

Stepfamilies and how to survive them.



Step families

Stepfamilies do experience the joys and sorrows of any other family, but there are extra factors to consider.

A new love is a new start for the couple but for the children, this can be very different. They may well resent the new relationship, feel threatened by it and feel they are losing the parent to a new love.

The children of one or both adults involved have important losses and shattered dreams. It is not uncommon for children to continue to dream that his/her parents will get back together and they will all become a happy family again.

There are previous family histories and the new family must combine those histories as well as developing new traditions. It must be remembered that the parent child relationships were formed before the new relationship and even if the children like the new partner, they can be resentful of changes.

In the case of divorce, there is a birth parent elsewhere, and in the case of death, the birth parent will still be firmly in the memory of any children. In either case, the absent parent still has influence over the children.

Initially, the relationship between the new step parent and child has no legal backing although sometimes step parents do adopt the step children at a later stage.

The children are members of more than one household and the extended step family can be quite complex and difficult as the children gather together several sets of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Standards, values and expectations may differ between the different sections of the family. Constant adjustments need to be made as the children come and go from family to family. However, children are adaptable and once the initial difficulties are resolved, they often settle down into a variety of routines.

Adults, however, are not nearly so adaptable and this can be a cause of anxiety and conflict. So it is important to reach agreement on these sensitive areas early on.

Stepfamilies can and often do work and it can be a rewarding experience - so take heart.

The following two sections are intended to help couples identify challenges which may lie ahead and address them before they become too serious.

10 discussion tips to help survive becoming a Step Family

1. Talk about the differences between you and make adjustments where necessary.
2. How do your lifestyles differ and what needs to change?
3. Talk about your expectations and how they differ?
4. How do your ideas blend on child rearing, discipline and setting boundaries.
5. The effects on the children's relationship with the birth parent.
6. How will you blend the family with the new extended families?
7. Do the children and the new partner like each other? If not, how can that be improved?
8. Finance, maintenance to the previous partner, other dependent children all need to be considered.
9. How will you make time for each other and have quality time with the children?
10. It is important to accept that all involved need to make adjustments to blend together.

Helping children cope with the new arrangements

The key to helping children is *communication*:

- **Encourage** them to express their feelings openly, otherwise anxieties and concerns may lie buried and erupt unexpectedly at a later date.
- **Listen** carefully and check that you have understood what they are trying to say.
- **Acknowledge** that their feelings are very real to them. Never suggest that their feelings are silly regardless of how irrational they seem to you.
- **Do not judge** their feelings but give reassurance that their feelings and views are important to you.
- **Involve them** in seeking solutions to resolve the issues they raise.
- **Reassure them** that they will always be supported and that you want to hear what they have to say.
- **Include them** in the decisions made for adjustments needed to blend as a new family, seeking their opinion and agreement. If that can be achieved, the children are less likely to rebel.

Useful websites:

Family lives	www.familylives.org.uk
Care for the Family	www.careforthefamily.org.uk/
Childline	www.childline.org.uk

Google “Step families for many other helpful websites.

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www.swanseaandbreconmu.org.uk