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Ask the Experts

A Baker's Dozen Tips for Parenting, Stepparenting and Discipline in Stepfamilies

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“Blending” families after divorce is a complicated process and needs time and careful attention to maximize the chance of success. Patricia Papernow shares four decades of research and clinical practice in the field to help navigate the transition.

1. For many children, becoming a stepfamily is harder, and takes more time, than adjusting to divorce.

- Adults are often ready to move forward well before children are ready. Children may be feeling a sense of loss (loss from the divorce, loss of intimate time with their parent; if there's been a move, loss of friends, school, familiar neighborhood, and familiar surroundings). They often struggle with loyalty binds (“*If I care about my stepmom/stepdad, I feel disloyal to my mom/dad*”).
- Children also struggle with the amount and pace of change in their lives. Research tells us that as the amount of change goes up, children's wellbeing goes down.
- Wait to introduce new loves until the relationship has weathered some ups and downs and you know it is solid. Take new meetings a step at a time – start with low key unpressured “meeting in the park.” Then have new person drop by for a limited amount of time. When everyone is together, keep the focus on parent-child relationships, *not* the new couple relationship. Tell children when a new love is going to come over or spend the night. For more details about these early stages, see *The Stepfamily Handbook: From Dating, to Getting Serious, to Forming a “Blended Family”* (Bonnell & Papernow, 2013).
- Bottom line: *Kids often need much more time to make new stepfamily relationships than the adults wish they did.* When in doubt, slooooww down!

2. Children need secure parent-child attachment.

- Falling in love is intoxicating to most humans. As a result, a new couple relationship often (quite accidentally) pulls parents away from their children.
- Make sure to keep carving out regular, reliable one-to-one time for kids and their parents, without stepparent's present. (Not multi-tasking time! Time when the parent can focus fully on the child.
- Young adult and adult children usually also continue to need reliable one-to-one time with their own parent!

- Dan Siegel reminds us that “helping children feel felt” is incredibly regulating for kids. Parents can help children in this big transition by providing empathy and compassion for what’s hard. *“This new stepfamily thing is tough, huh.” “Hard to have all these strange people around, huh.”*
- The dilemma is that, while kids are struggling, adults are often thrilled. Empathy requires a stretch! And it requires parents to face squarely into their children’s pain – not any parent’s favorite thing to do!

3. Age and gender make a difference:

- Research finds that stepfamilies are generally easier for children eight and under, and generally easier for boys.
- If kids are very young, and their parents have managed to maintain a low conflict divorce, stepparent-stepchild relationships are likely to be much easier.
- Adult daughters of older recoupling dads also have a hard time, especially if the dad-daughter relationship was especially distant, or especially close, before and during the divorce.
- Children who are struggling will need more time to make the adjustment. They may also need to spend less time “being a family” and more time one-to-one with their parent.

4. Hands down, “authoriTATIVE parenting” is best for children on every measure imaginable.

Authoritative parenting is both loving *and* moderately firm:

- *Loving:* Authoritative parents are responsive, warm, and empathic.
- *Firm:* AND authoritative parents calmly set moderately firm limits. They make “developmentally appropriate demands for maturity.” They monitor their children’s behavior and they follow through.

5. Stepfamily structure easily divides parents and stepparents.

- Stepparents everywhere seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren.
- Parents everywhere seem to want more love and understanding for their children.
- The goal is not to feel the same way. You probably won’t. The goal is to take a breath, slow down, and try to fully understand each other. When you don’t agree, see number 8!

6. Parents need to retain the disciplinary role.

- Until and unless stepparents have formed a caring, trusting relationship with step-kids, *parents need to remain in charge of discipline and limit-setting.*
- Many (many) stepfamilies go awry here.
- Research finds that even *authoritative* discipline, too early, doesn’t work for stepparent-stepchild relationships!
- *Sometimes, just moving a stepparent out of a disciplinary role can substantially ease a struggling child’s adjustment.*
- Note: For stepparents, relinquishing discipline can be hard. Stepparents often feel that parents are too permissive. Stepparents often see the need for more limits (sometimes accurately, sometimes not, often some of each). (See number 5 above.)
- Once children feel they have a caring trusting relationship, stepparents can move *slowly* into an authoritaTATIVE (loving and moderately firm) disciplinary role. This

very often takes years, not months! It is somewhat more likely with children eight and under. It is somewhat less likely with older children.

- In many healthy, thriving stepfamilies, stepparents do not have a disciplinary role.

