

PARENT Talk



Build a Strong Stepfamily

A stepfamily is formed every time a parent remarries, even if the children do not live with the parents all the time. Sometimes called “blended families,” stepfamilies are different from first families.

Each family member takes on a new role when a stepfamily is formed. Understanding the possibilities and the problems surrounding stepfamilies is a step toward bringing a second family together.

New families have special opportunities. A stepfamily is a chance to share a new parent and possibly new brothers, sisters, grandparents, cousins, other relatives, and friends. Stepchildren may meet new people and experience new lifestyles, hobbies, and skills. Building new family traditions to celebrate is very special.

Children in stepfamilies experience many feelings: sadness and grief at the end of the single-parent family, fear that the stepparent will disrupt the relationship with the first parents, confusion over the roles of parents and stepparents, anger, and resistance to a new family. The way parents in stepfamilies deal with emotions affects everyone.

Be realistic about relationships

Sometimes a stepparent feels pressure to develop a good relationship with the child. Stepmothers often have unrealistic expectations of being a “super mom”. This can cause a child to feel pressure and may result in shows of anger. Stepfathers may try to become instant authority figures. Children may develop resentment toward this. In both cases, the stepparents may take on too much responsibility for the child’s well-being, resulting in unnecessary stress for themselves and the children.

Stepparents should allow time for relationships to develop. Some counselors suggest that stepparents treat the relationship as an aunt or uncle would treat a niece or nephew. After all, the child already has a parent, but can always use another benevolent adult who isn’t trying to mold the child. That way, stepparents can reduce their own stress by realizing they’re not responsible for making sure this child meets their standards. They’re responsible only for the food, clothing, shelter, and general happiness of the child.

Counselors also suggest that a stepparent wait at least a year before disciplining stepchildren. After a year, the new roles in the blended family will be more defined, and discipline will be more natural. This also can avoid contests of wills that can last for years in some families.

Unless children are very young, it isn’t possible for a stepparent to be seen or treated as a “mommy” or “daddy.” However, a wide range of adult/child relationships can be satisfying and fulfilling.

Stepparents aren’t replacing other parents

Just remember that you’re not replacing another parent. Sometimes stepfamilies have difficulty accepting custody and arrangements with visiting the other parent. The right attitude can help ease the tensions – for the adults and the children. A stepparent should be patient in developing a good relationship with a child. It’s important to make a special point to share time, favorite activities, and to be flexible. There is no such thing as instant love; love grows over time. Let children set the pace; there’s no rush.

Family rules and responsibilities need to be clearly understood. It is best for parents to work out expectations for chores, homework, bedtimes, dating and other issues before discussing them with children. What worked in a first family may not always work for a stepfamily. Be realistic – and be flexible. Often, there is more than one acceptable solution to problems.

Also, remember that problems and emotions need to be discussed openly to prevent blowups and to improve relationships. Regular family meetings to make decisions and resolve conflicts can be helpful. Involve children in decisions. Although everyone should participate in the process, parents must make the final decisions in conflicts.

New families are extra work but offer rewards worth the effort.

If you need more help ...

If you need more advice, call Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740 where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. ©