



Stepfamilies Tip Sheet: Becoming a Stepparent



I'm a stepparent... What now?

When becoming a stepparent, traditional roles often don't work well.

The primary challenge for a stepparent is to develop a unique role that works for you and the family. What this looks like will depend on the ages and personalities of the children in your stepfamily, and the time you get to spend together.

What is absolutely essential is that you and your partner rolemodel a loving, respectful and emotionally secure relationship for the children.

Couples need to make time for their relationship and have couple time on a regular basis. This can be difficult, but a strong bond between a couple builds a strong bond in a family, benefiting the children. With a strong bond, open communication and patience, you can build a successful stepfamily.

Take care of yourself

Being a stepparent can generate varying emotions and expectations. Sometimes these are exciting and rewarding, but sometimes they can test your patience and character. Be aware of these feelings, the ups and downs: satisfaction, isolation, powerlessness, anger, pride, sadness, hope, guilt, jealousy and frustration. Talk to someone or get some support about your feelings.

Remember: feelings are temporary and they do pass.

It can take time for your stepfamily to find its own routines and traditions. It can be helpful to make some rules or guidelines with your partner about your active involvement with the children (e.g. homework, discipline, providing transport etc.) and when you will stay in the background as a support.

Remember

The road to being a well-functioning stepfamily can be winding one, and you will all need good humour and endurance. But many achieve it!

Be open to negotiating and reconstructing roles, and be mindful of relationships – past and current.

Let's get practical

Supporting the children

- Be the support, but not the disciplinarian (unless there's no other option) and let the biological parent discipline their children. Research confirms that this is what children want and expect from their parents.
- Ask for respect, but be prepared to be treated differently. Don't expect an immediate bond – it can take months or years to achieve one. Just try to accommodate, understand and communicate openly.

- Consider the age of the children, where they are at, what is appropriate and a potential common interest or activity. Remember that time, interest and effort are key to developing your relationship with them.
- Try not to get caught up in heated arguments, particularly with adolescent stepchildren. Walk away, and with your partner's help, resolve the situation by discussing it together at another time.
- Sit down with the children to discuss and decide together how you will address each other. Don't expect them to call you "Mum", "Dad" or "Parent". Let them know you are not there to replace their other parent, but you will be there to support and guide them whenever they need you.
- Allow children to have alone time with their parent, whilst you take some time out for yourself and your own interests.

Seeking more information or help

- Prepare yourself for becoming a stepparent by educating yourself about the realities of this role. It can bring untold joy and lifelong relationships, even though it is undeniably difficult at times. Read books or do a stepparent program, it can make all the difference.
- Seek support. Join a face-to-face or online group so you can talk to others in the same situation. You are not alone – many people navigate being a stepparent, and many do it successfully.
- Seek a practitioner familiar with stepfamily dynamics. They can support you and your relationship, and help build your emotional, communication and parenting skills.

Where to access further information or assistance:

Stepfamilies Australia
03 9639 2576 or www.stepfamily.org.au

Raising Children
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Family Relationships Advice Line
1800 050 321

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

Lifeline
13 11 14

