

Getting Through Step-parenting



Congratulations! You fell in love and decided to get married. Except, there is a unique twist: as part of the package: you are also inheriting someone else's children! Welcome to the role of stepparent. Parental authority is typically an extension of the depth of the relationship between parent and child. You, on the other hand, have joined the biological parent in the role of raising of his or her child, without necessarily having that same bond with the child. Often the stepparent-stepchild relationship gets off to a slow start, due to a limited emotional connection coupled with little to no shared history.



It is not uncommon for children to struggle with accepting a new person in their biological parent's life. Children who have become accustomed to having one parent may resent someone else now having a role in decisions. If the stepparent has never been a parent before, the day-to-day life of a stepfamily may be very different as well.



To insure a smoother start in this new model called "Stepfamily" it's important to incorporate some basic understandings into the design.



1) A child's loyalty to their biological parents may interfere with their acceptance of you.

Children are often emotionally torn if they find themselves enjoying a stepparent. They fear that liking you could somehow hurt their non-custodial, biological parent.



- *Keep silent if you find yourself wanting to openly criticize either of their biological parents. Your criticism will negatively impact their opinion of you.*

- *See yourself as an "added" adult in their life versus trying to "replace" or "stand in" for an absent parent.*



- *Encourage their relationship with their own biological parents and allow them to keep their loyalties with them.*

2) Let the children set the pace for their relationship with you.

The "ball" is in their court. This does not mean they have the power... it just means that whatever needs they have will largely determine the context for how they relate to you. If they are "open" to you and desire physical affection from you, then hopefully you will respond. If they opt to keep their distance, then allow for that space and do not force yourself on them. Discomfort will be part of the landscape for a while. It is no easy task to establish boundaries for this new relationship (with stepparent) while the child is still recovering from the loss of their first family.

3) Go for the "Unified Team" approach to discipline.

The hardest part of being a stepparent is determining how to set limits, teach values and enforce consequences with someone else's children. Since the stepparent starts off with little to no authority, it is a mistake for the biological parent to hand off the responsibility for child rearing and discipline to the stepparent.

A better approach is to first negotiate have

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the authority because the biological parent has put them in charge. So when any rule is broken, it is the “household’s” rule...not the “stepparent’s” rule.

Being in a relationship with a partner who has children can be both challenging and very rewarding. Remember that the children didn’t choose you, their parent did! Building your relationship with the children will take time and thoughtfulness, yet it is crucial to the success of your new relationship with their parent. ENJOY!

Dan Haycraft, MD and Meg Haycraft, LCSW of Wilmette are the founders of TWOgether, Inc. a premier educational and counseling resource for couples. **To contact them, call (847) 581-9444 or visit www.twogether.org.**

