the picture, I had lulled myself into a false sense of security. I was the one who taught Keisha how to ride a bike and how to read. I went to PTA meetings and took her whole class on a trip."

So how will Wilkens feel if Keisha's "real" father gets top billing when she gets married? "If I've been the kind of father I think I've been, I shouldn't feel threatened," he says. "Besides, I think a stepparent has to love a child unconditionally. I'm not loving her in order to be the one who walks her down the aisle." ■

Child contributor Melinda Blau, who lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, has won several awards for this column. She is the author of Families Apart: 10 Keys to Successful Co-Parenting.

Instructions for bird feeder

MATERIALS: 10" x 4" piece of pine board • 1" x 1" x 1" piece of pine board • 1" x 2" piece of decorative molding • drill with ¼" bit • nails • (4) 42" pieces of ¼" rope • hammer • jigsaw • wood glue • twine

1. Cut base: 8" x 10". For roof, cut 2 pieces 8" X 10". Cut one end of the 10" side of both pieces on a 45 degree angle. Cut 1" x 1" piece of wood 9" long. For molding, cut 2 pieces at 6" lengths; 2 at 3" lengths.
2. Glue angled roof edges together. Glue 1" x 1" x 9" piece on inside of peak; secure with nails. Let dry overnight.
3. Drill holes at corners of base 2" from edge. For roof, drill 4 holes an inch from front and back edges; 2" from bottom. Glue molding pieces 1" from edge on each side of base. Let dry overnight.
4. Knot ends of 4 pieces of rope. Thread through base with knot on underside. Measure 4" on each piece; make another knot. Thread through roof. Gather rope at center of roof. Secure with twine. Braid 3 pieces of rope; secure end with twine. Bend braid into a loop. Wrap fourth piece around end of braid; pull through rope.

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