

WHY STEPFAMILIES ARE
different
THAN BIOLOGICAL FAMILIES
AND IT'S OK!



by Laura Petherbridge

One of the greatest challenges in working with stepfamilies is helping them to understand how, and why a blended family differs from a first time biological family.

why?



They insist the 2 are the same.

People enter a remarriage, or a blended family, believe they can recreate the exact same structure, parenting, attachments, and bonds as a biological family.


THIS IS A NORMAL AND A NOBLE GOAL

So what's the
problem?

It's *unrealistic*

As badly as we desire for the new union to create a “normal” family, all the dynamics have changed. And when we refuse to learn and accept how things are different it prevents the couple from learning ways to create a “new normal”.

A huge part of the problem is how society portrays, addresses, and discusses this issue. It's popular to hear a parent who resides in a stepfamily say “We don't have any steps in this house. Everyone is just family.”



We don't
allow the word
“step” in this
house.

The reason behind the statement is kind and heartfelt. He or she doesn't want anyone to feel “less than.” The goal is for everyone to feel equal. And that's a fabulous thing. Here's the rub. Just because all the kids are equal in value and significance, it doesn't mean they feel the exact same attachment and bond to each other.



The adults believe, (and have been taught, hounded and shamed by society) that if they just remove the word step from the household, everyone will feel bonded and desire a connection with new stepfamily members.

THERE'S JUST ONE PROBLEM

It's not true and here's why

Stepfamilies take time

To think I'm going to view a brand new person in my home exactly the same way I do the sibling, parent or child that I've known since birth is naive at best, foolish at worst.

God created us this way

God knows what He is doing. He intentionally created us with a DNA bond to those who are our kin. This joint force provides us with a sense of safety, connection and belonging. It's a hard wired bond that is designed to be can difficult to break.

Stepfamilies have unique underlying emotions

Stepfamilies are built upon a loss. Either a death, divorce, or break up of a relationship has usually occurred for at least one of the spouses and kids. This created a grief, anger, detachment, resentment, fear or shock inside everyone involved. Those emotions don't magically disappear when a remarriage occurs. In many cases it exacerbates the feelings. However, parents don't like to acknowledge this truth. They believe all the child needs is a new mother or father to fill in the gap. Sometimes this new person can help the child heal. However, it normally takes time.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY?

01 **DON'T FORCE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STEPFAMILY CONNECTIONS**

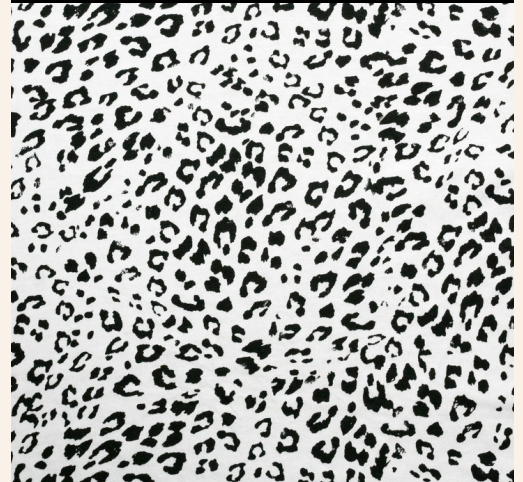
The situations that work out the best are when the bond occurs naturally, over time. **Warning:** This can take years, even in adult kids. When a person feels forced to love, embrace or bond in a step relationship, resentment can build. As much as a parent desires for their child to love the stepparent, or a half sibling, they can't make it happen.

