



# Tips for Successful Stepfamilies: Help! I'm a Stepparent!

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Successful stepfamilies can be characterized by one word—teamwork. Both the bio-parent and the stepparent must work together in order for the stepparent to be able to find and clarify their role in the family. If the two don't come together, the stepparent's relationship with the children will be much more difficult, if not impossible. The success of the stepparent relies on how well the stepparent and the bio-parent are able to form a parenting team.

## Who Am I, and What Am I Doing Here?

Most people who are stepparents do not have a clear picture of what is expected of them as they carry out the job of being a parent. Clarifying their role in the family is an important first step toward success. However, children may openly or secretly oppose any role the stepparent may attempt to assume. The biological parent holds the keys to the success of the stepparent. There are three keys that need to be present for stepfamilies to be successful.

## Three Keys to Success

### Key 1: Declare your spouse (the stepparent) your lifelong partner.

The relationship that the bio-parent has with their children was formed long before the relationship with their current spouse. As a result, the remarriage is a weaker relationship than the parent-child relationship. Often children will, either consciously or unconsciously, attempt to resist their parent's remarriage. If the couple doesn't realize what is happening, problems with the child will create a division in the couple relationship. So, the marriage must be protected and nurtured or the challenges of raising stepchildren may likely become fatal for the marriage. It's essential that children feel their parent's love and concern for them. However, at the same time, children must learn that they are not the decision makers in the family, and that their parent and stepparent are a team.

### Key 2: Pass Power to the Stepparent.

At the beginning of the relationship the stepparent does not have the authority needed to discipline the children. Therefore, in the beginning, the stepparent must "borrow" their authority from the biological parent. The amount of authority a stepparent may possess depends on the age of the child and the history they share with the child. Research has shown that, over time, successful stepparenting passes through three different levels of authority.

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- **Baby Sitter Role.** In the beginning the stepparent relationship is much like a baby-sitter. When the parent, in front of the children, says to the sitter these are the rules that I want you to enforce, then essentially the sitter is borrowing authority from the parent to carry out the parent's wishes. The parent is saying, "If you disobey the sitter, you are disobeying me."
- **Aunt/Uncle Role.** After functioning as a sitter for some time, the stepparent begins to move into more of an aunt/uncle role. The aunt or uncle is an extended family member and as such has more authority than a baby sitter. As the relationship deepens, the stepparent begins to negotiate certain limits with the children without having to borrow as much authority from the biological parent.
- **Stepparent Role.** Finally, the stepparent moves into a "parent" or stepparent role. As the relationship grows, so does the respect that each has for the other. However, each child is different so the stepparent can be at different levels of authority with different children. The age of the child when the stepparent entered the family is an important consideration. Whereas younger children might quickly allow the stepparent to have full parental status, this may never happen with older children. It is important to remember that each child sets the pace and determines the closeness the stepparent will be allowed to obtain.

In all cases, the stepparent and the bio-parent should come together as a unified team when dealing with the children. Behind closed doors the parents should negotiate and come to a unified decision regarding appropriate behavior for the children, and the consequences when rules are broken. Because most children will quickly recognize the influence of the stepparent in the new rules, the biological parent must assume ownership of the new rules and remain strong as they deal with resistance to the changes. The stepparent should be careful to never exceed his or her level authority when enforcing the rules.

### Key 3: Build Trust in the Stepparent.

Due to stepparent's lack of history living with their stepchild, the natural love and concern for the child that a biological parent feels may not be present in the beginning. As a result, some biological parents struggle to trust their

new spouse with their children. In stepfamilies, disagreement about how to deal with the children becomes a much larger issue because the biological parent may not be sure that the stepparent truly had the child's interest at heart, or may feel that the stepparent doesn't fully understand the child.

In order to build trust, the stepparent needs to be careful how he or she expresses their criticism of their spouse's children. Most parents tend to gain some portion of their self-esteem from how well they perform as parents, and when a stepparent is overly critical of their spouse's children, then the biological parent feels like they have failed. Being overly critical or finding fault in even petty issues will almost certainly slow down the trust building process.

On the other hand, biological parents need to be open to the stepparent's outsider perspective and listen carefully to their insight. In most cases the stepparent has a deep desire to learn to love their spouse's children and to help them succeed.

Biological parents must always be vigilant regarding their children's physical and emotional well-being. In a small minority of cases, it does happen that a stepparent, live-in partner, or step-sibling may be acting inappropriately toward one of the children. Parents should always listen to their children's complaints and evaluate them for any potential danger signs.

#### **Remember:**

- Don't expect too much. Enjoy what you have and allow the stepparent and the children to grow into the relationship.
- Don't begin to discipline before you have developed a relationship with the child. Especially with older children, be a friend before you try to be a parent.
- Go slow. In the best case scenario it may take a couple of years to bond with a child.
- Be consistent with the rules. Have one set of rules for all the children (his and hers).

- If you never develop more than a coach or counselor type relationship with your stepchild, don't worry. Some children may never allow more than that, and that's alright.
- A successful stepparent team begins with a healthy marriage.

No one is perfect; mistakes will be made. However, with a few simple adjustments progress can often be made.

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