

## Step Families

Children and families are remarkably adaptable and resilient to change as long as there is careful consideration as to the way that the change will impact each member of the family. Adapting to becoming part of a step family is a huge change for children and teenagers and can be a stressful process for all, disrupting and impacting upon family relationships. As a parent, it is crucial that you are able to communicate openly with your children about this change and can negotiate with them around their roles and responsibilities within the step family.

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

- Identify, through discussion with your partner, the roles that each of you will have with the other's children. It will be helpful if the discussion includes how you discipline your children; the ways you spend time with them, your expectations of the children, for example homework and leisure time and the children's household responsibilities. It is also important to talk about your relationship with each of them and what factors impede or enhance these relationships. Importantly, be clear about 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 often difficult for a child to accept a new adult in their home and life, and having to accept discipline from this adult only complicates things further. A step parent is more likely to develop a positive relationship with a partner's children if the relationship is not one involving discipline. It is important that you continue disciplining your own children in a consistent way, despite the family changes.
- Do not insist that your children call your new partner 'mum' or 'dad'.
- Make the time to discuss with your children any concerns or worries they may have about living in a step family. Carefully listen to their concerns and try to problem solve with them to come up with some mutually agreeable solutions to address these concerns.
- Spend time alone with your own children on a regular basis. You may want to consider holidaying with only your children if you feel they would benefit from some extended time with you or if they are struggling to adapt to the new family structure.

- Try to have realistic expectations of your children's ability to adjust to your living situation. This does not mean accepting violent or disrespectful behavior from them, but it may mean allowing them extra time and space to get used to the living arrangement.
- Ensure that the children know that it is okay if it takes them time to adjust to their new family structure and living arrangement. Try to model open and respectful discussion 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 ensure that they know they still matter to you.
- Do not discuss your thoughts about your partner's ex-partner in front of their children. Ensure that you talk respectfully about them in front of children. Aim to have as good a relationship with your partner's ex-partner as you are able, as 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, and with yourself, as you are all adapting to a significant life change.

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](http://www.lifesupports.com.au).