TEN TIPS FOR STEPFAMILIES

1. Recognize that the stepfamily will not and can not function the same as a natural family. It has its own special dynamics and behaviors, which can become predictable and positive. Don't try to make a stepfamily into something it's not.

2. Understand that the children are not yours and they never will be. You are stepparents, not replacements parents. No matter how the natural parents behave, they are sacred to the children. But, you can still play an important role in the development of the child.

3. Super step-parenting doesn't work. Go slow. Don't come on too strong.

4. Discipline styles must be discussed by the couple. The couple needs to work out what the children's duties and responsibilities are. What is acceptable behavior and what are the consequences when children misbehave?

5. Establish clear job descriptions between the parent, stepparent and children. What specifically is the job of each person in this household?

6. Unrealistic expectations create resentments. Do a reality check on yourself.

7. There are no ex-parents . . . only ex-spouses. Begin to get information on how to best handle the prior spouse.

8. Be prepared for conflicting pulls of sexual and biological energies within the step relationship. In the intact family, the couple comes together to have a child. The child is part of both parents, generally pulling the parents' energy together for the well-being of the child. In step, blood and sexual ties can polarize a family in opposite energies and directions.

9. The conflict of loyalties must be recognized right from the beginning. Often, just as the child in step begins to have warm feelings toward the stepparent, the child will pull away and negatively act out. He/she feels something like this: "If I love you, that means I do not love my real parent." The feelings are normal and must be discussed.

10. Develop your sense of humor and use it. Families are filled with the unexpected. Sometimes we don't know whether to laugh or to cry. Try humor.