02 **RESOURCES!**

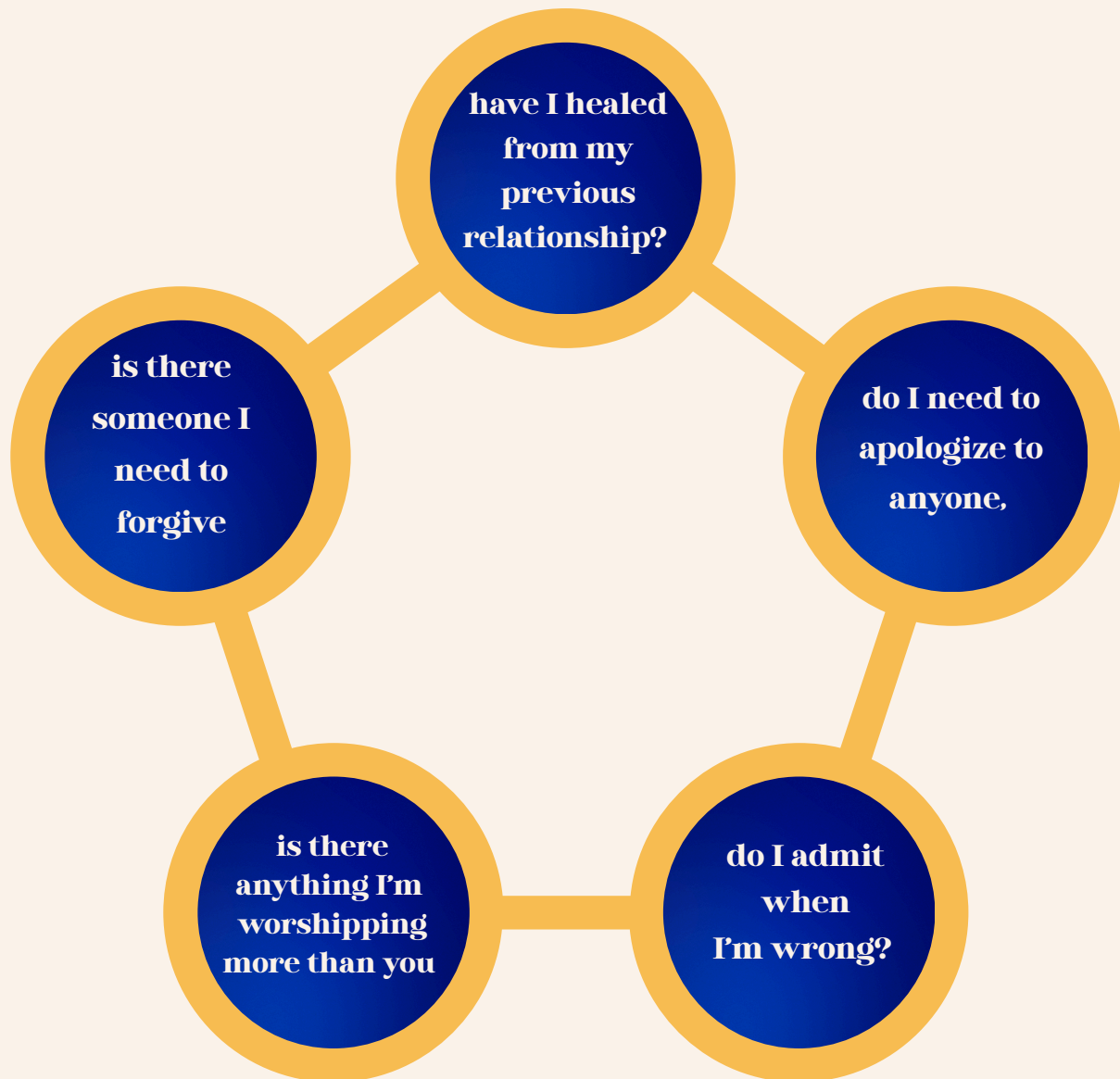
It is crucial to discover, preferably before the wedding, the normal dynamics and struggles for stepfamilies. Avoiding reality in an effort to have a positive attitude, can actually sabotage the relationship. The couples who do the best are the ones who don't ignore red flags, and who **ALREADY** know what is normal. They are prepared when struggles occur because they aren't ambushed by negative emotions.

