

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Stepfamilies — The Second Time Around \*

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Some of you may remember the song that states, "*Love is better the second time around.*" The song tells about two people who fall in love with each other after previous marriages. However, this song does not mention anything about children from previous marriages. With children, is it still "*better the second time around*"?

When children are involved, you have **stepfamilies**. The children may be "*his*," "*hers*," or (later) "*ours*." The optimistic term for this arrangement is "*blended families*." However, this term seems to minimize the problems that are unique to stepfamily relationships.

**First, the couple typically just falls in love.** They do not plan for the new relationships involved. They are trapped by the myth that the stepfamily will function just like a normal, biological family. In addition, children are even more likely to believe this **stepfamily myth**. They are likely to feel that their relationship with the stepparent will be like the one they had with the original parent. From both sides, these mythical beliefs create unrealistic expectations in the stepfamily situation. To add to this, most adults enter stepfamily life with another false assumption — the family will quickly learn to get along together.

In contrast to these myths, the stepfamily has many built-in problems. The wife's children see the new husband as a intruder. The husband's children may think that the new wife will take their father away from them. When a stepfather tries to discipline a stepchild, his wife may interpret this as a threat to a power, which used to be hers alone. Also, children often resist being disciplined by the new stepparent.



**Second, there is no clear definition of the roles and expectations of each family member.** There tend to be many misunderstandings caused by conflicting family traditions, unresolved power struggles, and poorly defined behavior standards. You need to realize that stepfamilies do not only involve the couple and their respective children. Added to this are several sets of grandparents, relatives of former spouses, relatives of new spouses, and even the people that the former spouses marry.



The more complex the family tree, the greater the confusion about roles within the family and the more stress everybody feels. Several different psychological studies have verified this point. The stress seems to hit the wife the hardest. (This is not only true with stepfamilies but for first marriages as well.) Typically the husband functions more outside the family situation, so the wife has the main responsibility for handling the family conflicts and squabbles. In a stepfamily, the stepmother is trying to relate to children with whom she had never had a chance to bond. (Bonding is the development of close emotional ties.) If the children are adolescents, this problem is even greater. She is trying to get emotionally close to them at the very time they are trying so hard to establish their independence.

**The third problem is that family members do not understand the dynamics of the stepfamily** — how it functions. Because of this, family members usually blame one another — rather than the situation — when problems occur.

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**Rather than blaming individuals  
when something goes wrong,**

## it helps to understand that the situation itself generates most of the problems.

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One of these situational factors is that both families have **different traditions** to handle various events — birthdays, vacations, allowance, bedtime routines, and the responsibilities of the children around the home. The list goes on and on. Essentially these traditions — often assumed and unspoken — govern the way family members expect day-to-day events to take place. When these traditions differ for any event — conflict occurs. This can happen in dozens of ways each day, especially at the beginning of the relationship.

With all of these problems, what can be done? First, when something unexpected happens, don't immediately blame others. Be aware that *the situation itself is usually the culprit*. As much as possible, ask for and listen to their expectations in that situation. Once you have listened, then communicate your expectations for the same situation and try to negotiate a compromise. In communicating, humor always helps — but only if it is not hostile humor.

As with any problem, preventive measures are always more effective. Before the marriage occurs, these expectations need to be discussed. It is even more effective if this discussion includes the children. Consulting with a marriage counselor is still better. Not only are counselors more aware of potential pitfalls, they are emotionally neutral. Even if you are already in a stepfamily, a counselor can still be a great help.

Another source of help and information about the problems of stepfamilies is the **Stepfamily Association of America**, 28 Allegheny Avenue, Suite 13107, Baltimore MD 21204. Write to them!

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\* Adapted from Carol Turkington's article, "Stepfamilies," [\*APA Monitor\*](#), October, 1984, pages 8-9.