

# The **Step Dating** Report



**Major Myths & Critical Questions**

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## The Step-Dating Report – An Introduction

**The Step-Dating Report** is an overview of the multiple issues and important questions facing divorced parents, singles dating parents, and step-dating couples who are contemplating a committed relationship. The report defines and explains **Step-Dating** and describes the **5 Common Myths** (there are many others) that surround Step-Dating and Stepfamilies in general. Next, there is a list of key issues and questions that individuals and couples should be discussing and asking them selves and each other, as they either, prepare to date or move forward in a more serious step-dating relationship. The **Questions** represent common areas of concern, and they have been gathered directly from a variety of relevant and reliable sources. The most important sources are the frequently asked questions from individuals and couples in my practice, and the content of research-based workshops that I offer for couples actively interested in learning more about Step Dating for their own personal growth and to ensure a healthy dating relationship.

Having been in a Step-Dating Relationship prior to my own marriage and living in a blended family since 1994, I know firsthand the value of gaining knowledge and insight that helps to clearly define the type of relationship you want from the step dating stage and as you move forward and become a committed couple. I encourage everyone in a step dating relationship to review this comprehensive report and challenge yourselves with the crucial questions presented here; you can then be more than adequately prepared for your Step Dating journey. For some, it may be enough to skim the surface and quickly determine whether this is the kind of relationship you want or are ready for, and that's okay. For others, it may be a more challenging assignment that requires extra time and attention. Just know that there are many additional challenges in Step-Dating that you never knew existed and it's beneficial for the health and happiness of your relationship to be aware and be prepared rather than be reactive and confused.

In either case, the most effective and efficient way to prepare for a new and successful step dating relationship is to educate yourself so that you can make responsible and conscious decisions about you and your parenting partner. So, I invite you to read this report and send me your questions re: this dynamic and engaging topic. I look forward to hearing from you soon and **Congratulations for deciding to take the first steps in successful Step-dating; you and your partner will be glad you did!**

**Yvonne Kelly**

## **THE STEP-DATING REPORT: Dating with Children in the Mix:**

### **What Divorced Parents and Singles Dating Parents Need to Know.**

#### **DEFINITION OF STEP DATING**

**Step Dating** occurs when one or both people involved have children. Step Dating can be between two single parents, or can involve a single parent and a single person with no children. It is unlike other dating because it automatically involves more than just the two of you and the needs and welfare of children are immediately involved. Given the high rate of divorce and separation, there is a good chance that many people will find themselves in a dating relationship involving either their own or another person's children, so it is wise to have some basic knowledge of what to expect in a Step-Dating relationship. Learning about the dynamics of Step-Dating is important for single parents, for singles dating or contemplating dating a single parent, and for pre-committed couples with children.

Because dating someone with children is very different, the Step Dating experience will be the time to test if the relationship is one that you want to be in for the rest of your life. For single parents, it involves determining if your new love interest is not only the person you want to be with, but also has the potential to be a good stepparent to your child(ren). For singles, it is an opportunity to determine if you are ready for an instant family, and are prepared to take on the role and responsibilities of a stepparent while building and nurturing a relationship with your partner.

Step Dating is not for the faint of heart, but if two people enter the relationship with open hearts and minds, access key information, and are honest with themselves and each other, they can build a healthy, happy relationship that may ultimately lead to a successful blended stepfamily.

## STEP DATING MYTHS

Myths abound about stepfamilies that can perpetuate unrealistic expectations which are the greatest hurdles for couples building a relationship, either Step-Dating or creating a Stepfamily.

Here are **5 Common Myths** about Step-Dating.

### **1. Myth for Single Parents – Your partner should unconditionally “love” your children – if they love you they will love your children as they do their own.**

This is an expectation, whether articulated or not, that leads to extreme frustration on the part of both the biological parents and their partners. In my experience, most stepparents report not having the same kind of “love” for their stepchildren as they do for their own children. This is not to say that they don’t care for, respect, like and provide for their stepchildren in a way that conveys an interest in their well-being; in fact this is exactly what stepparents should do. But, the adult relationship shouldn’t hinge on having the same feelings of love or the strong bond that biological parents have with their own children. Relationships take time and sometimes love between a stepparent and stepchild evolves gradually. While not absolutely necessary for a successful relationship, it can be a wonderful gift for all involved if it develops naturally.

### **2. Myth for Singles Dating Single Parents – My role is to co-parent with my partner and to become an equal parent in the raising the children.**

Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the responsibility of the biological parent to function as the primary parent with his/her children, especially during the dating phase. The role of the step-dating partner is to take on the role of a friend, a coach or a mentor to the child(ren), and the main task is to build trust in the child. Being in a hurry to parent, discipline or take an authority position with your partner’s children is not only unhealthy and confusing for the children, it is also a recipe for relationship disaster. Supporting your partner in parenting and eventually sharing some of these responsibilities is something that should only take place after a significant period of time has passed in a committed relationship.

