

Step-Family Perspective

Who's on the Inside? Who's on the Outside?

By Judy Graybill



Remember the movie, *The Outsiders*? It's about 2 teen-age rival gangs, The Greasers and The Socials. The story is told from the viewpoint of The Greasers. There are about a dozen Greasers who are all friends with each other. Yet, they are considered to be outsiders of the community, particularly The Socials. Each gang dresses and acts different than the other. Within each gang, everybody is an insider; but to everybody else they are an outsider.

We can all relate to these categories as we've had similar categorized groups in high school. In my high school, there were the yuppies (preppies), nerds (smart computer geeks), jocks and cheerleaders, skaters, and stoners. Each of these groups were outsiders to all other groups. Yet, within each of the groups, everybody was an insider. Insiders share stories and secrets with each other. Their comfort level is so high that they can just be themselves. Regardless of what they say or how they act, they are accepted. If they do something wrong, the other insiders easily find it in their hearts to forgive and be "buds" again. Although there is some interaction between people of different groups, it is minimal. The interaction usually doesn't progress to a "friendship". Hence, they remain outsiders to each other.

Every once in awhile, a person from one group will befriend somebody in another group. When that happens, the friendship is kept secret for a long time because each person knows the other will probably not be accepted into their circle of friends. These 2 people become insiders to each other, and their respective group, but remain outsiders to the other person's group. Eventually, one or both may be included and possibly accepted as an insider to their respective group. If so, it usually does not go smoothly. It is a rough transition wrought with arguments and stress over a long period of time first. This is an example of human nature and is similar to what happens when a stepfamily forms.

Two adults meet and form a relationship. They interact with each other's children. Everybody gets along fine. There is seemingly no problems. When they think the time is right, they decide to move in together and join families. Suddenly, problems arise out of nowhere. There is an underlying thought in the air of how this could happen when everybody got along fine before moving in together. The answer is simple: They haven't transformed from an outsider to an insider yet.

It takes a long time for the step parent to transcend into being an insider. He/she has not shared in past family traditions, vacations, and memories. There is evidence in every aspect of life from the foods eaten at meal time, family photos around the house or in albums, and the lack of insider knowledge of the significance of family mementos and memoirs. This feeling of the step parent being an outsider is felt by both the step parent and step children. Ironically, the biological parent often doesn't sense it.

Inherent to being an outsider, there is a lack of understanding of why people on the inside do or say certain things. This is simply due to the fact that he/she wasn't around when the things were said or done for the first time. Furthermore, things are done very differently in his/her past family. Hence, the family insiders also don't understand why the step parent says or does certain things. Because they are all human, they have a tendency to not accept that which is different. When things go wrong, blame is often automatically applied to the outsider. The step parent sometimes attributes blame to the step kids, whereas the step kids attribute blame to the step parent. It's not easy for somebody to forgive an outsider. Again, this partly stems from lack of understanding and acceptance; but, it is also due to the nature of each person being an outsider to the other.

Learning to accept that which is different takes a lot of time and effort. Sometimes it also takes a third party (a different outsider) to help bridge the learning curve of gaining acceptance. Once genuine acceptance for each (step) family member is achieved, there is a foundation for the step parent to start becoming an insider.

Please keep this in mind within your stepfamily. If some family members are not getting along with each other, it is probably because they still feel like an outsider to the other. Becoming an insider does not happen over night. Not only does it take a long time, but a lot of effort too. Genuine acceptance of the outsider's behaviors and things he/she says is the first step into becoming an insider. It sets the foundation upon which all other aspects of a healthy functional stepfamily can be built.

Judy Graybill, The Stepfamily Coach

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