

Working Together:

Active Parenting in Foster Families and Stepfamilies

by *Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D.*

The number of stepfamilies in the United States is growing substantially. According to the Stepfamily Foundation, *half* of the nation's 60 million children under the age of 13 are currently living with one biological parent and that parent's current partner. On a smaller scale, but equally important, the 2002 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) reported that 532,000 children in the U.S. were living in foster care. There are important differences between step- and foster families; however, they are similar in several significant ways. Parents who understand these common traits are better equipped to raise happy, healthy kids despite the challenges that foster and stepfamily life present.

#1. Both families are born of loss.

The impact of major loss on a child, whether by death, divorce, or other family changes, creates a psychological wound that requires healing. Without healing, children often act out their pain through misbehavior, depression, or physical ailments. Parents can assist in the healing process in a number of ways, including:

- 1) **Providing a loving and nurturing environment;**
- 2) **Talking with the child about his/her painful feelings** (such as anger, sadness, hurt, and mistrust) in a supportive, non-judgmental way;
- 3) **Helping the child develop healthy coping skills** (like writing in a journal, talking with peers and adults, playing sports, making new friends, and schoolwork— whatever works for that child); and
- 4) **Being patient.** It often takes a year or more to heal from loss. Don't take a child's misbehavior personally. Remain loving and use firm but respectful forms of discipline when necessary. Remember that it is the deep pain the child is experiencing that is causing the inappropriate behavior.

#2. Both must explore hidden expectations.

All parents and children have expectations of how the family will work. "*What is acceptable behavior and what isn't?*" "*How clean do we keep the house, and the kids' rooms in particular?*" "*Which jokes are appropriate and which ones aren't?*" The list is endless.

These issues are a challenge for any family, but the learning curve is particularly sharp for step- and foster families. "*Will she get mad if I say that?*" "*Will I be expected to make my bed perfectly?*" "*Gosh! I didn't expect that!*"

The key to understanding expectations is to "get them on the table" so everyone knows what the expectations are and can discuss them openly. This means lots of family meetings with kids over the age of 5 or 6, using phrases like, "*In our family we _____* (say a prayer before eating, take a bath every day, don't hit each other"— whatever your values and traditions dictate.).

Remember that children have expectations, too. Discussing with—**rather than dictating to** children will help them feel part of their new family. Be flexible so you can pay attention to the child's needs as well as your own values.

#3. Both must quickly establish limits and boundaries.

Any family must set behavioral limits and boundaries—in other words, what is and isn't acceptable behavior. Some limits may be strictly defined, such as where it is and isn't OK for kids to play. Others, however, may be more abstract, such as not treating anyone in the family disrespectfully. As a rule of thumb, the younger the child, the more important it is to have a very firm boundary.

In step- and foster families where no common history exists between family members, parents have an additional challenge: they must set clear limits quickly, before major misunderstandings arise. Again, involve the children in this process. Negotiate these limits, but only within the boundaries of your family values and the specific situation. In general, four key boundary areas must be addressed:

- 1) *Space*. This includes letting kids know where they can and can't go, how neat they need to keep their room and other rooms in the house, and how they can decorate their room.
- 2) *Time*. Is it OK to watch TV on school nights? If so, how much? What about other kinds of "screen time" (computers, video games, etc.)? How much time will be spent on homework, sports, and other recreation?
- 3) *Money*. How much is available for allowances, vacations, clothing, and other wants and needs? How can kids earn more money?
- 4) *Authority*. When do children need to ask permission and when don't they? Who is responsible for discipline?

#4. Both must address sexuality.

It is important that parents address issues of privacy and sexuality early on. Establish rules for knocking on doors before entering rooms, wearing modest clothing in the home, and respecting what makes each person uncomfortable. These boundaries are particularly important when you have one or more teenagers living in the home.

It is also important for adults to recognize and accept that members of a step- or foster family who are not biologically related will sometimes have sexual feelings for each other. While the feelings themselves are not necessarily a problem, acting on these feelings *is* a problem. Parents need to set and reinforce their own internal boundaries against acting on such feelings, know how to recognize when a problem exists, and get appropriate professional help if they need additional support.

#5. Both parents must establish an effective discipline style.

Because each parent has his/her own discipline style, it can be confusing and even scary for a child to have another authority figure enter his/her life. *How strict is my foster parent? How will I be punished? Is my new stepdad a "pushover"?*

Reassure children that while discipline may sometimes be necessary in your home, it will be fair, and won't be violent. This means that you will be neither a dictator nor a doormat, but will strive to be the kind of parent who uses discipline judiciously. Let children know that you expect them to abide by family rules. If they break a rule,

emphasize that there will be a consequence to help them remember it better the next time. Be sure to let them know they can always talk with you about your discipline decisions and that you won't yell at them or insult them. Make sure they understand that you don't think that those types of discipline are respectful, and in your family you always strive to treat each other respectfully.

#6. Both must build a positive relationship from scratch.

