

# For Those Who Are “Stepping TwoGether”

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**“Families are flawed, complex, intense organic units whose members often fail each other in important ways. But family affection is the glue that holds lives together.”<sup>1</sup>**

## **You know you are a stepfamily if:**

1. Your last name is Smith and your children’s last names are Johnson and Cooper.
2. You think your child is basically a good kid—but his or her child is a real problem!
3. You have found yourself, occasionally, feeling nostalgic about the “good old days” as a single parent.
4. You hear, “You’re not my mom (dad)!”
5. Your child has four separate birthday parties and you travel to six different houses on Christmas.
6. You received a family law summons from an ex-spouse before your honeymoon was over.
7. You struggle!<sup>2</sup>

Jim and I have felt so much sorrow over our failure to recognize or adequately meet our children’s needs during the traumatic upheaval in their lives created by our marriage. We have been speaking about the healing of our SoulMate love for several years, but only recently, with great hesitation, agreed to speak to a step-family support group about the challenges of parenting in a step-family. Mostly we told them about all the hurtful



things we did out of ignorance and blissful naiveté. By the time we found out that most step-families thrive with very different rules than biological families, and made some drastic changes, our children had suffered—some of them terribly.

In our defense, there were only a handful of books on the subject of stepfamily dynamics. Those brave authors were just beginning to expose the unique and, until recently, unrecognized foundational differences between a traditional, nuclear, biologically created family and a stepfamily. One of the counselors we saw for a few visits was in a second marriage with “yours, mine, and ours.” The therapist gave Jim some very valuable feedback about his relationship with Jimmy, but didn’t have a clue about where I should fit in.

If you don’t “get” anything else about this chapter, “get” this: The guidelines for successfully “blending” two families are as different from what makes a biological family work as the difference between good recipes for beef stew and lasagna. Both recipes require planning, attention to details, good seasoning, and a caring cook, but in order for each entree to be tasty, very different ingredients and cooking methods are needed.

<sup>1</sup> Pipher, Mary, Ph.D., (1996). *The Shelter of Each Other, Rebuilding Our Families*, p. 225-226. New York: Ballantine Books.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from “Realistic Expectations of Remarriage,” an article by Steve Sposato at [www.steplife.com](http://www.steplife.com).

In one major respect, we were fortunate. We did not bring into our marriage the wounds of a previous, failed relationship. We did not have to cope with hostile former spouses, angry former in-laws, or an impersonal legal system dictating custody arrangements or visiting agreements. I can only *try* to fathom the additional stresses that those factors place on the already shaky structure of a stepfamily.

We did, however, have our former spouses' parents and other extended family members who, understandably, wanted to maintain contact with Jim and me, as well as with the children. I remember when Jim's late wife's family visited us soon after we married. I was so aware of their graciousness to me in spite of their grief over Dixie's death. We all tried so hard it was exhausting. I remember Jim, the girls, and Dixie's family spending a lot of time recalling funny stories about her. It was healing for them. I didn't begrudge them the healing, but felt excluded, not because they were shunning me, but by the long history they all shared together. I was envious.

The complexity of the extended family of steps is mind-boggling. In a first marriage, adjustments owing to differing family patterns and demands of in-laws are often difficult. In a stepfamily, the issues multiply exponentially. For some, the complexity of biological and step relatives is mind-boggling. More and more often, the grandparents of the stepchildren have also divorced and remarried! It could be hard to find a piece of paper large enough to hold the diagram of the family tree!

In our case, the number of mouths to feed doubled instantly. I felt snowed by the job of simply keeping enough food in the house and planning meals. A few months after we married, I spent days planning out menus for 4 weeks, organizing the recipes in a notebook, and making grocery lists for each of 4 weeks. I planned to rotate the same menus each month. I made one mistake. Every fourth day or so, I left an evening meal open for eating up leftovers; but there weren't any! I was accustomed to cooking only every other day or so. Between the extra bodies and boys entering puberty with un-fill-able stomachs, the cooking seemed to take five times more effort than before. I resented it.

