

## Step-Families...The Challenges, Complexities, Rewards

by Terry Top, Executive Director/Marriage & Family Therapist

Remember the Brady's? Carol had three girls and Mike, three boys. On a hunch they married to form one big happy family – the Brady Bunch. America faithfully watched every afternoon as the family faced one silly crisis after another, but within 30 minutes, Mom or Dad stepped in to save the day and all was well again.



Best estimates say that one third of the total population in the USA lives in what we have labeled a “blended” or step-family. A step-family forms when an adult with children couples with another adult who is not the parent of those children. The parent-child relationship precedes the couple relationship.

Living in these families presents a different set of challenges than living in a “first time” family. Many people enter these step-family situations thinking that the same rules apply here as in first time families. The fantasy of having the “Brady Bunch” often creates unrealistic expectations of the one big happy family ideal. Instead, disappointment, anger and bitterness can be the long term result. Step-families are often “bi-nuclear” or even “tri-nuclear.” Family boundaries must be flexible enough to include multiple family groups.

**To help ease the stress in adjusting to a new step-family, here are some suggestions to create some harmony among everyone involved:**

1. Normalize the loyalty binds that family members are experiencing. Reassure children that the step-parent is not trying to replace the biological parent. Encourage the child to find a new spot in her heart for the step-parent that doesn't compete with the biological parent.
2. Parents cannot require children to love the step-parent or step-siblings, but they can require being courteous and civil.
3. It is often helpful if the amount of change is regulated so that members are not overwhelmed trying to make too many adjustments simultaneously.
4. Try to lower conflict with other households of the family whenever possible. Differences between divorced parents need to be resolved without putting the children in the middle.
5. Parents need to keep having individual time with their biological children apart from the new family members. Some of the old family traditions need to be continued so that members don't feel like they have lost all of their past connections.
6. Communication needs to be honest and open to avoid unresolved issues from festering. This requires a lot of grace and tolerance.
7. Try to stay positive and supportive while avoiding harsh criticism.

Many step-families don't survive because this work is very challenging. All of the “normal” issues are present plus many more. Navigating all of the potential mine fields requires a great deal of maturity and skill. Even the best of us will likely need some help in the process. Professional counseling from a family therapist experienced in working with step-families can be invaluable. Addressing problems early will greatly enhance the chances of success and happiness for everyone.



For more information, call  
**708-895-7310 or**  
**219-226-1810**



Originally published in “Turning a New Leaf,” Fall 2011.