Discipline never occurs in a vacuum — it's always within the context of the parent-child relationship. When that relationship is a strong, loving bond, less discipline is needed, and when it *is* needed, the child is more likely to accept it.

One problem that stepparents and foster parents often face is that they find themselves in a situation that calls for disciplining a child before they have had time to establish a positive relationship with him/her. When this happens, the child may feel that the parent has no right to take such action. In such cases, stepparents are wise to turn discipline over to the biological parent until they have had time to build the relationship.

Foster parents, who don't have the luxury of a biological parent on hand, need to work extra-hard on the relationship-building aspects of parenting, and to stress the following activities with children:

- Take time to have some fun together every day.
- Find things that you like about the child and encourage him/her each day.
- Teach your child things that he/she is interested in learning.
- Create a bedtime routine that includes reading to your child (or talking together if the child is older) and words of affection.
- Write your child a letter of encouragement, focusing on what you like and his/her strengths.

When it's necessary to discipline, stay calm and firm, but don't be too harsh. Afterward, be sure to follow up with a kind word, hug, or other gesture that lets him/her know that you still care.

#7. Both must deal with other parents.

As a step- or foster parent, you may not share a genetic bond with your children, yet you're still in the role of primary caregiver. It is *your* sacrifice and hard work to teach the child the lessons that will make a positive difference in the future. However, there are often other parents in the picture, whether it's a biological parent who gets visitation rights every other weekend or a parent who is seemingly out of the picture, but remains on the child's mind. The following tips about dealing with parents should help:

- 1) **Never put the child's biological parent(s) down.** Kids will probably resent it, and even if they don't, it'll hurt their self-esteem. They'll think that if their parent is so terrible, then maybe they are, too.
- 2) **Build a good relationship with any adult involved in the child's well being.** For the sake of the kids, keep anger and any past hurts out of it.
- 3) **Talk with your child about their other parents when they express interest.** Show sensitivity to their feelings, again being careful not to make disparaging remarks. Stress the positive.

#8. Both must work on becoming a “real” family.

There is no such thing as an instant family. Becoming a family is a matter of establishing your own way of being together, supporting each other, having fun together, and establishing a common history. This takes time, but the process can be accelerated with planning and attention.

Develop your own family traditions and ways of doing things—from everyday matters like having dinner together to important celebrations and holidays. Take lots of pictures, and be sure to display them. Use phrases like, “*in our family.*” Reminisce about family trips and other special events, even if they didn’t occur very long ago.

#9. Both need to let children know they are committed.

Children who have been hurt by death, divorce, or other losses are likely to be suspicious of other adults entering their lives. Building trust with these kids requires:

- Kindness
- Fairness
- Encouragement
- Honesty

Building trust also includes letting your child know that you are committed to their well being. Your goal, like any parent, is to help them survive and even thrive. Let them see that you are happy when they are happy and that you hurt when they hurt. Empathy shows them you care at a deep level and are truly on their side. Commitment doesn’t mean that you promise to be there forever. It means that while you *are* in the child’s life, you are committed and doing your best as a parent.

#10. Both have the unique opportunity to make a huge difference in a child’s life.

Step- and foster parents enter the lives of children when they have been hurt by events beyond their control; they have been “thrown from the horse,” so to speak. These kids are at risk of letting their hurt feelings cause themselves and others pain and suffering throughout their lives. The opportunity to make a positive difference in their lives—to help them “get back in the saddle”—is something very special.

One woman put it this way: “*When my stepfather came into my life after so many years of just my mother and I, I felt really offended. Now, I just call him Dad and I can’t imagine my life without him.*”

Whether you’re a stepparent or a foster parent, being that special person is one of the most important roles an adult can play, not only for the child, but also for every person that child will come into contact with throughout life.

More Recommendations

One of the biggest conundrums that many step- and foster parents face is whether to make a child’s biological parents an active part of that child’s life. In cases where children have been abused and are seriously at risk, visitation from biological parents may be forbidden. In the majority of cases, however, promoting visitations and healthy relationships between birth, step-, and foster families is a good idea.

- Often, problems are generational: Parents have problems because no one showed *them* how to be good parents. If left untended, the problems become the next

generation's inheritance. Foster parents can play an important role in establishing a break with the past by teaching effective parenting skills to a child's other adult caregivers. Keep the following points in mind:

- Foster parents need to form a relationship and build trust with a child's birth parents and other adult caregivers *before* they'll be welcome to help them address parenting issues.
- Frequent interaction between foster and birth families helps children feel more hopeful that reunification with their birth parents is a possibility for the future
- When frequent contact isn't possible due to geographic barriers or other obstacles, take advantage of technology by emailing pictures, letters, and stories from the child.
- Parental visits are an important predictor of future reunification. Such visits are opportunities for birth parents to learn how to meet the needs of their children and change the behavior that caused children to be removed from the home. The degree to which parents cooperate determines the chances for a successful reunification. The National Foster Parent Association offers trainings on how to develop positive relationships between birth and foster families. ■

About Michael Popkin

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at www.ActiveParenting.com.

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