

Marriage & Family

Strategies for Stepparenting

1. Develop realistic expectations for stepparent/stepchild relationships.
 - a. Don't expect instant love from stepchildren. You can expect respectful behavior, and your spouse should help you emphasize this, but you cannot expect a child to care for you the way that he/she cares for a parent they've spent so many years with.
 - b. Behave respectfully toward your stepchild by acknowledging his/her feelings, concerns, and desires. Modeling this behavior usually results in a stepparent's being treated respectfully.
2. Discuss your role with your spouse.
 - a. Stepparents sometimes feel compelled to step in as a "savior" for the parent who's been having a hard time with the children, taking over to provide order and discipline and often the biological parent is in favor of this.
 - b. The couple should realize, however, that children are often not ready for a stepparent in a disciplinarian role, so this is usually doomed to failure.
3. Determine the roles of the primary parent and the secondary parent.
 - a. Parenting usually includes having disciplinary power. A stepparent should take his/her time with this, especially with older children and teens.
 - b. The biological parent should remain the primary disciplinarian in the early years of stepfamily development.
 - c. When both biological and stepparent are present, discipline is best administered by the biological parent until the child is ready to accept the stepparent as a disciplinarian.
 - d. When a stepchild says, "You're not my Mom/Dad," a stepparent can say, "Yes. You are right. You have a mom and a dad, and I'm not going to replace either one of them. You and I are going to get to know each other a little bit at a time."
4. Learn about child development.
 - a. If you are not a biological parent or if your own children are younger than your spouse's children, read up on child development.
 - b. Realistic expectations for children's behavior is an important starting point when dealing with children. It's not an excuse for inappropriate behavior, but it often provides some understanding of what might be going on and what the child's capabilities are.
5. Develop the relationships in the family one on one.
 - a. In the early years of the stepfamily, the stepparent should focus on building a relationship with each of the stepchildren individually.
 - b. Although doing things as a family seems like a good idea, for stepfamilies, it's actually better to plan one-on-one activities to build and strengthen relationships. Try to find activities that are unique for each child.

6. Empathize.
 - a. Although it can be normal to feel defensive, it's important to try to put yourself in the other person's place to empathize.
 - b. Both adults and children in stepfamilies should try to empathize with the other's feelings and situations. This can go a long way in easing conflicts and reaching compromise.
7. Acknowledge that a child can be part of two households.
 - a. In order to prevent loyalty conflicts for the children, it's important for you and your spouse not to badmouth the other parent.
 - b. As long as there's no threat to the child either physically or mentally, the child should spend time with the nonresidential parent and should be supported in that relationship.
 - c. In addition, don't involve the children in conflicts with the nonresidential parent or quiz them about the other parent's activities.
8. Strengthen the couple relationship.
 - a. The couple relationship creates the family, yet it's the newest relationship in the family and therefore the most vulnerable. One of the main reasons couples redi-vorce is due to problems with stepchildren.
 - b. To avoid becoming part of the statistics, it's important that you build in time to nurture your couple relationship and that you communicate well with each other.

Alabama Marriage Handbook, 32-35.

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