

Stepparenting

What Works

www.stepfamilies.info

You're in a relationship with someone who has children. You know how to parent—after all, you were parented. You may even be a parent yourself. Yet, things are not running smoothly and you can't figure out why. Usually it is because we try to apply first family roles and expectations to stepfamilies. Doing this can often set us up for failure because there are important differences between stepfamilies and first families, especially in the beginning. The following are important recommendations and considerations that should help you in your stepparenting.

Develop realistic expectations for a stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Don't expect instant love from stepchildren. You can expect *respectful* behavior and your partner should help you emphasize this, but you cannot expect a child to care for you the way they care for a parent that they have spent many years with. In turn, behave respectfully towards your stepchild by acknowledging his/her feelings, concerns, and desires. Modeling this behavior usually results in a stepparent being treated respectfully.

Stepparent enforces the rules of the house.

Parenting usually includes having disciplinary power. *Take your time with this – especially with older children and teens.* The biological parent should remain the primary disciplinarian in the early stages of stepfamily development, especially with older children. When both biological and stepparent are present, discipline is best administered by the biological parent, until the child is ready to accept the stepparent as a disciplinarian. When the biological parent is not present, the stepparent operates much like a babysitter, or a visiting aunt or uncle. You are an adult in charge-but not a parent. You enforce the rules of the house:

"This is the rule of the house. Homework is done before television."
You can respond to "You're not my parent," with "Yes. You are right. You have a mom and a dad and I'm not going to replace either one of them. You and I are going to get to know each other a bit at a time. Meanwhile, though, I'm the adult in charge here tonight, and the rule is no TV until homework is done."

As children get more comfortable, a stepparent can become more of a primary disciplinarian. Follow the child's lead—**do not force parental status**. *As time goes by, you and your partner can help the children to understand that just as a parent can have more than 2 children and care for each in a special way, so can a child have more than 2 parents and can respect and care for each in a special way.*

Discuss your role with your partner.

Stepparents sometimes feel pulled to step in as "savior" for the parent who has been having a hard time with the children, taking over to provide order and discipline. As discussed in #2, children are often not ready for a stepparent in a disciplinarian role, so this is usually doomed to failure.

Sometimes stepparents see their partners as too easy on the children and want to enforce stricter discipline in the home right from the beginning. A discussion is necessary. Biological parents need to take time to hear and understand the stepparent's input, which may represent a very different (usually more disciplinarian) point of view. Stepparents need to take a more gentle, non-judgmental stance, and to hear the bio-parent's point of view, which will generally be more feeling-oriented. A helpful model is that the stepparent gives input into how things go, but the bio-parent retains the final say until children are ready.

Develop the relationships in the family one-on-one.

Although doing things "as a family" seems like a good idea, for stepfamilies, it's actually better to plan one-on-one activities to build and strengthen relationships. Try to find activities that are unique; that can become *your* activity with your stepchild—like, being the adult partner in your stepson's Boy Scout group or being the one to take your stepdaughter to basketball practices and games.

Empathize

Stepfamily living confronts family members with many differences from seemingly small ("What do you mean you don't sort the small forks from the large ones!") to major ("I can't stand being with your daughter!")
When dealing with these differences:

Spend as much energy trying to understand other stepfamily members as you do trying to get them to hear you. When your partner or a child tells you something threatening ("I'm jealous."), take a deep breath. Calm yourself. Then:

- Tell them what you do understand first before you respond with your point of view. This is not the same as agreeing. It is simply letting the other person know you hear them. It is then easier for them to hear what you have to say.
- Try to imagine yourselves in each other's position.

Acknowledge that a child may be part of two households.

In order to prevent loyalty conflicts for the children, it is important that both you and your partner do not badmouth the other parent. As long as there is no threat to the child either physically or mentally, the child should spend time with the nonresidential parent and should be supported in that relationship. Even if the other parent does not return this support, continue to validate the child's feelings for and relationship with the other parent. This approach has a much better chance of enhancing your relationship with your stepchild than if you speak badly of someone they care about. Additionally:

- Do not involve the children in conflict with the nonresidential parent.
- Do not quiz kids about the other parent's activities.
- If the other parent behaves badly, acknowledge the behavior in a neutral tone: *"Your dad does say bad things about me sometimes. That must be really confusing for you when he says those things. Most kids would find that hard. I'm sorry he feels that way. Hopefully, with time that might change."*
- Talk in a neutral tone about differences between households (Consistency of household rules is rarely achieved. Children can adjust to 2 separate rules): *"In your dad's house you can watch as much TV as you want, but you can't eat in the family room. In this house, your TV is limited but you are allowed to have snacks in other rooms if you clean up afterwards."*
- You and your partner should continually provide language that helps children sort out loyalty binds: *"You will always love your daddy, and he will always be your daddy, no matter who else you love or like. I know I'm brand new to you. We're getting to know each other a step at a time. And over time I hope maybe we'll come to like each other. Meanwhile, you do have to be civil."* (Important that bio-parent reinforces this).

Strengthen the couple relationship.

The couple relationship creates the family, yet it is the newest relationship in the family and therefore, the most vulnerable. One of the main reasons couples re-divorce is due to problems with stepchildren. To avoid becoming part of this statistic it is important that you build in time to nurture your couple relationship and that you communicate well with each other. Although this is important in every family, it is especially important in remarried families. Learn about stepfamilies together. Discuss how you each see the other's role. Discuss your parenting plan and philosophy. Take a parenting class especially for stepfamilies. The National Stepfamily Resource Center (www.stepfamilies.info) can point you towards books and professionals in your area.

Millions of adults in this country are parenting non-biological children. The numbers are growing at such a rate that estimates are that **half** of all Americans will be in a step relationship in their lifetimes. Others assert that soon stepfamilies will be the *most common family form*. Because stepfamilies are formed differently than first families and because they are usually more complex, it is important for a stepparent and their partner to think through and plan their interactions with the children in the family based on models of successful stepfamilies, not first families. These actions can help a stepfamily run more smoothly and create a healthy environment for the adults and children in the household.

Source: Papernow, 1993



National
Stepfamily
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Center

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