We took the equity from the sale of Jim's house and doubled the square footage of my house—another mistake. The home was functional and beautiful, but my children never surrendered emotional ownership of the house and Jim and his children never really felt like it was theirs. Sometime later, we learned that it works better to surrender both homes and buy one that is neutral territory for everyone.

In addition to the surprise stresses of extended family, cooking, and house ownership, there were more subtle unrealistic expectations that created hurt and anger as they surfaced over time. I expected my life to get easier, now that I had SoulMate, lover, and best friend with whom to share responsibilities. I thought my days of repairing sprinklers, installing curtain rods, or disciplining strong willed boys by myself were over. I expected my boys to be happy for me. Jim thought his girls would be my friends and Jimmy would welcome me as "Mom."

Jim had carried most of the practical burdens of household management and the parenting of Jimmy during the long years of his wife's illness. He was relieved to turn the bill paying over to me. He expected me to have the same relationship with Jimmy that his wife had enjoyed. He was sure I would adore Jimmy as did the rest of his family. I expected Jim to see past the hostility of my boys toward him, and value them for the great young men they obviously were under their sullen exteriors. We both expected the children to get along and love each other because *we* were happy. They barely knew each other! They fought about everything! They had no choice in this! Years later they confided that they sometimes had late night confabs commiserating with each other on the only subject about which they could agree—how terrible we were!

Another deeply hidden unrealistic expectation took longer to surface. I believed that my first attempts at “family” were flawed. I thought I’d lost my chance to be a truly great wife and mother because my first husband died, taking my dream with him. I had done the best I knew how to do as a single mom, certainly giving it all I had to give, but now I had a second chance! I wanted to “make” this family perfect! Because I didn’t have healthy communication skills or an understanding of what makes a stepfamily work, I did what I knew how to do: I planned elaborate birthday celebrations for each member of the family. I cooked grand meals. I shopped for great gifts. I expended a huge amount of energy on how the family looked from the outside. I guess I believed that if we looked good, the inner bonding and love would follow. Instead, the wounds, resentments, and unmet expectations corroded our chances from the inside out.



As I write this list, I am chagrined at the level of unreality and thoughtless insensitivity we demonstrated toward each other, yes, but primarily toward our children. I was so love-starved that, in retrospect, I see that I essentially abandoned my sons to spend as much time as possible with Jim. Recently one of them told me that at that time he believed he was no longer important to me—to the point of being expendable. I thought I was paying attention to them, but, obviously, not to the degree they needed. I was oblivious to the grief my sons were experiencing over the loss of the three-some that we had been for so long. Later they told me that, for all of their remembered life to that point, it had been Mom, Steve, and Pete against the world.

In talking with other step families, I hear that it is altogether too common for the grief being experienced by the children to be overlooked or judged as unnecessary because the parents are so joyful about finding love again.

We had been married eight or nine years and the worst of our nightmare was over. I was beginning to recognize how lost Steve and Pete had been in the chaos of those years. Jim was invited to sing the National Anthem at a Los Angeles Lakers basketball game and was given a few complimentary tickets. I love to hear him sing, but told him to invite those who would appreciate seeing the Lakers in person more than I would. I called Steven and asked to take him out to dinner. He was surprised. Where was Jim? Didn’t I want to go to the game, too? When I answered, “I’d rather spend the evening with you, tonight” he nearly cried. He was about 23 years old and on his own. He answered, “You can’t know how good it feels to hear you want to be with me more than Jim, for once.”

They have told me that they wanted me to be happy, and didn’t really begrudge me a husband, but felt as though their place with me disappeared in the transaction. At a time when they needed more time and individual attention, I gave them less. I made the mistake of thinking my relationship with them was proven and secure, so my energy went into trying to build the new relationships with Jim and his children. I forgot my first priority, which was the welfare of my own sons.

