Stepping into the role of step-parent

So you’re becoming a new family. A somewhat frightening endeavour for potential step-parents, especially if g together children from previous relationships.



What’s important to remember is that bringing two households together to create a new family can be both exciting and frustrating. Building strong, trusting and loving family relationships takes time, patience, and even a bit of luck. And even the best intentioned step-parents cannot expect to walk into a perfect, loving, and immediately satisfying situation. Here are a few tips to help you and your family adjust to the new arrangement.

Don't expect instant trust and acceptance. Many parents and step-parents are surprised to discover that the new household arrangement isn’t instantly embraced by everyone involved. Successful blending takes time and will depend on the age of your children. Research suggests that children under the age of five will bond more quickly with their step-parent (within one to two years). Older children or teenagers can take significantly longer.

So try to let the new family dynamic emerge gradually on its own, and avoid the trap of expecting instant trust and acceptance. It more than likely took time for you to feel truly comfortable with your new partner, so afford your children the same opportunity to discover their own personal trust and acceptance of their new step-parent.

Recognize the pulls of loyalty. It’s common for children to feel disloyal to their absent parent when they show affection to their new step-parent. These feelings of conflict run throughout the new household and can be emotionally draining on everyone. Often, just as a child is beginning to warm up to the new step-parent, he or she may suddenly pull away and act out. The child may believe, "If I love you, I can't love my real parent." By encouraging children to express their love for their biological parent openly, and by not forcing a relationship with the new step-parent, you can ease these feelings of conflict and pave the way for relationships to develop within the new family.

Set down the ground rules in advance. Before bringing your new family together, discuss with your partner what you both expect of the children, including the role each parent will play in enforcing these expectations. For example: Who will be responsible for assigning chores to the children? Who will enforce such things as bedtime and curfew? How will the children address their new step-parent? If you and your partner’s parenting styles are radically different, try to reach a middle ground. It’s important that both partners in the new household agree on the rules before discussing any upcoming changes with the children.

Use age-appropriate parenting methods. The parenting role that your new partner plays will depend a lot on the age of your children. If you have toddlers or infants, they are more apt to look to your partner like a biological parent. Teens, on the other hand, might adjust more easily if the step-parent tries to take on the role of an adult friend. Moreover, when disciplining older children or teens, let the biological parent take the lead with his or her own children. If the biological parent isn’t present, the step-parent should take on the role of ‘adult in charge,’ rather than parent.

"But you're not my parent." No matter how old the child is, this declaration of your step-child’s feelings is inevitable, and ultimately true. This isn't a feeling that will disappear quickly, and as a step-parent it will take a tremendous amount of patience and understanding on your part to properly reply to it. Prepare yourself for this and don’t avoid it in the hope that the feelings behind this will simply go away.

Show a united front. As you work towards acceptance of the new household arrangement, it’s critical that the children see their biological parent and new step-parent united in all facets of family life. If you’re not sure why your partner has acted in a certain way or chosen a certain course of action, calmly discuss the problem in private—not in front of the children.

Building a successful blended family can be an emotionally draining but extremely rewarding experience. Know how and when, you and your partner's stress levels are affected. Together, you and your partner need to stay emotionally and physically healthy to support one another.