

“STEPFAMILIES: WHAT ABOUT THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP?”

By Carri & Gordon Taylor

When we remarried and entered into “stepfamily-land” there was much confusion about the couple’s relationship. The unspoken thought was that it was going to be just like a first marriage, even though we were very much aware that we were both bringing children to this new relationship. Confusion set in, as the children became the main focus, parenting style collisions surfaced, ex-spouses didn’t vanish off the planet, but in fact they remained a very present force to be reckoned with. We didn’t just marry each other, we married an extended family system with tentacles extending into places we were and were *not* aware of.

This confusion prompted us to do some research and even more thinking, because we both wanted our second marriage to be successful. We were aware that we were statistically, a high-risk couple. Research points to the fact of higher divorce rates for second and subsequent marriages. At first it seemed like we had to put our marriage relationship “on hold” to give the time and energy to all the explosions that happened in this “open door, multiple household” system. Time together over dinner or on walks was spent strategizing our battle plan, not basking in the “romance” of our new found love.

To survive we had to work together and support one another in not only developing the new relationships - our own, our stepkids, new extended family members (in-laws); but also in continuing to nurture and nourish the pre-existing relationships we brought with us – biological children (no matter what age or where they resided), ex-spouses and the previous extended family members (out-laws).

About five years down the road (1991), we came to the conclusion that our marriage relationship hadn’t *really* been put “on hold,” but it had grown and been strengthened through adversity – as long as we fought together for our stepfamily, instead of fighting and blaming each other because things weren’t how we thought they would be!

We finally came up with a concept that works for our understanding and is helping other step-couples understand their territory. PRIMARY and FOUNDATIONAL. The following are the definitions of these terms.

PRIMARY: First in time or origin. FOUNDATIONAL: That on which something is founded and by which it is supported and sustained (the marriage relationship and family).

In first marriages, both principles are present in the couple relationship and are established simultaneously. The marriage relationship is established first (PRIMARY) and also supports and sustains all relationships (children) and interpersonal dynamics that take place (FOUNDATIONAL). **God’s Ideal!**

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In second and subsequent marriages things are different. The couple relationship is still FOUNDATIONAL, because without it there would be no stepfamily. It supports and sustains the newly developing stepfamily and everyone in it, maybe even ex-spouses. However, the children brought into this remarriage are the PRIMARY relationships. These relationships pre-exist the couple relationship.

A first marriage is primary and foundational. A second marriage is foundational and secondary. In the children's minds, this new marriage may not even be foundational, merely secondary. The foundation on which they entered the world blew up through death or divorce. Establishing the stepfamily as their new foundation takes time, patience, education, understanding and skills. Children may still be hanging on to the fantasy of getting mom and dad back together and in no way want to participate in building the new family.

Does any of this negate the importance of the remarried couple's relationship? Not in the least! It does mean that most of the time the couple must strengthen their relationship while ministering to the needs of the children (no matter what age) and supporting the biological parent as he/she deals with their children and even an ex-spouse.

Without understanding this concept: competition, jealousy, and resentment get in the way of building a stepfamily, which in turn set the couple and family up for even more trauma than remarriage and stepfamily development normally bring. Stepfamilies form backwards from biologically intact families. This is also true of the remarried couple's relationship.

What's our goal for remarriage? To reestablish our children's trust in marriage and family, while reducing the viability of divorce. To do this and more, our marriage must grow and remain intact to lend stability. Ideal? No. Real? Yes. As challenging as this is, the stepfamily can be a place to grow up spiritually and emotionally.

For more information on Carri & Gordon Taylor visit:

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