

Children in Step Families

Counseling 448

Interventions and Advocacy for Children

Children in Step Families

A step family is a family unit that evolves as a result of a marriage between two partners at least one of whom has been married previously, and includes at least one child who was born before the two partners married.

Background Information

Children Effected:

16% of all American children live in step families (6.8 million)

1300 new step families are formed every day in the U.S.

By the year 2000 one out of every four children by the age of sixteen

The traditional American family is the thing of the past

Stages in Step family Growth

Step families go through an evolutionary process in their development - Five Specific

Stages:

Fantasy stage: Idealism; illusion and delusion; members know each other superficially; little thought into potential problems.

Confusion stage: Individual differences appear; tension and confusion between parents and children themselves

Stages in Step family Growth

Step families go through an evolutionary process in their development - Five Specific

Stages:

Conflict Stage: Member recognize their needs are not being fulfilled; hidden and outward expression of anger; conflicts need to be negotiated for growth
Coming -together Stage: Conflict resolution, members make new connections; work out differences; out of fantasy into reality

Stages in Step family Growth

Step families go through an evolutionary process in their development - Five Specific

Stages:

Resolution stage: Family members no longer feel the need to be phony or to play games; real or more genuine in their relationships; sense a high degree of optimism; more skillful in resolving family conflicts.

Creating the Step family

Each person brings into the family a unique package of characteristics:

Personal set of values and beliefs

Family traditions and rituals

Religious beliefs

Personality traits

Life experiences

Birth order of children

Wellness or illness orientation

Previous standard of living

Unsuccessful Strategies in Forcing Step family Togetherness

Eating family meals together - no exceptions

Requiring children to be nice to each other

Insisting that children demonstrate acts of affection

Requiring stepchildren to call stepparent mom or dad

Requiring children of both parents to love one another and to play together

Manipulating environmental conditions so as to promote sameness among family members

Some Characteristics of Positive Together

Family members:

Accept differences

Communicate honestly

Work together toward the goal of blending

- Resolve conflicts
- Share rituals, traditions, and family celebrations
- Develop respect and trust
- Retain a sense of their own identity

The Skills Children Need to Learn

Hostility, anger, confusion, loneliness, guilt, hurt, frustration, shame, and embarrassment are the emotions children may experience.

Children experience a sense of powerlessness and abandonment; may feel hostility toward the natural parent but direct it at the stepparent because it is a safer alternative

The Skills Children Need to Learn

Children have to adjust to new communities, households, schools, divided family loyalties, step sibling relationships, expressions of affections toward step family members.

Also, changes in personal status, unrealistic family expectations in developing close relationships, family member role confusion, competition for time and attention, a coping with the stigma associated with step family living.

The Skills Children Need to Learn

ACCURATE INFORMATION:

- "Will I get along with everyone?"
- "Am I the only person going through this experience?"
- "Why do I feel angry, confused, and lonely?"
- "Why am I always being left out of everything?"
- "Do I have to love my step mom? Do I have to call her mom?"
- "Am I the cause of my parents divorce?"

The Skills Children Need to Learn

SECURITY, BELONGING, AND SELF-ESTEEM

- Lose their sense of predictability; experience fear, loss, powerlessness, anger, confusion, and loneliness
- Need to establish new connections
- Assume blame for the divorce
- Find it easy to devalue themselves
- Feel disconnected - support groups must address the issues of security, belonging, and self-esteem

The Skills Children Need to Learn

EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS:

- To discuss their feelings and to talk about how they are adjusting to step family living
- To explore feelings and the cause of those feelings
- To understand that their feelings are real, serve a purpose and that feelings are neither good or bad
- To learn acceptable and responsible ways to address feelings with others
- To engage in self-affirmation activities

The Skills Children Need to Learn

SELF-CARE:

- To develop the strengths that will help them feel safe, secure, belong, loved, and worthwhile
- To manage their feelings responsibly, communicate their wants assertively, solve their problems responsibly, and accept gracefully those things that cannot be changed

The Skills Children Need to Learn

ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING

- Help children identify what they want or need and to communicate those needs assertively to family - "I'm feeling lonely and I want a hug from you." Teach children how to assert themselves in responsible ways
- Children need assistance in understanding their rights and responsibilities and how to secure them in ways that empower them.

The Skills Children Need to Learn

PROBLEM SOLVING

- To develop confidence in self

- To develop confidence in self
- To practice confronting dilemmas using the 3Rrs model
- To behave in ways that will help them

The Skills Children Need to Learn

ACCEPTANCE:

Learn to recognize that there are things they cannot change in their step family Learn to readjust their thinking and to let go of the past, to set goals, and to move forward

Title Placeholder

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