TOGETHER

CREATING A SUCCESSFUL STEPFAMILY TAKES MORE THAN JUST SAYING "I DO."

BY DAWN WELCH

Remember the Bradys, Hollywood's sugar-coated version of a groovy, well-adjusted American step-family? Carol, lovely widow with three golden-haired daughters, meets Mike, successful architect and father of three young sons. Wacky wedding ensues at which dog tips over cake, followed by honey-moon complete with kids and animals. And except for occasional burnt pot roast (blame it on the maid) or bathroom squabble, those crazy Bradys live happily ever after.
That’s Hollywood. In reality, stepfamily living isn’t so neat and tidy.

Trying to blend two separate families who have their own sets of rules and traditions can present many challenges, to say the least. In fact, if the Bradys were an actual stepfamily living in the nineties, their story might sound something like this:

Mike and Carol’s first trips to the altar—like those of half of all first-time married couples—end in divorce. And like most divorced people, they give marriage a second chance. Carol has custody of the girls. Mike’s boys live across town with his ex but come to visit every weekend. Both Mike and Carol have high hopes that love will be sweeter the second time around and that their two families will merge into one big, happy, harmonious bunch. After the wedding, Carol and the girls move into Mike’s three-bedroom ranch. Within a few weeks, trouble begins to brew. Cindy misses her old neighborhood friends and begins acting up. Greg’s upset because Marsha lives in his old room and has painted the walls pink. Jan and Peter constantly fight over Nintendo. Bobby has become withdrawn. Each tense episode puts Mike and Carol’s parenting styles to the test. He’s a strict disciplinarian, while she’s got a more laid-back approach. The girls miss their real dad, who moved to another state with his new wife and baby, and resent Mike for trying to take his place. Carol feels guilty that she doesn’t love Mike’s children like her own, which she expected would happen right away. Money is tight. Moreover, Mike and Carol find they are so busy with work and the kids that they have no time to nurture their own relationship. As time passes, communication breaks down, and sadly, like 60 percent of all couples who remarry, Mike and Carol split up.

“The entire process of separation, divorce, and remarriage holds tremendous challenges for adults and children,” explains family therapist Elizabeth Einstein, one of the country’s leading educators in the dynamics of stepfamily relationships. “But stepfamilies can work well. Many people who live in this special kind of family reap rich rewards.”

Drawing from her experience as both a stepchild and stepparent, Einstein, who earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from SU in 1977 and a master’s degree in marriage and family therapy in 1991, travels around the country presenting workshops and offering encouragement and guidance to thousands of stepfathers, stepmothers, and stepchildren. She explains that a key element to making a stepfamily work is understanding up front the special challenges you’ll face. “The more awareness you gain early on, the smoother and steadier your progress will be.”

**Move Over, Ozzie and Harriet**

It’s no surprise that today’s children are growing up in a world much different than the one portrayed in the sitcoms of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. More than 80 percent of children born shortly after World War II were raised in traditional homes with brothers and sisters, cats and dogs, and more important, two biological parents who stuck together for better or worse. Back then, children who lived in stepfamilies usually did so because one parent died.

Statistics paint a much different picture of modern family life. Only 16 percent of all American families fit the traditional nuclear model: working dad, homemaking mom, and dependent kids. According to current research, 60 million adults and 20 million children are currently members of stepfamilies, most as the result of divorce. That’s about one-third of the United States’ population. Thirty-five percent of children born in the early eighteenies can expect to live with a stepparent before the age of 18. And if current trends continue, at least 50 percent of all Americans are expected to be part of a stepfamily by the year 2000. As the numbers continue to rise, it is becoming increasingly clear that we as a society are being forced to rethink what exactly constitutes a family.
**Understanding the Stepfamily**

Stepfamilies have gotten a bum rap historically, thanks in part to fairy tales like *Cinderella*, which pit the beautiful, sainted offspring of a former spouse against the ugly, wicked wife and children of a current marriage.

