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Step-Parenting Pitfalls

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These days many children have a step-parent, and there are important considerations in making the new family unit work well. Some parents expect their children to make an easy adjustment to a new person in their household and do not provide much help for them. Their thinking may go somewhat like this: "I'm happier in my life now so my children will naturally benefit from my new contentment." Or, "My children are lucky to have such a wonderful new (step-mom or step-dad). Or, perhaps, "Thank goodness, now I'll have some help getting Ryan to behave better and do well in school."

One family I worked with had an exceptionally difficult time managing the introduction of a stepfather. Howard married May when her son was ten and daughter was fourteen. The children's father lived in a different state and had only occasional contact with them. May had trouble controlling her headstrong daughter, Dorian, even before she married Howard. Dorian cut class, didn't study, and experimented with drugs. When Howard came along, he decided the problem was that May was too lenient, so he compensated by being extremely firm. In response, Dorian acted out even more; she was caught shoplifting twice and began sneaking out of the house. Howard was constantly angry at Dorian. May resented Howard's interference, while Howard resented not being appreciated and respected. And John, the ten year-old, was adversely affected too since everyone around him at home was unhappy and frustrated.

Our work together included couples and family sessions. May needed to be the one to discipline Dorian. She could accept and request input from Howard behind the scenes, very discreetly, and never in front of the children. Obviously this couple needed to work together. Dorian naturally was not going to respond to Howard's attempts to discipline her when they hadn't even established a bond or much of a relationship. It helps to put yourself in your child's shoes and realize that you, too, would resent interference in your life from someone whom you consider to be an outsider.

Howard's job was to build a good relationship with both children however he could, and to realize that this would take time. He needed to stifle his negative reactions as much as possible and provide only positive, reassuring messages to the children. In other words, he could ignore their misbehavior, let May deal with it, and instead catch them in the act of doing anything positive. He needed to spend time with each child, having fun and sharing experiences, before he could be accepted by them as a full-fledged parent. Basically, Howard had to first become an adult friend to them. I have had many people tell me that it took until they were grown, with families of their own, to really appreciate their step-parent (and sometimes this is true for natural parents too!)

Being a patient and non-reactive step-parent can be hard to put into practice. Sometimes the biological parent will lean on the step-parent for discipline back-up, thereby placing him in a precarious position. Or the step-parent will find it impossible to practice restraint in the face of blatant disregard or defiance from the children. It is natural to feel hurt and resentful if your efforts and good intentions are being scorned. But it helps to put your own feelings aside and to have a specific plan in mind for developing a solid relationship with your step-children. You may not feel that you have enough control at first, but ultimately you have the ability to be a very significant person in their lives.

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