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Managing Stress in Stepfamilies

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Introduction

Every family experiences stress and encounters problems. Stepfamilies, however, may face unique and complex challenges when problems arise. This happens, in part, because family members do not have a shared history and have not learned how new family members respond to stress. Also, the new family may not have learned to work together as a unit in responding to difficulties.

Stress can result when an event is either positive or negative, such as a birth of a child or the death of a family member (Olson & DeFrain, 2006). How family members define the event is an important part of responding to stress (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). For example, a job transfer and moving to another state can be viewed by some members of the stepfamily as a new and exciting opportunity, or it may be viewed by others as a negative experience because of leaving friends.

Things to Consider in Responding to Family Stress

Each family member's history of responding to stress may be different and is usually based upon how they responded to stress in their previous household. This can create difficulties as stepfamilies experience the ongoing stresses with new family members. Each family member also has personal resources to draw upon, such as religion, close friendships, or a successful history in dealing with tough problems. Although there are many things to consider when stepfamilies encounter a stressful event, effective communication, being flexible, and developing closeness are particularly important.

Effective communication is essential in working through difficulties in a stepfamily (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Communication is the process through which families can create common understanding, develop coping strategies, and maintain harmony and balance (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997). Families need to take time to allow for healthy communication. Holding family meetings can be an effective way to foster communication and the sharing of feelings. It is especially important to allow children to express their feelings and emotions without the judgment of adults. There are several things that families should remember about communication:

- Because each family member experiences and defines stressful events differently, it is important that each person have an opportunity to talk about their thoughts and feelings without being criticized. For example, a child may be worried about the health problems of an extended family member on the non-custodial parent's side. A stepparent may not even know the extended family member and, consequently, may not feel stressed or concerned at all. In light of different perceptions and reactions to stressful events, family members should try to empathize and understand each other's point of view.
- Because each person has a different history of responding to stressful events, each person in the stepfamily may have a different response to stress and it is important to discuss those differences. One person may need to talk to others when dealing with a stressful event and may not want to be alone. Another may want personal time to think about what is happening. Some family members may prefer to talk to a counselor or a grandparent.

- Each person draws upon different resources when responding to stress and it is important to explore those resources so that family members can better understand and learn from each other. For example, one person in the stepfamily may use friends to help them respond to stress and another may rely on religious leaders to help.

Communicating about these differences can help family members better understand each other, learn from each other, and work together to respond effectively to a stressful event.

Flexibility is very important in a family's effort to maintain stability in responding to stress (McCubbin, et al., 1997). Because family members have individual ways of defining, responding to, and using resources regarding the stressful event, flexibility in family activities allows those individual expressions to be realized.

- There may need to be flexibility of structured roles, schedules, and family activities so that each family member can adjust and adapt to the stress in their own way. For example, a stressful event like breaking an arm or running for class president may mean children's chores are adjusted for a period of time, or family members may need to be excused from a family outing.
- Family boundaries may need to be flexible to accommodate family members' needs. If there is stress related to the well being of a non-custodial parent such as illness or a death in the family, children may need additional contact with that parent and extended family (Michaels, 2006).

Developing closeness, or building a cohesive family, is also important when responding to a stressful event (Olson & DeFrain, 2006). Although family members each need an opportunity to respond to stress in their own way and to use their own resources, stressful events are opportunities for members in the stepfamily to learn to work together, support each other, and appreciate one another. It is important to learn from each other about effective ways to respond to stress. Parents can foster closeness by facilitating positive family meetings. Family meetings not only provide an opportunity for communication to occur, they also allow family members to support each other and work as a team to respond to difficulties.

Conclusion

Because members of stepfamilies have unique histories and resources in responding to stress, family members should be allowed to deal with stressful situations in their individual way, though this may need to be negotiated if differing responses conflict with each other. Dealing with stress individually needs to be balanced with opportunities to work together and support each other as a family. A home in which there is effective communication, flexibility, and opportunity to develop closeness allows family members to respond to stress in their individualized ways, and also creates an atmosphere where the new family can work together to become more united.

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