
Children in Stepfamilies

“Nancy, I’m tired of picking up after you. You don’t see Carl or your Dad messing up the house.”

It isn’t unusual for parents to get after kids to pick up or do their chores. Yet if Nancy is a stepchild in a new stepfamily, this statement may cause hurt feelings and anger. Nancy may be accustomed to living alone with her father. He didn’t mind her leaving her toys around the house. With a new stepmother and stepbrother, there are new rules and responsibilities. Nancy may feel unsure about how to act. Like most stepchildren, Nancy faces special stresses and confusion.



Traditional families usually have a history of good times to help them weather the hard times. Stepfamilies often don’t have this advantage. Both divorce and remarriage bring changes for all family members.

Understanding the stresses stepchildren face is important. Adults who understand the special fears and feelings of children can begin to create a comfortable stepfamily household. Consider the following stresses of stepchildren.

Stresses stepchildren experience

Stepchildren may worry and wonder, “Where do I belong?”

Often, children in stepfamilies have lives filled with changes. By the time they become part of a stepfamily, many children have already been part of two or more households. Children can adjust to changes in their lives, but they are usually one year or more behind their parents. When a parent is ready to remarry, children may just be getting used to their single-parent home.

Stepchildren may wonder, “How will I fit in?”

Children often have to accept both a new adult and new stepsiblings when they enter a stepfamily. A child who as the “youngest” may now be a “middle” child. He or she may be in a busier, more crowded house with new rules and routines.

These changes can make children feel confused and helpless. Children may accept stepfamily life one day and reject it the next. Age, gender and temperament all make a difference in how children adjust.

Stepchildren may feel they should instantly love all the members of their new family. This myth can lead to disappointment or guilt. Relationships take time. If stepparents and stepchildren develop their relationships in their own way, over time, friendships can grow.

Discipline The hardest adjustments for children often involve discipline. At first, biological parents should be in charge of discipline. New rules and chores bring confusion. Children are familiar with the discipline style of their parents.

Children also will be more likely to accept a stepparent if he or she does not step in as an authority figure. The stepparent can monitor his or her stepchildren, be the adult in charge when the biological parent is not present, and be involved in setting household rules and limits.

Partners can discuss in private what they want and expect from children in their home. This way they can remain united in decisions about the family.

To help your child adjust to changes:

- Encourage your child to talk about concerns and fears. Accept these feelings and help your child understand the needs of other family members.
- Try to look at your child's world from his or her point of view. Consider each child's history, values, age and developmental stage. You may then begin to understand why he or she reacts in a certain way.
- Discuss discipline and other important decisions with your partner. If you are united in your decisions, your children will feel more secure.

Children have experienced many losses.

Children in stepfamilies face the loss of daily contact with one parent through death or divorce. They have lost a familiar home and in some cases, a neighborhood and friends.

When a parent remarries, children often fear losing that parent or his or her love. In the case of divorce, many children hang on to the hope that their biological parents will get back together. A remarriage may force children to give up this dream.

When losses are severe, it's more difficult for children to accept the changes that come with the new marriage. For example, older children often feel losses more strongly. They have set ideas about what their families should be like.

Children with little or no contact with a biological parent may feel a greater loss than those who maintain contact with both biological parents. Biological parents and stepparents may feel frustrated if children react to a remarriage by becoming withdrawn or by acting out. However, children need time, understanding and patience.

To help your child cope with loss:

- Recognize losses in your child's life.
- Understand that contact with both biological parents is important for your child.
- Help your child understand the perspective or viewpoint of other family members.
- Don't be surprised if your child expresses a hope that you and his or her other biological parent get back together. It's a common fantasy.
- Accept your child's feelings about a remarriage and understand that they may change over time.
- Help your child keep in touch with grandparents. Children who have had loving relationships with their grandparents and other extended family members need to maintain those ties.

Children also experience guilt

Children often feel responsible for their parents' divorce. A child also may feel guilty about his or her divided loyalty. For example, when she's with her mother, a child may miss her father. Or, she may fear that liking her stepmother will hurt her biological mother's feelings. When these feelings are not expressed and dealt with in healthy ways, children feel badly about themselves and others.



It's sometimes difficult for children to experience positive relationships with both biological parents and stepparents. This is especially hard if the two biological parents are still angry with each other. Confused and angry children may act out. Their behavior may be difficult to tolerate or handle. Parents must remember a child's feelings are behind these behaviors.

