

# A Guide for Stepparents

Parenting is difficult these days. Helping raise someone else's child is even harder. Schools typically consider only biological parents, ignoring stepparents. You might feel all alone — although stepparent families are a rapidly growing group in our society. You may wonder:

- How much authority do I have?
- How can I deal with my hurt, anger, jealousy or other feelings, not to mention those of my spouse or the children?
- How do I relate to the children's other biological parent?

## Stepparent, Parent, Friend

Children always have two parents, even if one is deceased or the parents are separated. The influence of those parents will continue through your stepchildren's lives, regardless of how often or rarely they see each other.

As a stepparent, you are a relative newcomer to the family, so you have to define your role. What's more, your role, like everyone else's, will change over time. Stepparents usually fall into one of three general types: primary parent, other parent or friend.

**Primary** parent stepparents usually live in the same household as the children. They operate much like biological parents with many of the same responsibilities and benefits. The children may call them "mom" or "dad" and accept their role. These relationships most often exist when the counterpart biological parent has little or no contact with the children. They generally develop over time and are more common when the children meet the stepparent at a young age.

**Other** parent is the role most stepparents play. Their job may be the most difficult because the children continue active relationships with both biological parents. Other parents often have regular parental duties, but lack authority or the children's acceptance of their role. Other parent stepparents need to maintain clear communication with their partners and accept that it takes time to develop good relationships with the children.

**Friend** stepparents do not usually reside with their stepchildren. Older children are often most comfortable with this kind of relationship and may use the stepparent's first name. While friend stepparents may have considerable influence with their stepchildren, this is due to the strength of their relationship, not because of their parental role.

Each of these roles is appropriate in certain circumstances. Only you, your partner and the children can decide which is best for your situation, and how family roles will evolve.

## A New Kind of Family

You, your partner and the children will form a new kind of family: a **blended** family. This is difficult because there are few guidelines or rules. But it is an opportunity, too. The lack of rules means you can build your new family to best meet everyone's expectations and needs.

You will be confronted by the past, by loyalty conflicts and possibly by financial strain. A strong commitment to your relationship and the gradual involvement of all family members in solving common problems will help you form a family characterized by acceptance, caring and mutual respect. Counseling or the support of other stepfamilies may help you succeed.

## Guidelines for Stepparents

### Don't expect too much too soon.

Love and relationships develop over time, especially between stepparents and stepchildren. Old relationships and conflicting feelings can slow the progress, so be patient and remember you have many years to develop your relationships with the children.

### Maintain a healthy relationship with your partner.

This is critical to a satisfactory family life. This does not mean you and your partner will never disagree, especially about the children, but you need to resolve issues to keep your relationship alive and growing. You also need to make time to enjoy one another and balance the sacrifices each of you must make to provide for your family.

It is critical that one adult does not consistently side with the children against the other adult, and equally important that you do not force your partner to choose between you and the children. Your partner may feel some loss or guilt about the ending of the former family relationship. Recognize that this is normal and allow your new relationships to develop in their own time.

### Avoid competing with your partner's ex.

It is easy to fall into the trap of competing with the children's biological parent. However, you are different people with different talents, values, and personalities. This doesn't mean one of you is better, just that you are different.

Watch out for trying to outspend a biological parent or being overly indulgent. You cannot buy children's affection or loyalty and attempts to do so may well backfire.

Try to develop some communication and respect with the children's other biological parent. An occasional telephone call or friendliness when

you exchange the children can go a long way towards showing the children they can love and appreciate all of their parents.

### Respect the differences between your histories and households.

A stepparent joins a family with established traditions affecting everything from how people show affection to who gets the shower first. As the newcomer, you'll probably have to do most of the adjusting at first. That doesn't mean you aren't valued, just that habits are hard to break and it's usually easier for one person to adjust than a whole group.

Your new family will also share a history of common memories that do not include you. Remember that you and the family are now creating new memories of which you are a part.

More memories and traditions are created if the children spend time with their other biological parent. This can cause tension if there are differences in discipline, values or religion. The children may be confused or even reject your standards and beliefs. It is best to compromise but acceptance works when that is not possible. The children need to understand that both sets of standards might be different, but they must respect both.

**Discipline carefully.** Discipline causes the most problems for stepparents, as it does for biological parents. Responsibility for discipline should rest with the biological parent, especially early in the relationship. A stepparent can play a greater role as time goes by and relationships with the stepchildren grow. Discipline requires close communication between the biological parent and the stepparent, and mutual support when one must discipline. Your partner must make certain the children understand that you are in charge when s/he is not available.

