

## [Handout #6] **What the Research Tells Us: 8 Tips for Parenting, Stepparenting and Discipline in Stepfamilies**

For more details and for citations see Papernow (2013),  
*Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't*. And:  
*From Dating to Getting Serious to Forming a "Blended Family"* (Bonnell & Papernow, 2019).

### **1. For many children, becoming a stepfamily is harder, and takes more time, than divorce. Age and gender make a difference:**

- Stepfamilies are generally easier for children under eight, and for boys.
- They are generally harder for girls (including, by the way, adult daughters of older recoupling dads).
- Stepfamilies are especially hard for young teen girls.
- If the transition was relatively fast, or children are especially vulnerable (lots of losses, tight loyalty binds, more sensitive temperament, less solid relationship with parent, hostile stepparent), becoming a stepfamily may be extra hard.

### **2. Hands down, "authorITATIVE parenting" is best for children on very measure imaginable. Authoritative parenting is both loving *and* firm.**

- Loving: Authoritative parents are responsive, warm, and empathic.
- Firm: AND authoritative parents calmly set moderately firm limits. They make "developmentally appropriate demands for maturity."

### **3. Stepfamilies seem to divide parents and stepparents around discipline.**

- Stepparents everywhere seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren.
- Parents everywhere seem to want more loving and understanding for their children.
- When this goes well, stepparents help pull parents "UP" toward more firmness. Parents help stepparents pull "OVER" toward more softness.
- When it goes badly, increasingly painful cycles of "polarization polka."

### **4. Parents need to retain the disciplinary role with their own children.**

- Until and unless stepparents have forged a caring, trusting relationship with kids, parents need to retain the disciplinary role.

- Once stepparents have forged a caring relationship, they can move slowly into an authoritative (loving and moderately firm) disciplinary role. This very often takes years (not months)!
- More likely with younger kids (eight and under) than with older kids.
- In many (successful) stepfamilies stepparents do not have a disciplinary role.

## 5. Authoritarian parenting by a stepparent is almost always toxic.

- *Authoritarian* parenting is hard (not loving or empathic).
- Authoritarian parenting often uses negative labels (“You’re lazy.” “You’re a brat.”) It makes harsh demands (“*Takeout the trash right now.*”)

## 6. The guideline for stepparents is, “connection before correction.”

- “Relationships before rules.” Concentrate on getting to know stepkids. Not controlling them. (Can be hard if kids’ behavior is irritating/they’re distant!)
- *Research: Warm stepparent-child relationships make a big difference!* They are linked to psychological, behavioral, academic, and physical well-being in kids. *And* to happier stepcouple relationships and higher stepfamily cohesion.
- Positive stepparent behaviors include: Openness, flexibility, warmth. Take an interest in kids. When there is conflict, constructive communication.
- Spend 1 to 1 time with kids, *without their parent*. Find easy fun things you both like to do: Make a favorite food. Shoot baskets. Do a woodworking project.
- Good stepparent roles: Like an aunt or uncle, or adult friend.

## 7. Meanwhile, stepparents have *input*, parents have *final say*.

- Successful stepcouples *do* work as a team.
- Often stepparents can help parents to firm up a bit. Parents can help stepparents to understand their children better.
- Stepparents can practice “*monitoring*” (James Bray). *Check in* with kids (vs Control them): “How’s math going?” *Notice* what kids are doing. *Report concerns to parents*. “Looks like Janie is having trouble getting her math homework done.”

## 8. Successful stepcouples face the same challenges that struggling ones do.

- Struggling stepcouples criticize and/or avoid. (Gottman’s “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling.”)
- Successful stepcouples communicate about parenting differences with kindness and caring.
- They use a “soft start up” (Soft/Hard/Soft is a good tool for this)
- They repair when there is a glitch. “*Ooops. Sorry. I was sharp!*”