

Successful Stepparenting

Although stepparenting can be very challenging, but it can be extremely rewarding as well. Here are a few tips to assist you on your journey of creating a successful stepfamily . . .

Develop realistic expectations

Don't expect everyone to immediately love one another and become one big happy family. It takes time to build loving, caring relationships. In the meantime you can make *respect* an important rule of the house. You can show this by being respectful to the children and expecting it in return. The biological parent should help enforce this rule.

Biological parent remains primary disciplinarian

If both the biological and stepparent are present, the biological parent should administer the discipline. If the biological parent is not available, the stepparent acts as visiting aunt or uncle. They are an adult in charge and enforce the rules of the house.

Discuss the stepparents role

Sometimes stepparents can feel "pulled" into the discipline right away. They might feel a need to save the parent who is having a hard time with the children. Other times they see their partner as being too easy on the children and they prefer more strict rules. It is important both parents agree upon family roles. One helpful approach might be that the stepparent gives input, but the biological parent retains the final say.

Encourage open communication

Allow the children to express their feelings and concerns about the recent changes in their family. Empathize with their difficulty and acknowledge the changes. Spend more time and energy trying to understand other family members than you do trying to be understood.

Develop relationships one-on-one

Although doing activities as a family can be helpful, it is also important to spend time together one-on-one. This allows the child and stepparent to get to know one another and build a relationship.

Support the child's relationship with their other parent

Do not badmouth the other parent. Even if the other parent does not do the same, it is essential that you continue to validate the child's feelings for and relationship with the other parent. As long as the child is not in danger, they should spend time with their nonresidential parent and be supported in that relationship.

Strengthen your couple relationship

"The couple relationship created the family, yet it is the newest relationship in the family and therefore, the most vulnerable." Keep the couple relationship a priority and devote the time and effort necessary to keep it healthy. As it grows and becomes stronger, the other family relationships will follow.

Adler-Baeder, F., Sanford, T., West, C., & Smith, L. (2001). *Smart steps for adults and children in stepfamilies*. Jefferson County, NY: Cornell Cooperative Extension.
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