

20 Steps to Building Healthy Stepfamilies

Note: Finding language that differentiates the insider “original” parent from the outsider stepparent is challenging. “Biological parent” vs. “stepparent” seems clearest. However, many original parents are actually adoptive parents. I tried to resolve this problem in a variety of ways. I would appreciate input on language that honors both adoptive and biological parents.

Get started well:

1. *Start with the Right Map*

Trying to build a stepfamily based on what you know about first time families is a bit like driving around Los Angeles with a map of Iowa City—confusing, frustrating and even dangerous. Stepfamilies, and stepparenting, are different from first-time families. Save your family a lot of grief and considerably increase your success by using the right “map.”

Anyone who has lived in one knows that new stepfamilies do not “blend.” Expect to take a *minimum* of two years to begin to develop easy paths to joint action in an adult stepcouple. If you and your new partner do not handle differences well (i.e., one or both of you gets really upset, or critical, or withdraws), expect things to take longer.

2. *Educate yourself*

We now have a wealth of research about what works and what doesn’t in stepfamilies. If you like to read, try my book *Becoming a Stepfamily* (analyticpress.com) or James Bray’s book, *Stepfamilies: Love, Marriage and Parenting in the First Decade* or any of John and Emily Visser’s books. Don’t like to read? Look for these books on tape from your local library or from amazon.com. Listen to them in your car, on your home system while cleaning or doing projects. Be sure to differentiate lay opinions from research-based guidance. For instance, research has shown that advice like, “The stepparent should be treated like a parent,” backfires.

3. *Find other people to talk to who “get it.”*

Find (or form) a local chapter of the Stepfamily Association of America (800) 735-0329, saafamilies.org. Or just find a couple of stepparents, or re-coupled parents, to meet with regularly. Sharing stories with other people in stepfamilies will help remind you that you are normal and will increase your sense of humor! Find a therapist with experience with (or willingness to learn about) stepfamilies.

4. *Slow down to speed things up.*

Children will adjust best when you move a step or two at a time. Introduce kids to your new partner slowly. Give them time to know them well before moving in together or announcing marriage plans. When in doubt, slow down. Do not insist that stepsiblings spend long periods together if they do not enjoy each other. Having children bring friends over eases adjustment.

Address insider/outsider issues:

5. *Compartmentalize: Spend time in one-to-one relationships.*

Paradoxically, your new family will develop best by arranging regular time in *one-to-one relationships*. I call this “*compartmentalizing*.” Insisting on doing things together as a whole family certainly *seems* the right thing to do. However, every time a new stepfamily gathers together, divisive “insider-outsider” forces are intensified. So, especially in the first few years of stepfamily life, somebody always feels left out, and somebody feels torn, every time the whole family is together.

Making regular time one-to-one time for the adult couple and for the stepparent-child pairs in the family helps build step relationships. Carve out both adult couple time and parent-child time (#8). *Do plan some all-family times, but expect tension, especially in the early years.*

Adult stepcouples need time alone together to develop a relationship without being interrupted by the needs of kids. *Stepcouples* need regular date nights and vacation time to enjoy each other without children. They *also* need to set aside separate regular “business time” (like a regular lunch) to talk calmly about the many issues that arise in a new family. *Stepparents* desperately need time with their new partners when they do not have to compete with children’s needs. Biological (or adoptive) parents need time when they can attend to their new partners without worrying about their kids. Reliable couple time often makes it easier for the stepparent to give over to necessary biological-parent child time.

Stepparents and their stepchildren need time alone away from the biological parent in order to find their own middle ground. Find “shoulder-to-shoulder” activities that both stepparent and stepchild enjoy. Focusing together on an outside activity makes the new relationship less awkward. Examples include going to a ball game, going shopping, board games, a woodworking project, sewing, etc. Look for things the stepparent knows that the child really wants to learn (how to hit a ball, how to sew, etc.). Or, the teacher role can be reversed, as the child helps the stepparent with a computer problem, or does her stepmother’s hair for a special event.

Send *stepsiblings* out together to pick up take-out food or assign them a fun task together. Get a shy child to teach a new skill to a stepsibling. *Do not force stepsiblings together if they are not comfortable.* They did not choose each other. You chose for them. Stepsiblings can be required to be civil and respectful to each other. They cannot be required to love or even like each other. “But she’s your sister” is the adults’ wish. It is not the children’s reality.

6. *Shift don’t blend*

Choose family activities that bring outsiders together and shift insiders out. If mother and daughter are expert skiers and stepdad is a klutz. A “family” ski vacation will be miserable for everyone. Mom will be in an impossible bind: Ski the advanced slope with her daughter or hang out on the bunny slope with her husband? Either way, one person, daughter or stepdad, is left out. Save ski trips for special mom-daughter time, or until the family is much more solid.