Even though I wasn’t aware of how much more of me they needed during those years, I had years of precious memories and bonding experiences with them that made it possible for me to see beyond their acting out. Jim had no history with them, so was impatient and offended by one’s rudeness and the other’s defiance and trouble making. He was seeing them only at their worst. I had not given birth to Jimmy, had not watched him learn to walk, or celebrated his learning of language. When he shared some boyish treasure with me, I was touched; but, when he whined or pestered, I was annoyed. I felt guilty and helpless one night when he, face

down on his bedroom carpet, wailed “I want my Mommy!” over and over for at least 30 minutes. I knew it wasn’t for me his little broken heart was crying.

As the stepparent, we have no history and no bonding from which to draw tolerance or to temper our irritation. It is so classic as to be a rule that the stepparent always sees what the stepchild needs more clearly than the biological parent. Children were meant to be reared by biological parents for this very reason . . . the “rules” are softened by the loving bond. That bond is absent in the step-relationship.



The issue of a lack of bonding even extended to our family dog. Lady, our exuberant boxer, had been a full member of our family for about 8 years before the Landrum bunch joined us. Lady loved the extra attention, but my boys resented Jimmy for calling her “his” dog. I was hurt by Jim’s irritation with her shedding and his disgust at the fleas she introduced to our carpet. I didn’t like shedding or fleas, either, but accepted the extra vacuuming and flea treatments as part of the price I willingly paid for her valued membership in the family.

Now, we laugh about an incident with Lady the first Christmas we were all together. Teri, Jim’s oldest daughter, had married the year before. In a grand effort to give her support to the “new” family’s first Christmas, she made each family member a red Christmas stocking. They were filled with fruits, nuts, little gifts, and each was topped with a small package of gourmet Famous Amos Chocolate Chip Cookies. The stockings were stored in a large brown grocery sack in our bedroom, waiting to be hung over the fireplace.

Jim and I returned home late one evening to find a trail of empty stockings, oranges, and nuts from our bedroom to the doggy door at the other end of the house. Jim was furious. He found Lady shirking in the shadows of the patio, fully aware that she was in big trouble! Torn Famous Amos wrappers testified to the fact that she had eaten every cookie from every stocking. As he marched around the yard picking up bits of evidence, he was “yelling” in a heavy stage whisper to avoid rousing sleeping children or neighbors, “BAD DOG! VERY BAD DOG!” I knew he wanted to swat her but wouldn’t dare. I was in the house, chuckling. He spent the next several days trying to track down identical packages of cookies so he could reconstruct the stockings. The cookies were outrageously expensive, but he didn’t want Teri to think we were uncaring or unappreciative of her efforts toward family solidarity. It was many years before he could tell Teri the story and laugh.

Lady lived with our family for five more years. After her death everyone missed her, but even so, no one grieved her loss more than Steven, Peter, and I. We had bonded with her as a puppy, and had eight more years of history with her than the other half of the family.

What began as little scratches here and there, eventually became a gaping wound from which the family nearly died. By 1984-1985, I had gained nearly 100 pounds from a raging eating disorder and was clinically depressed; Jim and I could hardly be in the same room without fighting; Karen was struggling her way into a shaky adulthood; Steven had been expelled from several high schools and was using drugs; Peter was withdrawn, going about his life in isolation, head down against the storm; and Jimmy fluctuated between compulsive demands and grand tantrums. It was about this time that Jim threatened to divorce me.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, that crisis led to our seriously looking for help and the slow process that resulted in the saving of our marriage and the eventual healing of our family.

Although every relationship within our walls had its challenges, most of the conflict between Jim and me was about my role as Jimmy’s new mother. When we married, we agreed that the older children would be

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One of “How to Stay Married & Love It” by Nancy Landrum with Jim Landrum, c.2002.

parented by their biological parent—they were past the age of accepting a new “mom” or “dad.” But Jimmy had been only eight and wanted a new mom. Our problems began and escalated when Jim’s and my ideas about how that would look differed. We repeatedly tried to settle on rules and consequences for Jimmy that we could both support, but inevitably, the agreements disintegrated as Jim found frequent exceptions and I resented his change of plans. The conflicts grew until our marriage was threatened.

It’s important to note here that not one iota of this mess was Jimmy’s fault. All children seem to be born knowing how to take advantage of the smallest rift between Mom and Dad. The blame for our problems was one hundred percent the fault of the two ignorant, and in this area, immature adults that were trying to act as Jimmy’s parents!

