

# CONNECTIONS

A NEWSLETTER ABOUT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS & PERSONAL GROWTH

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Question & Answer

*"Recognize that the stepfamily will not and can not function as does a natural family. It has its own special state of dynamics and behaviors. Once learned, these behaviors can become predictable and positive."*  
Jeanette Lofas

## PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

### When Your Husband Has Children Close to Your Age

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- STEP 1** Recognize that he has had many more years playing father to them than lover to you. You may have to make allowances, give him time. Remember, there are limits. You are the adult and are to be treated as such. He is their father, and to be treated with respect.
  - STEP 2** Competition often occurs between a new love and his children. You may feel like you are directly competing with them. You may be... YOU DON'T HAVE TO.
  - STEP 3** If you are close in age to his children, he may treat you like one of them. This diminishes your authority, and his too. Gently point out how he does that and come to an agreement.
  - STEP 4** He feels the need to "catch up" when they are together. Usually he feels that he has not had enough time with his children. Guilt may be the motivating factor. Discuss and agree on expectations about time spent with you and time spent with his children.
  - STEP 5** The sexual bonds between you and your husband may cause conflict between him and his children. His children just don't like this new, younger woman being their dad's partner. The conflicting pulls of sexual and biological energies

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## When Your Husband Has Children Your Age

- within the step relationship can polarize the family unless there is constant work at communicating among all family members.
- STEP 6** You may feel that his girls “come on” to him. What he calls cute, and loving may seem too sexual to you. Competition between daughter and the wife can be strong. Whose man is he anyway? You can often gain ground by giving them time together and gently clarifying with him what is sexual and what is affectionate behavior.
- STEP 7** Establish clear job descriptions and expected behaviors between the parent and the stepparent. What is specifically the job of each one of us in the household? We need to be specific.
- STEP 8** The couple needs to agree on discipline. The natural parent generally disciplines, the spouse says, “in this house we...”
- STEP 9** The issue of money, the “buy me, get me” wants of the children, plus the allocation of money in general may come as a “negative surprise.” Talk about it in a “non-blaming” way.
- STEP 10** Guard your sense of humor and use it.

## 10 Steps for Grandparents in Stepfamilies

by Carolyn Berger

- 1** Recognize the dynamics of Step: The stepfamily has its own special state of dynamics and behaviors. Once learned, the behaviors can become predictable and positive. DO NOT try to overlay the expectations and dynamics of the intact and natural family onto the stepfamily. To learn more about stepfamilies, literature is available.
- 2** Give yourself time to grieve over the loss of the biological family: A stepfamily comes about upon a death or divorce in a nuclear family. Grandparents need to mourn the loss of that relationship before they can become a part of the stepfamily. Anger, resentment and fears are normal.
- 3** Value yourself as a grandparent: Grandparents and stepparents are wonderful resource people. You have a lot to offer, such as unconditional love, family history and your life experience. Share!
- 4** Reserve judgments: Negative judgments with a child can serve to increase the child’s sense of confusion, conflict of loyalties and impact his/her self-esteem.
- 5** There are no ex-grandparents, only ex-spouses. If you feel that you are not being treated fairly as a grandparent, find a way to establish your rights through a family meeting, a grand parenting organization or legal means, if necessary.
- 6** Step-grand parenting: Go slow and see where your grandparenting skills are needed. Be prepared for the conflicts of

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# Extension Spotlight

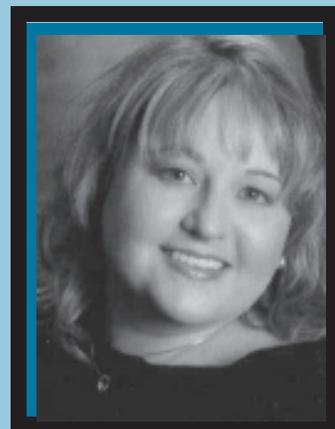
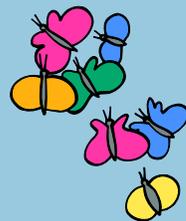
## Andrea Karcher

Andrea Karcher began her Extension career in Reno County as a 4-H agent in 2001 and moved to the FCS position in 2003. Prior to Extension, she sold advertising and worked as a graphic designer for a Tulsa newspaper. Andrea has a B.A. in Journalism Mass Communications—Advertising (1999) and a B.S. in Family Studies and Human Services—Life Span Human Development (2001), both from K-State.

