



Utah

Having trouble meshing your stepfamily? Utah community classes offer help

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There was a time when stepfamilies — families with at least one parent with children from a previous relationship — were exotic enough to get the Hollywood treatment, most notably with the 1968 film "Yours, Mine and Ours."

But these days, blended families are just about as common as any other. Consider this: in 1960, 73 percent of children lived in a home with two married parents in their first marriage, but today 46 percent of children live in a stepfamily, according to Pew Research Center. And according to the U.S. Census Bureau 1,300 new stepfamilies are formed daily.

There are many statewide, university and community courses available to those looking for parenting and marriage guidance in stepfamilies, and many researchers believe classes help stepfamilies meld together.

Community resources

Most family community courses and support groups are geared towards helping those in their first marriage, while fewer are for those who have remarried or are in a stepfamily, said James Bray, a professor and clinical psychologist at Baylor.

"There is no research that (classes) make a difference in the divorce rate, but many stepfamilies find it helpful to go attend a support group where they have a chance to come and talk about their frustrations to others in the same situation," Bray said.

When Julie Shaw, 40, married her husband David in 2011, she had three children from a previous marriage and he had two. Since then, they've had two daughters together. They've had their fair share of challenges learning to bring two families together, but with years of learning, it's become second-nature to them.

The Shaws decided to go as a family to a course through Utah State University's distance education program. They went to one of the satellite locations where classes are held across Utah.

"We learned about being patient with our kids in the transition ... and because there were other families doing it together and everyone learned together from their experiences, it made a broad picture that there are a lot of different types of stepfamilies," Shaw said.

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The why of stepfamily classes

Due to the divorce rate being so high (currently at about 50 percent in the U.S., according to the American Psychological Center), there are a lot of families doing something they've never done when combining two families, said Tiffany Millar, a stepfamily site coordinator at Kids on the Move, an organization in Orem, Utah, offering services to families with young children.

"We provide (a safe) environment and we normalize the subject of divorce and families that are blended together, and help them understand how they can function and function well," said Scott Bean, CEO of Kids on the Move.

Normalizing the idea of a stepfamily, especially for the kids, is something those at KOTM make one of their missions.

"It's almost a faux pas thing to do, to walk around and say, 'I'm divorced,' or, 'I am dating my boyfriend and want to get married and he has kids,'" Millar said. "It's important and they all need this understanding and a lot of them end up being good support for one another, they come in and they're not afraid to talk about those hard things."

Millar has taught some of the classes at KOTM, helping adolescents open up and talk about the difficulties of having a parent remarry, and dealing with the transitions into a new family unit.

Things to learn

According to a recent survey of 2,000 web questionnaires from The Stepfamily Foundation, a nonprofit based in New York City, 75 percent of stepfamilies complain of "not having access to resources as a stepfamily."

There are stepfamilies looking for resources, but there are also many experts ready to share any help parents and children may need. Here are five common areas of interest for stepfamilies:

Co-parenting

Bray believes it's important for stepparents to establish a good relationship with the children of their partner before stepping into serious parenting roles. The stress of the first year of marriage is heightened for most stepfamilies because children are involved, and showing trust can lead to a more solid parental role later.

"What they can do during the first year is to monitor behavior: what they are doing, who they do it with, whether they are doing their homework, while the biological parent can play the parental role," Bray said.

For Shaw, teaching one of her stepsons about chores wasn't easy at first, but she had to learn to compromise and give each child what they could handle, while also teaching responsibility.

"I had to turn it back to my husband and learn to not be so controlling," Shaw said. "We learned it in the parenting class, but in real life we had to *learn*."

Nurturing the marriage

Bray found in his research that in stepfamilies with children, nurturing the marriage often fell to the wayside, which caused many other problems.

"It's important to take time to do things without the kids," he said. "You will be a happier family, having a strong marriage. It isn't just about sex, it's the relationship, it's time together, it's communication ... if you're happier with your marriage, it's easier to work through other stresses and parenting."

Shaw and her husband have specifically worked out their family's schedule with the exes, so that when they have all children together at once, and when one set of children visits their other parent, all of the children are gone besides their youngest.

Finances

According to APA, "Adults should agree on where they will live and how they will share their money. Most often partners embarking on a second marriage report that moving into a new home, rather than one of the partner's prior residences, is advantageous because the new environment becomes 'their home.'"

Bray also found in his studies that deciding how to deal with money from the beginning is very important for less stress in the end, and that most stepfamilies end up using a "one pot" plan, where all money goes to one place for both parents.

Family plans

One of the biggest challenges many stepfamilies face is learning how to handle children and a home in similar ways. Bray said everything takes time to adjust a family plan, for both families to come together.

Nina Farr, a parent coach based in Exeter, U.K., believes that starting before the family is moved in together is an important way to get on top of any issues that may arise in a stepfamily home.

"Going to a class together is a brilliant way to find out what your partner thinks about core parenting issues — bedtimes, diet, education, screentime — any flashpoints that you have on your own will increase exponentially if you have established different rules in your own homes already," Farr said. "It's much easier to plan for transitions than it is to repair relationships under stress in a new house."

Shaw found that the stepfamily courses her family took were a good foundation for the things they all had to learn themselves from experience in their new home.

"I would totally tell anyone to go take a parenting class," she said. "I think it was just wonderful, and if they can't do that, they need to read up on it — how to be a stepparent. There are a lot of things to read about, I read about how to be a stepmom and working with another stepmom, when your ex gets married too, and learned to co-parent and co-mom with my kids."

The University of Missouri also has an extension course for building a successful stepfamily, with resources at: extension.missouri.edu/p/GH6700.

For families in Utah interested in courses from Kids on the Move, go to www.kotm.org/stepfamilies for the dates of their annual courses.

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