

## **Comfort Zones: Addressing Boundary Issues in Your Stepfamily**

We're all most comfortable when our unspoken rules about where 'me' stops and 'you' begins are in sync with the people around us. Our rules about what's 'me' and 'mine'--and what isn't--are *boundaries*. They define our territory and relationships.

In a new stepfamily, boundary issues are common. They can be powerful, too. When a group of relative strangers moves in together, their differing emotional and physical comfort zones can clash. Shared space and forced contact act like a pressure cooker to heighten the underlying tension.

Boundaries can be particularly troublesome for stepfamilies because they're different from first families. In a typical nuclear household, *family* includes all the residents. Love them or hate them, they're your kin. In contrast, each member of a stepfamily can have a different idea of who's inside--and outside--the family circle.

Close biological ties extend beyond the threshold when children have a parent who lives elsewhere. Whether they go back and forth between parental residences or not, their notion of family typically includes both parents.

Conversely, one member of a stepcouple may exclude the other's children from his or her emotional clan or a child may refuse to acknowledge a stepparent as a family member. An older child may refuse to identify with the newly formed stepfamily altogether.

*Robbie was 14 when we all moved in together. He took part in family events reluctantly and eventually stopped participating. He just didn't see himself as part of the family.*

Healthy stepcouples learn to recognize boundary conflicts and negotiate their successful resolution. It's easiest to identify conflicts over physical boundaries: what a closed door means, what areas are

off limits to which family members, how common spaces are used and cared for. Issues over emotional boundaries can be harder to recognize.

For example, do you have emotional room for your stepchildren or is it too much of a stretch for you to include them? Do your children resent the energy you spend with your new spouse and his or her children? How comfortable are you encouraging your stepchildren to have a healthy relationship with their ‘other’ biological parent?

Shaping boundaries is the process of establishing and maintaining emotional and physical space for individual members of the stepfamily, for the stepcouple, and for the stepfamily as a whole. Healthy stepfamilies eventually develop sturdy and consistent boundaries that are sensitive to the complexities of their situation.

Four steps help you, as a stepcouple, resolve these issues for the benefit of everyone in your home.

### **The First Step**

Learn to recognize boundary issues by the way they feel. We all have a characteristic emotional response to having our toes stepped on -- literally or figuratively.

For this exercise, pick a time and place when you’re both calm and can dedicate some uninterrupted time. The length of time you allow isn’t important. What *is* important is that you’re both ready to sit together and talk.

As a stepcouple, each of you identify a recent situation where you felt like your personal physical space was invaded. Since you’re just beginning to learn this skill, it’s a good idea to choose an issue that isn’t particularly ‘hot’ for you.

For instance, if your stepchild consistently uses your favorite chair/shoes/makeup and you’re so frustrated you can’t think straight, *don’t* choose that particular issue. Learn how the process works before you tackle the most irksome situations.

Here's a hint to make the process go more smoothly. This is about discovery, not pointing fingers. Agree ahead of time that you won't make negative, blaming comments about each other's responses.

Take turns completing the following sentences.

**Recently, my personal space was invaded when....**

You:

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Your stepcouple partner:

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*Example: Recently, my personal space was invaded when Amber left her dirty track clothes on my favorite chair.*

**When my personal space was invaded, I felt....**

You:

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Your stepcouple partner:

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*Example: I felt irritated/anxious/angry/sad.*

As you each answer the second question, consider other similar situations. Do you tend to respond the same way? If not, make a note above about other ways you feel when your spouse, child, or stepchild walks past your personal 'Keep Off the Grass' sign.

You can both use this self-awareness to recognize when boundary issues come up in your stepfamily. If you wrote down 'irritated' above, for instance, and you feel a similar flash of irritation, examine the situation to see if there's boundary issue you can address together using the next three steps.

### **The Second Step**

Forget about right and wrong. Conflict over boundaries doesn't mean that someone is at fault.

We all have different needs for physical and emotional space. They're a function of our previous experiences in the family we were raised in and all the relationships that came after. Stepfamilies in particular can be a breeding ground for sensitive boundary issues.

It can be *really* tempting to view someone else's stepping over the line of your boundary as intentionally hurtful. (And, in the case of true physical or emotional abuse, it is.) But it's more likely that the other person simply views the situation differently.

Here's a perfect example.

*I went into our bedroom at the end of a long, hard day, ready to get lie down and relax. My wife's daughter was curled up on my side, under the covers, talking to my wife. She was even using my pillow.*

*My kids and I have always used the family*

*bed as a place to catch up. If somebody wants some special 'mom' time, that's where we go. It's quiet and private.*

In your own situation, identify where you first learned the specific 'rules' that were broken. Write down what you discover below.

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*Example: When I was a kid, I would never have dreamed of laying on my parents' bed. There's no way my dad would have put up with that for one second. Our family hung out in the family room downstairs.*

Your partner, too, has history with the issue. Find out what he or she feels and believes. Spend some time exploring your answers together. Avoid arguing for your position or criticizing your partner's stance. The purpose is to understand your differing histories and perspectives on the issue.

### **The Third Step**

Now that you understand where you're both coming from, you can begin to negotiate a solution. Together. No matter who trespassed on whose boundaries, your job as a stepcouple is to find a solution to the situation that you both support.

When the two of you are in agreement, the children and stepchildren in your house feel more secure. Secure children feel less need to act out. Which means that life together is a little easier for all of you.

To generate a solution you can both agree to, the most important factor is creativity. Think outside the box! Where can you flex? Are there elements of the situation you can live with as long as certain key areas are respected? Jot down your ideas below.

You:

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Your stepcouple partner:

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*Example: I don't mind if my wife and my stepdaughter use our bedroom for quiet time, as long as Amber respects my space.*

*(Your partner):*

*How would it be if she sat at the foot of the bed?*

### **The Fourth Step**

Take a deep breath and ....f...l...e....x.

That's right. Get the cards on the table, and learn to be flexible. In a new stepfamily, everyone has to give a little. It makes your own life easier.

It's also your job, as the adult partners in the family, to model adaptability for the children and teens in your household. Everybody has to learn to stretch their comfort zones a little.

That's what makes a healthy stepfamily--when boundaries expand to include new people and new ways of doing things.

### **A final suggestion**

Unspoken issues have a way of growing by leaps and bounds. So repeat this process--the awareness you developed in the first step,

the non-judging exploration strategies in the second step, and the negotiation process of the third step--early and often to limit the impact that boundary issues have on your stepcouple relationship and your stepfamily.