Step-parenting: when your new love comes with children

If you are getting involved with someone who already has children, you are not alone: the stepfamily is fast becoming one of the dominant family models in our culture.



Friend over parent-substitute

A stepfamily is different from a two-parent family; it has a special dynamic of its own. Stepkids, especially older children, already have two biological parents and usually aren't interested in replacing them.

Families work best if the responsibility of raising children includes both biological parents. Step-parents need to understand the situation they've married into and work out what role is appropriate for them. In successful reconstituted families, this usually means being an adult friend not a parent to the stepchildren.

Strengths and weakness of stepfamilies

There are two phases to stepfamily life. Each phase has its strengths and weakness that you will have to deal with.

Early stage of stepfamilies. Research shows that in the early stage of a second marriage the stepchildren are:

- Two times more likely to have school problems than children living with both biological parents.
- Four times more likely to have psychological problems than children living with both biological parents.
- More likely to have difficulties than those living with a single parent.

The process of blending families can be a huge adjustment for kids. Getting used to divorce is difficult enough. But when another adult enters the scene, possibly with another set of kids, the change can seem overwhelming to a young person.

Bitter divorces and continued fighting between biological parents are the main culprits of these difficulties. Most experts agree that divorce is actually less harmful to children than how the relationship is handled post-divorce.

Stepfamilies after the first five years. The picture of stepfamilies, though, isn't all doom and gloom. Long-term, the outlook for stepfamilies is bright:

- After the first five years, stepfamilies are more likely to last than first marriages. People find the love and care they need and children experience the joys of having happy, loving parents.

- Once the blended family adjusts, its members appear to be more satisfied, supportive, complex, and better at coping than traditional families.

- Many children raised in stepfamilies become tough, flexible, sensitive to and willing to accommodate other's emotional needs, and are prepared to face the world outside.

Adjusting to a stepfamily: a child-centred process

To successfully build a new stepfamily relationship, everyone involved—you, as the new parent, your partner and the former partner—needs to understand his or her role. The following "Steps for Steps," are two lists that give hints on what to expect and how to act as you enter the stepfamily experience.

Tips for blended families

1. **Don't try and replace the biological parent.** You are not the mother or father of your partner's children, and never will be. But you are the male or female head of your household. You can be a guide, a mentor, and even, in time, a psychological parent to stepchildren, but take it slowly.

2. **Discuss and agree to the "norms and forms" of discipline with your partner.** Generally, the biological parent does the disciplining and the stepparent reminds kids that, "In this house we…"

3. **Aim for a predictable and organized home.** In a home with structure, parents and children spend less time negotiating and arguing. Parent/child power struggles over repetitive issues waste time and undermines the child's self-esteem. Talking about real issues and creating intimacy should be the goal during the time you spend together.

4. **Recognize the potential for conflict of loyalties.** Just as children in the step-family begin to warm up to their step-parent, they may suddenly pull away and act out, thinking, "If I love you, I can't love my real parent." These feelings are normal and must be discussed openly with other family members.

5. **Don't withdraw if things don't work.** Step-parenting is complicated, and the notion of not being the "master" of your own household is tough. Do all you can to work out the "forms and norms" with your partner.

6. **Expect competition.** Both members of the new couple need to recognize that the biological parent has had many more years of experience as a parent to their children than their new partner. New partners may feel as though they are directly competing with the children in the household. But it doesn't have to be this way. Sort out time, energy and money allocations as a couple.

7. **Spend time with just the kids.** The biological parent may feel that they would like more time with their children to catch up with them alone. The step-parent might also like some time with just their new step-kid(s). Discuss and agree about time spent with your partner and time spent with children.

8. **Nourish your sense of humour and use it.** Whether you're a biological or step-parent, the ability to laugh at yourself or a situation is a necessity.

Though step-parenting is no easy task, the rewards of living as part of a blended family can be enormous for everyone involved. The more you can make an effort to engage in regular and clear communication with your partner and with the children involved, and the more you're able to cut your partner and yourself some slack, the happier you'll be. It is by acknowledging the difficulties and facing challenges as a couple and as a family that the bonds of your new family are formed. Enjoy the process.