

# Putting Kids First in Stepparenting

by Terri DeCoster Grasso

Current research shows that more than half of all Americans today have been or will be in one or more stepfamilies during their lives. Most people entering remarriage with children have not educated themselves about life in a stepfamily.

As a mental health professional, a mother and a stepchild, I have a personal interest in helping stepfamilies find paths to successful parenting. Accurate information and expectations can make a critical difference. Stepfamilies get the help they need at the Kids First Center. We offer programming and referrals, and also have a lending library to help parents find solutions to their own unique situations.

## Stepfamily Myths—True or False?

Read more to find out how the experts answer these questions.

1. It is important to have high expectations for the stepfamily in order for it to succeed.
2. Adjustment to stepfamily life takes about 4-7 years.
3. Stepfamilies are similar to first (or biological) families.
4. Group activities make it harder for stepfamilies to bond.

Studies show that stepfamilies have predictable stages of development that are different from first families. Through videos, role plays and handouts, the Kids First Program for Stepparents outlines these stages and explores common, avoidable pitfalls. One participant noted that he thought the facilitator “must have been looking in (his) living room window last weekend” because the scenarios so accurately reflected his experiences. The program includes a segment on conflict resolution and a bibliography in an effort to give participants real coping skills to apply immediately.

Here are the correct answers to the questions. How did you do?

1. ***It is important to have high expectations for the stepfamily in order for it to succeed.***  
FALSE: Unrealistic expectations will undermine and slow the development of the stepfamily. The greater the distance between fantasy and reality, the greater the sense of disappointment. Accept that there may not be an immediate sense of comfort and ease among family members - this is normal. Pressure to “bond” may result in stubborn refusal to get along.
2. ***Adjustment to stepfamily life takes about 4-7 years.***  
TRUE: According to Patricia Papernow, psychologist and author of Becoming a Stepfamily, it takes the average family 4

to 7 years to function with ease and intimacy. Although this is slower than most people would like, authentic relationships take time. When families are dealing with grief and loss, extra care is required.

3. ***Stepfamilies are similar to first (or biological) families.***  
FALSE: When stepfamilies begin, the primary relationship of at least one adult is with their child. You must accept that no matter what your feelings are about the child or opinions of their parenting, the primary bond between parent and child must not be weakened. Undermining the relationship of parent and child is destructive not only for them, but also for the future of the stepfamily. Never underestimate the strength of that loyalty.
4. ***Group activities make it harder for stepfamilies to bond.***  
TRUE: Just as friendships deepen and grow from one-on-one time, so do stepfamilies. Group activities often accentuate differences between family cultures and increase the insider-outsider feeling. Make time for adult-only activities and one-on-one time with each child. Beware of the holidays - this is often a time of great stress in stepfamilies.

The Kids First Center, in partnership with other professionals and agencies, can reach more stepfamilies and get them on a successful track sooner. For information on our locations and on how we can work together or support your stepfamily, please call (207)761-2709.

Terri DeCoster Grasso is a trainer and volunteer at Kids First Center. As a child of divorce, stepfamilies, stepsiblings and a half-sister, she brings experience and compassion to her work at the Center.

**Kids First** offers Stepparenting classes at their Portland Center. They also offer other classes for parents, kids and mental health professionals in various locations. Call toll free 866-543-7347 or visit their website at [www.kidsfirstcenter.org](http://www.kidsfirstcenter.org).

### Kids First Programs

Kids First Program for Stepparents

Kids First Program/Co-Parenting Education

### Evening Workshops

Separation, Divorce and the Very Young Child  
Separation, Divorce and the Adolescent

### Half-Day Workshop

Preparing Mental Health Professionals to Testify on Behalf of Children  
With Judge David Kennedy

### Support Groups for Kids ages 6-18

Call for details (207)761-2709

