Relationship Rehab Show

Episode 42: Stepfamily Parenting & Interview with Elisabeth Stitt

Definition of a Stepfamily: A family unit in which one or both adults have a child from a previous relationship.

Parenting is one of the major challenges to figure out when you first form a stepfamily. You can avoid one of the most common complaints of children by following the advice of multiple stepfamily research outcomes. The biological parent does all of the parenting, ideally with the other biological parent in a co-parenting agreement. The step-parent's job is to support the parenting decisions of the biological parent/s.

The step-parent makes whatever effort he or she wants to as far as developing a cordial, respectful relationship with the step-child. It is up to the step-child to dictate how quickly that relationship progresses. The step-child does not have to like the step-parent, but the parent insists that the step-child treat the step-parent and step-siblings with respect.

Tips from Elisabeth Stitt:

1. There are a few house rules that everyone is expected to obey.

2. When a step-child approaches a step-parent for permission to do something, the step-parent replies, "Go ask you mom/dad. She/he is in charge of decisions about you." This prevents the child from playing one against the other. The parenting line is always clearly maintained.

3. Each parent is responsible for making decisions about his/her child.

4. Other than the few house rules everyone was expected to obey, Elisabeth and her husband could insist on different rules for their respective children.

See what you can learn from this true story: **"OUR BOOK BOND",** by Ptolemy Tompkins, Senior Contributing Editor, Guideposts Magazine. - September, 2008 Issue (used with permission)

I moved into my new wife Rebecca's Greenwich Village apartment back in 1994, and knew that it would take a while before I really felt at home. Like most New York apartments, Rebecca's was small. It was also crammed full of her and her

seven-year-old daughter Mara's stuff. Where, in this jumble of Fisher-Price toys, leotards, record albums and Polly Pocket lunch boxes, would I fit any of my stuff?

Most important, my books. Ever since I was a kid, I've been one of those people who doesn't just read books. I arrange my life around them.

Not that there weren't plenty of books in the apartment already. Most of the wall space was taken up with Rebecca's bookshelves. And Mara's little bedroom was packed with them too. Apparently, Mara was a reader just like her mother.

It was the one tenuous connection I felt with her. Though Mara was polite, I could tell I was basically just another alien adult in her eyes.

Mara was a very different kid than I had been. I had been quiet, dreamy, solitary...much happier with my head buried in a dinosaur book than with a bunch of other kids my age. Books were my friends. Mara, on the other hand, was intensely social. She did her reading in between visits to friends' houses and very long chats on the telephone.

Even the books that Mara read were hard for me to figure out. One day not long after I moved in, I pulled out the paperback that was poking from the top of her backpack and gave it a quick examination: *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, by someone named Louis Sachar. Glancing at the back cover, I divined that it was about an elementary school that had been built sideways, and the adventures of the school kids who went there.
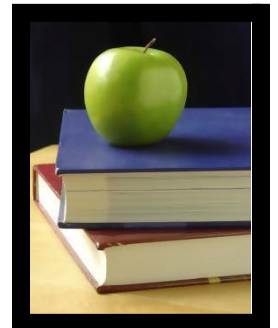
It was the last kind of book I would've been interested in at her age. Too many characters. Too much dialogue. No dinosaurs. No sharks. What kid would want to read that?

But from that day on, I studied the covers of the books she toted around and tried to get the hang of which ones appealed to her and which ones didn't. Most books got just a single reading. But when Mara really liked a book, she returned to it again and again, bringing it with her to school, to bed...even into the tub. I had felt the very same way about my favorite books when I was her age.

"There's some free shelf space out on the sun porch," Rebecca said to me one afternoon. "Why don't you get some of your books out of storage and set them up there?" With each book I pulled out of the boxes, I felt more at home—more like this wasn't just where Mara and her mom lived, but where I lived, as well.

One day at Barnes & Noble I dipped into the kid's section and picked up a few titles for Mara. "Thanks!" she said when I handed them over. Sure enough, one of them was a volume called *My Crazy Cousin Courtney* that looked like it had Mara written all over it started showing up again and again around the apartment. I'd scored a hit!

From then on, I bought Mara books regularly—and not just from Barnes & Noble, but from rummage sales and flea markets too. With each one, I got to know her just a little bit better and came closer to feeling like I might really belong in her life after all.

One June day when Mara was fourteen years old, I came home and found a square package on the coffee table. "What's that?" I asked Rebecca.

"Why don't you open it and find out?"

It's hard to buy me books. Especially on subjects I like. But the one in that package—a big pictorial natural history of sharks—was one I'd never seen before. "For Ptolemy," read the inscription. "Happy Father's Day, with love from Mara."

Books are funny things. They just have a way of making you feel at home.

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What can be learned from this story? What did Ptolemy do?

What did Ptolemy not do?

What character traits did Ptolemy demonstrate?

How long was it before Mara gave him a "Father's Day" gift?

What behaviors, attitudes or expectations might you duplicate?

How can you begin to put these plans into practice?

Like constructing a building, a caring step-relationship requires long-term planning and commitment. Quick results are the exception, not the rule.

> **TRUTH:** The more you encourage your step-child's relationship with both bio-parents, the faster that step-child will accept you.

You have my love and support,

Nancy Landrum