



Building a new family is an exciting but challenging time. It needs a lot of time, energy and hard work. There are many different kinds of stepfamilies and each will have different strengths to build on and difficulties to overcome.

About stepfamilies

The various people involved in the new stepfamily may have very different ideas about what they want and how it will work. Some of these are not spoken out loud and can cause difficulties. Grandparents, for example, may not want your new partner's family. Teenagers may not be very enthusiastic. You and your new partner and younger children could be looking forward to it. If these feelings are not out in the open and understood they can be stumbling blocks. Plans need to be openly discussed with everyone concerned.

- Stepfamilies don't start with an empty slate. There are always losses involved. For the children, a remarriage might be the event that finally makes them give up their hopes that their parents will get back together again. This can happen even if the parents have been separated for many years.
- The biggest thing for parents (and often the hardest) can be letting go of the ties from a previous relationship. Feelings that come with separation, divorce or death are very powerful and can affect any new relationship. If you haven't dealt with these feelings, eg you still feel angry, sad or upset with your ex-partner, you need to get some professional support before you start a new partnership. This gives more chance for the new family to work well.

Starting a stepfamily

- You cannot expect your stepchildren to love you, but you can expect them to respect you, as you respect them.
- Stepfamilies, especially the children from the previous relationship breakdown, have had losses, eg miss having their parents together, may have to move to a new home, may lose their own bedrooms etc. In a new stepfamily situation, children might even lose their position in the family with the oldest or youngest child ending up somewhere in the middle.

- One of the biggest challenges is to overcome the tension that can exist between stepfamily members.
- Stepfamilies cannot be just a tight knit group (just mum, dad and the kids). There are many other people involved including former partners, their new partners and families and members of the extended families.
- Grandparents may be afraid they will lose contact with their grandchildren or their adult son or daughter.
- A new partner cannot suddenly become a new mother or father. Parenting will probably still need to be done by the children's natural parents if they are still involved with their children.
- If children have been with their parent in a single parent household for a time, they may have functioned like grown-up friends to their parent. This will be hard for them to give up, particularly to their parent's new partner.
- There may be difficulties with the children's other parent about arrangements for ongoing contact with the children.
- All of the old family rules and traditions will need to be re-looked at, as each family will bring its own expectations to the new stepfamily.
- There are likely to be ongoing changes as children move between families.
- There may be problems with loyalty. For example, children may feel it is disloyal to their other parent to become friends with the new stepparent, especially if they really like the new stepparent.
- If you have gone from being single to being a stepparent, the cost, difficulties and disruptions in bringing up children when you are not used to it, is likely to be a big change. For example, even the way children speak today is very different from what you might be used to.
- It is easy to underestimate how difficult it is to build a complicated new family. It takes years, not months, and lots of effort.

What parents can do

- Keep changes to a minimum. It can be a lot for children to manage when homes, schools and friends all have to change.
- Talk to the children and each other about your plans.
- Tell the children it will be strange at first, and will take time to get used to the new changes.
- Listen to children's feelings.
- Let the children know that their other parent who is not living with you is important and will always be their Mum or Dad. Tell them that you will still support their rights and needs to love and be with that parent.
- Never speak badly of any of the children's parents in front of the children, even though this may be hard.
- Understand the strong bond between your new partner and his or her children. Make time for them to be together.
- Make time for you to spend with your own children if you have them.
- Avoid taking all your partner's time so the children feel left out, but remember to keep time for your new partnership. There won't be a stepfamily for the children if the partnership does not work.
- Spend time building relationships with all of the children. Take it at their pace, which will be different for different children.
- Try and be flexible when plans get changed at the last minute by the other parent. Have back-up plans and don't take it out on the children.
- Try to give children some control over things that will affect them.
- Make sure that each child has some privacy even if it is only a place or space of their own in each house.
- If it can be managed, find a new place to live so it is a beginning for everyone. It will be harder for everyone to feel they belong if you live in the home of one of the previous families.
- Decide that unless the children are very young, each parent should discipline their own children and not expect their new partner to do it, especially at first. If the stepparent does the discipline and does not do exactly as the other parent would it can cause problems for everyone. However if there is a personal problem between

the stepparent and the child, the stepparent will need to deal with it. For example, if a stepchild speaks rudely to you, you have a right to say that you will not respond to that kind of talk.

- Work out what will be the new rules and traditions for your new family.
- New ways for celebrating birthdays and other special times, eg Christmas, will need to be worked out. Be prepared to make changes.
- Allow children time to sort out their feelings. There may be behaviour problems, unfriendliness or disagreements while they sort it all out.
- Keep a diary of stepfamily events. It will help you to see the progress you have made and help build the history of the new family.

Reminders

- **Stepfamilies are usually decided by two adults who want to be together. The children may not share the same feelings about it.**
- **Never fight in front of the children or stepchildren.**
- **Remind yourself why you fell in love with your partner in the first place and make time and ways to take care of that love.**
- **Keep your own individual interests as adults and support the different interests and activities of each of the children.**
- **Every family and stepfamily is unique. What works for someone else may not be what works for you.**
- **Be honest about your feelings and sensitive about how you express them.**
- **Listen to the feelings of all the others in the family.**
- **Stepfamilies are complex, but they can work.**

Want more information?

Parenting SA – www.parenting.sa.gov.au

(parenting and child health information) - www.cyh.com

Parent Easy Guides (PEGs): Family break-up,
After the break-up, Being a parent, Being a Mum,
Being a Dad

Written in Partnership

Parenting SA
Centre for Parenting

Produced by

Parenting SA - telephone (08) 8303 1660
© Copyright
Revised 0506

Parent Helpline
1300 364 100



Government of South Australia

Children, Youth and Women's
Health Service