### **3. Myth for Everyone - We’ll be one big happy family if we spend all of our time together. WRONG!!**

We’ll turn into one big unhappy, miserable family because individual needs are neglected in the rush to transition into a family when you are

still getting to know each other; it's stressful for children and adults alike. The couple has fallen in love, not the kids and they can't be expected to be on the same emotional timetable as the adults. Children need time and a gradual introduction to the new arrangement. They also need to know that the relationship with their primary parent is not going to change, that they are still the priority to them, and they will not be displaced by a new person in his/her life; this is fundamental. It's important to understand the value of investing in time with children, slowly introducing the new partner, and gradually spending time together as a unit. The kids will feel less threatened and more open to accepting the new partner.

#### **4. Myth for Everyone - Love Will Conquer All ! Those other people in failing second marriages involving children, just didn't love each other enough. But We Do!**

Most couples who start out Step-Dating and go on to develop a permanent commitment loved each other very much and believed they had what it took to make it work. They may even have known that it wasn't going to be easy. But, believing that love will take care of everything and prevent the challenges of step-dating or stepfamily life, is a naïve idea. Love is undeniably very important, but learning specifics about what to expect and planning for it, will help couples make more informed relationship choices.

Here is what we strongly advocate for:

- A. Knowing each other well
- B. Observing how the children interact within the new relationship
- C. Learning everything you can about stepfamily dynamics and your individual roles at various stages of relationship development

#### **5. Myth for Everyone- Someone must be to blame when problems arise and if we can just 'fix' the person, then the issues will go away.**

Actually, the people and personalities in Step-Dating relationships and stepfamilies are not usually the problem; it's the complex dynamics that are so very different from other dating relationships. What sets failure in motion is having little understanding of what to expect and how to deal with anticipated issues. Even when we understand the challenges and have some level of preparation, it can be extremely confusing. When there is no awareness of what to expect, it can feel like being hit by a truck. Our first impulse when we experience tension, stress or frustration in our relationships is to blame our partners or the children (or the exes, of

course). Next, we try to fix things by criticizing, which is meant to encourage change in behaviors, but we know that never works.

**Following is a list of the common problematic relationship dynamics:**

**A. Conflicts of loyalty felt by everyone:**

Parent vs child re: partner; partner vs partner re: child; partner vs partner re: prior spouse; and child vs stepparent re: biological parent. These loyalty conflicts play themselves out in the new relationships in many different ways over time. If they are not recognized and acknowledged, they can become the basis for decision-making that ultimately threatens the relationship or the stepfamily.

**B. Diminished parenting following separation or divorce**

Balancing a variety of responsibilities, learning how to co-parent with your ex, navigating a new relationship, and experiencing guilt from the end of a marriage can leave parents exhausted with little reserve for their job of intentional parenting. This contributes greatly to diminished and/or ineffective parenting.

**C. Feelings of loss and unresolved grief from previous relationships, family breakdown, death, or even childhood issues.**

Feelings of loss and grief can be triggered in the transition to a new relationship, or they may be unresolved from any number of situations and relationships from the past. The above represent only a small percentage of the challenging dynamics that are unique to step-dating and stepfamily relationships. Unrecognized, unacknowledged and misunderstood, they manifest themselves in emotions and behaviors that are mistakenly identified as the problem. The results are often frustration, judgment, criticism, and blame that prevent any resolution of the problematic dynamics, and the underlying needs or issues. In fact, this leads to further pain, distress and the deterioration of relationships. The positive alternative is understanding complex dynamics, anticipating them, and learning how to address them at a fundamental level.

*\* A note of acknowledgement to Dr. Jeannette Lofas with The Stepfamily Foundation from which I've drawn various resources and elements that you see in this Report.*

# **Common Issues and Questions facing Divorced Parents, Singles Dating Single Parents, and Pre-Committed Step-Dating Couples.**

The following are issues and questions that you we encourage people to consider at the various stages. These issues and questions also represent a framework for coaching aimed at preparing singles and couples for relationships as well as helping them to enhance the relationships they are already in.

## **SINGLE PARENTS**

### **Issue #1. The Single Parent Experience**

**Q.** I'm looking for someone who is potentially a good parent for my child, in addition to being a suitable life partner for me. What traits or behaviors should I be looking for?

### **Issue # 2. Unknown Entity: What I don't know and the element of risk**

**Q.** Will this person be able to rise to the challenge of step parenting? Will my child(ren) adjust accordingly and will I be able to successfully navigate balancing a relationship with my partner and my children?

### **Issue # 3. Being Emotionally and Physically Ready to Date.**

**Q.** In addition to knowing my wants and needs of an adult life partner, what should I be looking for in a partner who is potentially going to be a stepparent to my children? How do I identify and organize the factors in my life that will allow me to date successfully ie. friends, family, ex, custody arrangements, time, money, etc. How do I cope with the obstacles in my life that may make dating a challenge, ie. family, friends, ex, custody arrangements, time, money, etc.?

### **Issue # 4. Timing**

**Q.** When is the right time to start thinking about dating post divorce or separation?

When is the right time to introduce the children to a new partner. When should you consider moving ahead with a more committed relationship?

## **Issue # 5. My Children**

**Q.** What do they need to make a healthy adjustment to a new relationship?

When do I introduce a new dating partner and how?