Eventually, as a desperate measure to save our marriage, I resigned from my role as Jimmy’s mom and Jim began acting as a single parent. At the time it seemed like a drastic, horribly painful step. We thought it was necessary because Jim and I had been so “bad,” such “failures” at working together as Jimmy’s parents. Now we know that the original expectation that I would immediately and fully become Jimmy’s parent, was unrealistic and therefore unreasonable. It very, very rarely works. Most of this agony could have been avoided if we had known the one primary principle that works for most stepfamilies—the concept of biologically driven parenting.

Biologically driven parenting is promoted by the Stepfamily Association of America as well as a growing number of experts on stepfamily dynamics. Biologically driven parenting is characterized by these practices:

1. The biological parent is always the primary parent and always the source of any discipline even if the stepparent thinks he or she doesn’t discipline enough!
2. The biological parent and the stepparent discuss the parenting plans in private, perhaps even take a parenting class together. They agree on specific house rules and consequences of misbehavior. Ideally *both* agree, but the final decision is always the biological parent’s.
3. House rules are written down for the benefit of parents and child.
4. The biological parent takes the lead in dealing with the child. The stepparent backs up the biological parent so the child cannot pit them against each other.
5. The biological parent follows through consistently with the plans agreed upon, first of all for the benefit of the child, but also so that the stepparent is not placed in the intolerable position of being an adult, helplessly at the mercy of a misbehaving child.
6. The stepparent backs up the written rules as a messenger, not the source of the discipline. The rules are referred to as “your Mom’s (Dad’s) rules” not “our rules.”
7. Spouses reevaluate parenting regularly, keeping each other “in the loop” and cooperating respectfully with each other.
8. Lapses of discipline, or annoying infractions of house rules are issues that are settled first between the spouses, and then between the biological parent and child. The stepparent curbs the desire to control, scold, or discipline the stepchild. The stepparent also refrains from giving the bio-parent unasked for advice or criticism.
9. Frustrations and upsets are discussed between spouses within the format of a skilled dialogue, using whatever *respectful* communication methods they use, *first* hearing each other’s feelings, *then* problem solving. All the rules of respectful, non-attacking communication are especially important in this process because the biological parent is deeply, and instinctively protective of the child if that child is attacked. Most adults are defensive if their parenting skills are attacked, as well.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Respectful communication is practiced with the ex-spouse, as well. The tools that work to build a great marriage also increase the chances of having a sane, workable relationship with your child’s other biological parent. Just as dealing with the child is the biological parent’s responsibility, all communication with the other biological parent (ex-spouse) is the responsibility of the former spouse, not the new husband’s or wife’s responsibility.

10. The pace of developing the relationship between stepchild and stepparent (or stepchild to stepchild) must be dictated by the child, not forced by the stepparent. Certainly, invitations for a shared activity or caring questions and conversations are offered, but the child is given time and freedom to respond when ready without undue pressure to “produce” a good relationship with the stepparent on command. Of course, common courtesy and respect are expected of everyone in the household.

I thought my heart would break when I relinquished my role as traditional mom to Jimmy. The change in dynamic had almost instantaneous benefits, however.

1. I no longer had the responsibility of trying to figure out what was best for Jimmy. That was now entirely up to Jim. My only responsibility was to work with Jim when decisions concerning Jimmy directly affected me. An essential part of our agreement was that I would not even offer advice or suggestions unless Jim asked for them. It wasn't long before I began to feel relieved that the responsibility was no longer mine.
2. A huge source of conflict was eliminated between Jim and me. It took a while for us to regain our trust in each other . . . trust that we would each honor the new “rules” to which we had agreed. There were slips, but over-all, we experienced an instant, gigantic leap forward in the regaining of our love.
3. The problems Jimmy was having could no longer be blamed on me. Without the struggles being focused on me, and what I was doing to cause problems with Jimmy, Jim soon realized that Jimmy had some needs that were not being met by his parenting practices. He was eager to get help. He began implementing an active parenting plan that provided far more healthy guidance for Jimmy.

