



## Help for Stepfamilies!

A Review of

Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't

by Patricia L. Papernow

New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. 229 pp.

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Reviewed by

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Many years ago, when Benjamin Spock was a speaker at my university, he mentioned that, despite the fact that he was one of the world's best-known pediatricians, it had taken him five years after his new marriage for him to achieve a good relationship with his stepdaughter! Newly married stepparents sometimes are stunned as to how difficult it can be for them to build close or positive relationships with their stepchildren. The thesis of Patricia Papernow's book *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't* is that becoming a stepfamily with compassionate and caring interactions among the adults and the stepchildren takes hard work and is a long-term process.

Many adults newly in love have fantasy ideas that somehow this new family will work out just fine as they decide to wed and bring into the new household children for whom they are "strangers." Those stepchildren have been raised in prior households. They have strong attachments and allegiances to each biological parent. Bonding with a stepchild is a far more difficult task than many newlyweds ever dream that they will have to face. This book contains the distilled wisdom that the author has gathered from her long years of therapeutic work with stepfamilies in distress.

Papernow provides specific detailed genograms as well as dialogues and vignettes of therapy interactions with each family she describes. These detailed stories alert the reader to the myriad conversations and stages that it may well take in order to help stepfamilies survive and ultimately thrive as they work through the long process of becoming a close-knit family. This book is particularly useful because, as a therapist, Papernow also explores work with African American, Latino, and lesbian and gay stepfamilies.

The author explains that many different factors can make cohesiveness and caring more problematic to achieve in stepfamilies. Some difficulties arise from traumas in the parental family of origin. Some arise from varying lifestyle values such as dietary preferences or preferring a boisterous family versus a quiet way of living.

Some troubles arise from varying stages in children's lives. Being the stepparent of a teenager, of a grown, married person, or of a toddler will present different problems and

require different tools and strategies for attaining positive interactions. Other problems arise from sensitivities due to differing temperaments—withdrawn or feisty, for example—that children bring into a newly configured family. Sometimes the troubles in forming a new family stem from hostility of stepchildren who are being parented in authoritarian (“Do as I say!”) ways by the “stranger,” the new stepparent. As Papernow advises, over and over, only the biological parent should do the disciplining at first. Even when things are going better, authoritative caring and fair discipline are far more effective with children than is authoritarianism.

Many of the problems elucidated by Papernow’s stories of stepfamilies reveal the strength of the bond that children feel to their biological parents and their wish not to be disloyal. This trouble is vividly recounted in the story of a teenager who snubbed a made-from-scratch cake that her stepmother had carefully toiled over for the girl’s birthday—as if by tasting and enjoying that cake, the child would express a major disloyalty to her biological mom, who baked cakes from mixes.

All the cases that Papernow presents are of families that came to consult and seek help from her over several years. Yet some stepfamilies might come for only a couple of therapy sessions when in grievous difficulties or in a crisis. For those who treat families that cannot commit to long-term helpful sessions, this book contains a treasure trove of ideas on how to assist them in interacting in more peaceful, productive, and caring ways in order to resolve split feelings, cold silences, and angers, and to help children who have strong fears and feelings of loneliness living in a stepfamily. Once a 10-year-old explained sadly to me, “My stepdad doesn’t understand children and yet I want to live with my mom.” I recommended to the judge in that divorce case that the stepdad (who kept a long and rigid list of rules on the refrigerator in the kitchen) needed to take a parenting class; this suggestion was then incorporated into the divorce/custody agreement, with results that eased the child’s misery.

## Caveats

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What can happen when stepfamilies continue to use defensive and hurtful techniques such as accusing each other of isolating the stepparent rather than including that person? Papernow repeatedly refers to “inside” and “outside” positions in stepfamilies. The outside person (nonbiological parent) feels lonely and unappreciated. “You accusatory” statements, as Tom Gordon (2000) labeled them so well, result in defensive anger and escalate to quarrels and retaliations. It would have been useful for Papernow to include among her recommendations Gordon’s book as well as work by Shure (2004) on helping children reason, adding their good ideas on how to handle children’s difficult feelings, actions, and relationship troubles. Papernow does emphasize, as Gordon did earlier, how useful “I” statements can be for furthering dialogue when one is upset with a partner’s actions or lack of actions, such as a dad not asking his biological children to help out with any family chores or not insisting that his children behave with civility toward the new stepparent.

Papernow warns in her book that many pitfalls can arise if stepparents do not have a clear legal will that sets forth their wishes for inheritance. Without a will, deep fractures can occur on the death of a parent in a stepfamily that result in irrevocable sadness and resentments because biological children may be left out of estates. Even with legal clarity, fractures and breaks can still cleave apart stepfamilies. One successful and compassionate colleague remarked quietly to me, “Ever since my dad married his new wife, we grown children from

his first marriage, because of her insistence, have been totally cut out of any inheritance, even though my dad is still alive.”

The positive and admirable strength of *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships* is that it can boost a therapist’s skills to do more sensitive and effective work in healing the rifts that can tear stepfamilies apart. The writing is so lucid and the examples are so detailed and clearly set forth that laypersons who truly want to help their stepfamily succeed better at the task of making close and caring family connections between the adults and each child can find this book eminently easy to read and full of helpful and gentle insights and suggestions.

## References

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Gordon, T. (2000). *Parent effectiveness training: The proven program for raising responsible children*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Shure, M. (2004). *Raising a thinking child: Help your young child to resolve everyday conflicts and get along with others*. New York, NY: Holt.