What kind of reactions can I expect from my kids?

What are the important things my children need from me to make healthy adjustments?

How do I make sure they feel secure and reassured that they are an absolute priority to me, no matter what else changes?

How do I stay focused on being the adult and taking responsibility for adult decisions?

How do I validate their feelings and concerns without making them think they are in charge of my relationship?

## **Issue # 6. Ex-Spouses**

**Q.** How do I help my kids understand there are no ex-parents?  
How do I navigate dating in a new relationship while staying committed to the best co-parenting plan possible for my kids?

## **Issue # 7. My Step Dating Partner and Their Unique Reality.**

**Q.** Even if they have children of their own, how do I help my partner feel comfortable and establish a friendship with my kids?

If my partner doesn't have kids, how do I help them adjust to my kids?  
What qualities should I look for in a partner who will be spending time with my kids, and me eventually?

Is it more important to look at their behaviors around the kids, or their attitudes towards life such as tolerance, flexibility and positive outlook?

## **Issue# 8. My Relationship or Partnership**

**Q.** Should I be willing to put my relationship with my partner at the centre of our life together once we're in a committed relationship, even though this may look like I'm putting my kids second?

How do I balance the relationship with parenting and make everyone feel happy and loved?

How do I split time and attention effectively and is it even possible?

## **Issue# 9. Personal Red Flags**

**Q.** How do I identify my red flags and determine how to deal with them?

What are the common danger signs that indicate a relationship could range from strained to very unhealthy with little chance of success?

Should I listen to my inner voice persistently cautioning me about the Relationship?

How do I deal with issues such as unresolved grief from either partner, ongoing hostility with an ex that gets into the way of a relationship, or an urgency to remarry or cohabit on either or both partner's part?

## **Issue # 10. Going from a Dating Relationship to a Pre-Commitment Stage**

**Q.** How do I know when I'm ready? How does my partner know?

What are the important milestones and stages?

How do you know when you are in one and not another?

## **SINGLES DATING SINGLE PARENTS**

### **Issue # 1. The Single Experience**

**Q.** I'm looking for a suitable life partner so how do I decide whether I am willing or capable of sharing my partner, my time, energy, and attention with child(ren)?

## **Issue # 2. The Unknown Entity: What I don't know and the element of risk**

**Q.** How do I know if I'm willing to alter my life path and/or vision as I knew it up to this point, to include my partner's child(ren) and the needs that they bring into the relationship?

If I don't know a great deal about children and parenting, how can I learn and make the commitment required in this relationship?

## **Issue # 3. Considerations about My Role**

**Q.** What is my role with the children as a dating partner?

How do I safeguard my interests in the relationship and balance them with what the kids need while not becoming resentful?

How do I express any concerns, questions or reservations I may have with my partner, especially if it has to do with the children?

I know dating someone with children doesn't give me permission to make demands about how this needs to look in order for me to stick around , but if I have real difficulty with how my partner parents can I speak up? How do I express my concerns in a spirit of cooperation, negotiation and compromise and is this even possible?

How do I know when it's a deal breaker?

## **Issue # 4. Step Dynamics and my Defined Role**

**Q.** Should my partner expect me to love his/her children very early on in the relationship and is this a requirement. I think it puts a lot of pressure on the non-parent in the relationship.

How do you deal with conflicted loyalties? My partner often feels caught in the middle between meeting the needs of his children and the needs in our relationship and we're both frustrated. How do I prevent myself from feeling I isolated, alone, and outside the loop that includes him and the kids?

How do you get rid of the wedge or is it something you have to live with?

How do I stop myself feeling frustrated and powerless about what I perceive as disrespectful behavior of my partner's children toward their parent, and then the feelings of resentment towards the children as a result?

Can coaching really address these issues and dynamics and give me effective tools to work with while I have all these strong feelings swirling around?

### **Issue # 5. My dating partner and Their Unique Reality.**

**Q.** How can I begin to appreciate and understand their struggles as a single parent?

How will understanding the parenting experience help me to value and appreciate this person in a new way?

How will this help our relationship?

How will this tell me if our relationship can move towards the committed stage?

### **Issue # 6. Personal Red Flags in the Dating Relationship – You Determine Them.**

**Q.** How can I recognize the danger signs that may indicate the relationship could become strained or unhealthy with no chance of success?

Should I listen to my inner voice persistently cautioning me about the relationship?

How do I deal with issues such as unresolved grief from either partner, ongoing hostility with an ex that gets into the way of a relationship, or an urgency to remarry or cohabit on either or both partner's part?

### **Issue # 7. Deciding to Go from a Dating Relationship to a Pre-commitment Phase.**

**Q.** How do you know when you are in one and not another?

What are the relevant stages of the relationship, how do I recognize them, and what do they represent?

How do I discuss them with my partner?

How do we know when we're ready to move on to the next stage of commitment?

## **PRE-COMMITTED DATING COUPLES WITH CHILDREN IN THE MIX**

### **Issue # 1. The Couple's Experience**

**Q.** Knowing that we each bring different needs, questions and considerations to this experience, how will we know we are ready for the Pre-commitment Stage of the Relationship?