Having grown up in the forties and fifties, Einstein remembers all too well the stigma attached to divorce and remarriage. "The notion of the nuclear family was almighty," she explains. "Anything that was different was perceived as an aberration, a pathology if you will, and was discounted in some way. As a child growing up in a stepfamily, I felt a lot of shame that my mother was divorced. There weren't many stepfamilies around, so we did what most people did. We acted as though we were a nuclear family."

Fortunately, times have changed. As their numbers increase, stepfamilies are gaining acceptance and the accompanying stigma is being chipped away. "Today, every kind of family is acknowledged," Einstein explains, "whether it's a stepfamily, a single-parent family, an adopted family, you name it—they're all important." All types of families can provide environments in which members can love, grow, and thrive, she says. And a stepfamily is no better or worse than a traditional nuclear family. "It's just different."

Distinguishing the differences between the two is crucial to a stepfamily's survival. For example, there's a major difference between how the two families are created. Couples married for the first time often feel invincible, that life is full of possibilities, and they have usually been spared life's major sorrows.

Stepfamilies, on the other hand, are born of loss. They're created by people whose attachment to loved ones has been severed by death or divorce. Feelings of loss are often carried over into the stepfamily. "A new stepfamily is often a paradox," Einstein explains. "Hand in hand with joy and hope lingers sadness."

Divorced parents, for instance, may be thrilled about the prospect of giving marriage a second chance. Yet they're also painfully aware of the anguish a failed marriage can bring.

Divorced adults often jump into a new marriage too quickly, says Eleanor Macklin, an SU professor of marriage and family therapy. "There is a natural tendency within human beings to wish to be close to another person," says Macklin. "It's a very strong driving force. But often they fall into a second marriage without having analyzed why the first one failed or what role they played in making it fail. They don't do much healing from the first marriage and divorce. And without the necessary healing stage, they have no more hope for the second marriage than they had for the first."

New stepparents who don't yet have children also face loss. Their fantasies about marriage may be shattered by the reality of inheriting an instant family. Dreams of romantic getaway weekends and private bubble-baths-for-two may be replaced by Little League games and ballet recitals. Moreover, issues like child support, alimony, school conferences, and frequent telephone calls to and from the children's other parent are constant reminders that someone else shared a life with their spouse before they came along.

Kids, however, suffer the greatest loss. Research shows that stepchildren have more emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems than children who grow up in nuclear families. At particular risk are adolescents. Researchers have found that children between ages 9 and 15 have an especially hard time adjusting to stepfamily life.

It's no wonder, says Ruth Wynn, SU professor of child and family studies. "Their whole lives are turned upside down. Many children lose daily contact with one parent. They may also lose part of their family network. One set of grandparents, aunts,
Uncles and cousins often drop out of the scene. Many kids also move away from their homes, schools, and friends. And the worst part is there’s nothing they can do about it.” Remarriage also destroys a common dream among children of divorce. “It puts an end to the fantasy that their parents will ever get back together again,” Wynn says.

Lee Silverman, a 1987 graduate of Syracuse University’s S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, remembers with sadness the day her parents broke up and her life changed forever. Ironically, it was April Fool’s Day when Silverman—then an 11-year-old, straight-A student—and her mother and sister moved from their upscale, suburban Philadelphia home into a small two-bedroom apartment. The following day, Silverman’s future stepmother (her mother’s former friend) and two sons moved in with her father.

After the breakup, Silverman, now 28 and tour director of a New York City-based national theatrical booking agency, and her father didn’t speak for five years. She says her father didn’t know how to handle having two families, so he chose to ignore one—hers. “It was the most difficult time of my life,” she says. “I was very insecure and depressed.” Silverman’s weight increased as her grades took a dive.

Compounding Silverman’s unhappiness was the fact that her stepbrothers attended the same school. “They were living in my home, and I could see they were very well taken care of, while I was wanting in every aspect of my life.”

At 16, Silverman reconciled with her father and moved back to her old house. The move was a good one because it provided the discipline and structure that was lacking in her life. Yet she felt terribly guilty about deserting her mother. To this day, neither family gets along, and her relationship with both has high and low moments. Even as an adult, Silverman feels she has to walk a diplomatic tightrope between the two families.

