

STEPFAMILIES

AN OVERVIEW

Starting a step family (full time or part time) comes with many differing expectations and emotions, which will be confronting and new to you. It is important that clear boundaries are set from the start so that both adults and children know and understand their roles. These rules and boundaries help everybody feel more secure, and will help children to settle into the new or changing living arrangements.

Stepfamilies vary greatly.

- › One or both adults can have a child or children from previous relationships;
- › Children or young people of different ages when joining a stepfamily;
- › One adult in the stepfamily might not have been a parent previously;
- › and the new couple might have an additional child or children together.

It is unsurprising that in comparison to a 'nuclear family' there are other emotional and practical problems for both adults and children in a stepfamily to deal with.

Nowadays approximately 20% of all Australian families have children from previous relationships.

Regardless of your personal circumstances, becoming a stepfamily is a major life change. It would be unreasonable not to expect a huge readjustment period.

These changes can bring lots of good times but often lots of challenges as well. It is how we deal with and respond to this adjustment that is really important. The key is to balance optimism with a realistic approach and to remember that the children didn't choose this new arrangement.

Looking back I gave Peter (stepdad) such a hard time, I really tested him. Now we are **actually mates** and we can laugh about it, but back then I was angry.



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The changes in children's lives are significant now they don't have their primary parents caring together for them. They have to adjust to different living arrangements and moving between households and need to find ways to get along with new people in their families e.g. stepparents and stepsiblings.

Settling in can be difficult and that is normal in stepfamilies.

Just like in any family, bonding can take some time, and of course no family is perfect! The reality is that despite your greatest efforts, the early days of a new stepfamily may not meet your expectations or run smoothly all the time. There will be days with strong alliances and then days when it all seems to flow along quite smoothly, however, be prepared that the love you show may not always be reciprocated (or vice versa), or that certain members in the stepfamily simply won't get along for some time or perhaps at all.

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER

- » All families are different, but it generally works best when children are guided and disciplined predominantly by their primary (biological) parent, rather than the stepparent. The stepparent can be a major support, and enjoy activities with the children but when things become difficult they shouldn't carry the burden of dealing with problems. Children naturally want their parent to do this.
- » At first, the adults may not get as much time as a couple together as they'd hoped, as the children's initial needs are met, the focus needs to be on them. Over time it is important that you make time as a couple but at first it may be challenging!
- » Keep in mind that stepfamilies are very different from nuclear families. Stepchildren and stepparents start in the family as strangers.

Don't expect close loving relationships between all family members. A good goal to aim for is for all stepfamily members to respect each other.

- » For part time stepfamilies try to maintain a consistent visiting schedule.
- » It will take time to adjust to the new family dynamic, lower your expectations and allow time before things run smoothly and talk to others in similar situations.
- » Communicate often, together with all family members and one-on-one discussions to reassure the children. Children look to adults to tell them everything will be OK. It is important that everyone knows what is going on.
- » Work together with your partner. Be on the same page when it comes to communication, setting boundaries, enforcing rules and discipline when and if necessary.
- » Remember children may not be able to label their emotions. It's important to encourage them to talk about their feelings. Help them to do this by talking about feelings such as jealousy, sharing and feeling loved and needed.

LET'S GET PRACTICAL

- » Sit down as a family (if some children visits are part time, ensure they are included in important family discussions) and decide together on some household rules that everyone agrees to. Display these rules so all family members can see them including; age appropriate chores, rewards and consequences if these rules are broken. Try to involve children in making decisions that affect them and the whole family.
- » Try not to indulge children who are part time or on a contact visit. It is important to treat all children equally.
- » Explain to all children that regardless of whether you see them full time or part time, that they all have the same rights as each other.

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- » Children thrive on routines, so make sure they feel part of a household by ensuring they have their own personal space, whether it is their own room or cupboards where they can keep their special things.
- » Expect differing emotions and take the time to talk with each child individually. Let children have their own time if necessary. Don't force them to 'join in'.
- » Make sure the children's school is aware of changes to their household. Arrange for the school to keep you, your partner and the other parent informed about your child's progress and any activities that require parental involvement.
- » If possible allow children to keep their normal activities such as sports, play time at friends' houses or music lessons.
- » Be understanding when it comes to children forgetting items such as clothing or homework at the other house. Living across different households is challenging for children and it will improve over time with your support.
- » Encourage children to bring a friend over to play. If this isn't possible, arrange for cousins or friends with children to come over.
- » Do not feel rejected if older children prefer to do things with their friends rather than their family on weekends. Just make sure you communicate and involve them on a regular basis.

SEEK HELP

- » Prepare for becoming a stepfamily, or if you are already in one, take the time to educate yourself more about the some of the realities of stepfamily life. Read books or do a stepfamily course – it can make all the difference.
- » See a professional that is familiar with stepfamily dynamics. They can help with things like communication, parenting and emotional skills.
- » Seek support. Join a face to face or online group so that you or your partner or other family members can talk to others and not feel alone.

Go to www.stepfamily.org.au and we can connect you to support.

It's so important to reassure children, whether they come on short visits or live with you most or all of the time that they are loved and will always have a place in your life.

Where to access further help:

Stepfamilies Australia www.stepfamily.org.au

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

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