The most rewarding aspect of her job is knowing that “people are walking away from my office or from a workshop with new information or new skills that can help them in their life.” She was amazed to see how excited the mentally disabled audience was when she taught them about writing checks. This was a life skill that they have never learned.

Her greatest challenge is finding new Extension audiences, especially for the information and opportunities regarding family well-being that Extension has to offer. She currently is speaking to groups, including the faith community, about *PeopleTALK* and *CoupleTALK*. Andrea is part of a new Marriage and Relationship Task Force in Reno County that worked together to promote Healthy Marriage Week in August, an activity coming out of the Kansas Healthy Marriage Institute. The community group worked with businesses to give coupon specials to encourage couples to have a ‘date night.’

On a more personal level, Andrea married the love of her life, Tracy Karcher, on January 22, 2005. He is a District Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service.



“My most rewarding moment to date (as an Extension Agent) was teaching high functioning mentally handicapped adults how to manage a check book and write checks.”

*Andrea Karcher*

As for hobbies, Andrea loves to sew, go to auctions, spend time with family and do crafts. Her new hobby is knitting and, “Everyone I know is getting a scarf for Christmas!”

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## Reminder

November 21 is the sign-up deadline for emailing my secretary, Paula Seele (pseele@ksu.edu) to attend a two-part national satellite conference on, “The Impact of Couple & Marital Relationships on Parenting and Child Outcomes” on December 2 and December 9, from 10 am to 12 noon.

Host sites are the Southeast Area Extension Office, the Northwest Area Extension Office, Leavenworth County, Johnson County, Finney County (December 2 only) and the K-State Campus (Waters 137).



# Building Rapport with New Teenage Stepchildren

by Tania K. Cowling  
Based on the article at

[http://familytlc.net/teen\\_stepchildren.html](http://familytlc.net/teen_stepchildren.html)

Most U.S. marriages break up when kids are either very young or when they are teenagers, and most remarriages happen within a few years of the breakup. Thus, about 35 percent of U.S. teenagers are now part of a stepfamily.



Because teenagers are at a stage in life where they are trying to assert their independence, it is not easy for them to integrate into a new step-family bent on togetherness. The key is to go slowly and to be aware that the teenage stepchildren can be moody and appear to be indifferent, but down deep they need to feel they belong to their new family.

□

## COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

Stepfamilies grow and develop through shared experiences and good verbal communication, but this, too, takes time. How step-parents communicate is as important as what they communicate. Teenagers want to be taken seriously. Show respect for their ideas, opinions, temperament, desire for privacy and the physical changes they are going through. The bonus for showing respect is winning respect.

## WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT TEENS?

Teenage stepchildren need positive and caring discipline, but it is hard for them to accept yet another authority figure in their lives. So, typically, it is the



new stepparent who bears the brunt of a teenager's anger and rebellion. The teenager is afraid of losing a biological parent; so lashing out at a stepparent becomes a way of coping. Teens are also old enough to sense any insecurities a stepparent may have and are likely to take advantage of it. If you are the biological parent, reassure your teen that you are not abandoning him or her and that no one will come between you. Put your words into action by continuing to do the things you enjoy doing together.



## DECIDE ON RULES

When a stepfamily is formed, the new partners need to agree on some basic rules that cover areas such as chores, homework, participation in family activities, food and mealtime behavior, pet care responsibilities, religious practices, money, privacy, dating, and any limits on the TV, phone, computer, VCR/DVD, and car.



Family rules should apply to visiting stepchildren also, but be willing to do some negotiating. For example, if a teenager has another curfew at the other house, decide on one rule and make sure all the kids follow it.

Here are some ideas for ways to create smooth relationships with teenage stepchildren:

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## Stepfamilies in Middle/Late Adulthood

*Divorce and Remarriage in Later Adulthood, by Kay Pasley, Spring 1998*

*Based on an article at <http://www.saafamilies.org/faqs/findings/7.htm>*

Estimates suggest that about 11% of women will have their first marriages end in divorce some time after their 40th birthday (Uhlenberg, Cooney, & Boyd, 1990). While older adults are less likely to remarry than are younger adults (e.g., those in their 20s and 30s), many do remarry and confront unique issues to their age group. For example, when an older adult remarries, they may have grown stepchildren who are concerned about inheritance issues. Clearly, remarriages amongst mid-life and older adults is an increasingly common phenomena worthy of our attention.

