



## American College of Pediatricians

[www.BestforChildren.org](http://www.BestforChildren.org)

### Patient Information Handout

---

## Tips for Stepfamily Success\*

### **Have realistic expectations about how quickly your blended family will bond and find harmony**

- The average stepfamily needs between five to seven years to form a family identity. In movies, love between adults and bonding with children happens quickly; in real life, it happens gradually.
- Be patient with yourself, your marriage, and the children as family members find their fit. Simmer a stepfamily in a slow cooker, not forcibly in a blender!
- If still dating, slow down on a decision on marriage. Kids need more time than adults to get used to the idea of a wedding.

### **The marriage relationship is the most important relationship in a stepfamily, yet often the most neglected**

- Express to your children that your marriage is the new foundation of the family and strive to balance nurturing your marriage with a strong commitment of time and energy to your children.
- Marriage is hard work and the average step-couple has about three times as much stress as married couples of non-blended families. You cannot afford to just have “better than last time” intentions while you guard yourself from being hurt again — have an “all-in” commitment attitude for making your new marriage successful.
- Become a ghost buster. Identify and deal with any painful ghosts from a previous marriage so that they don’t affect trust in this relationship. Try to prevent your fears from determining your actions.
- There is a honeymoon for couples in stepfamilies; it just often comes at the end of the journey, not at the beginning.

### **Working Together as a Parental Team**

- Conflicts will arise over discipline and other aspects of childrearing in stepfamilies. Therefore, parents need to regularly communicate and review their approaches to parenting.
- Early on, biological parents should continue to be the primary disciplinarian to their children while stepparents build relationship, trust, and respect with stepchildren.
- As stepparents transition towards having more authority, they need back-up from the biological parent. Biological parents should avoid making critical remarks about the stepparent in front of the children or reversing the stepparent’s decisions (as this robs their authority).
- Be proactive. Don’t wait until problems occur to discuss behavioral expectations, methods of punishment, consequences to be enforced, and the values you wish to instill in the children.
- When in doubt about what to do in a parenting situation, tell the children that you will get back with them after discussing with your spouse. This response communicates to the kids that you seek, respect, and honor each other’s input in parenting decisions, and it will speak volumes about your unity as a couple.

This document is provided for educational use only and is not intended to be a substitute for consultation with a physician concerning the issues presented. The information contained within this document has been submitted by a College member and approved by the Board of Directors for distribution, but has not been formally endorsed or validated by the American College of Pediatricians. Reproduction of this document is permitted.

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PEDIATRICIANS© 2014

## **Help your children work through their difficult emotions**

- Common difficult emotions for children in stepfamilies are grief, anger, separation, loss, disappointment, rejection, and feelings of uprootedness. Children also often struggle with divided loyalties between biological parents and stepparents.
- Children in stepfamilies have experienced loss. The pain of the past often leads children to be guarded and untrusting and may cause a tremendous fear of the future. Painful emotions from the past must be dealt with so that children can grow to trust and move on.
- Especially during the early years, it can be very stabilizing for the children if the biological parent regularly spends time with his/her biological children apart from the stepsiblings.
- Parents need to work through their own painful emotions so they can help their children resolve their own thoughts and feelings.

## **Dealing with Ex-Spouses**

- If children travel between households, it is crucial to strive towards good communication with your ex-spouse. Good cooperation between households typically results in well-disciplined and better adjusted children.
- Ex-spouses who communicate well and cooperate on behalf of the children are making success more likely for the new blended family.
- Put your differences aside and focus on being good parents for your children.

## **Help from Above**

- Many stepfamilies find beneficial support in a faith community.
- Spiritual resources may help stepfamily members achieve forgiveness for each other and find strength and grace for the journey.

## **Persevere though the wilderness with trust and determination**

- Remain dedicated to gradually forming a family identity over time.
- Remember, the home is the primary context in which your children will hopefully learn and experience the character of love. Love can be what holds the jigsaw pieces of the stepfamily together, resulting not in a bunch of broken, disconnected pieces, but a home.

### **Recommended Websites:**

- Smart Stepfamilies: [www.smartstepfamilies.com](http://www.smartstepfamilies.com)
- FamilyLife Blended: [www.familylife.com/blended](http://www.familylife.com/blended)

\*Adapted from *The Smart Stepfamily, Revised & Expanded Edition* (2014) by Ron L. Deal, Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved.