

elevate your RELATIONSHIP

Instant Family and Love?

Building a strong marriage is challenging. But for couples in a stepmarriage, there are constant reminders of past relationships and expectations from former family experiences that affect a couple's new marriage. For some couples, their new marriage offers a second chance and is a triumph over a past experience that wasn't so good. For other couples, their expectations are more fantasy than reality. Unrealistic expectations can cause stress in any marriage, but can be particularly troublesome in stepmarriages. Two of the most common expectations couples bring to stepfamily life are instant family and instant love.

First, because many stepmarriages are by-products of divorce, most couples enter their new union expecting it will somehow be better and happier than the previous one. But better and happier takes lots of work. Before remarriage, couples should sit down together and explore each other's expectations. For example, discuss what didn't work in your previous relationship, how you expect the present relationship to be different, and what you each must do to nurture your marriage.

Nonetheless, couples shouldn't expect to be able to identify every expectation before their marriage. Sometimes they actually have to experience marriage awhile before they realize what they themselves, or their partner expects. Therefore, it is important for stepmarriage couples to keep the lines of communication open. By sharing disappointments and disillusionments, couples can create a sense of "we" rather than "I." Talking with other couples in stepmarriages or reading about stepfamily myths and expectations can also help.

Second, many couples in new unions unrealistically believe that all members of their new family will instantly and automatically love one another. A couple's unrealistic expectation that their children will want to, or ought to, instantly love (or even like) their new stepparent is a source of much family discord that ultimately leads to problems between the couple.

Close, nurturing relationships are developed over time. Schedule time during which all members of the new family can be together to interact, as well as one-on-one time between children and their biological parent and stepchildren and their stepparent. Couples in stepmarriages should continue to work on their marriage relationship and make family love a goal that will grow over time.

Expectations are normal in a marriage; everyone enters marriage with a dream in his/her heart. Unrealistic expectations can cause stress, but if couples come to realize the differences between stepmarriage and first marriage families, they also begin to realize they are living in a new kind of family. Nurturing the couple relationship in this new family generally requires more planning and attention than in less "challenging" families.

Activity

Want a few ways to clarify expectations and bring your new family together? Here are a few things you could try:

- Sit down with your partner and individually write out your expectations for your marriage and children. How do you want to spend time together? How do you believe parenting should be handled? What do you want for each other and the children? Share your expectations with each other and discuss how these expectations can either be met or compromised on.
- Have each family member write down their favorite family traditions from the past and/or present (holiday traditions, family vacations, etc.). Give each person time to share their story about their favorite traditions and encourage everyone to listen (not judge or evaluate) to each person's story. Are there traditions the family can support? Are there traditions the children can continue to practice with their other parent if that is possible and desired? Are there traditions that family members are comfortable modifying? Are there any new traditions that you can start as a new family? Listen first to understand, and then work together to make shared decisions.
- Ask each family member to write down one to three activities that you can all do together as a family (i.e., bowling, camping trip, movie night, etc.). Put those ideas into a jar or container. Each month (or more frequently) pick one activity out of the jar and plan a time to do that activity together.

For more resources to help your remarriage and stepfamily thrive, visit the National Stepfamily Resource Center at www.stepfamilies.info.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

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