



# Stepfamily Living

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Living as a stepfamily can be challenging for all involved. Parents, stepparents, and children alike all have major adjustments to make. Though it can be difficult, approaching the new family dynamic with persistence, patience, and humor can help. It can also lead to a life-long attachment to new family members and a source of support for all involved.

For all family members to develop healthy expectations, it is helpful to understand some of the differences between biological families and stepfamilies. Some step parents might have unrealistic expectations that their partner's children will be close to them right away. However, the parent and child relationship is older than the new couple relationship. A previously single parent and child relationship can be very close, and as a result, a new step parent may feel like an outsider in the family. Children may feel a sense of loss when a new step parent enters their lives as it means the end of hope that their parents will reconcile. This is particularly true for young children who often blame themselves for the parent's divorce or death. Children might have a difficult time adjusting as they are often members of two different households with two sets of rules, structures, and dynamics.

## Steps before the Stepfamily

There are some steps that you can take in building a stepfamily that might make the transition and adjustment process a little easier, including some tips for new couples, tips for parents who are bringing children into the new relationship, and tips for step parents.

### Tips for New Couples

Couples who already have children need to focus not only on raising the children but also on strengthening and nurturing your relationship. Here are some things that you can do early in the relationship or before moving in together to establish a healthy partnership in your relationship and parenting:

- Spend regular time together as a couple without children present so that you can bond as a couple. Some couples find it helpful to establish regular date nights. Since couples in a blended family don't get the time before having children to grow as a couple that those in relationships without children do, it is especially important to have time together as a couple.
- Try not to involve the new person with your children until you are certain the relationship is serious. Children can be traumatized by getting close to a new person and then lose them if the relationship is not a serious one.
- Before moving in together, discuss practical concerns such as how money will be spent or shared and living arrangements. Be clear on roles and responsibilities and who is financially responsible for aspects of the household.
- Discuss the stepparent's role in parenting the children and in the new household. Agree on how you both intend to parent and adjust parenting styles if necessary before moving in together.
- Agree on general household rules, structure, and chores.
- If possible, give any children who spend time with you away from their primary home their own room and let them to decorate it to their own taste.
- Discuss any concerns or issues from the previous marriage or relationship. It is very important to understand why the previous marriage or relationship did not work out so you don't repeat the same mistake. Couples' counseling may be helpful for this.
- As much as possible, try to space out big changes and do not rush to merge your households. Although this may not suit all circumstances, it is easier for your kids to have some time of adjustment after a divorce or death. This gives your children time to accept the divorce or mourn the death and provides a space to introduce a potential step parent.

### **Tips for Parents Bringing Children into the Relationship**

A parent's new relationship may bring up feelings of loss or loyalty conflicts for children. Children might feel loss as the new relationship reminds them of their old family arrangement and ends any hope that their parents will reconcile. Children might also have a difficult time sharing their parent with a new partner.

New relationships may also create loyalty conflicts for children. They may feel that they are somehow being disloyal to their other parent if they accept a new step parent, especially if there are still unresolved differences between their parents. Here are some tips for parents that might help their children adjust to a new relationship and household arrangement:

- Make it clear that you expect that everyone will show each other respect, but don't try to force the relationship between your children and your new partner and let it happen over time.
- Don't ask your children about the other parent and what is happening in their life. Don't use you children as messengers to the other household.

- Depending on your children, you might need to maintain your role as the sole parent and disciplinarian of your children until they have some time to bond with their new stepparent. A step parent can provide input, monitor behavior, and report concerns, but should aim for a camp counselor or adult babysitter role until the child is ready to accept him or her in a parenting role. Younger adolescents may especially be slow to accept a new adult in a disciplinarian role. Though in time it is good for both of you to share parenting responsibilities, if you begin too soon, it only creates resentment.
- Spend some special one on one time with your child and continue to nurture your relationship with him or her. Discuss the importance of this to your new partner, especially if they do not have their own children and may not understand the need to spend time alone. Encourage your child to share his or her feelings and concerns about the changes and listen. Find common interests that you can enjoy together.
- If there are new step siblings, try to give all of the children a chance to meet before moving in together. If they will be sharing a room, let both children decide on how it will be set up and give some input on its decoration.
- Allow for open discussion about feelings of new children being brought into the household. Expect there may be some initial conflict or rivalry and help the children learn coping skills for how to handle this.
- Keep expectations realistic. It takes time for children to adjust and bond to a new step parent and for everyone to adjust to a new household arrangement.
- Work to form a unified position of leadership with your partner. Focus on governing as a team. This means that even if you disagree with a consequence your partner has given, you still support him or her in front of the kids and discuss differences later.
- Encourage your children to maintain regular contact with their biological parent. This shows your children that you do not intend your new partner to take the place of their parent and it reduces loyalty conflicts and resentment.
- Do not speak badly about your children's other parent in front of your children and try to maintain a peaceful relationship with your ex. It might be more difficult for children to adjust to a new household if there is conflict. Be clear with your child that the new step parent is not a replacement for their other parent.

