

Parent <> Stepchild <> Stepparent: Is There No Respect?

By Moe & Paige Becnel

We have been hearing that many blended families are struggling with a lack of *respect* among family members – some between spouses, some between stepparent (new parent) and stepchild (new child), and less often between stepsiblings.

Let's first look at some scenarios that create disrespect in a blended family. *As we discuss each scenario, we are not taking sides! We are only pointing out how wrong actions, AND reactions can produce disrespect.*

I. A Spouse Dishonors their Spouse's Position

We often hear a scripture quoted at weddings from Genesis 2:24 which says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." This scripture means that a husband and wife are to place the highest priority on their marriage relationship, excepting to their relationship with God. All other relationships are important, but not as important as the relationship between spouses.

Now, it is a natural response for a parent to defend their children from harm. In a blended family we often see a natural parent defend their child from - and in front of - the stepparent who is disciplining the stepchild in a harsh tone, or making unreasonable demands on the child (at least in the natural parent's mind).

The stepparent takes offense to the correction by the natural parent, *especially* when done in front of the child. This is because the natural parent has, in effect, chosen the child over the spouse - placing the child in the #1 relationship position that rightfully belongs to the spouse.

If this occurs frequently, resentment will build in the stepparent --- both toward the spouse who values their natural child more than their spouse, and toward the stepchild who has taken the spouse's rightful position in the marriage and home. *This creates a "death-spiral" effect, causing the stepparent to become even harsher toward the child during discipline and everyday interactions.*

II. Stepchild Sees the Stepparent as an Outsider

There are a number of reasons that a child may resist wanting to connect to a new parent (or new siblings).

Here are a few:

1. The child may still be hurting from the divorce, or death of a parent, and is not ready for the new family.
2. Children of divorce often have dreams of their natural parents reconciling. Their hopes and dreams are shattered, and the stepparent is viewed as either the cause or an obstacle.
3. The child may think, "The last family shattered, this one probably will, too." So they do not want to *emotionally attach* to the new family members.
4. The child may feel a sense of betrayal to their natural parent (i.e. getting close to their Stepmom may hurt their natural Mom's feelings.)
5. The child may also be feeling resentment toward the new parent because:
 - a.) the new parent occupies much of their natural parent's time.
 - b.) the new parent may have taken the responsibilities that the child had in the former single-parent home.

III. Stepparent Shows Favoritism Toward their Natural Child(ren)

If the stepparent shows no real interest in their new child, or shows much more interest in their natural child, it will cause the new child to not feel a part of their life, and not feel respected. Favoritism has damaged many families, and it will keep your new family from becoming a loving, peace-filled safehaven for your new child.

(Read our June, 2002 Article: [Are the Children the REAL Problem in Your Blended Family? Part 2: Favoritism Destroys Fellowship.](#))

IV. Stepparent Disciplines the Stepchild With No Love

Discipline by a new parent who does not yet have a loving relationship with the new child usually causes hurt feelings and resentment. They may listen to you, but they will not respect you.

A husband and wife may enter into a blended family with the assumption that they now have parental authority over all the children in the family. Not so – at least not right away!

Love must cover discipline. Discipline cannot cover love.

Hebrews 12: 6 says, "Because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

This scripture tells us that God disciplines and punishes those He loves and accepts as sons and daughters. *Unless, or until, we truly love our new children and accept them as our sons or daughters, we have no right to discipline them.*

"Wait a minute!" you say. "If they are going to live under my roof, I have a right to discipline them." I understand how you feel, but hear me out. When you were a child or teenager, if someone other than your parents tried to discipline you, what did you do, and how did you feel? You probably thought something like, "What gives him the right to tell me what to do?" or "You are not my parent!"

Yet, you accepted discipline from your Mom or Dad. Why? Because they loved you, and you knew they loved you. Your new children feel the same way about discipline from their new parent. This will eventually change as they feel the new parent's love toward them grow.

When discipline covers love, the implication is, "When you do what I say, then I will love you and respect you." This is no different than discipline in the Army or from a police officer. This type of "conditional love" is not really love at all, but is more closely related to tolerance.

When discipline or punishment is dispensed from someone who does not love the recipient, respect fades and resentment builds. Love must cover discipline.

By now you may be thinking, "WOW! Is there any hope?"

YES! Each of the above scenarios can be successfully managed! But we need to change our thinking toward our new family members, and our approach toward dealing with each scenario.

Here's Help Here are some guidelines that have worked for many families:

Regarding Scenario I:

- The natural parent must DEMAND that the child respect their new parent. You cannot make your child love your spouse, but can require them to respect them. (And there needs to be consequences when they do not respect the new parent.)

Definition of *respect* – to honor, to esteem, to show regard for, to appreciate

- Never confront your spouse, taking your natural child's side, in front of your child. Those discussions need to be only between spouses, and need to take place away from the child.
- For you natural parents whose world revolves around your children, your axis *should have shifted* on the day you married your spouse. *Your world – your devotion – now needs to be to your spouse first (lining up with Genesis 2:24). **Cling and cleave to your spouse!***

If you will make this shift, you will be amazed at how much more BALANCED your family will become!

Regarding Scenario II:

- The *main thing* is be patient with your new child, just as God is patient with us! Consider that the child may still be hurting from a broken home, or apprehensive to attach. Continue to reach out in love.
- Give your new child one-on-one time with their natural parent. They will appreciate and respect you for it!
- Make your new child feel a part of the family by giving them a few responsibilities and chores to do, even if they only visit on the weekends.
- Lift your new child up. Be positive! A positive attitude is contagious. Ask them to help you with a project around the house.
- Begin the process of developing a loving relationship with your new child. Take them on "friendship" dates. Go bowling, canoeing, or whatever they like to do. Give the relationship the time it needs to grow.

All people (including children) will gravitate to the place where they are loved unconditionally! (That is why gangs exist.)

As stepparents, we will have an impact on our new children's lives. We either lovingly embrace them, or we let them know (through actions, words, or passively) that we are not interested in them!

LET'S TAKE THE HIGH ROAD AND EMBRACE THEM AS OUR OWN, just as Joseph embraced Jesus as his own. (Read our January, 2004 Article: [Joseph Did It - You Should, Too!](#))

Regarding Scenario III:

- Realize that favoritism is created by the parents, not the children.

- Realize that children will do whatever they can to elevate their parents' love for them, including negative actions.
- Make the choice! Choose to love all of the children in your home EQUALLY.
- Let each child know that they are very important to you, and a vital part of your family --- even those who do not live with you.
- Guard against spending more time with the child who likes doing what you like. Spend your time equally with all of them.
- Display acts of kindness equally to all of your children, not just your natural children.
- Give each child purpose and responsibility in your home.
- Vacation together. Do not leave anyone out.

Regarding Scenario IV:

- The stepparent should not discipline their new child until a loving relationship has been established.
- Sit down with your spouse and agree on reasonable rules and resulting discipline that will apply to the whole family. Then stick to them, and be consistent with discipline for everyone.
- When your new child misbehaves, express the need for discipline to your spouse, but let the natural parent administer the punishment until your love for that child increases enough that you have earned respect, and the right to discipline.
- Begin the process of developing a loving relationship with your new child. (As described in II. above.)

Our prayer for you: Father, we pray for the family reading this article that has lost respect in their home. Give the parents the desire to make positive change in themselves first, and then in their family members. Father, by Your Holy Spirit, give them fresh ideas on how to regain the respect that has been lost between family members. We know that all things are possible through You. Breathe Your breath of life into their home, and make it a place of unconditional love for their entire family. We pray in Jesus' Name, Amen!

Pursue new levels of relationship in your home!

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