



# Stepfamilies Tip Sheet: Overview



## Stepfamilies

Starting a stepfamily (full time or part time) comes with many differing expectations and emotions, which may be confronting and new to you. It's important to set clear boundaries from the start so that both adults and children know and understand their roles. These rules and boundaries will help everybody feel more secure, and will make it easier for children to settle into 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 can be of different ages when joining a stepfamily;
- One adult in the stepfamily might not have been a parent previously;
- The new couple might have an additional child or children together.

This can pose challenges different to a "nuclear family", but it can also provide new opportunities. The bonds formed among stepfamilies can be just as deep, if not deeper, than those of nuclear families.

You're not alone, either. 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 to not expect a 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 important. The key is to balance optimism with a realistic approach.

Also make sure to remember that the children didn't choose this new arrangement. They may struggle or feel resentful, and it's important to remain empathetic. The changes in children's lives are significant as they no longer have their primary parents caring together for them. They may need to adjust to different living arrangements and moving between households and will 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.

*"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."*

## 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 biological parent to do this.
- As a stepparent, it's good to want to be involved, but remember that your partner may have set different expectations with their children, and that the children may have different expectations or be used to different norms. Be accepting of this, and open to change.
- At first, the adults may not get as much time as a couple together as they'd hoped. However, until 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 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. Also make sure to talk to others in similar situations.

*Remember: This is the first time your children may be going through something like this, and things which seem mundane or normal to you may be a big change for them. Try to understand why your children are feeling the way they are, and be prepared for changes in behaviour.*

- 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 pay extra attention to 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.
- 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. Even adults forget things sometimes!
- 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](http://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](http://www.stepfamily.org.au)

Family Relationships Advice Line  
1800 050 321

Lifeline  
13 11 14

Raising Children  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

Kids Helpline  
1800 55 1800 or [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

