



Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

Healthy Communication in Stepfamilies

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How family members talk and act with each other says a lot about how well they function as a family. When it comes to communication, most families could use a little help to improve their skills. For stepfamilies, the need for effective communication is big. So are the challenges.

At the Pennsylvania State University, researcher Tamara Golish, Ph.D. got curious about what people in stepfamilies talk about and how stepfamilies talk to each other. She wondered if communication in strong, well-functioning stepfamilies is different than communication in stepfamilies that weren't doing so well.

Seven Challenges to Creating Family

Consistent with previous research, Dr. Golish found that of the stepfamilies she studied, most faced one or more of these seven challenges:

- Feeling caught between relationships: children caught between parents; parents and stepparents feeling pulled between two opposing forces.
- Managing boundaries with the children's other family.
- Unclear parental roles.
- Traumatic bonding—when a parent and child (especially mother and daughter) form a very close bond after the divorce.
- Competition for resources like money, privacy, and territory.
- Different styles of conflict resolution.
- Building unity as a family.

Challenges Aren't Always Negative

While it is true that stepfamilies face many challenges, it is also

important for stepfamily members to know that these challenges aren't always negative. When people have realistic expectations about the length of time it will take to develop bonds with each other; an understanding that they are likely going to feel uncertain about their roles within the family; and understanding that issues over boundaries are probably going to arise, they are better prepared to deal with the challenges in positive ways.

Communication Strengths in Healthy Families

Spending time in one-on-one activities, spending time together as a family, and openly confronting issues are important strength-building activities for families. Family researchers have learned that strong, well-functioning families use a variety of communication tools and actions to build connections with one another. Healthy families:

- Listen to each other
- Directly, but positively address conflict
- Openly share information on
- Participate in activities together
- Nurture relationships by showing affection; attending children's activities; establishing family rituals and standards; engaging in everyday talk, using humor; and paying attention to the words they use with each other.

More Communication Strengths of Healthy Stepfamilies

In addition to the five communication strengths listed above, healthy stepfamilies share these characteristics:

- Most parents in strong stepfamilies are able to maintain a cordial relationship with their former spouse. This contributes to positive communication between children and their parents.
- In well-functioning stepfamilies, the remarried couple models healthy communication and commitment to their marriage for their children.
- Strong stepfamilies often use compromise to resolve problems.

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