

**Find resources and use them early on.** Read about stepfamily development together. Discuss how you each see the other's role. Discuss your parenting plan and philosophy. Take a class especially for stepfamilies. Take a marriage education class. Utilize family therapy or counseling early on when issues present themselves. Make sure the counselor or therapist is someone knowledgeable in stepfamily formation and dynamics.

Millions of adults in this country are parenting nonbiological children—and the numbers are growing at such a rate that *estimates are that half of all Americans will be in a step relationship in their lifetimes*. Some experts believe that soon stepfamilies will be the most common family form. Because stepfamilies are formed differently from first families and because they are usually more complex, it's important for a stepparent and his or her spouse to think through and plan their interactions with the children in the family based on models of successful stepfamilies, not first families. These actions can help a stepfamily run more smoothly and can create a healthy environment for the adults and the children in the family.

\*Adapted from Papernow and Adler-Baeder, (2003).  
www.saafamilies.org/yourstepfamily

### Recommended Resources

The National Stepfamily Resource Center  
[www.stepfamilies.info](http://www.stepfamilies.info)

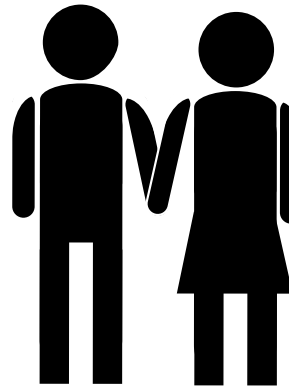
Successful Stepfamilies  
[www.successfulstepfamilies.com](http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com)

### ❖ Coparenting with Expartners

In many new marriages, one or both of you will continue to deal with the other biological parent of a child (usually an expartner or exspouse). These coparenting relationships can often be challenging. One parent may make it difficult for the other parent to visit the child. Another parent may use late child-support payments as a form of

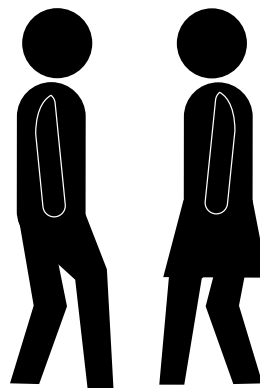
getting back at the other parent. Conflict between households is stressful for the children, stressful for the adults, and stressful for your marriage. It's important for everyone, therefore, to build cooperative relationships with your children's other parent(s).

An important first step in managing the coparenting relationship is *to ensure that you are appropriately separated from the other parent and appropriately connected*. In healthy patterns of partner and family transitions, two biological parents who are no longer together *move from an intimate relationship to a nonemotional, more businesslike relationship*.



#### Intimate

- Many assumptions
- Unspoken/unwritten expectations
- Informal
- High emotional intensity and personal involvement
- Low personal privacy
- High personal disclosure



#### Businesslike

- No assumptions
- Explicit agreements, contracts
- Formal courtesies, structured interactions, meetings, specific agendas
- Low emotional intensity and personal involvement
- High personal privacy
- Low personal disclosure

\*Adapted from *Mom's House, Dad's House*, Ricci (1997).



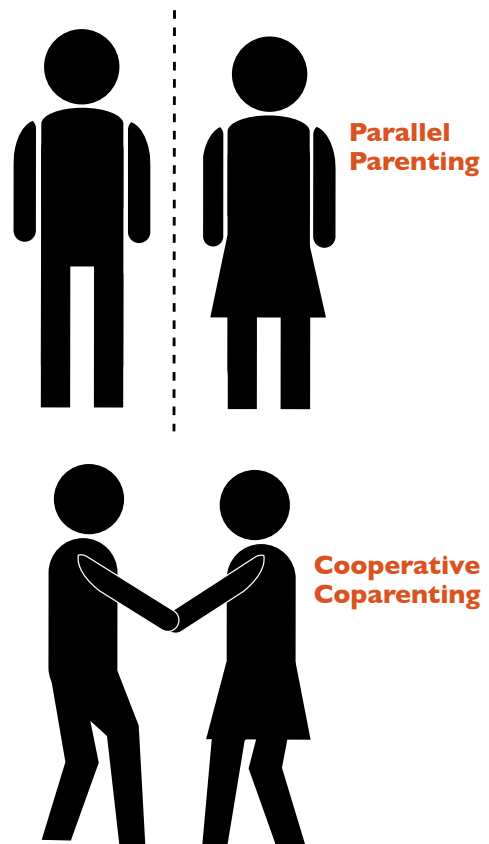
**Coparenting** - Rate your level of involvement with your child's other parent to see which relationship model is most like yours. Circle your responses to the statements below as strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neither (N), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA).