How can we agree that we are going to use this phase of the relationship as a testing ground to determine if there is a future for us as step or blended family?

### **Issue # 2. The Unknown Entity: What we don't know yet but this is the time to find out.**

**Q.** Do we have what it takes to make this a successful union and family experience?

How can we best use this time to determine if we can move forward?

### **Issue # 3. What is STEP DATING and What Does it Have to do With STEP PARENTING?**

**Q.** Which Step Dynamics are important to know about and understand? What are the common myths and misconceptions about stepfamily life that sabotage our relationship?

What are the various roles and how are they defined and negotiated?

What are our roles with each other's children at this stage, ie. discipline, primary parenting tasks, building relationships, etc.

What is the Stepparent's role and how does this get defined? What is the

negotiable and non-negotiable.?

#### **Issue # 4. Differences Between Nuclear and Stepfamilies**

**Q.** What are the major differences between nuclear and stepfamilies that present us with challenges?

Why is it important to know about this?

#### **Issue # 5. Expectations at this Stage of the Relationship?**

**Q.** What should I expect in terms of time, children, and relationship building?

What about couple time, family Time, kid time for both the bio parent and their partner?

How do you balance the various relationships? bio parent in primary parental role; partner as friend, mentor but not in any kind of parenting role at least until the relationship is permanent?

How do we invest time in our relationships with our own children, reassuring them that they will always be a priority in our life, regardless of other changes that may take place?

#### **Issue # 6. Understanding and Learning About your Partner**

**Q.** Who is my partner?

How do they handle challenges in a family context?

How do they communicate and get their needs met?

How do we effectively use coaching and seminars to help us explore and learn more about each other?

How do we develop a communication styles, preferences, and traits that support the relationship?

## **Issue # 7. Notion of the Family**

**Q.** How do we learn to articulate our vision of our family?

What are the most important factors to help us maintain a happy, healthy family unit?

## **Issue # 8. Our Decision – Preparing for a Long-term Commitment or Not.**

**Q.** What are the steps to consider if we're preparing for the commitment phase, such as telling the Ex(s), telling the Kids?

How do we learn about the stepfamily experience beforehand?

How do we articulate clear goals and a vision of what life and family we want?

## **Moving Forward**

Begin with your Vision Statement and from there, work together to articulate a plan or roadmap to get to a place where you can blend and balance the important relationships and areas of your life including:

Your couple relationship, time to build relationships with each of the children individually, parenting and step-parenting plans, managing and putting boundaries around involvement with an ex-spouse, household management using the 6 R's framework: Roles, Rules, Routines, Respect, Relationships, and Rituals

## **Children's Needs that Cannot be Compromised**

1. Safety and security
2. Love
3. Reassurance
4. Emotional Well-being
5. Unconditional Acceptance
6. Respect
7. Consistency and Structure
8. Effective parenting
9. Dependability vs chaotic persistent change
10. For Parents to protect them from own conflicts and badmouthing in particular
11. Self-Esteem
12. To not be made responsible beyond their years, or parentified; parents should not lean on their children or confide in them as they would a friend or adult
13. Access to both parents
14. Some locus of control in one's life – appropriate choices for developmental age
15. A healthy parent(s)
16. Mature, well-meaning Step-parent

## **The Children and what they NEED vs What they WANT**

The children have defined needs which are non-negotiable. It is important to be clear on these and in particular for a single person or potential new stepparent to understand the depth and breadth of these needs and the commitment required to being in their lives.

I want to take a moment to speak to the difference between Needs and Wants that can be so controversial and create a great deal of conflict between the biological parent and stepparent. It is not uncommon for a bio parent and a childless parent to have strong differences of opinion on what constitutes the needs of children and how these get met. For example, a guilt-ridden bio parent may insist on meeting all of the "wants" or preferences of the child under the guise of meeting their needs, at the expense of meeting any of his/her own needs or the needs of the couple.

Or, on the flip side of that, a childless step dating partner or stepparent, may not be able to fully appreciate the scope of needs that the child has and may choose to see the biological parent as indulgent and overprotective at the cost of meeting the couple's needs.

- It often requires an objective third person to help the couple identify and distinguish between the needs and wants of the children and then decide what the needs of the other individuals are including the couple, to be able to fit that into the equation.
- As much as the "true needs" of the children must come first and it is the bio parent's job to make sure this happens, the reality is that no other individual or potential stepparent will remain in a step dating or step family situation for very long where none of their needs are met or at the very least factored into the equation, particularly the need to have time for the couple relationship.
- Of those who do stay and don't speak to their needs and frustration, resentment becomes a special companion.
- **In 'STEP' our goal is to get some of EVERYONE'S needs met.**

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## **Steps in Safeguarding the Interests of the Child(ren) while Dating**

I know this is a big concern for many of you, single biological parents and singles who are dating single parents alike. I believe that most people want to protect the children and simply don't know how to go about this. It begins with some important steps, simple to talk about, harder to follow through on.

- 1.) Give your children adequate time to heal from the loss of their first family and make the adjustment to the new way of life living with one parent at a time.
- 2.) Don't compromise your time with them; keep your focus on them. They need to know that when you date it is not going to threaten

their central place in your world and that no one (new partner or new partner's children) is going to replace them.

