



Stepfamilies

Family life — it's fun, it's exciting and it's hard work! Conflicts are part of the package. Working to resolve conflicts is one challenge all families face.

Stepfamilies and nuclear families share many of the same problems and joys. At the same time, stepfamilies are unique. In stepfamilies:



- Family members have often experienced loss. They may feel the loss of relationships, routines or dreams of what they thought family life would be.
- Family members carry strong ideas from their earlier family lives. They bring memories and feelings. They bring different styles for getting along with others.
- Children aren't a choice in a stepfamily. They're important parts of the family from the very first day.
- There's at least one other biological parent who will always be a part of the family. Even parents who have died and exist only in memory affect the stepfamily.
- Children are often members of two households.

Growing together takes time and effort. Stepfamilies must work to develop a feeling of togetherness. They must also value the needs of each special family member.

Stepfamilies bring change.

After a divorce, children and parents need time to mourn their losses. Mixed feelings are natural. Divorce can bring an end to stress and arguments, yet children and parents alike may miss the familiarity of their previous lifestyle.

For children, divorce can lead to changes in every area of life. Most children lose daily contact with one parent. Daily routines change. They may feel unsettled by the different rhythms, physical environments and expectations of two separate households as they move back and forth between their biological parents. Some children must adjust to a new neighborhood and school. They need time to settle into their new lives.

Most people don't have realistic expectations for their new stepfamilies. They often compare themselves to a perfect nuclear family – mother and father with their biological children. However, no family is perfect. Stepchildren and stepparents who strive to become this idealized family expect all stepfamily members to love each other. When “instant love” doesn't happen, they may feel disappointment, guilt, and anger.

A successful stepfamily allows relationships to grow naturally. A biological parent and child can feel close and loving. On the other hand, a stepparent isn't expected to love his or her partner's children right away - if ever. Some stepparents read child development books to better understand their stepchildren's development.

A stepfamily doesn't have to look like the "perfect" nuclear family to be happy and successful. Given time, stepfamily traditions and togetherness can grow.

Stepparents and biological parents must support each other.

If a couple decides that the stepparent should share in the disciplining of children, the stepparent must first develop a trusting relationship with the stepchildren. It may take three to four years before children see a stepparent as an authority figure. It's very important that the biological parent consistently try to support the stepparent in this new role.

Parents may feel caught between loyalties to their biological children and the desire to please their new partners. Yet, the adults in the family should present a united position. Remember, adults must keep control over how family decisions are made. Sometimes, they may let the children make the decision. Other times, they may decide that a biological parent and his or her children should make a decision. For other decisions, the family as a whole or the parents may decide. The parents need to communicate so they provide the leadership to keep the newly formed family stable.

Children often have two homes and two lifestyles.

Children usually will have very strong pulls toward both biological parents. They want to spend time with both and in most cases benefit when they do. Children also may be more accepting of stepparents if they don't feel cut off from biological parents and/or other family members.

Children may feel guilty about wanting to be with both parents. A parent should be direct in telling his or her children it's okay to enjoy time with their other biological parent and stepparent.

When children travel between two households former spouses must communicate often. They must work out details for visiting rights, schedules, holidays, financial problems and their children's reactions to living in two households. This can be difficult. Former spouses should keep their conversations business-like and stick to discussing the children. Adults should never tell children to pass a message to the other household.

Biological parents and stepparents also must remember the many changes children face when moving from one home to another. A child may have a different seat at the table, a different bedtime or different chores. A child may be the oldest child in one home and the middle child in the other. Parents should give children time to adjust after changing homes.

Stepfamilies bring special advantages.

Remember the positive side of stepfamily life. Stepsiblings often develop close friendships and benefit from having new caring adults in their lives. Living in a home where parents love and support each other teaches children about caring relationships. A parent who is happy in his or her marriage can share with children in new ways.

Living in a stepfamily can teach all family members about flexibility. It can provide children a variety of new experiences that encourage independence and maturity. Stepfamilies may not notice these positive changes since they develop over time. Taking time to look for the positive can be rewarding for all members of the family.

Important points to remember:

- It takes time to create a comfortable stepfamily atmosphere. Some research shows it may take three to four years or more.
- Don't expect stepparents and stepchildren to love each other immediately. Give them time to build relationships.
- Spend time together and create some goals as a family, but also create opportunities for individual family members to spend time together. Getting to know each other is important.
- Be sensitive to the needs of children living in two households. Give a visiting child his or her own space to feel a part of the family. This space may be a special drawer, closet or bedroom.
- United parents strengthen families. Parents can handle family conflict and decisions more effectively when they support each other.
- Realize that family life won't be smooth all the time. Be patient with your spouse, your children and your stepchildren when difficulties occur. Develop your communication skills. Children need your help to learn how to behave in this new family. Your spouse needs your support to find his or her role and cope with family demands. You will need to let your family know how you feel and what you can and can't do.
- Try to create businesslike arrangements with your former spouse's household. Communicate directly about schedules and arrangements for the children rather than asking children to carry messages for you.
- Find personal time for you.
- Make time for you and your spouse. Couple time is as important as personal and family time.
- Find help within your community if you need to discuss your stepfamily concerns. The stress of trying to get several people to live together successfully can be overwhelming.

Sources: Papernow, P. (1993). *Becoming a stepfamily: Patterns of development in remarried families*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

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