7 Tips for Parenting, Stepparenting & Discipline in Stepfamilies: What the Research Says

1. For many children, becoming a stepfamily is harder, and takes more time, than divorce. Age and gender make a difference:
   - Stepfamilies are generally easier for children under eight, and easier for boys.
   - They are harder for girls (including, by the way, for many adult daughters of older recoupling dads).
   - Stepfamilies are especially hard for young teen girls.
   - More vulnerable children will find stepfamily life more difficult, and may need much more time for adjustment, and more alone time with their parent. Ie, children with more losses, tighter loyalty binds, who have experienced more transitions, who are more vulnerable in other ways (a very introverted child, a child on the spectrum, a child with bipolar, a child with especially challenging learning disabilities).

2. Stepfamily structure divides parents and stepparents.
   - Stepparents everywhere seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren.
   - Parents everywhere seem to want more loving and understanding for their children.

3. Hands down, “authoriTATIVE parenting” is best for children on very measure imaginable.
   Authoritative parenting is both loving and firm:
   - Authoritative parenting is both loving: Authoritative parents are responsive, warm, and empathic.
   - And firm: AND authoritative parents calmly set moderately firm limits. They make developmentally appropriate demands for maturity.

4. The guideline for stepparents is, “connection before correction.”
   - Until and unless stepparents have forged a caring, trusting relationship with kids, the parents need to retain the disciplinary role.
   - Once stepparents have forged a caring relationship, they can move slowly into an authoritaTATIVE (loving and moderately firm) disciplinary role. This very often takes years, not months! It is more common, and may come more quickly with younger children than with older children.
   - In many healthy thriving stepfamilies, stepparents do not have a disciplinary role.

5. AuthoriTARIAN parenting by stepparents is almost always toxic.
   - Authoritarian parenting is hard (not loving or empathic), and not loving.
   - Authoritarian parenting often uses negative labels (“You’re lazy.” “You’re a brat.”) rather than calm requests: “Would you take out the garbage please.”

6. Meanwhile, stepparents have input, parents have final say.
   - Successful stepparents do work as a team, even though they do not feel the same way about many issues.
   - Often stepparents can help parents to firm up a bit. Parents can help stepparents to soften up and develop more understanding.
   - Still, until stepparents have a caring trusting relationship with their stepchildren, stepparents do not directly discipline. Stepparents have input. Parents have final say about their own children.

7. Successful stepcouples face the same challenges that struggling stepcouples do.
   - Struggling stepcouples criticize, blame, & avoid. (Gottman’s “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling)
   - Successful stepcouples have better interpersonal skills. They communicate constructively about parenting differences with kindness and caring.
   - Successful stepcouples use some version of “Soft/Hard/Soft” when bringing up parenting differences.
   - Successful stepcouples repair when there is a glitch.