- 3.) Elicit their feelings and their thoughts about what is happening. Hear them. Validate them even if it is hard to hear that they're not happy about some of the things that are taking place. Don't enforce your emotional timetable or feelings on to them. It is better to openly know about their discontent, than to deny that it is there and give them the message that you only want to hear from them when they're happy about what's going on.
  - 4.) Take the time to exclusively date someone for a good length of time before introducing the children, so that you have some strong inclinations that this is someone you could be in a long-term relationship with that involves your children. Address any red flag concerns that you are already aware of before introducing the children, don't wait. And know your potential partner's views on children (even if they're not a parent) in order to evaluate if your values around children, parenting and family could be a match.
  - 5.) Once the children know about your relationship, don't change things up too much. Keep your time with them the same, primarily seeing your dating partner when you are not with them. Gradually introduce spending time together, and I mean gradually.
  - 6.) Keep your sexual relationship completely separate from them.
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## The Ten Stages from Divorce Recovery through to Remarriage

These stages are of course not mandatory but recommended for optimal outcomes in your Step Dating Experience and/or Committed Relationship leading to Remarriage and instant Stepfamily or Blended Family.

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### **DIVORCE / SEPARATION**

#### **1.) Divorce**

**2.) Post-Divorce or Divorce Recovery** (6-12 months or longer; as long as it takes to heal, to learn about how you contributed to the breakdown of your previous relationship and to begin to determine what you want your new life to look like and what you are looking for in your next serious relationship.)

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### **CONSCIOUS DATING PERIOD**

**3.) Casual Dating** – Decision that one is ready to date again; telling the children that you will be making new friends and dating

**4.) Committed or Serious Dating** to find a life partner

**5.) Exclusive Dating** - one person; waiting for some time before telling or introducing the children (3-6 months)

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### **PRE-COMMITMENT STAGE OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP (6-12 months)**

**6.) Involving the Children:** Telling the Children and introducing your new partner

**7.) Testing Compatibility** before making a full-commitment

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### **COMMITMENT STAGE OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP**

**8.) Making a Decision to commit** to a permanent relationship (ie.) engagement or announcement (perhaps another 6-12 months)

## 9.) Marriage or Permanent Commitment

## 10.) Live Happily Ever After

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### Timeframes involved

**POST DIVORCE OR RECOVERY** - 6-12 months or longer

**EXCLUSIVE DATING** - 3-6 months

**PRE-COMMITMENT STAGE** - Continuing to Date and test the relationship 6 - 12 months (on average) before making a full commitment

**COMMITMENT STAGE** - Making a Decision to commit to a permanent relationship (engagement or announcement); perhaps a 6-12 month engagement period

- Engagement
  - Marriage or Permanent Commitment
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- Using these stages as outlined above, the time frame from dating someone exclusively and telling the children to remarriage or a permanent union, would be somewhere between 15 months to 2 ½ years.
  - This after, having taken 6-12 months in the Post Divorce period to really establish you and your kids as a single family unit with all of the transitions that that entails. Taking this initial time to support the kids in the post divorce transition period, paves the way to helping them make future adjustments to a new partner and eventually a new family.
  - These are recommended guidelines only and by no means take into consideration the unique circumstances couples experience in their own situation.
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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SINGLE PARENTS, SINGLES DATING SINGLE PARENTS AND PRE-COMMITTED COUPLES

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### \*\*\* RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SINGLE PARENTS \*\*\*

- 1.) When dealing with your child(ren)'s reactions to your dating it might be useful to distinguish between their needs and wants (e.g. they might want you not to date at all or get back together with your ex, and they might need quality time with you). You can help your children distinguish between and clarify their own needs and wants, as well as their fears and hopes related to your dating.
- 2.) We recommend that you talk with your child(ren) about the idea of you dating before you actually date. Realize their reactions will most likely be ambivalent or mixed, but will provide an indicator of their openness and readiness for you to date that you can discuss with your coach.
- 3.) General wisdom is to not to introduce your children to your dates until you are both dating each other exclusively and becoming pre-committed as a final area of "testing".
- 4.) We recommend that your dates do not sleep over while your children are home at least until you're in an exclusive relationship and your child is comfortable with your new partner.
- 5.) We recommend that you impartially observe how your pre-committed partner interacts with his/her own children and your children, regarding:
  - a. possible negative/harmful or neglectful treatment of own children.
  - b. preferential treatment of own children over your children when all are together.
  - c. discipline: When rules are broken, use of authority with your children
  - d. values inconsistent with yours.
- 6.) We recommend that you carefully observe how your pre-committed partner interacts with his/her EX.

- 7.) We recommend that you and your pre-committed partner become knowledgeable about blended families and step-parenting by reading books, taking classes, talking with other couples, and working with your coach to address the challenges ahead. FACT: Relationship failure and divorce is far higher for blended family situations.
- 8.) General wisdom recommends the biological parent retain primary parenting responsibility and the step-parent start out being a friend and positive adult in your child's life, support the primary parent (even when disagreeing), and gradually share some parenting roles as your child adjusts and accepts your new partner.
- 9.) When behavioral issues arise, we recommend the new step-parent set limits and speak firmly to your child as any adult might, and make requests of you for intervention and correction.