### **Tips for New Step Parents**

While becoming a step parent can be intimidating, it can also be a rewarding experience. While it can be tempting to jump right in and try to parent your partner's children, it takes time for everyone to adjust to the new household.

Here are some tips that might help make the transition a little smoother:

- Work with your partner to set and enforce limits and household rules. It is significantly easier to enforce a rule if your stepchildren see it as a house rule rather than your own. While it might not be appropriate for you to act as the disciplinarian right away, setting boundaries can help children feel secure and loved.
- If possible, find some common interests and spend some time doing activities with your step children one on one. This can help everyone get to know each other better. Allow your step child to set the pace in the relationship.

- Show praise and affection for your step children, but take it slow. Try starting out with verbal affection, as step children may feel uncomfortable with physical affection, such as hugs.
- Respect children's need to spend time with their parent and give them space to nurture that relationship.
- Step children might compare you to their other parent or sound critical of you. Try not to take it personally or overreact.
- Give it time. Just like it takes time for your step children to warm up to you, it might take some time for you to come to know and love them too.
- Be consistent and model house rules for your children. Your stepchildren may test you for a while, and though you might feel tempted to give in a little, this only causes problems in the future with bigger issues at stake. Show them from the start that you are serious and they will respect you in the long run.
- Don't force your stepchildren to call you "Mom or Dad." You may offer, but leave it an open topic. The children may feel disloyal to their biological parent if they call their step-parent "Mom" or "Dad". Decide together what you will be called, but don't let them call you by your first name.
- Work towards a congenial relationship with your stepchildren's biological parent. Though this is oftentimes easier said than done, it proves to the kids that you aren't trying to replace this parent. A civil relationship also helps with keeping to routines, which can help children feel more secure.
- Expect to grow into a relationship. The parenting bond does not come immediately.
- Understand that the way that stepchildren react towards stepparents can be highly dependent upon the age. Younger children might have an easier time accepting a new step parent, especially if he or she seems to be a positive influence in the home. Older teens may be less invested in the stepfamily and need less parenting as they are moving toward independence. Younger teens might have the most difficult time adjusting as they are just starting to develop their independence and individuality.

## Stepfamily Living

Once a new blended family is established, family members need to work to strengthen their relationships and create lasting bonds. Each family member has different challenges and needs.

All members of the family play a part in making the family work, and so all should be involved in the beginning for setting up the household. Here are some issues and practicalities to address:

- Develop a family communicating style with steps in place for family members to express complaints and healthy criticism.
- As much as possible, work to have a civil relationship with the children's other parent. Work to handle any conflict peacefully and keep drop-offs and pick-ups of your children calm and smooth.

- Develop a way for children to communicate with their other parent and related extended family.
- Create new family traditions and rituals such as a new holiday or birthday tradition or a family game night.
- Expect some bumps along the way. It can take a few years to adjust to living together as a family.
- Keep a large family calendar in a busy area of the house where all can write down their activities and what they are responsible for to avoid last-minute crises. You may need to work out with the other parent transportation and other issues.
- If you make promises, keep to the commitment.

## Conclusion

Becoming a stepfamily has many unique challenges. Having healthy expectations and planning for the transition is only a start in building and strengthening your family. It can take years to form a cohesive family, so persevere and have patience even in tough times. You might also consider reaching out to licensed therapist or counselor for additional help and guidance. Many blended families have been helped through the objective advice of a family therapist. Through the turbulence, you can form and strengthen your relationship with your new family.