Step- Mothers, Facts and Myths

This information is on step parenting/adoption, but it will apply to any relationship where the biological mother is not in the picture – i.e., grandparent.

The absence of the biological parent leaves the child with a number of special problems including: (1) having to deal with her sense of loss and rejection without the necessary emotional tools and support; (2) needing to idealize that parent in order to preserve the bond that has taken a hit from the abandonment; and (3) feeling extremely guilty when having positive feelings toward the stepparent. This is precisely your stepdaughter’s situation. If she has feelings of affection toward you, then it signifies to her that she has let go of her mother. If she feels anger at her mother for abandoning her, the anger further distances her from the mother that isn’t there thus making the loss more permanent. It’s a no-win situation for her that leaves you in the unenviable position of becoming the new object of anger since the biological parent is not available. As the substitute parent, you have the dual role of symbolizing the loss and serving as an emotional container for the rejection your stepdaughter feels.

My suggestion is to work with her on verbalizing her confusion and conflicted feelings. You are right in maintaining the rule of no disrespect, but during times when she is not in conflict with you, you could approach her and try initiating a conversation about what it feels like to be without her mother. By helping her talk about this, you can form a better alliance with her without her feeling that you’re trying to take her mother’s place. Depending on how well these conversations go, you could also encourage her to talk some about the confusion involved in having both a mother and stepmother. If you have personal examples to use, that would be helpful. Her father’s involvement in some of these conversations is recommended as he is the link to the family that once was, and as such offers an emotional bridge for his daughter in mourning the loss. Counseling for your stepdaughter might be helpful as well as for you and your husband to provide some hands on assistance in working through the situation.

School-Going Children

From the ages of 7 to 12, a child’s social world expands beyond just family members and friends. They interact with more people and may be influenced by them. At this age a child will interact with more people and may be influenced by their thoughts and actions.

They also become increasingly capable of understanding the concept of being adopted. As young as age 3, they may start to ask, "Why did my birth mother give me away?" The people whom they meet may not be sensitive in their use of language and the adopted child may feel hurt or confused in the process. At times, they may have questions about their birth parents and the adoptive parents can let them know that they are not alone with these feelings and that it is appropriate for them to express such feelings.

Adopted children may also compare themselves unfavorably to children who are not adopted. While "testing" limits is something that occurs throughout the development of a child, adopted children who feel they might have already been "abandoned" by their birth parents may feel a greater need to test the love and support of adoptive parents. Hence, they may be rude to adoptive parents or reject them.

However, the adoptive parents should also set limits as to how the child chooses to react to his or her feelings. For example, should the child, after a fight with his or her parents, want to run off and look for his or her birth parents, the parents should
guide and instruct the child in a non-antagonistic way. Ways to deal with this situation should be planned before they arise. This process is transient in most cases, but if not handled properly, could jeopardize the relationship between the child and the adoptive parents.

In essence, attachment is a life-long process that can shift and change over time. Adoptive parents are encouraged to be patient and creative during the initial phase of parenthood and to remain optimistic to the changes that can happen in the relationship.

If the child is suffering from grief and confusion and the adoptive parents are unable to address the child’s concerns fully, it would be advisable for the adoptive parents to seek professional help. They can do so by attending parenting classes or counseling sessions with the child.

Karen S. Headlee
3406 Palm Beach Blvd.
Ft Myers, FL 33916
kheadlee@ufl.edu

UF
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
IFAS Extension
Lee County
Family and Consumer Sciences