If stepdaughter and stepfather are good ice skaters and mother is a lousy ice skater, then ice-skating will make a *much* better family activity. Stepdad and stepdaughter can whiz off while mom clutches the side of the rink. This shifts the “outsider” stepparent to the inside and takes mom right out of the middle.

7. *Give stepparents a break*

Stepparents need time alone in the house and time engaged in satisfying activities outside the house. Living with a partner’s children means living as an outsider to intimate relationships that predate you, and in a parent-child culture you did not create. This is wearing to the most loving stepparent. When possible, establish a private, preferably soundproof, retreat space in the house for stepparents... All stepparents need to maintain friendships and activities outside the family where they can find easy and familiar connections. I also encourage stepmothers to keep their jobs.

Help children with losses:

8. *Establish regular, scheduled, parent-child time*

The need to “compartmentalize” extends to all relationships in the family. Children and adults have often become quite close in single-parent families. When the parent starts dating, children, especially girls, often feel suddenly pushed out. The adults may experience children as “resistant” Children simply need regular time alone with their own parent. Re-establishing parent-child alone time often improves children’s well-being markedly, and makes it a bit easier for children to share their parent with their new

partner. Biological parents also need time alone with their children where they are not straining to balance their children's needs with their new partner's needs. This includes some vacation time.

This may seem "unfamily-like." Research and extensive clinical experience tells us that a consistent, caring relationship with a parent is a major factor in improving children's adjustment to divorce and stepfamily life. *We build better stepfamilies when we take care of children's basic needs for a secure attachment.* Compartmentalizing builds new step relationships and also provides for children's needs.

9. Respond compassionately to children's negative feelings.

The new couple relationship is a gain for the adults. It is often a loss, and the continuation of unwelcome major changes for the child. Children adjust best to the losses and changes of divorce and remarriage when they feel that their parents understand their feelings. This is harder than it sounds. The very changes that are thrilling to adults make children sad or angry. It is easy for parents to respond to, "I hate my stepmom," with, "But she's such a nice person." The child says, "This new house stinks." The parent wants to respond with, "But it's so much bigger and nicer than our other one." The adolescent daughter says to her father, "I feel like I'm losing you." The father, thrilled with his new relationship, says, "Nonsense!"

Children need, *"I know this has been a tough ride for you. I know it's not your favorite thing to have a new stepfather."* *"I am betting all these changes are hard. Say some more."* *"It does change things when I am with Jenny (new partner) on the week-ends. Say some more about what that's like for you."*

An empathic connection with a parent helps children feel less alone. Adults help children (and each other) ride each wave of feeling until it comes to a soft place. Deeply listening, without defensiveness, to your children's upset about your divorce and/or recoupling is challenging to most parents. Strengthen this critical skill by reading the terrific book, *How to Talk So Your Kids Will Listen and Listen So Your Kids Will Talk* (Adele Faber). Don't like to read? Listen to the tape!

Help children with loyalty binds:

10. Adults need to pro-actively assist children with their loyalty binds: Loyalty Bind Talks

Even when parents are not warring, children of divorce seem to have an almost genetic experience of "loyalty binds." Loving one parent means betraying the other. Caring for a stepparent means betraying

the parent of the same sex. Children need help loosening loyalty binds, not only in the beginning of a new stepfamily, but often at each major transition (new couple moves in together, marriage, etc.)

Children need to hear, *“Having a stepparent can be kind of confusing. You have a big heart. Your mom will always be your mom. Her place in your heart is permanent, like the sun, like the earth. Mary will be your stepmother. You don’t have to love her or even like her. I hope that sometime Mary will have a place in your heart, too. If she doesn’t, that’s OK, too. You don’t have to love her. You do have to be respectful and civil. But even if you do come to care about her, she will have a different place in your heart from your mom’s place.”*

For young children, use very concrete imagery. For adolescents you can say, *“I know that you probably already know this. But just so you know how I feel. I know some kids feel pressured when they have a stepparent. I want you to know that I know that you have a big heart. I know that your mom has a permanent place in your heart. Sorta like the sun or the earth. I hope you come to care about Mary sometime. But I chose her, not you. So I just need you to know that I don’t expect you to love her, or even like her. I do expect you to be respectful and civil to her. I hope you come to care about her sometime. But even if you do, just want you to know that I know it will be a totally different place in your heart from your mom’s place.”*

Stepparents need to reassure their stepchildren that you will never take the place their other parent. Loosening loyalty binds free stepchildren to care about all the people in their family and assures better outcomes for all (*including* the ex-spouse-child relationship).

