
Stepfamilies: Help Children Adjust to Stepfamily Life

One of the best ways for adults to help their children adjust to stepfamily life is to avoid having arguments in front of their children and stepchildren. Children may feel guilty, believing they have caused an argument. They may fear losing contact with a biological parent. They may worry that their stepparent and biological parent will divorce.

Here are some additional ways to help children adjust:

- If possible, allow children to spend time with both biological parents and stepparents. Spending special, fun times and “talk” times will help relationships grow. Children will gain trust in both their parents and stepparents.
- Choose family activities that are new to all family members and include everyone in the activity. If mom and daughter are good at bowling and stepdad isn’t, find an activity all three members are good at so no one feels like an outsider.
- Provide children and stepchildren with their own space. You may set aside a drawer for clothes, a shelf for schoolbooks or a separate bedroom. Having personal space helps children feel at home. Keep other siblings and stepsiblings out of this private, personal space.
- Remember, children often test parents and stepparents by misbehaving or talking back. They “act out” to make sure adults in their lives really love and want them. Have only a few rules, but enforce them with consistency and love. Try to treat all children fairly when enforcing rules, and giving rewards and responsibilities.
- Let children and stepchildren know they aren’t responsible for making the new marriage work. That is the parents’ responsibility.
- Talk directly to your ex-spouse. Don’t place children in the role of messenger.
- Don’t criticize your ex-spouse in front of your children.
- Praise, encourage and respect your children and stepchildren. Give positive words and hugs or pats on the back throughout the day. Say thank you and please.
- Do fun activities with your children and stepchildren. Play cards, read, play sports, visit a museum, go for a walk or bike ride.
- Allow children to adjust after coming from their other home. This may mean allowing some quiet time or giving a gentle reminder about a rule or expectation. A transition ritual may be even more helpful.
- You may stop for a snack after picking your child up from his or her other home. This will give a parent and child time to discuss feelings and catch up with each other.
- Allow children to have contact with their other home. Making phone calls or going back one night for dinner may help. Contact can lessen a child’s fear that he or she is missing out on family activities.



- Expect children to take some responsibility around the house. Keep chores appropriate for a child's age and ability.
- Stepparents should develop a friendly relationship with stepchildren before acting as a disciplinarian. This takes time!
- Physical displays of affection between a biological parent and a stepparent may make children feel uncomfortable. Be discreet.
- Hold family meetings to solve problems. Talk to children and listen to their opinions. You may want to discuss issues like a limited budget, family rules, household responsibilities, homework, sibling/stepparent relationships, modesty standards and appropriate dress.

Remember the steps to problem-solving:

1. Define the problem
2. List possible solutions
3. Identify the positive and negative outcomes or results of each possible solution
4. Rank the solutions and choose the most desirable one.

Sources

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