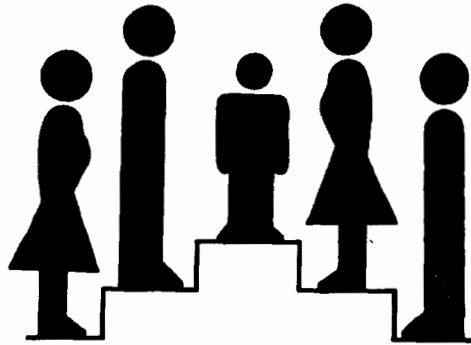




ASSOCIATION OF
FAMILY AND CONCILIATION COURTS

GUIDE FOR STEPPARENTS



So, You're A Stepparent!

That is not an easy job. Just being a parent in this day and age is hard enough. But to step in and help rear someone else's children is also difficult.

How much authority do you have?

How do you deal with the hurt, anger, jealousy, and other feelings which may exist in yourself - spouse - child?

How do you relate to the children's biological parents?

These are only some of the questions which frequently trouble stepparents. It is because these questions are so frequently asked, and are so very important, that we have prepared this pamphlet.

Society has not made your job any easier. All of us have grown up with the fairy-tale image of the "wicked stepmother" who condemns Cinderella to life as a maid. Forms and procedures in school frequently consider only the biological parents and ignore the stepparents.

Stepparents and stepfamilies are, however, a rapidly-growing group in our society. Estimates indicate that there may be as many as twenty-five million stepparents in the United States alone, including those who live in the same household with the children, as well as those who relate less often in "visitation" situations.

Stepparent, Parent and Friend

There are no ex-parents. Your stepchildren will always have two biological parents, whether one of those parents is deceased or divorced from your husband or wife. Regardless of how often or how seldom your stepchildren have contact with their other biological parent, they were first part of that biological family. They will continue to live with that influence.

Since a stepparent is always a relative newcomer to a "blended" family, your role has to be newly defined and often redefined over time. Stepparents usually have three major choices: they can be a "primary" parent, "other" parent, and friend.

"Primary" parent—"Primary" stepparents usually live in the same household with the children. Their relationship with the children is like that of a biological parent, with the same responsibilities and benefits. Children may call them "Mom" and "Dad", and accept them as full parents. Such a

relationship most often exists when the other biological parent has little or no contact with the children. This role is usually acquired over a period of some time, and is more common where the children are very young.

"Other" parent—Most stepparents probably fit in this category - and they usually have the hardest job because the children continue to have a regular relationship with their other biological parent. "Other" parents may be expected to perform many parental duties, but often do not have the acceptance or authority that usually comes with being a biological parent. Being an "other" parent requires long and sensitive conversation with your spouse, getting to know the children, and a lot of patience!

"Friend"—Stepparents who relate in a "friend" role most often do not live in the same household with the children. Older children often prefer this "friend" relationship, and usually feel more comfortable calling such stepparents by their first name. Stepparents who are "friends" may exert considerable influence on their stepchildren, but usually do so more through the special relationship they develop with the children than by filling a parental role.

All of these three roles are appropriate ones for a stepparent. Deciding which is best to emphasize for your family will depend upon your particular family situation. Stepparents can relate to their stepchildren in more than just one of these ways. Furthermore, your role will change as time goes by.

A New Kind of Family

Remember, you are not re-creating a "nuclear" family. In "blended" families, there are few guidelines or specifically prescribed roles. You will need to deal with past history, conflicting loyalties and feelings, and possibly financial strain. With a strong commitment to the marriage relationship and with the gradual involvement of all family members in solving common problems, you will, in time, have the opportunity to create a family characterized by acceptance, caring, and mutual respect. Professional counseling or mutual support from other stepfamilies may be helpful resources in your quest to fashion a satisfying family life.

Guidelines

1. Don't expect too much too soon. There is no such thing as "instant love", especially between stepparents and stepchildren. Love and relationships ordinarily develop over a period of time. More important, both you and the children will likely have some conflicting feelings that interfere with the full expression of love which may come later. So be patient, recognize that you have a number of years to develop a relationship which meets your needs and theirs.

2. Keep your marriage healthy. In stepfamilies, as in other families, one of the most important factors in satisfactory family life is a strong bond between husband and wife. Certainly the two of you will disagree about different things, including the children. There will also be times when you must sacrifice time or things you want in order to provide for the children. But care should be taken to insure that one adult does not always seem to side with the kids against the other. Provide time and space for the two of you to resolve disagreements, have fun together, and keep your marriage alive and growing.

Stepparents have a special responsibility to avoid making your spouse choose between you and the children. He or she probably feels especially responsible to the children, maybe even feeling some guilt for the breakup of the former family relationship. Respect those feelings and allow your relationship with the children to develop in a way with which your spouse is comfortable.

3. Avoid competing with your spouse's "ex". Your personality, skills, and values are no doubt different from those of your spouse's previous partner. That doesn't mean either of you is better - just different! You may feel you have to compete with the "ex" in order to gain your stepchildren's love.

Such competition might take the form of spending more money or being more understanding. Remember that you can't buy love and respect from your stepchildren. A better approach is to be yourself and don't try to out-do their biological parent. Competition is best avoided if you and the children's other biological parent can have mutual respect and effective communication. These can be developed in many small ways, such as occasional telephone contact and courtesy at visitation times, or meeting together to discuss the children. In this way the children will be able to better accept and appreciate the special talents of all parenting adults.

