



Stepfamilies Tip Sheet: Teamwork



How to work together in a stepfamily

Parenting in general comes with great and many expectations, fears, rewards, joy, confusion, laughter and tears. Parenting in a stepfamily, you may feel all these and then some. The roles are more complex, and the responsibilities can be more divided.

These challenges are best met when parents and stepparents are united and reach agreements on how to handle certain situations. You will all have your own style, but it is very important that parents and stepparents are on the same page when it comes to the wellbeing of the children and one another.

This means regular, positive communication and planning along with a unified or shared understanding of acceptable behaviours, behaviour management strategies and consequences for any children's misbehaviour. It is crucial that you all reassure your children that they are loved and that they will always have a place in your life.

It is also important that you are positive role-models. You can do this by cultivating caring, respectful relationships for your children (and to one another – it's hard but try!) and by learning and growing (particularly if your last relationship lacked some of these characteristics).

If you decide to extend the family and have a baby together, this can be a beautiful and exciting time, but you'll need to be considerate about the feelings of the other children when discussing the new addition to your already changing family. Expect an array of different emotions (depending on how many children) and try to ensure that all the children and/or stepchildren still feel equally special.

A few things to consider:

- Parenting as a stepparent comes with varying emotions and expectations. It can be exciting and rewarding, but more often than not, it can test everybody's patience and character. Be aware that the children can feel conflicting loyalties between their parents and stepparents.
- Stepfamilies are different to first families. The foundations are different and careful reconstruction and negotiation of roles and responsibilities is often required. Parenting within this family environment can be very challenging, but many people do it successfully.
- Your children may need to get used to a new parenting team. This can be especially pronounced if you have come out as LGBTIQ+ and the child has to adjust to a new way of doing things. Even if you were accepting and progressive prior, and even if your children are, actually experiencing it can take some adjustment time.

- Be aware that many children may not want the change and will wish for the situation to return to how it was before. This is quite normal and they are not trying to hurt you or make things difficult. However, these emotions sometimes come across in the form of unacceptable behaviours.
- It can be helpful to make some rules or guidelines with your partner about when you will have active involvement as a stepparent with your partners' children (homework, discipline, providing transport etc) and when you will stay in the background as a support. Maintaining set rules, routines and boundaries will make the parenting a lot easier.

Some practical ideas

- Aim to be fair and treat all children the same (appropriate to their age).
- Let the primary (biological) parent discipline their own children if possible. Be there as a support but don't administer the discipline (unless there's no other option). Research suggests that children naturally want their parents to discipline them if necessary.
- Be prepared to be treated differently as a stepparent – but with respect. Don't expect a bond to form straight away, this can sometimes take years, just try to be accommodating and keep communicating openly.



- If you are faced with difficult situations, try and put yourself in the children's shoes. This is a difficult exercise but if done sincerely it can raise your awareness. Remember that they are people too, and that it is their first time being their age. Becoming a stepfamily involves changes they may not be used to, and for many, it may be the biggest change they have experienced.
- Work on your parenting style. Learn some positive parenting techniques. Children thrive when they are guided and supported rather than criticised. Remember that even discipline is about learning, not punishment.
- Take some time out together as a couple, not only for some essential alone time, but also to discuss your parenting choices.
- Don't ask open ended questions to younger children, provide two options [both which you are happy with]. This ensures you get the desired result and it empowers the child as they get to make a choice.
- Try not to get caught up in heated arguments with adolescent stepchildren. Walk away and work together to help resolve the situation by discussing it at another time.
- With older children, sit down, discuss and make decisions that affect the family together. This involves them and makes them feel like their opinion is valued, giving them a sense of responsibility.

Some practical ideas for dealing with the arrival of a new baby

- Be mindful that siblings will all respond to this news differently [this will be even more profound for an only child]. Some will feel excited and others could feel jealous, angry and even threatened as a new baby can take the attention away from them.
- Reassure older children that they are loved and still equally important in your lives.
- Keep all household routines as normal as possible; the less disruption, the easier the transition will be for all.
- Keep everyone informed about what is going on, but don't make too big a deal of the pregnancy with the other children.
- Have separate play areas for older children; negotiate these areas just before the baby arrives so their things will be respected and they will still have their space.
- When the new baby arrives, involve the other siblings. If they are old enough, give them practical tasks that will help you and the baby, giving them a sense of involvement.



Seeking more information

- Read books or do a stepfamily course – 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.
- See a counsellor that is familiar with parenting and stepfamily dynamics. They can help with things like communication skills, setting boundaries and respecting others.



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

Men's Line Australia: 1300 789 978



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