What do we know about divorce among older adults? We know, for example, that there are social, psychological, financial, and physical consequences of divorce for older adults. Recent evidence shows that divorce, both at midlife and after midlife, negatively influences a person's economic and physical well-being (Holden & Smock, 1991; Lillard & Waite, 1995). Also, their relationships with their children are affected (Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994), as are their social networks (e.g. Gerstel, 1998). We believe some of these negative influences are a function of a more limited range of options after divorce among older adults, especially older women. Many older women may lack the requisite education, skills, and employment experiences that enhance their ability to either reenter the paid labor force or to advance in their current positions. The financial responsibility to one's children decreases with age, although at midlife many parents are assisting their young adult children with college expenses. There is some evidence to show that even older parents continue to contribute financially assistance (e.g., the down payment for a home.) When divorce occurs, the cost of maintaining two parental households may prohibit continued assistance to one's adult children.

Beyond financial issues, research also shows that the quality and nature of the relationship between parent and children change when parental divorce occurs later in children's life, especially for young adult children. For these children, custody, visitation and child support are no longer issues affecting the relationship, although there may be other forms of continuing financial support, such as college tuition. Using reports from 3,281 young adults who grew up in nondivorced families with parents divorcing after children were young adults, Aquilino (1994) found that parental divorce lowered the quality of the parent-child relationships as reported by the young adult, especially the father-child relationship. He also found less contact between parents and young adult children after parental divorce. Cooney (1994) found similar findings, although her study showed that parental divorce had little impact on the relationship between mothers and children, but some dramatic effects on fathers and children. Both studies show that divorce weakens kinship ties and obligations when it occurs later in life.

What happens when an older adult remarries? We know much less about a remarriage in older adults than we know about divorce. Some research shows that older remarries perceive more negative social pressure about their decision to remarry. Sanctions ranged from knowing glances and raised eyebrows to rejection by adult children. In one of the few studies of a remarriage in older adults, McKain (1972) reported that 25% of her 100 couples said they almost did not remarry because of such pressure. Later research by Vinick (1978, 1983) showed that the negative sanctions were more common from one's peers than one's children. In fact, most adult children in this study were supportive of their parent's remarriage.

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### ***Building Rapport with New Teenage...***

#### ■ **Learn more about teen development.**

When teenagers push you away, they are not really trying to hurt your feelings. Also be aware that most teenagers will not ask you directly about yourself, but they are listening and watching everything you do.

■ **Be a nice person.** Don't waste your time lecturing, scolding and voicing your disapproval. You'll most likely be "tuned out" anyway. Try to become a trusted advisor and ally.

#### ■ **Communicate with humor and affection.**

Pass along information in many forms: handwritten notes tacked on the fridge, e-mail and voice mail messages. Make reminders about chores brief.

■ **Balance family togetherness with a teen's need to be with friends.** Encourage teens to bring their friends home. That way, you know where they are and you get to know their friends. You can learn a lot when you see kids interacting with their peers.

■ **Watch out for flirtatious behavior.** Sexual energy between teenagers and their stepparents is common, but dangerous. If your child or stepchild starts parading around scantily clothed, for example, discuss this behavior with your partner. Keep the lines of communication open. And be aware of being fully dressed yourself in the presence of teenagers.



■ **Don't try to buy a teen's love and acceptance.** It won't work in the long run. Resist the temptation to overindulge and over schedule, especially with visiting stepchildren.

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### ***Stepfamilies in Middle/Late Adulthood***

More recent studies have examined the internal dynamics of a remarriage in older adults. For example, Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1990) studied the effects of conflict, sharing, and consensus on marital satisfaction in a sample of 70 remarries 55 years and older. They found that those who report higher levels of marital satisfaction also reported less negative types of conflict being expressed (e.g. argue/shout, slap/hit, sulk/slam doors). In addition to expressions of negative conflict, women who perceived that their spouses shared their problems with them also more frequently reported higher levels of marital satisfaction.

Another study by Bograd and Spilka (1996) used 125 remarried families to compare types of self-disclosure and marital satisfaction in mid-life (ages 30-40) and late-life (ages 60-75) remarriages. Their key findings were: (a) the amount and depth of self-disclosure were less in late-life remarriages, and (b) men in mid-life remarriages reported less marital satisfaction than men in late-life remarriages. They suggested that remarried couples may develop communication patterns that were absent in their first marriage, and these contribute to marital survival and satisfaction. Findings from Wu and Penning (1997) support this idea. These authors found that redivorce was more common among an older remarriage.