Research shows that, over time, kids can adjust to divorce. In fact, many report enjoying the extra attention they get during this time. But when one parent chooses to remarry, the child’s security is shaken again as he or she is forced to share the parent not only with another adult but often with stepsiblings as well.

Interestingly, adults whose parents divorce and remarry experience feelings of loss similar to those of young children. “It can be pretty devastating, especially if their parents have been married for 30 or 40 years,” Einstein explains. “On some levels they feel betrayed because they thought their parents had a good marriage. They feel as though the whole model they had for marriage was a myth.”

Another issue that differentiates nuclear families and stepfamilies is history. Nuclear families share common rules and rituals: shoes are taken off at the door, dinner is always served at 6 sharp, everything on your plate must be eaten. Saturday night is pizza, everyone goes to church on Sunday. Stepfamilies, on the other hand, bring together two groups of people with different backgrounds and traditions. Each family may have different ways of doing things, which can lead to confusion and resentment. A classic example of this was demonstrated recently by a stepfamily Einstein counseled in Rockville, Maryland. A few weeks before their first Christmas together, everyone went to the woods to cut down a tree. As Christmas approached, however, the tree stood tall in their living room undecorated. It seems each family had different ideas about how to decorate the tree. Eventually, they opted for a compromise, which resulted in a strange-looking creation: half the tree was decorated with golden balls and tinsel, the other half with popcorn and cranberries. But the accord represented a step forward for the family: They learned to respect each other’s traditions.
Finding happiness and harmony in a stepfamily takes hard work and commitment from everyone. Numerous books and studies have explored the many ingredients to successful stepfamily living. Among the myriad pages of analysis are some consistent findings. Researchers say it is important to:

**Arm yourself with information.** Go to your local library or bookstore for books on stepfamily life. Go to lectures on the subject. See a professional who specializes in stepfamily counseling. "Couples who arm themselves with wisdom and understand that it’s hard at first aren’t going to have so many unrealistic expectations," says Einstein. "They are the families who make it. The ones who don’t bother to do this preparation, who think that love conquers all . . . usually become part of the horrible 60 percent remarriage-divorce statistic."

**Resolve your past relationship.** Family therapists call this “achieving an emotional divorce.” “There’s a big difference between a legal divorce, which is a piece of paper, and an emotional divorce, which can take many years,” Einstein says. Achieving an emotional divorce depends on a number of factors, including who initiated the breakup, how many children you have, their ages, and how long you were married.

**Respect your child’s other parent.** For instance, never speak negatively about the other parent in front of the child. Recognize and respect how important that person is in the child’s life. Your efforts will likely be rewarded. In a 1990 study published in the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, Macklin and her SU colleagues found that when biological parents and stepparents maintain a positive relationship with each other, everyone benefits. Stepparents don’t mind that their spouse communicates with a former husband or wife as long as they feel secure in their own marriage. The outside parent is more likely to be cooperative in terms of caring for his or her children financially and emotionally. And the children feel more secure.

**Don’t expect instant love from your stepchild.** Give the relationship time to develop and grow. Plan activities you can do alone with the child to get to know each other better. But don’t force it if the child seems reluctant.

**Treat your stepchild like a friend.** Researchers have found that stepparents who view themselves as friends rather than substitute parents are more happy and successful. "Children often resent someone coming in and trying to parent them who is not their parent," says Macklin. That’s why it’s a good idea to leave issues of discipline up to the biological parent, at least initially.

**Accept that nobody is perfect.** Conflicts arise in every family. It’s normal and doesn’t mean your family is going to fall apart. The bottom line is this: Be patient.

"Understand that remarriage and the creation of a successful stepfamily is a process. It takes a long time," Einstein explains. "It’s not an event. Research shows that even under the best of circumstances, where people have divorced well and have used divorce mediation and counseling, putting a stepfamily together to the point where people feel comfortable with one another takes an average of four to seven years. Taking your time and getting support and guidance is critical."

And odds are good the effort will pay off.