

“STEPGRANDPARENTING: BRINGING THE OUTSIDERS IN”

By Carri Taylor

The first time around I married into a family with three sons. I got the middle one. During our marriage, the other brothers both got divorced – one twice. I found it interesting and confusing that my mother-in-law at that time ‘collected’ all the ex’s, new girlfriends, and any new male attachments to these women, whether married or not. The entire bunch of us would be together at times celebrating holidays, special occasions, or just visiting. Everyone seemed to get along fine in whatever combination we might come together.

Then when I married my current husband in 1986, she ‘invited’ him to be part of the family. He politely refused, but we did share a number of occasions with my ex-in-laws while they were alive. After all, I was the mother of their granddaughter, from my previous marriage to their son. It was then that it dawned on me what may have been the goal of my former mother-in-law’s inclusiveness – continuing relationships with her grandchildren. By maintaining relationships with all the ‘old-timers’ and ‘new-comers’ she was guaranteed contact with her grandchildren. I always did admire her gracious and open attitude to these estranged family members, including me, after my divorce from her son.

My current husband had been the single-parent father of three teenage boys for almost nine years after his divorce. The youngest of his sons had just left the nest (maybe flew the coup) when we were approaching our wedding. Even though it was three to one (his sons to my daughter), the intensity was definitely on my side because we did not have daily contact with his sons.

My first biological grandchild came as a surprise when my daughter at 19 became a single parent. Through an amazing set of circumstances, my new husband and I became the legal guardians of this grandchild. She’s been with us since birth and is now 14 years old. My husband knew he signed up for a 14-year-old stepdaughter when we married, but he had no idea he would end up parenting a stepgrandchild.

I also admired my husband’s attitude when my former mother-in-law invited me, him, my daughter (her granddaughter) and my granddaughter (her great granddaughter), to spend a couple of days with her. We went and my husband even slept in the same bed my ex-husband and I had slept in when we would visit her during my first marriage. She pointed out gifts I had given her that she was still using and I noticed my pictures still hung on the wall along with my ex-husbands new family.

The next additions came when my husband’s middle son married a woman in 1996, who brought a young son with her from a previous relationship. Even though this was not a bio-grandchild for either of us, my husband’s son’s wife exhibited an attitude of inclusiveness that was caught by all members of the extended family and has allowed both of us to be considered his grandparents, along with all the others.

When this same couple had a child of their own four years later, I was invited to be part of the “grandmother” team welcoming this new little granddaughter into the world. The team consisted of the biological grandmoms on both sides (obviously one of them was my husband’s ex-wife) and me. This step daughter-in-law reminds me somewhat of my former mother-in-law; willing to extend the family borders and keep the gates open for more to enter.

In the meantime, a daughter that I had adopted out at birth re-entered my life by surprise. My husband knew about her, but neither of us ever dreamed we would encounter her or have her become part of our extended family. An unbelievable drama unfolded that brought this daughter and me together even though neither one of us was searching for the other. That was 13 years ago and I now have six grandchildren from her. With 1500 miles separating us, continuing contact requires an investment of time and money. Again, increasing the intensity from my biological forces. This also introduced the presence of her birth father (a former fiancé of mine) by my initiative.

If you are able to follow this right now, you may be ahead of me because I’m getting confused just writing it.

My husband’s oldest son has never married. The youngest son married in 1998 after a long courtship – which gave us time to get to know his fiancé. They brought a son of their own into the world in October of 2001. Again, I’m grateful to be included and considered a Grandma.

So what’s the score? I have two bio-daughters; one I never dreamed I would know. I have seven bio-grandchildren. My husband has three bio-sons, two bio-grandchildren and one-stepgrandchild. It went from his three to my one and is now his six to my nine. But who’s keeping score? The best part of this is: we both have family members we never would have had or known had we not remarried. We are also able to enjoy relationships with the entire system because of an attitude of “inclusion” rather than “exclusion” that can be driven by the biological bonds.

For those grandparents that haven’t experienced divorce themselves, but their adult children have, there can be little or no interest in investing in the stepgrandchildren brought into the remarriage situation. As we’ve spoken across the nation, I’ve heard the comment many times, “Well, those aren’t MY grandchildren,” meaning they are not biologically related and the emotional relationship hasn’t had time to form.

I’ve also heard painful stories from remarried couples regarding what they consider inequities when the stepgrandparents don’t treat the stepgrandkids the same as the bio-grandkids: especially at holidays and birthdays. By the stepfamily’s very nature, inequities are inevitable. The score may never be even. I believe there is a responsibility on both sides. For the remarried couple, it’s important to understand that steprelationships take time to form. Depending on the age of the children, I think it can be helpful to explain to them in a positive way that these are NOT biological grandparents. These are new relationships in the process of forming. For the step-grandparents I would hope they could adopt the attitude of inclusion rather than exclusion.

And, that as “mature” adults, they would take the responsibility to reach out to these new members of the extended family system.

One dear divorced friend of mine married a widower. She moved into the home he had shared with his former wife where his kids had been raised – which definitely brought a host of other issues. On top of that, they both brought teenagers, six altogether, and struggled through launching them with the pain of loss – divorce and death.

One of her sons, who was devastated by the divorce, disappeared into the sub-culture and was missing for years. After launching the remaining kids, they moved into a town home of their own to welcome the “empty nest.” Shortly after settling in, one of her daughters revealed that she was in an abusive marriage with two children and needed a safe place. Could they turn her away? No. To help this daughter get the help and safety she needed, they moved her and two grandchildren into the master bedroom of their new town home temporarily. About the same time, the lost son appeared wanting to reconcile with his mom. Could they turn him away? No. Luckily they had three bedrooms and now all of them were taken – with her kids and grandkids – not his! So much for the “empty nest.”

This was a tough time for the couple. This situation didn’t last forever – although it seemed to them an eternity while in it. The daughter eventually found the help and safety she needed, the son was with them for an extended period of time, but moved on also. This is one story of many I’ve witnessed. What’s the key to traversing these situations successfully? Inclusiveness, not exclusiveness. In my mind, if you sign up for a stepfamily, there is no room for jealousy that closes the gates to the pre-existing relationships that come with the territory. In other words – you marry everyone in the system no matter where they are because that can change.

In my own case and the one I just shared, the stepdads had and continue to have the opportunity to form close relationships with the adult stepchildren and stepgrandchildren. My dear female friend in the story ended up regrettably dying of cancer a number of years later and her husband went on to marry again. At this wedding, the stepdaughter that had moved into their town home with her children, not only attended his wedding, but also addressed him as “Dad.”

When my daughter decided to marry, she chose my husband, her stepdad, to walk her down the aisle. We had married when my daughter was 14 and when she was 28 she asked my husband if she could call him “Dad.” Well, both of these stepdads certainly earned the title. They honored the pre-existing relationships they knew about and those that they didn’t. They invested their time, finances and energy, winning the hearts of their wives.... and the entire stepfamily system benefited.