### **Be aware of potential money**

**problems.** Other than discipline, money causes most problems for stepfamilies. Stepfamilies often experience financial stress. Add the guilt, resentment and hurt people can feel about how money is spent and it is not surprising that conflicts develop over money. Clear communication between you and your partner, and sometimes the children, is the best way to prevent money-related problems. A written budget can be helpful so everyone knows where the money is going.

**Be sensitive on sexual matters.** The absence of a biological relationship between you and the stepchildren, and between stepsiblings, can bring heightened sexual tension to normal activities. This tension should not be ignored, and the fact that you are now all a family should be emphasized. Your physical relationship with your partner may be more visible than was your partner's former relationship and that may distress the children. Recognize these differences and be prepared to provide greater discretion than you might prefer, particularly in the early stages of your relationship.

### **Expect stepchildren to be angry.**

Children are hurt and frustrated when their parents end their relationship. This may be expressed as anger, which is easily focused on a stepparent. The children may believe a stepparent is responsible for the parental break-up or that the stepparent is preventing reconciliation.

Children are often very angry if they believe a stepparent does not like or approve of a biological parent. They may also feel disloyal if they accept or like a stepparent, and may therefore act angry or cold with that stepparent.

Understand what causes your stepchildren's anger and recognize that it is healthier for these feelings to be expressed than to be bottled up inside.

**Yours, mine and ours.** Things will be even more complicated if you and your new partner each bring children into your relationship. Birth orders change as do the roles of each child in the new family situation. Some parents try to cope with this by treating every child equally but this isn't really possible. Attitudes and expectations on everyone's part will still lead to hurt feelings, resentment and feelings of inequality. It may be better to strive for understanding and openness in discussing feelings and resolving conflict.

**Adopting your stepchildren.** This should be approached only when your new relationship is well established and stable. Talk with the other biological parent early in the process if that person is available. It may be best to drop the matter if he or she opposes it or if the children are strongly opposed. Children may feel intense, loyalty conflicts or fear it is an attempt to eliminate their biological parent. Be sure to use an experienced adoption attorney to handle the complex legal requirements if you do proceed.

**If you separate from your new partner.** Stepparents and stepchildren often develop very close and meaningful relationships so it is understandably painful when they are disrupted by further family problems. Many states have laws that permit stepparent visitation under certain circumstances, but first try talking with the children's parent about maintaining contact.

# **A Guide For STEPPARENTS**

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*Developed by AFCC members Emily Brown, Hon. Michael Dugan, Paul Hopkins, Norman Lobsenz, and Virginia Martin (1986). Revised 2003.*

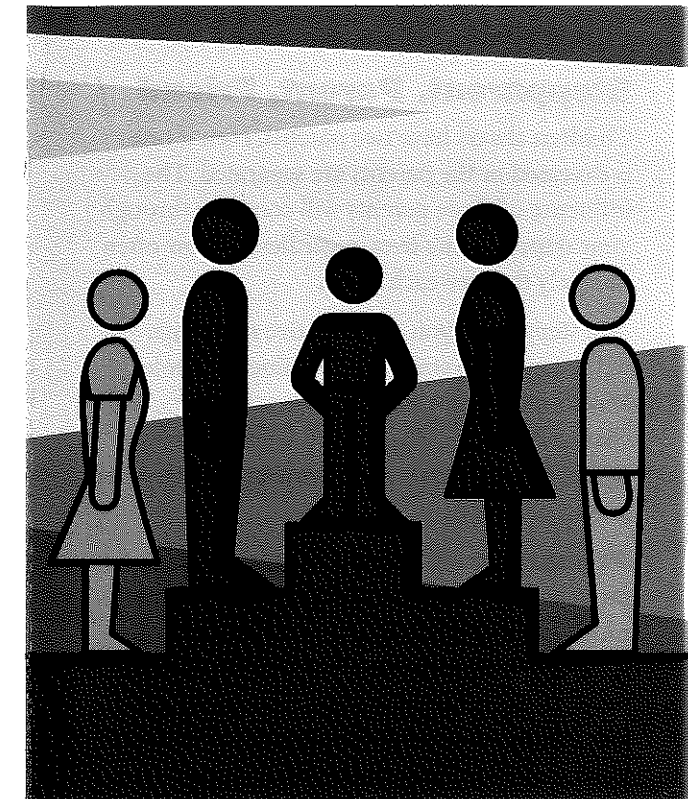
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