I make lots of assumptions about my child's other parent.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
We are so close we do not need to talk about our expectations.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
We are very informal with each other.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
Our relationship is very emotionally intense.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
We each maintain a high level of personal privacy.	SD (5)	D (4)	N (3)	A (2)	SA (1)
We do not tell each other a great deal of personal information.	SD (5)	D (4)	N (3)	A (2)	SA (1)

Add up the numbers associated with each of your responses. The higher your score, the more likely it is that you have an over-involved and inappropriately connected, coparenting relationship. A score of 15 or more may threaten your marriage, as overinvolvement with an expartner can interfere with your efforts to build a strong and stable marriage.

It is also useful to consider the range of coparenting practices. Although a *cooperative* coparenting relationship is ideal, the reality for most parents is that they move up and down a continuum of coparenting, depending mostly on how they manage the inevitable conflicts that can arise. The main difference between *parallel parenting* and *cooperative coparenting* is the amount and type of interaction between parents. Parallel parents communicate only when absolutely necessary and have little direct communication, such as face to face or by phone. Instead, they put things in writing or ensure that someone neutral is present or they're in a neutral place when they're communicating directly. Cooperative coparents can speak directly to each other more frequently about the business of parenting.

There may be times when direct communication is going well and then something occurs that initiates conflict (such as a remarriage), and all attempts to communicate effectively repeatedly fail. You should consider moving toward more



*parallel parenting and make attempts over time to re-establish your previous level of cooperative coparenting.*

*A cautionary note: Cooperative coparenting is not appropriate when domestic violence has occurred between parents. Cooperative coparenting requires face-to-face contact between parents and should not be used if one parent feels he or she may be in danger. Safety is the primary goal.*

### ❖ Tips for Coparenting

The following are some suggestions for all coparents, no matter what the level and style of coparenting.

## Tip #1 + Agree to keep conflict away from your children.

Tip #2 + Use respectful words, and don't put each other down, particularly in front of the children. Don't use sarcasm or make snide or hurtful remarks.

Tip #3 + Say positive things about each other, particularly when the children are present.

Tip #4 + Don't make promises you can't keep.

Tip #5 + Don't make the children feel they must choose between you.

Tip #6 + Encourage your children to love and respect the other parent. Encourage their connection with the other parent.

Tip #7 + Send messages to each other directly; don't use the children as messengers.

## Tip #8 + Respect each other's new relationships.

## Tip #9 + Communicate directly with each other about the children instead of with the other parent's new partner.

Tip #10 + Call a time-out when a discussion becomes too intense. Stop and separate so that you both can calm down. If this pattern continues, it's best to take a longer time-out from direct face-to-face communication for a while and use other methods of communicating information.

Tip #11 + Allow for each other's parenting styles. Pick your battles. As long as the child is safe, emotionally and physically, he or she can adjust to different parenting styles and rules between households.

Tip #12 + Practice good communication skills if you need to discuss an issue.

Tip #13 + Ask new partners and members of your family to respect these guidelines as well.

*Often, parents who are following these types of rules become frustrated if the child's other parent is not. The recommendation is to just keep doing what you're doing. This is what is best for you, your children, and your family. You cannot control the actions of the other parent. If you keep doing the right things, chances are much greater that the other parent will start following the guidelines as well.*