To help your child with guilt feelings:

- Discuss and acknowledge feelings and clear up any misunderstandings that may exist.
- Tell your child it's all right to enjoy spending time with his or her other biological parent and stepparent.

Children may feel stepsisters and stepbrothers are rivals

Building relationships with stepsiblings can be difficult for children. Ages of children may influence their relationships. For example, stepsiblings are sometimes very far apart in age and have no interests in common.

Stepchildren who are the same sex and close in age may see themselves as rivals. They may feel in competition for attention and worry about fair treatment. For teens, space and privacy are important concerns. They may find it difficult to share a bedroom or bathroom with a stepsibling.

To help stepsiblings build relationships:

- Praise and encourage signs of cooperation between stepsiblings.
- Avoid comparisons. For example, "Your stepbrother is so good about cleaning his room; you could learn from him."
- Don't overreact if children accuse you of favoritism. Take the time to understand their feelings. Acknowledge the feelings and clarify the reasons for your decision or actions.
- For instance, "It sounds like you think I'm not treating you fairly. But, Sally is three years younger and a foot shorter than you. It would be dangerous for her to mow the lawn."
- Respect your children's needs for privacy. You may need to find creative ways for children to have space and time to themselves.

Age makes a difference

Change is difficult at any age. It's very important to know how to talk to children of different ages about family changes. In general, a young child adapts more readily than an older child, but children of all ages will react to a new lifestyle.

The young child

Young children haven't developed enough to understand the complex changes in their families. They may wonder, "Will Mommy still love me if she doesn't live with me?" Parents are very special to young children. They often react strongly to the feelings and behavior of adults.

- It isn't unusual for young children to regress or to act younger when they're under stress. A child may again wet the bed, wake up at night, or cling to Mom or Dad.
- Talk to him or her about what's happening within the family. Keep your explanation and language simple.
- Repeat and remind him or her of changes or plans you have already discussed.
- Try to set up a consistent and predictable routine and keep to it. Prepare your child for any changes in routines ahead of time.
- If you are confident and happy with your plans, most likely your child also will feel comfortable about them.
- Send a child's special item, such as a blanket or a stuffed animal, when your child visits with your ex. It will smooth the transition and comfort your child.
- Crying and clinging are normal for a young child who's confused or upset. Your child needs comfort, reassurance and encouragement.

The school-aged child

School-aged children from six to 12 years old pick up family tensions very easily. Some school-aged stepchildren suddenly have trouble in school. Reading or math skills may worsen. Some children withdraw from activities or friends. These are signals that a child is having trouble coping.

School-aged children need encouragement to talk about fears and concerns. Older school-aged children may feel ashamed. They may worry that others will make fun of their new family situation.

- Tell your child about plans that affect him or her. Involve children in family discussions and decisions whenever possible.
- Let your child know you love him or her all the time - even when you're angry.
- Make sure your child understands he or she didn't cause your divorce or the death of a biological parent.
- Your child may feel insecure, so keep plans and promises. If plans must be changed, explain why to your child and listen to his or her feelings. Encourage your child to share both positive and negative feelings. Let your child know all these different feelings are okay. If your child becomes withdrawn or aggressive, explain that you accept his or her feelings but not the behavior. Talk about acceptable ways to express angry feelings. For example, a child may bounce a basketball, run around the block, pound nails into an old block of wood or tell you about his or her frustrations. Allow your child as many choices as possible within your household. Choices may include when to call his or her biological parent, what to eat for breakfast or how to spend an allowance.
- Talk to your child's teacher about the stress your child might be experiencing. Get help for school-related problems.

The adolescent

Teens are learning to be independent. They often swing between wanting to be looked after and wanting to be on their own. If the teen was part of a single-parent family, he or she may have had more responsibility and more freedom.

It's extremely difficult to leave this "young adult" role and be considered a "child" again. Teens may also feel uncomfortable seeing their parents in new romances because they are concerned about their own developing sexuality.

Teens often confide in their friends when they feel confused or angry. Many stepparents never become close to their teenage stepchildren. Others may become friends or listeners without taking on any parenting responsibilities.

Stepfamilies that create working relationships are successful even if they don't act like "traditional" families. Include your teen in family decisions. This may mean allowing your teen the opportunity to decide how involved he or she wants to be in certain stepfamily activities.

Tell your teen that his or her thoughts and feelings are important to the family. Encourage teens to share their feelings. Listen and accept these feelings. Remember, accepting feelings doesn't mean you must accept a teen's behavior.

Source

Adler, F. (1999). Stepfamily Association of American Training Institute. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County. Children, Youth, and Family Programs.

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