Parenting in stepfamilies

11. Stepfamilies pull the stepcouple to opposite parenting styles.

Parents are “heart-connected” to their children. They feel worried and guilty about their pain and they have been parenting alone. By the time of recoupling, single parents have usually drifted towards *permissive* parenting (*kind* but not firm). Stepparents find stepchildren’s behavior more intrusive and more irritating and feel less connected to them. Stepparents are often regularly rejected by their stepchildren. Not surprisingly, stepparents are pulled towards a more controlling *authoritarian* stance (*firm*, but not kind).

Stepparents need to help insider parents to become firmer. Insider parents need to help stepparents to develop more understanding and kindness. However, parents often feel extremely sensitive about their parenting and their children. Stepparents often feel exhausted and defensive. A soft/hard/soft approach is necessary for success. Start with what you do understand, what you do appreciate. Then state the problem or your wish, calmly and kindly. Then say more about what you do understand and do appreciate.

12. *The biological parent remains primary disciplinarian*

Stepparents do not yet have “parental status” in children’s eyes. Direct orders (“You need to say hello to your stepfather”) should come from the parent, not the stepparent, until or unless the child is ready. Different children in the same family will move at different paces. Most children need at least a couple of years to get to know and trust the stepparent. A very available child may be ready within six months or so. A child in a tight loyalty bind (i.e., a child who is especially close to parent in the other household) or an older child may never accept a stepparent in a disciplinary role.

Meanwhile, the stepparent functions in the same way that an adult babysitter or uncle or aunt would, as *an adult in charge when the parent is absent, not as another parent*. When the parent leaves the house, the biological parent says, *“Your stepfather is in charge while I am gone. I expect you to follow the rules of the house. Homework before TV. Tooth brushing starts at 9:00. Bedtime is at 9:30.”*

The stepparent then enforces the “Rules of the House.” When a child says to a stepparent, “You’re not my father/mother,” stepparent can calmly respond with, *“Yes, you are right. You have a mother/father. I’m not about to take her/his place. Meanwhile, though, I am the adult in charge tonight, and the rule of the house is, no TV until you’ve finished your homework. Otherwise, no TV tomorrow night!”*

13. *Insider parent needs to reach for an “authoritative” parenting style.*

A large body of research has established that children do best on every measure imaginable with parenting that is both “kind and firm” (i.e., authoritative parenting). Recent findings show that authoritative parenting is a major factor in the successful adjustment of children to major transitions like divorce and remarriage. Children do need their parents’ compassion. They also need calm, firm responsive limits and age-appropriate expectations for mature behavior. The second half of *How to Listen So Kids Will Talk and Talk So Kids Will Listen* provides excellent step-by-step coaching on authoritative discipline skills.

“You have every right to be upset about everything that’s happened here. And, it is not OK to scream at me and call me names. I think you are old enough to come to me and say, ‘I feel awful’ or ‘I’m mad.’ I promise I will try to listen when you do.” (Then coach yourself to NOT correct children when they do tell you directly how they are feeling! Breathe. Listen. Try “Mmm.” “Huh...” “Yup, that is tough!”)

“I understand that you hate having your stepsiblings here this week-end.” Listen first! Ride the wave! You’ll get heard much better *after* the wave goes by. Then shift to, *Let’s talk about what would help. Should we set some toys off-limits? Shall we make a date for you with a friend outside the house? Do you need some alone time while Jerry is visiting?”*

“It is really awful when Janey (stepsister) takes your toy without asking. I really get that. However, it is not OK to hit her when she takes your toy. Ask her, calmly and nicely, to give it back. If she doesn’t, come get help from an adult.” If the child is too upset, allow him or her to calm down by listening or by taking a time out. Then talk *calmly* together about the incident. Screaming, nagging and name-calling is not effective parenting. Make *calm, clear* limits about bullying. Your home needs to be safe for all its members.

It is never good parenting (biological or step) to label children (or adults) with “you messages.” “You have horrible manners!” “What is wrong with you that you don’t say hello to your elders!”

Authoritative parenting describes the behavior and calmly gives direction:

“You have been walking into the room without saying hello to your stepfather. I chose him, not you, and you do not need to love him. I do expect you to treat him with basic decency. That means saying hello when you see him.”

14. Stepparent functions as a sounding board not as a savior.

Research shows that stepparents who attempt to step in as a “savior,” taking over to provide order and discipline, are doomed to failure. Stepparents, however, have a critical role as a *sounding board* for the biological parent. Rather than saying directly to the stepchild, “Don’t talk back to your mother,” stepparents can, *calmly and kindly*, say to the parent, out of the child’s earshot,

“Can I give you some feedback? I know you’re used to it, but I thought Janie was really rude to you today. Was that an issue for you? Wanta hear what I think?”

15. Stepparents take a “monitoring” role, not a “bossing” or parental role.

Monitoring, a term developed by James Bray, means expressing interest in a child, being aware of soccer games and exams and aware of school requirements. Monitoring means expressing awareness of the child (“*How was your game?*”). Monitoring means asking the child, “*How’s the math homework?*” and offering to help. It is the *biological parent* who says, “You need to do your math homework,” not the stepparent. The exception is when the parent had put stepparent in charge while the parent is absent.

