

Step-Parenting and Blended Families

How to Bond with Stepchildren and Deal with Stepfamily Issues



When families "blend" to create stepfamilies, things rarely progress smoothly. Some children may resist changes, while parents can become frustrated when the new family doesn't function like their previous family. While changes to family structure require adjustment time for everyone involved, these guidelines can help blended families work out their growing pains and live together successfully.

Planning a blended family

You and your partner have decided to make a life together and form a new, blended family that includes children from one or both of your previous relationships. Congratulations. What lies ahead can be both a rewarding and a challenging experience. It can take a long time for a blended family to begin to feel comfortable and function well together.

While you as parents are likely to approach remarriage and a new blended family with great joy and expectation, your kids or your new spouse's kids may not be nearly as excited. They'll likely feel uncertain about the upcoming changes and how they will affect relationships with their natural parents. They'll also be worried about living with new stepsiblings, whom they may not know well, or worse, ones they may not even like. To give yourself the best chance of success, it's important to start planning how a blended family will function before the marriage even takes place.

Laying the foundations for a blended family

Having survived a painful divorce or separation and then managed to find a new loving relationship, the temptation can often be to rush into remarriage and a blended family without first laying solid foundations. By taking your time, you give everyone a chance to get used to each other, and used to the idea of marriage.

- **Too many changes at once can unsettle children.** Blended families have the highest success rate if the couple waits two years or more after a divorce to remarry, instead of piling one drastic family change onto another.
- **Don't expect to fall in love with your partner's children overnight.** Get to know them. Love and affection take time to develop.
- **Find ways to experience "real life" together.** Taking both sets of kids to a theme park every time you get together is a lot of fun, but it isn't reflective of everyday life. Try to get the kids used to your partner and his or her children in daily life situations.
- **Make parenting changes before you marry.** Agree with your new partner how you intend to parent together, and then make any necessary adjustments to your parenting styles *before* you remarry. It'll make for a smoother transition and your kids won't become angry at your new spouse for initiating changes.
- **Don't allow ultimatums.** Your kids or new partner may put you in a situation where you feel you have to choose between them. Remind them that you want *both* sets of people in your life.
- **Insist on respect.** You can't insist people like each other but you can insist that they treat one another with respect.
- **Limit your expectations.** You may give a lot of time, energy, love, and affection to your new partner's kids that will not be returned immediately. Think of it as making small investments that may one day yield a lot of interest.

Given the right support, kids should gradually adjust to the prospect of marriage and being part of a new family. It is your job to communicate openly, meet their needs for security, and give them plenty of time to make a successful transition.

What makes a successful blended family?

Trying to make a blended family a replica of your first family, or the ideal nuclear family, can often set family members up for confusion, frustration, and disappointment. Instead, embrace the differences and consider the basic elements that make a successful blended family:

- **Solid marriage.** Without the marriage, there is no family. It's harder to take care of the marriage in a blended family because you don't have couple time like most first marriages do. You'll have to grow and mature into the marriage while parenting.
- **Being civil.** If family members can be civil with one another on a regular basis rather than ignoring, purposely trying to hurt, or completely withdrawing from each other, you're on track.
- **All relationships are respectful.** This is not just referring to the kids' behavior toward the adults. Respect should be given not just based on age, but also based on the fact that you are all family members now.
- **Compassion for everyone's development.** Members of your blended family may be at various life stages and have different needs (teens versus toddlers, for example). They may also be at different stages in accepting this new family. Family members need to understand and honor those differences.
- **Room for growth.** After a few years of being blended, hopefully the family will grow and members will choose to spend more time together and feel closer to one another.

Adapted from: *RemarriageSuccess.com*

Bonding with your new blended family

Early in the formation of a blended family, you as a step-parent may want to focus on developing positive relationships with your stepchildren. You will increase the chances of success by thinking about what the children need. Age, gender, and personality are not irrelevant, but *all* children have some basic needs and wants that should be met as a precursor to a great relationship.

Children want to feel:

- **Safe and secure.** Children want to be able to count on parents and step-parents. Children of divorce have already felt the upset of having people they trust let them down, and may not be eager to give second chances to a new step-parent.
- **Loved.** Kids like to see and feel your affection, although it should be a gradual process.
- **Seen and valued.** Kids often feel unimportant or invisible when it comes to decision making in the new blended family. Recognize their role in the family when you make decisions.
- **Heard and emotionally connected.** Creating an honest and open environment free of judgment will help kids feel heard and emotionally connected to a new step-parent. Show them that you can view the situation from their perspective.
- **Appreciated and encouraged.** Children of all ages respond to praise and encouragement and like to feel appreciated for their contributions.
- **Limits and boundaries.** Children may not think they need limits, but a lack of boundaries sends a signal that the child is unworthy of the parents' time, care, and attention. As a new step-parent, you shouldn't step in as the enforcer at first, but work with your spouse to set limits.

Let the child set the pace

Every child is different and will show you how slow or fast to go as you get to know them. Some kids may be more open and willing to engage. Shy, introverted children may require you to slow down and give them more time to warm up to you. Given enough time, patience, and interest, most children will eventually give you a chance.

