

Step Families

Children and families are remarkably adaptable and resilient to change as long as you are able to be empathetic and considerate of how the change will affect everyone in your family. At the same time, adapting to being in a step family can be extremely stressful for children and teenagers which can be destructive to family life. As parents it is important to carefully empathise with your children and negotiate how they will be part of your step family.

If you are in a step family it may be helpful to:

- ◆ Carefully discuss with your partner what your roles will be with each other's children. Discuss how you discipline your children, spend time with them, expectations about homework, curfews and what works for you to have a good relationship with them. Discuss what you expect from each other in relation to each other's children. As a general rule it does not work well for step parents to be involved in disciplining their partner's children. It is hard enough for a child to accept a new adult in their home and life let alone accepting discipline from them. It is okay for you to continue disciplining your own children. This gives the step parent the best opportunity to develop a good relationship with your children.
- ◆ Do not request your children to call your new partner 'mum' or 'dad'.
- ◆ Discuss with your children their worries about living in a step family. Carefully listen to their concerns and problem solve around worries they might have.
- ◆ Spend regular time alone with your own children. You may want to consider holidaying with just your children if they are struggling.
- ◆ Have realistic expectations about your children's adjustment to your living situation. This does not mean allowing violent or disrespectful behavior, but you may need to allow them time and space to get used to the living arrangement.
- ◆ Set a precedent that it is okay for people to take time to get used to their new living arrangement. Be an example of being able to respectfully talk about both the positive and negative aspects of all living together.
- ◆ If you became particularly close to one of your children when you separated from their parent, be very careful that they don't feel rejected as you become close to your new partner. Make it a priority to talk with them, spend time with them and make sure they know that they still matter to you.

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- ◆ Do not discuss your thoughts about your partner's ex-partner in front of their children. Make sure you talk respectfully about them in front of children and have as good a relationship with them as you are able to. Children generally find this very settling.
- ◆ Remember that adjusting to living in a step family is generally very difficult for children and teenagers. Be patient with them.

Please feel free to contact Life Supports on 1300 735 030 if you would like to discuss your situation with a professional counsellor. You can find more information about Life Supports services by visiting www.lifesupports.com.au.