4. Respect differences in histories and households. A stepparent joins a family with an established history. Traditions affect everything from who gets first claim on the shower in the morning to how people show affection to each other. Keep in mind that you are the newcomer and that you will probably have to do most of

For Further Help

the adjusting at first. Also keep in mind that your spouse and the children have common memories which you do not share. Just remember that you are now creating memories that all of you will share together in the future.

Different histories continue to be made if your stepchildren are with their other biological parent and his or her family regularly. If they have different standards of discipline or religious beliefs, for example, the children may be confused or even rebellious against your standards and beliefs. If compromise is impossible between the two households, your best approach is acceptance. Explain to the children that they are part of two families, and that exposure to those differences enriches their experience. Help them understand your beliefs, but don't try to turn them against those of the other parent. Support the position that, though different, both systems of beliefs are entitled to respect.

5. **Discipline carefully.** Discipline causes the greatest number of problems for stepparents. This should not be surprising because appropriate discipline is the biggest problem for biological parents, too. Responsibility for discipline should probably rest primarily with the biological parent in the early stages of the relationship in order for your relationship with the children to develop with time and with a minimum of conflict. As time goes on, a stepparent should take a direct share of the parental responsibility for discipline. You and your spouse should discuss limitations and tactics carefully, however, and support each other in actions taken. Your spouse will need to let the children know that you are in charge when her or she is not available.

6. **Be aware of potential money problems.** Money pressures are usually greater for stepfamilies. The same income which previously supported one household may now be supporting two. Even when the other biological parent is contributing to the total, expenses may be increased because of the need for two sets of clothing, furniture, and so on. Furthermore, everyone frequently has feelings of guilt, resentment, and hurt which may be exaggerated by the way money is spent. Your best remedy for avoiding money-related problems is clear and honest communication, first between you and your spouse, and also at times with the children. A written budget which shows where the money comes from and where it goes, especially in regard to the children, can be very helpful. Remember that your decision to marry a person with children carries certain costs, including financial ones.

7. **Be sensitive to sexual matters.** The absence of a blood relationship between you and your stepchildren

(or between stepiblings if you brought children to the family), may bring heightened tension to everyday activities. Your relationship with your spouse, furthermore, may well be more physical than it was in your spouse's previous marriage. It is important to recognize these differences for stepfamilies, and to respond appropriately. It may be necessary, for example, to provide greater privacy for everyone than you might prefer, especially in the early months of your marriage.

8. **Don't be surprised by anger in stepchildren.** Children are frequently very hurt and frustrated by their parent's divorce. These feelings often come out as anger which is sometimes expressed toward the stepparent. The children may think the stepparent was responsible for their parents' divorce, and may see you as the one who prevents their reconciliation. (This sometimes causes children to try to break up the new marriage.) Or they may be angry because they think the stepparent dislikes their other biological parent. Or they may even be really angry at their biological parents and take out that anger on the stepparent. Try to understand what causes the anger, and realize that some expression of these feelings is better than keeping them bottled up inside. Acceptance of the stepparent may cause the child to feel disloyal to the biological parent not living with them.

9. **Yours, mine, and ours.** If both you and your spouse bring children to your marriage, your problems may be more complicated. Many stepparents in "yours, mine, and ours" situations strive for equality in their treatment of the children. Even if you were able to treat each of the children equally, however, the differences in your attitudes and in the children's expectations could result in occasional feelings of inequality. While equality is a commendable goal, a more appropriate and realistic goal is understanding and openness in discussing feelings and resolving conflicts.

10. **Adopting stepchildren.** Adoption should be approached cautiously and the stability of your present marriage should be well established. If the other biological parent is still alive, for example, his or her permission is usually required. Before consulting an attorney to find out what the law requires, you should talk with the other biological parent. If her or she is opposed, then you probably should drop the issue. After obtaining this information, you can discuss the idea with the children. They may be opposed because they view the move as your attempt to eliminate the parent not living with them. If they remain opposed, it is probably best not to proceed.

BOOKS:

The Stepfamily, Living, Loving and Learning, Elizabeth Einstein. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982

Living in Step,

Ruth Roosevelt and Jeannette Lofas. New York: Stein and Day, 1983

How to Win as a Stepfamily,

John and Emily Visher. New York: Dember Books, 1982

ORGANIZATIONS:

Self-help organizations offer specific assistance to stepparents. Local chapters may be listed in the phone book or in your newspaper. The central offices of these are:

Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.,
28 Allegheny Avenue, Suite 1307
Baltimore, MD 21204

The Step Family Foundation
333 West End Avenue
New York, New York 10023

COUNSELING:

Professional counseling can be useful in resolving difficult problems of relationship and adjustment. Choose a counselor carefully, asking about credentials, training in stepfamily issues and years in practice. If you need advice in choosing a counselor, you can contact the:

Association of Family and Conciliation Courts
329 W. Wilson St.
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 251-4001

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
1717 K Street N.W., Suite 407
Washington, D.C. 20006
(202) 429-1825

Other sources for advice include Family Services agencies, your family doctor, or your minister, priest, or rabbi.

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