What does all this mean? Clearly, there is a need to focus more research attention on remarriages among older adults, given that the "baby boomers" are now in these age groups. We would anticipate that more older adults and their adult children will experience these marital transitions. Learning about the experience of divorce and remarriage for all members of these families can help us to better meet their needs through prevention and intervention strategies.

\* *Kay Pasley* is the Chair of the SAA Research Committee, and is on the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



# Resources

## Stepfamily Resources

### K-State Research and Extension

#### Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies

The program is designed for stepfamilies having children under the age of 18. Its resources include a home study course, a teaching guide for a one-hour lesson, lesson one-page handouts (Parent Fact Sheet, Grandparent Fact Sheet, and Financial and Legal Issues Fact Sheet), a 34 minute video, an audiocassette, and a training manual. Publications can be downloaded from:

[www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/)

Training resources can be ordered from [pseele@ksu.edu](mailto:pseele@ksu.edu). All county offices received a complete set of materials at the time the program was created.

### Other Extension Research-Based Materials

#### Smart Steps: For Adults & Children in Stepfamilies

English and Spanish versions are available at a cost of \$150 for a complete set of materials in either language. Each set includes a six-session leader guide and handouts for adult workshops and the same for children workshops. Each set also includes videotapes and a CD to reproduce handouts. Order from:

<http://ecommerce.4w.com/stepfam/booksandtapes.htm#200201>

### Organization Website

Stepfamily Association of America  
<http://www.saaamilies.org/>

The **Stepfamily Association of America (SAA)** is a national non-profit organization dedicated to providing support and guidance to families with children from previous relationships. It offers a catalog of resources that have gone through a rigorous, research-based review process. Other services are also available.

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#### 10 Steps for Grandparents in Stepfamilies

biological and step feelings in you if there is more than one set of children in a household.

**7** Holidays, traditions and rituals: Maintain family rituals in your home as you wish them to remain. Adapt to new traditions in the stepfamily as they develop.

**8** Wills, family heirlooms: Money generally follows biological family. Don't be hasty to reassign family heirlooms or assets. Consult your attorney for legal matters.

**9** Listen: be an impartial sounding board to your grandchildren or step grandchildren. At times they might need someone just to listen.

**10** Guard your sense of humor and use it: The step situation is filled with the unexpected. Sometimes we don't know whether to laugh or cry. Try humor.

Source: <http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Bliss/Bliss.html>

Note: This website has other useful information for stepfamilies.



FROM THE DESK OF

Charlotte Shoup Olsen



# National Families Week

As we come upon the holidays, family traditions and celebrations come to the forefront. National Family Week, November 20-26, was created by the Alliance for Children and Families 30 years ago and written into legislation to coincide with the week of Thanksgiving. This year's theme is *Connections Count*.



These connections include: 1) Positive relationships within and among families, as well as support from community networks and institutions. 2) Everyday access to

dependable transportation, technology, education, and childcare. 3) Opportunities to build solid financial foundations.

For some families, there may have been major changes in family life during the past year that create changes in how Thanksgiving and other holidays will be handled. Many parents and children, of



all ages, are living in stepfamilies and will find more complexity in how to arrange holiday happenings. This issue is devoted to stepfamilies, not necessarily with young children, but with older ones. We hope it sheds some light on the many dynamics occurring among stepfamilies, not just for the holidays, but year round.

Charlotte Shoup Olsen  
W. Jared DuPree

## Answers to Questions from Kansas Extension Agents

### Question:

What are professional development ideas for becoming more culturally competent in working with under-served populations?

### Answer:

There is a very good article in an electronic journal, "The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues," that specifically addresses this question. Written by a family life Extension specialist from Utah State University, it gives very practical ideas to be more effective in reaching culturally diverse populations. The author, Dr. Linda Skogrand, suggested that a process for learning about your audience included using academic

resources, learning from culturally specific media, attending cultural events, visiting locations frequented by members of the target population; and enlisting help from a cultural guide. For the complete article go to: [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/9\\_1/skogrand.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/9_1/skogrand.html)

I will pass along from time to time other professional development opportunities in this arena. For instance, the Five-State Multi-cultural Conference held in the springtime in Garden City brings in excellent speakers and has energizing activities that can strengthen one's inter-cultural competence.