Dealing with the death of a parent

When a parent has died, the remarriage of the remaining parent may trigger unfinished grieving in children. **Give them space and time to grieve.**

How children adjust to blended families

Kids of different ages and genders will adjust differently to a blended family. The physical and emotional needs of a two-year-old girl are different than those of a 13-year-old boy, but don't mistake differences in development and age for differences in fundamental needs. Just because a teenager may take a long time accepting your love and affection doesn't mean that he doesn't want it. You will need to adjust your approach with different age levels and genders, but your goal of establishing a trusting relationship is the same.

Young children under 10

- May adjust more easily because they thrive on cohesive family relationships.
- Are more accepting of a new adult.

- Feel competitive for their parent's attention.
- Have more daily needs to be met.

- May have the most difficult time adjusting to a stepfamily.
- Need more time to bond before accepting a new person as a disciplinarian.
- May not demonstrate their feelings openly, but may be as sensitive, or more sensitive, than young children when it comes to needing love, support, discipline and attention.

Adolescents aged 10-14

- May have less involvement in stepfamily life.
- Prefer to separate from the family as they form their own identities.
- Also may not be open in their expression of affection or sensitivity, but still want to feel important, loved and secure.

Teenagers 15 or older

Gender Differences – general tendencies:

- Both boys and girls in stepfamilies tend to prefer verbal affection, such as praises or compliments, rather than physical closeness, like hugs and kisses.
- Girls tend to be uncomfortable with physical displays of affection from their stepfather.
- Boys seem to accept a stepfather more quickly than girls.

Attachment relationships and blended families

Anyone with an insecure attachment history may have problems establishing close, loving bonds with new members of a blended family. Fortunately, an insecurely attached child (or adult) can learn to trust others, and bond with people who treat him with consistent affection, attention, and respect. See the Related Articles section to learn more.

Dealing with differences in blended families

As you merge two families, differences in parenting, discipline, lifestyle, etc., may become more pronounced and can become a source of frustration for the children. Make it a priority to have some unity when it comes to household living, including things like rules, chores, discipline, and allowance. Agreeing on some consistent guidelines and strategies will show the kids that you and your spouse intend to deal with issues in a similar way. This should diminish some feelings of unfairness.

Recognizing the ways that stepfamilies are different can help you understand and accept some of the problems you're likely to face in your new family structure, and can be an important first step in achieving a healthy blended family.

Some common differences in blended families:

- **Age differences.** In blended families, there may be children with birthdays closer to one another than possible with natural siblings, or the new step-parent may be only a few years older than the eldest child.
- **Parental inexperience.** One step-parent may have never been a parent before, and therefore may have no experience of the different stages children go through.

- **Changes in family relationships.** If both parents remarry partners with existing families, it can mean children suddenly find themselves with different roles in two blended families. For example, one child may be the eldest in one stepfamily but the youngest in the other. Blending families may also mean one child loses his or her uniqueness as the only boy or girl in the family.
- **Difficulty in accepting a new parent.** If children have spent a long time in a one-parent family, or if children still nurture hopes of reconciling their parents, it may be difficult for them to accept a new person.
- **Coping with demands of others.** In blended families, planning family events can get complicated, especially when there are custody considerations to take into account. Children may grow frustrated that vacations, parties, or weekend trips now require complicated arrangements to include their new stepsiblings.
- **Changes in family traditions.** Most families have very different ideas about how annual events such as holidays, birthdays, and family vacations should be spent. Kids may feel resentful if they're forced to go along with someone else's routine. Try to find some common ground or create new traditions for your blended family.
- **Parental insecurities.** A step-parent may be anxious about how he or she compares to a child's natural parent, or may grow resentful if the stepchildren compare them unfavorably to the natural parent.

Strengthening a blended family

One challenge to creating a cohesive blended family is establishing trust. The children may feel uncertain about their new family and resist your efforts to get to know them. Learn not to take their lack of enthusiasm (and other negative attitudes) personally. It isn't that they don't want you to be happy; they just don't know what it will be like to share their parent with a new spouse, let alone his or her kids. These feelings are normal.

Create clear, safe boundaries in blended families

An important part of building trust in a family has to do with discipline. Couples should discuss the role each step-parent will play in raising their respective children, as well as changes in household rules.

The following tips can help make this difficult transition a bit smoother:

- Establish the step-parent as more of a friend or counselor rather than a disciplinarian.
- Let the biological parent remain primarily responsible for discipline until the step-parent has developed solid bonds with the kids.
- Create a list of family rules. Discuss the rules with the children and post them in a prominent place. Try to understand what the rules and boundaries are for the kids in their other residence, and, if possible, be consistent.

Keep ALL parents involved

Children will adjust better to the blended family if they have access to both biological parents. It is important if all parents are involved and work toward a parenting partnership.

- Let the kids know that you and your ex-spouse will continue to love them and be there for them throughout their lives.
- Tell the kids that your new spouse will not be a ‘replacement’ mom or dad, but another person to love and support them.