03 **ACCEPT A NEW NORMAL**

Learning how to set boundaries with your spouse regarding his/her kids is often a huge part of blending. A stepparent should not try to parent his/her step kids more than the biological parents. It's a common mistake many stepparents make, especially in the beginning. It is the number one reason why stepfamilies fail.



Ask God to Reveal



STOP LIVING IN SHAME



ASK

Say to the kids/family, “We want to know how you desire to describe the others in this home. Would you like to say stepsister, or stepdad? Or would you just prefer to call him your dad/mom (if bio parent is OK with this) or by his/her name? Would you prefer to come up with another name all together?”

EXPLAIN

If someone asks why you use the word “step” say that we asked the kids what word they like and this is what they chose. They may change their minds in the future but right now this is what they desire.

ACCEPTANCE & BOUNDARIES

If there are family members who choose not to accept a new stepfamily member they should understand the guidelines. The biological parent is required to say, “You don't have to like your stepparent, you don't have to love your stepparent, but when you are in this home you are required to respect my spouse. If you treat my spouse with disrespect the consequence will be ...”.

A common statement that confuses a stepfamily is ,

“The marriage must come first”

It sounds wise and biblical.

However, choosing the marriage over a child might mean **VERY different things to the parent vs. the stepparent.**

Comparing the love, safety and loyalty for your child vs. the love for your spouse can be **extremely confusing and **ill defined**.**

EXACTLY what does it mean?

And does it mean the same thing to my spouse as it does to me? Usually NOT.



**MOST COUPLES NEED HELP
DISCOVERING WHAT
“PUT THE MARRIAGE FIRST” MEANS.**



**This is why obtaining a life coach or
therapist who specializes in stepfamilies
is often crucial and necessary to save or
prepare the family.**

**He or she can help to discover how to
overcome the issues, and emotions
associated with stepfamily complexities .**

**Laura has had 2 stepmoms and 1 stepdad.
She became a stepmom to 2 boys 39 years ago, and now has 2 grandchildren.
This is where she found a passion to help stepfamilies.
She has numerous free resources on her website. Her books, blogs, booklets,
life coaching and classes will benefit anyone who desires a deeper
understanding of stepfamily dynamics.**

Laura Petherbridge



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Publications

- Stepfamilies of the Bible: Timeless Wisdom for Blended Families
- When "I Do" Becomes "I Don't"—Practical Steps for Healing During Separation and Divorce
- The Smart Stepmom, co-authored with Ron Deal
- 101 Tips for The Smart Stepmom
- Quiet Moments for the Stepmom Soul
- Seeking a Silent Night: Unwrapping a Stepfamily Christmas

All About Me

Laura Petherbridge serves couples and single adults with topics on marriage, stepfamilies, co-parenting, divorce prevention, and divorce recovery. She is an international speaker and author.

Laura's speaking career includes:

- The Billy Graham Training Center
- FamilyLife Blended
- Celebrate Kids (Dr. Kathy Koch)
- American Family Association
- Kingdom Bound

Her various TV and radio broadcasts include:

- Family Talk with Dr. James Dobson
- Focus on the Family with Jim Daly
- Family Life Today with Dennis Rainey
- Moody Broadcasting
- Java with Julie Slattery
- 100 Huntley Street
- HomeWord with Jim Burns
- Culture Proof
- Parenting with Ginger Hubbard
- No More Perfect Marriages: Jill/Mark Savage

She has been published in

- Focus on the Family Magazine
- Christianity Today's Marriage Partnership
- Crosswalk.com
- Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN.com)
- Proverbs 31 Woman (Lysa Terkeurst)
- Lifeway's HomeLife Magazine
- ibelieve.com

Laura has been a featured expert on the DivorceCare DVD series, equipping more than 16,000 churches worldwide. She and her husband, Steve, reside in Atlanta. She has 2 stepsons, and 2 grandchildren.