

10 Things to Know Before You Remarry

Challenges every single parent should consider before deciding to remarry.

Specializing in stepfamily therapy and education has taught me one thing: Couples should be highly educated about remarriage and the process of becoming a stepfamily before they ever walk down the aisle. Remarriage—particularly when children are involved—is much more challenging than dating seems to imply. Be sure to open your eyes well before a decision to marry has been made.



The following list represents key challenges every single parent (or those dating a single parent) should know before deciding to remarry. Open your eyes wide now and you—and your children—will be grateful later.

1. Wait two to three years following a divorce or the death of your spouse before seriously dating. No, I'm not kidding. Most people need a few years to fully heal from the ending of a previous relationship. Moving into a new relationship short-circuits the healing process, so do yourself a favor and grieve the pain, don't run from it. In addition, your children will need at least this much time to heal and find stability in their visitation schedule. Slow down.

2. Date two years before deciding to marry; then date your future spouse's children before the wedding. Dating two years gives you time to really get to know one another. Too many relationships are formed on the rebound when both people lack godly discernment about their fit with a new person. Give yourself plenty of time to get to know each other thoroughly. Keep in mind—and this is very important—*that dating is inconsistent with remarried life.*

Even if everything feels right, dramatic psychological and emotional shifts often take place for children, parents, and stepparents right after the wedding. What seems like smooth sailing can become a rocky storm in a hurry. Don't be fooled into thinking you won't experience difficulties. As one parent said, "Falling in love is not enough when it comes to remarriage; there's just more required than that."

When you do become serious about marriage, date with the intention of deepening the stepparent/stepchild relationships. Young children can attach themselves to a future stepparent rather quickly, so make sure you're serious before spending lots of time together. Older children will need more time (research suggests that the best time to remarry is before a child's tenth birthday or after his/her sixteenth; couples who marry between those years collide with the teen's developmental needs).

3. Know how to "cook" a stepfamily. Most people think the way to cook a stepfamily is with a blender, microwave, pressure cooker, or food processor. Nothing could be further from the truth. All of these "cooking styles" attempt to combine the family ingredients in a rapid fashion. Unfortunately, resentment and frustration are the only results.

The way to cook a stepfamily is with a crockpot. Once thrown into the pot, it will take time and low heat to bring ingredients together, requiring that adults step into a new marriage with determination and patience. The average stepfamily takes five to seven years to combine; some take longer. There are no quick recipes.

4. Realize that the "honeymoon" comes at the end of the journey for remarried couples, not the beginning. Ingredients thrown into a crockpot that have not had sufficient time to cook don't taste good—and might make you sick. Couples need to understand that the rewards of stepfamily life (security, family identity, and gratitude for one another) come at the end of the journey. Just as the Israelites traveled a long time before entering the Promise Land, so will it be for your stepfamily.

5. Think about the kids. Children experience numerous losses before entering a stepfamily. In fact, your remarriage is another. It sabotages their fantasy that Mom and Dad can reconcile, or that a deceased parent will always hold his or her place in the home. Seriously consider your children's losses before deciding to remarry. If waiting till your children leave home before you remarry is not an option, work to be sensitive to your children's loss issues. Don't rush them and don't take their grief away.

6. Manage and be sensitive to loyalties. Even in the best of circumstances, children feel torn between their biological parents and likely feel that enjoying your dating partner will please you but betray the other parent. Don't force children to make choices, and examine the binds they feel. Give them your permission to love and respect new people in the other home and let them warm up to your new spouse in their own time.

7. Don't expect your new spouse to feel the same about your children as you do. It's a good fantasy, but stepparents won't care for your children to the same degree that you do. This is not to say that stepparents and stepchildren can't have close bonds; they can. But it won't be the same. When looking at your daughter, you will see a 16-year-old who brought you mud pies when she was 4 and showered you with hugs each night after work. Your spouse will see a self-centered brat who won't abide by the house rules. Expect to have different opinions and to disagree on parenting decisions.

8. Realize that remarriage has unique barriers. Are you more committed to your children or your marriage? If you aren't willing to risk losing your child to the other home, for example, don't make the commitment of marriage. Making a covenant does not mean neglecting your kids, but it does mean that they are taught which relationship is your ultimate priority. A marriage that is not the priority will be mediocre at best.

Another unique barrier involves the "ghost of marriage past." Individuals can be haunted by the negative experiences of previous relationships and not even recognize how it is impacting the

new marriage. Work to not interpret the present in light of the past, or you might be destined to repeat it.

9. Parent as a team; get your plan ready. No single challenge is more predictive of stepfamily success than the ability of the couple to parent as a team. Stepparents must find their role, know their limits in authority, and borrow power from the biological parent in order to contribute to parental leadership. Biological parents must keep alive their role as primary disciplinarian and nurturer while supporting the stepparent's developing role (read [this series](#) of articles for more on step parenting). Managing these roles will not be easy; get a plan and stick together.

10. Know what to tell the kids. Tell them:

- It's okay to be confused about the new people in your life.
- It's okay to be sad about our divorce (or parent's death).
- You need to find someone safe to talk to about all this.
- You don't have to love my new spouse, but you do need to treat him or her with the same respect you would give a coach or teacher at school.
- You don't have to take sides. When you feel caught in the middle between our home and your other home, please tell me and we'll stop.
- You belong to two homes with different rules, routines, and relationships. Find your place and contribute good things in each.
- The stress of our new home will reduce—eventually.
- I love you and will always have enough room in my heart for you. I know it's hard sharing me with someone else. I love you.

Work smarter, not harder

For stepfamilies, accidentally finding their way through the wilderness to the promised land is a rarity. Successful navigation requires a map. You've got to work smarter, not harder. Before you remarry, be sure to educate yourself on the options and challenges that lie ahead.

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Ron Deal is a marriage and family author, conference speaker, and therapist. He is founder and president of Smart Stepfamilies™ and director of FamilyLife Blended™, the ministry initiative of FamilyLife® to stepfamilies (for more visit www.RonDeal.org and www.FamilyLife.com).