

## Blending a Family? Try Simmering Instead!

Did you also know that 1 out of 3 Americans is now in a step family relationship? That's about 109 million people! Stepfamilies are more common than most realize. And yet, there are not many resources available for these families. How do we begin to navigate stepfamily life? Luckily USU's Healthy Relationships Utah offers an incredible course called Smart Steps for Stepfamilies that help families navigate the complexities of stepfamily life.

Being a member of a stepfamily comes with different challenges and complexities than with a first marriage/coupled family. One complexity is the relationship between stepparent and stepchild. It is normal for stepparents to feel confusion about their obligations, rights, and roles in their new families. Typically, there is a transition period of family disorganization and reorganization that lasts approximately 3 years. If you are just beginning to blend your family and it feels chaotic, that's to be expected! Your family will find their new sense of normalcy with time and as we build relationships with one another.

So how do we begin to build a relationship with our new family members? Even though we often use the term "blending" when referring to stepfamilies, these relationships actually take plenty of time and patience. It would be so nice if we could metaphorically throw all those new relationships into our blender and have it come out nice and quick. But creating these loving relationships don't happen overnight and need time (years!) and us being intentional in cultivating those friendships.

One trap that we can fall into, that can hinder progress with our family relationships, is not spending one-on-one time with individuals. Building a relationship takes time and although doing things "as a family" seems like a good idea, but for stepfamilies, it's actually better to plan one-on-one activities to build and strengthen relationships. Try to find activities that are unique; that can become your activity with your stepchild – like, being the adult partner in their scout group, or being the one to drive your stepdaughter to basketball practices and games. Helping with homework or everyday chores are great for one-on-one time, too. These individual activities build connection and create shared experiences that strengthen the relationship with your stepson or stepdaughter. You'll find that your individual relationships will progress a lot faster as we do one-on-one activities.

If you are currently in a stepfamily and would like to learn some more tools, tips and tricks to building your family strengths, you can visit [healthyrelationshipsutah.org](http://healthyrelationshipsutah.org) to register and learn more. USU Extension's Healthy Relationships Utah offers free online and in-person stepfamily education courses for individuals and couples in stepfamilies. Classes cover a variety of topics including expectations, legal and financial issues, empathy, parenting, stepparenting, conflict management, communication, co-parenting, and stress management. USU's Healthy Relationship Utah initiative also teaches courses for singles, couples, and parents.