**\*\* The Recommendations for Single Parents are part of THE CONSCIOUS DATING CHECKLIST FOR SINGLE PARENTS and is the property of THE RELATIONSHIP COACHING INSTITUTE [www.relationshipcoachinginstitute.com](http://www.relationshipcoachinginstitute.com) We have been granted permission by RCI to use this information in the Step Dating Report\*\***

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**\*\*\* RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SINGLES DATING SINGLE PARENTS \*\*\***

**1. Do the work to determine what your requirements are of a Relationship at this time in your life.** Have a vision of the future, what your values are, and the characteristics of the relationship that you are seeking to have. Be clear and honest with yourself. Be willing to walk away from a relationship that does not meet your requirements. Requirements are different from needs, in that they are the components of your relationship that you will not settle for less around. Needs are important but can be negotiable.

**2. Take the time to decide if you are truly interested in dating someone with children at this time in your life.** Do you like children, want to be around them and have an understanding of what they need? If you are not sure, and if possible, spend time with other children, friends or family; be aware of your comfort level, tolerance level, ability to enjoy them and how you generally feel about the experience. Do you have a plan for your life that eventually involves children? Can you envision yourself in a relationship that involves children, whose needs will often take

precedence over your own as the natural course of events in the evolution of your relationship? Wanting children of your own someday is very different than being a stepparent to someone else's children, particularly if you are not ready for this type of commitment and it is essential to be aware of that.

**3. Take responsibility early on for articulating your own needs.** Don't assume that your partner knows what they are. Not talking about your needs and expectations creates a vacuum for misunderstanding and usually leads to issues between the two of you. It doesn't mean all of your needs will be met in the relationship but it does increase the likelihood that some will. It is also healthy because you alone are responsible for getting your needs met. By sharing this with your partner, you are also determining if there is a good fit between the two of you and what better time to find out than now?

**4. Be willing to support your partner in meeting the needs of his/her children, as it relates to your relationship.** This means having a clear plan around the following: how and when you see each other, boundaries around sexual conduct, how he/she maintains parenting responsibilities, in particular, alone time with the children, and what your role is with the children.

**5. Learn as much as you can about step dynamics which are alive and well in any step dating relationship.** It will help you determine if this is the relationship for you. And if you decide to pursue the relationship it will inform you about how to proceed in ways that will safeguard the interests and feelings of everyone involved.

**6. Be willing to flag issues in the relationship to allow so that you and your partner can assess if they are issues that you will be able to work through, or ones that are deal breakers for the relationship.** If you are ever certain that the relationship is not going to work, then do the right thing and be honest with your partner. There are more people involved in this relationship than just yourselves, and there is more a stake. Step relationships at any level require a great deal of awareness, responsibility and honesty in order to protect the interests and well being of all involved.

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### **\*\*\* RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRE-COMMITTED COUPLES \*\*\***

**RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT** - Take **the Relationship Assessment for Couples (\* The Relationship Coaching Institute)** examining in more depth the many facets of any relationship. This can help you to decide if you are in the right relationship for you. If you believe you are but know there are some areas that need work, it will help you to identify those and set goals in relation to these areas to work on to improve the relationship and your chances for success.

**STEP DYNAMICS** – Take a course or read as much on the subject as possible to acquire knowledge about how your step relationships and eventual your step or blended family will be different from a nuclear family. This is a first and essential step in understanding what you are entering into.

**CHECK EXPECTATIONS** - Examine each partner's expectations of what the relationship and family will look like. Don't assume you are on the same page around this. Everyone comes with their own notions of what relationships and family will be like, much of which is based on our experiences either in our own family of origin or our previous relationships/family. When you each know what the other person is expecting/wanting you then have something to work with and can determine where the areas for negotiation are and where you can expect some conflict. At the very least, you are finding this out well ahead of the time before you make a permanent commitment to the other person.

**PARENTING AND STEPPARENTING** - Get clear on the fact that the biological parent is the primary parent and disciplinarian. Knowing your role as a dating partner with someone else's children is fundamental to everyone's well-being. You are a friend and mentor. As the relationship progresses and once a permanent commitment is made, the biological parent can begin to share more parental responsibilities with you but this also hinges on the quality of the relationship between the partner and the children as well as their emotional readiness to accept someone in the stepparent role.

