

# Managing Today's Stepfamily

If you are a member of a stepfamily, you know how difficult it can be to integrate all of the new members and adjust to the new boundaries and rules. The following ideas may help you make a successful transition during this challenging process.

**Have patience.** Establishing new families takes time. Just because you love your new partner, it is unrealistic to think that you will automatically love his or her children. It is equally unrealistic to expect that your new partner's children will instantly love you. It can be difficult to accept that even though you wish to have a relationship with your stepchildren, they may not be ready for a relationship with you.

**Expect to adjust.** With proper help and guidance, children can recover from family disruption. All children experience a difficult adjustment period following a divorce or remarriage. It takes time, patience, and perhaps some professional assistance, but most children are able to regain their emotional bearings. It is critical that the adults manage their own emotional recovery in order to help the children adjust without trauma.

**If you are part of a part-time stepfamily, you may need a longer adjustment period.** All relationships take time to grow and develop. When stepchildren see you less often, you have less time to get to know each other. This is why it may take a part-time stepfamily longer to move through the adjustment process.

**Don't expect your new family to be like your first family.** If you expect that your stepfamily will be just like the family of your first marriage, you are setting yourself up for frustration. Your new family will have its own unique identity and will evolve in its own special way.

**Expect confusion.** Forming a stepfamily is a confusing time for everyone. Think about how confusing it is for a child to become part of two new families. All of the family members—parents and children—must learn to understand the new structure and learn to navigate the boundaries.

**Allow time for grieving.** Stepfamilies begin with an experience of loss, and everyone needs to grieve. The adults' losses are not the same as those of the children, and both must be respected. Adults grieve the following losses:

- The loss of a partner
- The loss of a marriage relationship
- Lost dreams of the way they thought it would be
- They must adjust to changes that result from the divorce or death (moving to a new house, starting a new job, adjusting to changes in lifestyle, etc.)

Children grieve, too. Their losses are usually different from those of their parents:

- They may now be living with one parent instead of two.

- They may have less time with one or both parents during times of dating and remarriage.
- There may be less stability in their homes.
- They must adjust to changes that result from the divorce or death. (They may have a new place to live and go to a new school; they may have lost friends in this process.)
- They have lost the fantasy of how they wanted their family to be.

Children have an especially difficult time resolving their grief when their parents are hostile with one another, when one or both of their parents remarry, and if they have trouble accepting their new stepparents.

**Acknowledge the absent parent.** When one of the original parents is absent, the children need a special kind of understanding. An absent parent (who has died or who lives elsewhere and doesn't visit) is part of a child's past. The child must be allowed to have memories of this parent. The children who have access to both of their parents are those who adjust the best to divorce. They should be allowed to regularly speak with, visit, and write to their noncustodial parent.

**Help the kids fit in.** Children of stepfamilies belong to two households. It is understandable that they have questions about where they fit in. They are usually able to adjust to having two sets of rules as long as they are not asked to choose which is better.

**Be clear about the rules.** Ideally, both sets of parents should discuss the family rules and what will happen if rules are broken. When the adults agree on the rules, they should explain them to the children. Most successful stepfamilies have learned that the rules should be decided together in the beginning, and that the biological parent should do the explaining and disciplining. The stepparent may have more involvement after the relationships with the stepchildren have been established. All of this works best when the parents can agree to be flexible and cooperative with one another. This may be difficult immediately following a divorce or remarriage, but it is important to work toward this objective.

**Educate yourselves and seek emotional support.** Read books about managing stepfamilies, attend classes, and participate in stepfamily support groups. Seek the help of an experienced mental health professional to help you through the rough spots. Marriage and Family Therapists have specific skills and training for working with families and stepfamilies.

**Give the kids their own space.** Make physical space available for the children who don't live with you. Children need a sense of belonging. Creating a room or section of a room for visiting children will help them feel like part of your family.

**Expect them to think it's temporary.** Accept the fact that your children may expect you and their other parent to reconcile. They may fantasize that your new relationship with your partner is only temporary. This is especially true in the beginning. Find a time to sit down with the children and explain that when two people are unable to live together anymore, it doesn't mean they love their children any less. This is especially important for the parent who has moved away, since the children will inevitably feel a sense of rejection.

**Expect resentment.** No matter how good a parent you are, you will never be the biological parent of your stepchildren. It is natural for a stepchild to feel some resentment for you, especially when you are setting limits for their behavior.

**Show the children love.** Sometimes children need love the most at a time when it is the most difficult to give it to them. While bad behavior should never be rewarded, always praise children when they are behaving well.

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