

GRANDPARENT'S ROLE IN STEPFAMILIES

Being a grandparent is rewarding and challenging at the same time. Most grandparents relish this challenge and say there's no better feeling in the world.

Changed family circumstances, caused by divorce or even the death of a parent can mean grandparents have either a greatly increased or a reduced involvement with their grandchildren. Research suggests that most step-grandchildren consider the step-grandparent relationship important, and are eager for more contact with step-grandparents and to maintain this relationship as they get older.

Communication with the parents (your children) is essential in the initial stages, as they may need you in a different capacity than before. They may be particularly sensitive to criticism or your opinions as a result of the changes in family. Accept that the new family formation as it changes and extends all takes time to settle and there will be a role adjustment for everyone involved.

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER

- » Acknowledge that you may be disappointed, angry, delighted etc. with your adult child and his or her previous partner, following the break-up (or whatever the situation is) and accommodate for this. Seek advice from wise friends or just let yourself reflect on these feelings, rather than blaming or initiating conflict if possible.
- » Don't expect everyone in a stepfamily to bond straight away, this will take time. Allow adult children and their new partners the time to make connections in their own way. Don't expect close relationships; accept that given time new relationships will be formed.
- » Be particularly understanding of teenagers, they can feel particularly shy and awkward with new arrangements.
- » Although you are important in your grandchildren's lives, initially it may take a while before you are able to spend the quality time that you want, be patient and supportive.

Truth be told, there's nothing better than being a grandparent. All our elders know this and it is evidenced by that twinkle in their eyes. They know more than they let on – life's secrets have come to them through time, experience and patience.



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SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS

- » Grandparents can bring a lot of life experience and wisdom, but remember not to be judgemental and make too many demands – sometimes it's hard, but try to be supportive at all times.
- » Consult with all parents and stepgrandchildren about the name the grandchildren call you, don't force a particular name, ask your step grandchildren what they feel comfortable with
- » Try and be fair at all times – when giving gifts spend around the same amount on your grandchildren and your step grandchildren as appropriate.
- » Try and learn what both your new and existing grandchildren like and dislike.
- » Let the the whole family know you are there for support. Offer to take the grand children sometimes so that the parents can have some alone time.
- » Be reassuring, sometimes children just need to hear someone older and wiser say "Everything will work out in time, it will be OK".
- » Communicate respectfully at all times. Role model this communication in front of the grandchildren, with your adult child and his or her partner. Set a positive example to follow.
- » Do something enjoyable with the 'new' and extended' family on a regular basis. Whether it's the park, a dinner invite etc. make it regular so younger kids can look forward to it.

GRANDPARENTS AND FAMILY LAW

Unfortunately not all grandparents have ongoing contact with their grandchildren. However, grandparent's rights are enshrined in law. The Family Law Reform (2006) states that one of the aims of the reform is "to lessen the potential for parental separation to diminish or sever the relationship between children and their grandparents and other people who play a significant and beneficial role in the children's lives."

The Shared Parental Responsibility Act (2006) recognises that "children have a right to spend time on a regular basis with, and communicate with, both their parents and other people significant to their care, welfare and development (such as grandparents and other relatives) where this is consistent with their best interests".

If the situation is getting difficult, and things aren't working out you may want to seek legal advice, *however if you can work it out yourselves, the outcomes are generally better*. There are plenty of organisations that can offer advice (see below), or ask a friend or another relative that could act as a mediator during this tricky time.

SEEKING MORE INFORMATION

- » Read books or do a course for stepfamilies – it can make all the difference
- » See an experienced practitioner that is familiar with stepfamily dynamics. They have lots of advice and can help with communication, setting boundaries, how to define your new role, etc.

Remember it's ok to seek help when you need it:

Stepfamilies Australia www.stepfamily.org.au
or 9663 6733

Family Relationships Advice Line 1800 050 321

Lifeline 13 11 14

Raising Children www.raisingchildren.net.au

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 or
www.kidshelp.com.au

Men's Line Australia: 1300 789 978

My Mob App – a positive family communication app to stay connected to one another wherever you live and whatever your family looks like. Go to www.my.mob.com