Monitoring generally means reporting major problems to the parent, rather than stepping in to deal with them directly, especially in early stepfamily life.

16. Stepparent gives input; biological parent retains final say.

A helpful model is that the stepparent gives input into rules and major decisions regarding their stepchildren, but the biological parent retains final say, until or unless children are ready.

Again, some children in the same family may be ready quite early ready for the stepparent to take a more active disciplinary role. Others may never be. Stepparents need to be able to tell their partners what they see and what they need. Biological parents need to make the best decision they can for their own children. Over time, biological parent and stepparent can work together to increase the areas of shared principles of parenting. Some differences may remain.

This is particularly true when the remarriage involves adult children. A stepmother may feel strongly that a biological father should not keep financially rescuing his adult daughter. The stepmother can “give input” calmly and compassionately,

“Want to hear what I think. You won’t be surprised! I know you really care about your daughter. But I actually think it would better for Amy to live in an apartment she can afford rather than you buying her a luxurious townhouse.” It is, ultimately though, the biological parent’s choice.

17. Stepparents can express their concerns to children with “I” messages and a request.

Stepparents do *not* have to remain silent when they are unhappy with a child. However, “I” messages will be much more successful than issuing orders.

“I find it really painful when you come into a room and don’t say hello to me. Would you say hello?” will work better than, “*Don’t treat an adult that way.*”

This will be very hard for stepparents raised in authoritarian families where children obeyed adults, no matter what. However, the research is clear. Stepparents who move directly into a disciplinary parental role with their stepchildren are usually doomed to failure. Stepparents need their partner's back up on these issues. Biological parents need to say to their children:

"I know it's tough to have a new stepparent. You do not have to love your new stepfather. You do have to be respectful to each other. You don't have to adore him. But that doesn't mean you can roll your eyes at him either."

Build new family rules, values and traditions slowly

18. A step at a time saves nine.

Leaving everything the same imposes too great a burden on the stepparent. Making too many changes too fast requires too much adjustment of children and will backfire in depression and rebellion. *Choose two or three changes in rules* that really matter to the stepparent, and that you both agree upon. Leave the rest the same for a while.

When there are two sets of children, try to ask about the same amount of change of each set. Managing the rate of change may require leaving two different sets of rules in place for a while. When your kids complain that his kids can have sugar cereal for breakfast when they can't, you can say,

"Yeah I know that's tough. It is hard to watch them eat those nice sweet Fruit Loops while you eat Shredded Wheat. Your stepfather and I have different ideas about what's OK for kids to eat for breakfast. When you're grown-up you can decide what you think is right. For now, I'm your mom, and I think kids do best when they have non-sugar cereal with milk for breakfast, just like we always have. After you have your shredded wheat, you can have a small bowl of sugar cereal." Obviously, adults must not allow the kids who are eating Fruit Loops to flaunt their privilege.

19. Expect to negotiate holiday rituals slowly, over time.

Combine "Something New, Something Old, Something Borrowed, Something Blue"

Expect that major holidays, where both families have firmly established rituals, will require extensive negotiation to create joint rituals that satisfy all stepfamily members. It may take several years and a few experimental disasters before new rituals form.

Sometimes stepfamily development is actually served better by celebrating some major holidays separately for a year or two. Forcing “blending” too early can create miserable family memories, exacting a high price for “togetherness.” Going more slowly can actually speed development.

Remember, that changing old rituals means at least one person loses something important. Losses already abound in these families! If you listen long enough, and with enough genuine curiosity, you can figure out what feels precious to each member of the new family. Then work together to include something that is familiar for each person. Invent some new things that work for everybody.

Try to treat the disappointments with a sense of humor, as learning experiences, not as evidence of failure. Remember that the old rituals formed over many years, a little at a time. Try to remain patient. Get curious and compassionate when things bomb.

You can also scout out some “virgin territory,” where neither family has previous history. It will be less challenging to create a family holiday where no family member is attached to any particular ritual.

20. Require civility, not love.

As much as adults would like stepparents and stepchildren (and stepsiblings) to love each other, we cannot require strangers, who did not choose each other, to love each other. We can and should, however, require civility. The script goes something like:

“You have a father who will always be your father. Joe is your stepfather. I love him. You do not have to love him. I hope over time you will get to know him and maybe even love him. Meanwhile, you do need to be respectful of each other. That means, when he walks into the room, you gotta look him in the eye and say hello. I know it’s tough. I know you’d rather he not be here. However, it’s not OK to treat him like a piece of furniture. I wouldn’t want anyone to treat you that way either.”