**PARENTING STYLES** - Are your parenting styles very different? If so, have you had conversations about this and are you willing to accept that your partner will likely be committed to maintaining their chosen parenting style, with some exceptions of course? Parents often range from willing to eager, to do some things differently, for example, be more consistent and add in more expectations of their children, if they have the support of their partner, instead of criticism or judgment. While some modifications to parenting practices are required to meet the best interests of the child, they never come about as a result of a partner who is demanding the changes. If you are in complete disagreement with most of what your partner stands for at this time, then better to know that now so you can make an informed decision and take the appropriate course of action. This could be a deal breaker. Once you commit, it doesn't give you license to try to change someone or demand that they do things differently

**COMMUNICATION and TOLERANCE STYLES** - Learn about each other's communication styles because you will want a clear understanding of where your partner is coming from, how to communicate with him or her and to how to hone your own skills in this area. It will not be long before you are dealing with issues that are sensitive in nature and have heightened potential for inducing conflict. Also, learn about each other's frustration tolerance as this can be equally important to communication. No matter how much you understand about stepfamily dynamics and what to expect, you will absolutely be in situations that try your patience – GUARANTEED. Fostering tolerance, acceptance and flexibility is important for each person to work on individually and will actually enhance your experience in a relationship that involves children. If you or your partner are finding this exceptionally difficult, this can be a red flag or at the very least, an issue to do some work on and quite possibly get some professional support around.

**CHILDREN AND TRANSITIONS** - Transitioning with the children as you embark on the commitment stage of the relationship. This is always made simpler if you have taken the necessary time and steps beforehand to get here. Children need time to heal from the loss of the first family and relationships that were radically changed for them. If we don't give them this, it will only make any subsequent changes and transitions even more challenging than they need to be, no matter how much you are ready to move on. No amount of working hard at it, can replace the need to give them time to heal, to adjust to the first set of losses, and to become accustomed to the new reality (parent and kids) where they can learn to

trust and feel secure again before introducing new people and new transitions into their lives.

**CHILDREN WITH OTHER CHILDREN** - They need time to adjust not just to the idea of new children in their lives, who might potentially be new step siblings someday, but time to adjust to the individuals themselves. And there are no guarantees that they are going to “like” each other. But there are steps you can take to give them the best chance for making a successful adjustment:

- Don't rush them into it.
- Don't make every time or even most times about “family time”.
- Preserve and be consistent about special kid time with their own parent.
- Do things together as much as possible on neutral ground or visit both homes and equalize it as much as possible.
- Don't have any expectations about how this needs to look or how you need them to feel or get along. Remember, the two of you are in love, not everyone else. Give them time and space and recognize they're on a different emotional time table.
- Parent your own children.
- Reassure your own children that no one will ever take their place. The special bond you share will not be threatened, taken away from, or replaced by a bond with anyone else.

**STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF A STEPFAMILY** - There are a number of stages that occur in the evolution of most stepfamilies with tasks associated that can help you to make the most out of the stages.

### **The Stages:**

**1.) Disneyland Stage** – The Romance Stage – it will all be wonderful.

**2.) Disorientation Stage** – What's wrong? It's not what we expected. Needs and expectations clash, particularly if none of this was discussed beforehand.

**3.) Do or Die Stage** – This is the stage where conflict comes into the open, full blown - partially because family members don't know what to do at the second stage when problems start to surface. It is time to work on the issues and get the help required, or unfortunately for the majority of unions, it is the time when people walk away.

**4.) Dealing with It.** – This stage is where families, having decided at the previous stage, not to give up but to work things through, can begin to deal with the hand that they have been dealt. Facing problems, negotiating, finding new ways of doing things, accepting the reality of the situation – all happen at this stage. All possible, because a decision was made to persevere and look for solutions. This stage is looked upon as the beginnings of creating a stable foundation for your family.

**5.) Destination** – The beginning of the final stage where family members are learning to accept the new reality. The accumulation of the struggles and the work to resolve issues together, allows individuals to begin to have some confidence in the new relationships and the people involved. It is certainly not perfect, but the acceptance of that very fact is critical to the success of the family. Time, new ways of doing things, shared experiences and establishing new traditions that are unique to this family grouping, all have a way of supporting the evolution of the stepfamily or blended family through this stage.

**COUPLE STRENGTH** - It is about quality time, respect, acceptance and understanding what your partner values and also what they struggle with. Making your relationship a priority, even in the midst of the chaos, can be central to giving each person the strength to keep persevering. Putting the relationship on hold until things get sorted out never works. Find out early on what is important to both of you in this area and commit to each other to make that happen. Knowing, planning and following through are all critical elements for having a solid relationship at the centre of a stepfamily. You can't survive without it. Also, knowing how your partner wants to be "loved" and attended to, is critical; don't assume to know this – ASK!!

**INDIVIDUAL / TAKING CARE OF YOU** - Live intentionally, take care of yourself, be clear about what you need, and accept what you have embarked on so you can put your energy into making it work instead of wondering why it is happening to you. Don't beat yourself up (or others) when things seem overwhelming or when you don't have the answers or the strength. Seek out support and answers and in doing so, don't forget to look inside and to yourself as a source of solutions. When we bring ourselves entirely into this new set of relationships, we also bring along our own emotional "baggage", which can be so easily triggered in the context of family. A willingness to be introspective, to be able to own "our stuff" and to work on our own issues, is absolutely key.

Remember you will be investing in the lives of several other people, so it is essential to take care of yourself. Remain involved in outside interests and relationships, ask for support when you need it, maintain your unique sense of who you are, and don't doubt that you can meet the challenges of the situation, if you are taking a balanced approach in your life.

**HOME AND FINANCES** - Finances can be one of the harder things to discuss when coming together in a new relationship and even more complex when there are several other people involved. Regardless of how old the children are that you may be bringing to the relationship – from 2-40, there are sensitive and practical issues of all kinds that need to be talked about openly, planned for and addressed. This is a fundamental part of Pre-Remarriage Coaching and we recommend speaking with a financial expert for financial information that everyone should have when embarking on a family merger. And of course for those situations requiring more complex discussions ranging from questions about financial responsibility for step children to wealth management and inheritance, this kind of expertise is invaluable.

Also, discussing and assessing the scope of resources required to blend your lives together and make a family work – time, energy and money included, is critical. Much is required and having a good idea of who and how and what you are each going to take on, can build a sense of trust, team work, equity and fairness even before you get started.

**VISION OF THE FUTURE** - Vision Your Relationship Together at the stage it is in now, and beyond to see if there is a fit and / or room to negotiate to ensure everyone's needs are taken into consideration. The two visions will not be the same but if they complement each other, you can begin to bring them together into a Joint Vision. From this foundation you can begin to look specifically at plans in each of the areas of your relationship together. I.e. How do we spend time together as a family, how do we discuss money, how do we want to celebrate special days and holidays together, what is our plan around parenting and step parenting together, how do we intend to assess and then divide up the scope of responsibilities involved in this venture.

**PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY, SELF-GROWTH AND INTENTIONALITY** - We strongly recommend that each person view this new journey as an opportunity for self-growth and learning. Relationships, families, and blended families in particular, provide us with storehouses of experience

that if embraced, can teach us more about ourselves than we probably ever knew possible. But it takes consciousness, an awareness that even the challenging times serve a unique purpose and a willingness to commit to using these experiences for learning and growth.

Recognize that the awareness of the issues and planning for the inevitable challenges, while giving you best chance possible to succeed in your step relationships is just the beginning. Issues or challenges will always arise that could not have been predicted and most people report being taken aback from time to time because of their strong emotional reactions to events and people in their family. We are often surprised by how we feel and behave in relation to certain dynamics – afraid, powerless, angry, resentful, full of judgment, demanding. So equally important to making the commitment to learning as much as possible beforehand, is taking the commitment itself absolutely seriously and being intentional about it.

We can know now with certainty, before making the decision to proceed, that we are embarking on a very complex set of dynamics and that we'll inevitably have a lot of curve balls thrown our way. In essence we are intentionally committing to the unknown and committing ourselves to be as open, mature, accepting, flexible and optimistic as we can be in the face of new and unexpected circumstances that will arise in the context of step relationships. One's ability to have an open mind, flexible approach, and all round optimistic perspective on life will give you such an advantage. It is equally important for creating successful step relationships as all of the information and planning that goes beforehand.

**BEST OF LUCK** – And a little luck never hurts either.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

**\*\* The Recommendations for Single Parents are part of THE CONSCIOUS DATING CHECKLIST FOR SINGLE PARENTS and is the property of THE RELATIONSHIP COACHING INSTITUTE [www.relationshipcoachinginstitute.com](http://www.relationshipcoachinginstitute.com) We have been granted permission by RCI to use this information in the Step Dating Report\*\***

**\*\* The Relationship Assessment for Couples is also the property of THE RELATIONSHIP COACHING INSTITUTE [www.relationshipcoachinginstitute.com](http://www.relationshipcoachinginstitute.com) We have been granted permission by RCI to use this information in the Step Dating Report\*\***

**\*\*We Gratefully Acknowledge the Contributions of Jeannette Lofas the Founder of the Stepfamily Foundation [www.stepfamily.org](http://www.stepfamily.org) for her work and contributions to this Report.**

## Call to Action and Next Steps:

This report is not intended as an exhaustive presentation of every step-dating issue and question with everything you need to know to prepare for a new relationship. My stated goal is to give you a well-rounded overview of important information and key considerations you should be aware of when embarking on a Step-Dating Journey. Most people report that they had no idea what was involved in a step dating relationship until they were in the middle of it. Without exception, their biggest regret is that they had no exposure to this kind of information before either dating with children in the mix, or making a serious commitment. Some say it would have changed their minds about the relationship, but most say it would have helped them to better prepare and avoid unnecessary pain, conflict and emotional hardship.

Whenever I can share useful information and help individuals and families before they get into troubled waters I have done my job. It's a known fact that education and support at the beginning stages of a relationship prevent a great deal of problems occurring as it progresses. With the tools they need to recognize, address and deal with inevitable challenges, couples can deal with problems without being overwhelmed or destroyed by them.

I appreciate the time that you have taken to read this report. I would welcome your questions, and an opportunity to discuss any of this with you further.

Please contact me at [yvonne@stepinstitute.ca](mailto:yvonne@stepinstitute.ca) with any questions you may have, or to schedule a **Free 20 minute Consult or an Introductory Coaching Session** to learn more. You can also inquire about **our New Group Coaching Options** available for Singles, Single Parents, Step Dating Couples and Pre-Committed / Committed Couples that we do via Teleconference Calls by checking out this link:

<http://www.stepinstitute.ca/coaching-program-offers.php>

**Best Wishes.**

**Yvonne**

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