Over years, the stepparent may or may not gradually begin to meld into a more traditional parental role. The younger the child, the sooner the stepparent *may* be able to assume a semi-parental role, with the support of the biological parent. This is becoming known as “graduated parenting.” The stepparent’s first priority is to offer opportunities for bonding with the child. The child is ultimately in charge of how fast those efforts will be accepted. With some children it’s almost immediate. With others a bond develops over many years—or never. The stepparent only assumes a more traditional role of authority/parent as the relationship with the child builds. A general rule of thumb is that it takes up to the same number of years to bond as a family as the age of the child when the marriage took place.

I spent a day with Teri collecting medical records and getting pre-op tests shortly before her back surgery. Before we walked into the first of several doctor’s offices, she said, “Would it be O.K. if I just introduce you as my mom? You *feel* like a mom to me today, and I’d be proud to introduce you as my mom, Nancy.” Yes!

Dixie was gravely ill during Karen’s early teens and died when Karen was 16 years old. I was helping Karen as she was recuperating from Alyssa’s difficult birth. She said something like, “I can barely remember my mom before she was sick. You feel like a mom to me. You’re the one who’s been there to answer questions about being pregnant and nursing. You’re there when I have questions or want guidance. You’re a mom to me.” Sigh.

Steven was 15 years old when we married. Just before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, Steven said something like this to Jim during a treasured conversation held in “guy” territory (the garage) late one night, “You did the best job of being a stepfather that I could ever have asked for. None of my problems were your fault. I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m glad you’re there for my Mom. I love you and respect you. I’m grateful you’ve been there for me, too.”

When Peter calls home, he and Jim have long conversations whether I'm here or not. When we made the 300-mile trip to see Pete's graduation from the California Highway Patrol Academy, Jim's hug and "Your father would be so proud of your today" brought tears to Peter's eyes. Pete has told me several times how much respect he has for Jim.

Soon after I "resigned" as a co-parent to Jimmy, I gave him the option of calling me by my first name. At the time of this writing, he is 28 years old and I am still "Mom." I feel so blessed to have his love and loyalty after all we put him through. And I'm the one he knows will bake his favorite chocolate chip cookies (not Famous Amos!).

For me, a large part of the healing was grieving the loss of the family I *thought* we would be. We would never be a "normal" family. I, again, had blown the chance to be a perfect wife and mother of a perfect family. It's taken time and distance for me to see that there *are no perfect families*. Maybe there are no "normal" families, either. There are just families . . . biological, step, happy, sad, dysfunctional, and healing. Grieving the loss of the *fantasy* made room for the wonderful *reality* of the family that we are.

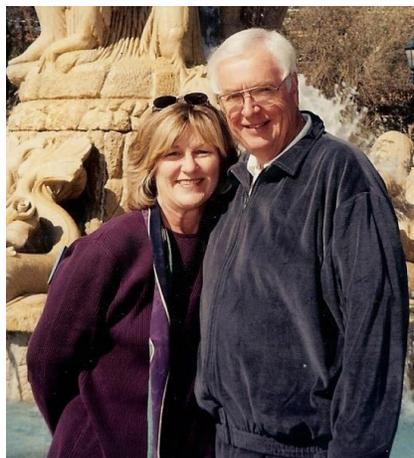
**"There is a honeymoon for step-couples...it just comes at the end of the process rather than at the beginning!" Ron Deal**

Lesson: Responsibilities in a stepfamily are different than in a biological, first or nuclear family. Accepting and co-operating with that truth minimizes our struggles.

**A step-father reports:**

**"I began to feel like a permanent assistant coach. I was there on the sidelines, there at halftime, but ultimately, I made none of the decisions. I had to accept that they weren't my children...I had to focus on stewardship and service, not ownership. I also had to accept that I didn't have a fan club. The kids would never run to greet me by yelling, 'Daddy's here!'"<sup>5</sup>**

*"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."  
Galatians 5:22-23*



<sup>5</sup> Neil Chethik, *VoiceMale*, p. 205-206, Simon & Schuster, 2006.