Communicate often and openly in blended families

The way a blended family communicates says a lot about the level of trust between family members. When communication is clear, open, and frequent, there are fewer opportunities for misunderstanding and more possibilities for connection, whether it is between parent and child, step-parent and stepchild, or between step-siblings.

Uncertainty and worry about family issues often comes from poor communication. It might be helpful to set up some ‘house rules’ for communication within a blended family, such as:

- Listen respectfully to one another
- Address conflict positively
- Establish an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere
- Do things together—games, sports, activities
- Show affection to one another comfortably

Use routines and rituals to bond blended families

Creating family routines and rituals help unite family members. Decide on meaningful family rituals and plan to incorporate at least one into your blended family. They might include Sunday visits to the beach, a weekly game night, or special ways to celebrate a family birthday. Establishing regular family meals, for example, offers a great chance for you to talk and bond with your children and stepchildren as well as encourage healthy eating habits.

Tips for a healthy blended family

- **All brothers and sisters “fall out,”** so don’t assume all family arguments are the result of living in a blended family.
- **Beware of favoritism.** Be fair. Don’t overcompensate by favoring your stepchildren. This is a common mistake, made with best intentions, in an attempt to avoid indulging your biological children.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Be sure to discuss everything. Never keep emotions bottled up or hold grudges.
- **Make special arrangements.** If some of the kids “just visit,” make sure they have a locked cupboard for their personal things. Bringing toothbrushes and other “standard fare” each time they come to your home makes them feel like a visitor, not a member of the blended family.
- **Find support.** Locate a step-parenting support organization in your community. You can learn how other blended families address some of the challenges of blended families.
- **Spend time every day with your child.** Try to spend at least one “quiet time” period with your child (or children) daily. Even in the best of blended families, children still need to enjoy some “alone time” with each parent.

Maintaining marriage quality in blended families

Newly remarried couples without children usually use their first months together to build on their relationship. Couples with children, on the other hand, are often more consumed with their own kids than with each other.

You will no doubt focus a lot of energy on your children and their adjustment, but you also need to focus on building a strong marital bond. This will ultimately benefit everyone, including the children. If the children see love, respect, and open communication between you and your spouse, they will feel more secure and may even learn to model those qualities.

- Set aside time as a couple by making regular dates or meeting for lunch or coffee during school time.
- Present a unified parenting approach to the children—arguing or disagreeing in front of them may encourage them to try to come between you.

When to seek help for your blended family

If, despite all of your best efforts, your new spouse and/or children are not getting along, find a way to protect and nurture the children despite the difficult environment. Hopefully, if the kids see and feel your emotional support, they will do their best with the situation.

It might be time to seek outside help from a therapist if:

- a child directs anger upon a particular family member or openly resents a step-parent or parent
- a step-parent or parent openly favors one child over another
- members of the family derive no pleasure from usually enjoyable activities such as school, working, playing, or being with friends and family

Finding a good therapist in your area

It may take some time, but choose a therapist that everyone in your blended family is comfortable with. A good connection with a therapist should result in some positive changes right away.

You can obtain referrals from:

- **Your family doctor.**
- **Family or friends.**
- **Provider listing from your insurance company.** Keep in mind that not all mental health professionals will be covered by your insurance.
- **Mental health associations.** Mental health associations provide databases of therapists that specialize in certain areas.

More help for step-parenting

Family and Divorce Help Center: Learn what you can do to meet these challenges by better understanding your own needs and those of your children at this difficult time.

Step-parenting help

- [Children and Divorce: Helping Kids Cope with Separation and Divorce](#)
- [Attachment and Adult Relationship: How the Attachment Bond Shapes Adult Relationships](#)
- [Co-Parenting Tips for Divorced Parents: Making Joint Custody Work after a Separation or Divorce](#)
- [Relationship Help: Advice for Building Relationships that are Healthy, Happy and Satisfying](#)

Adjustment challenges

- [Separation Anxiety in Children: Easing Separation Anxiety Disorder](#)
- [Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: The Rewards and Challenges of Parenting the Second Time Around](#)
- [Supporting a Grieving Person: Understanding the Grieving Process](#)
- [Help for Parents of Troubled Teens: Dealing with Anger, Violence, Delinquency, and Other Teen Behavior Problems](#)

Resources and references

[Preparing to form healthy step families before the wedding](#) – Tips for making a second marriage a smooth and healthy transition. (IDoTakeTwo.com)

[Couples Considering a Blended Family](#) – Things to consider before remarriage and tips for creating a cohesive blended family. (University of Florida)

[Living with Step-parents](#) – A guide for children on being part of a blended family. (Kidshealth)

[National Stepfamily Resource Center](#) – Clearinghouse of information, resources, and support for stepfamily members. Topics include counseling, finances, co-parenting, co-grandparenting, and more. (NSRC)

[LoveNotes](#) – One sheet PDF files with tips on cultivating your marriage relationship and developing strong bonds with your new spouse. (Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative)