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Stepbrother + Stepsister = Trouble

When Hormones Rage in Stepfamilies With Teens

By Lisa Cohn

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You're the parent of a healthy teenaged boy, and you just married the parent of an attractive teenaged girl. The teenagers are suddenly living in the same house together. They're checking each other out and soliciting opinions from friends about how they should interact with this appealing member of the opposite sex.

"Any healthy teenage boy thinks, 'She's cute, and we live together. What are my buddies going to think?'" says Margorie Engel, Ph.D., president and chief executive officer of the Stepfamily Association of America, based in Lincoln, Neb. "And she's thinking, 'He's cute, and he's nice, and should he be my boyfriend?'" They are conflicted about what their relationship can or should be."

In traditional families, natural taboos generally prevent teenagers from experimenting with sex: Boys know they shouldn't get involved with their sisters, says Engel. Sometimes teens who have been living with stepsiblings for many years instinctively feel these taboos. But in new stepfamilies, such taboos don't exist. When teens' hormones are raging, the teenagers can become confused about how they should interact with opposite-sex stepsiblings – and even with stepparents. That's especially true if they're feeling pressure from friends to become romantically involved with their steprelatives, Engel says.

Clarify

Parents in stepfamilies and dating single parents should be aware of the potential for sexual attraction between stepsiblings. They need to clarify and communicate their values about how they want their teens to behave, and should take steps to prevent their teens from becoming romantically involved with one another, experts say.

Sexual relationships between teenaged stepsiblings can lead to long-term pain, says Patricia Papernow, Ed.D., a psychologist in Hudson, Mass., and author of the book, *Becoming a Stepfamily* (Analytic Press, 1993). That's because family members can't simply walk away from one another after a breakup. They'll be forced to face each other again and again at family events, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

"I had a patient who had a relationship with a stepsibling as a teenager," Papernow says. "That person is now an adult. The relationship was devastating for my patient. The couple broke up, and the person couldn't tell anyone what had happened. The stepsiblings were thrown together over and over again in the same family. No one knew how they were suffering."

To help stepteens avoid such painful experiences, parents should, first of all, be clear about their expectations. It's helpful if all the parents in an "extended stepfamily" – both sets of biological parents and all stepparents – agree on their values about sex and attraction, says Peter Gerlach, MSW, a therapist who specializes in stepfamilies in Oak Park, Ill. In some rare cases, parents may feel that it's OK for stepsiblings to become involved with one another, given that they're not related by blood, he says. That may be especially true of stepsiblings who don't live together on a day-to-day basis.

"Some parents may think if stepteens act sexually with one another, it's no different than teens living in separate homes," he says. However, given the potential for long-term pain, most experts recommend that parents discourage sexual relationships between stepsiblings.

Communicate

Talking about sex to teens is not always easy, though, says Papernow. To communicate their values about this issue, parents should consider making "public service announcements," she says. This type of communication doesn't require the teens to respond directly, but lets teens know how parents feel about a particular issue.

"You might say, 'We have a lot of people from different families of different sexes, and here's how we will handle it,'" says Papernow. If new stepparents aren't sure about their values, they ought to visit with a counselor to establish a plan for their family that addresses such issues, says Stacy D. Phillips, a family law attorney with Phillips, Lerner and Lauzon LLP in Los Angeles. **"You need a plan for creating a whole new family, and you need to decide what the rules and boundaries will be," she says. "When you have teens, you need to impose new boundaries on kids whose hormones are raging."**

The stepfamily plan should focus on providing for privacy, says Papernow. That may mean ensuring opposite-sex stepsiblings don't share bathrooms, she says. "If there's a way for 15-year-old boys and their stepsisters not to share a bathroom, absolutely," Papernow says. "Sometimes there isn't, and you could make a schedule about who gets to use a bathroom when."

Papernow notes that many stepfamilies don't consider creating separate private spaces for stepsiblings in houses; they often try to "blend" kids together in an effort to create a "traditional" family. "People have the wish or idea, 'If we are thrown together, we will be one big blended family,'" she says. "That can exacerbate the tension. It doesn't support what people need to create a stepfamily. The sexuality issue makes it too hard."

Positive Steps

Rather than insisting on acting like a traditional family, it's a good idea to treat steprelatives like "guests" when you're trying to decide how family members should be clothed at home, says Papernow. That means teens and adults should embrace modesty. "People need to be fully clothed, not running around in towels," she says.

In other efforts to keep teenage hormones in check, parents should avoid creating opportunities for stepsiblings to experiment with sex, says Engel. Don't leave teenaged stepsibling alone at home together, she says. "Don't ask a 15-year-old boy to baby-sit for his well-developed, 11-year-old stepsister," she says. "Don't give them the room and space to experiment, especially if they feel pressure from their peers."

Engaged single parents may even consider delaying their wedding if they suspect sexual attraction between their teenagers, Engel says. Parents should take such steps to help ensure their teenagers don't get involved in relationships they'll really regret later and that could cause the whole family pain. However, parents should also understand that adult stepsiblings sometimes fall in love with one another, and when your children and stepchildren are adults living outside your home, that's their decision.

"There's nothing wrong when adult stepsiblings suddenly discover they love each other," Engel says. "I have heard of quite a number of cases of this."

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