7. AuthoriTARIAN parenting by stepparents is almost always toxic.

- *Authoritarian* parenting is hard and demanding without enough of the regulating warmth and empathy that children need.
- Authoritarian parenting often uses negative labels (“You’re lazy.” “You’re a brat.”) rather than calm requests (“Would you take out the garbage please.”)
- Unfortunately, stepparents are easily pulled into authoritarian parenting. That’s partly because kids’ behavior is often more irritating to stepparents than it is to parents.
- Relinquishing this style will be especially hard for stepparents who were raised with authoritarian parenting. *Authoritative* (warm and firm) parenting may feel “wimpy” or “weak” (even though its exactly what kids need).

8. Meanwhile, stepparents have input, parents have final say.

- Successful step-couples *do* work as a team.
- Often stepparents can help parents to firm up a bit. Parents can help stepparents to develop more understanding and empathy for children.
- Still, until stepparents have a caring trusting relationship with their stepchildren, stepparents have *input* into decisions about and limits for children. Parents have *final say* with their own children. Stepparents often have lots of good ideas. But they do not directly discipline, parents do.

9. The guideline for stepparents is “connection before correction.”

- Spending one-to-one time with stepchildren is helpful in building this new relationship. Start with the more available child(ren). Because children usually need their parents much more than they need their stepparents, when parents are around, parent-child relationships dominate, and stepparents are pushed to the side.
- Find easy, fun things to do together, without the parent – help a child to make his or her favorite dinner, play basketball together, make a favorite dessert together, go to a game, do a craft project together, get a child to teach you something technical on the computer.
- Successful stepparent roles include friend, uncle, aunt, caring adult. Over time, a stepparent can often become very loving “intimate outsider” – intimate enough to know a child well and care deeply, but outside enough not to be as reactive as a parent might be. For children, an “intimate outsider” stepparent can be a wonderful mentor, career guide, and sounding board.
- Some stepchildren (especially those eight and under) may be available for a more intimate parent-like relationship.
- Other children will need much more distance. Children who have an especially tight loyalty bind with their other parent, kids who have had a lot of loss and change, or who are vulnerable in other ways (on the spectrum, for instance), or who are older, will likely need much more time. Some may need to remain somewhat distant from a stepparent.
- Stepchildren’s need to distance makes sense. However, for all humans, rejection and feeling “invisible” is painful. Stepparents often need to reach for comfort (“*I could*

use a hug.”) Parents can help stepparents by offering extra warmth and understanding. (“I know it’s hard when he can’t look at you.”)

10. Researchers find that successful stepfamilies face the same challenges that struggling stepfamilies do.

- But successful step-couples have better interpersonal skills. Stepfamily challenges create lots of differences and unexpected glitches, often at times you’d most expect to be fun or easy or close. When successful step-couples have a glitch, they take a breath and calm themselves down. And then they communicate constructively, with kindness and caring.
- Successful step-couples also repair when there is a glitch. *“I’m so sorry I got a little sharp!”*
- Struggling step-couples criticize and/or avoid. They are more likely to use researcher John Gottman’s “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling.

11. Maintain a ratio of five positive to one negative in communication with kids (and adults)

- Positive communication between adults and children goes down in stepfamilies.
- Especially at this major transition, children need to feel warmth and caring from adults. This remains true even when (sometimes especially when) kids are “behaving badly.” Remember, “bad behavior” often means a stepchild is struggling, but doesn’t have language for what they need, or believes the adults won’t get it. Adults do need to set limits (*“You have every right to be upset. But no swearing and no throwing things.”*) Adults *also* need to provide empathy and compassion (*“Sounds like this was a hard day. Can you use your words to tell me?”*) Then listen and, even if it’s hard, look for what you DO understand. You’re going for connection, not correction!
- Be sure to look children in the eyes and express warmth and caring. Parents, this does not mean failing to set limits. It means, remaining “authorITATIVE” – combining warmth and empathy with clear limits. *“I know it’s tough that you’ve got a stepparent and new step-sibs. It’s still important to be civil to them. Do you need more time apart from them?”*
- Proactively provide specific, positive feedback to kids: *“I saw you took out the trash. Thanks! It’s a stinky job and it helps a lot when you do it.” “I saw you said hello to Joe (stepdad) this morning. I know it’s tough for you that he’s here. Thanks!” “I saw you studied hard for that math test and you did well on it. You Go.”*
- *All of these guidelines also apply to your adult relationship. Count!* Increase your positives: Look your sweetie in the eye. Look for things you can appreciate. Offer extra tenderness and extra hugs (out of children’s sight). Do sweet things for each other.

12. Children do best when they have positive relationships with ALL of the adults in their lives

- Children in a stepfamily have another parent, dead or alive, delightful or distinctly undelightful. The most robust predictor of poor wellbeing in children is not divorce. Or single parent families. Or step-families. *It is tension between the adults* (along with lack of authoritative parenting).
- Stepchildren live in *two* homes. Resist the urge to “circle the wagons” around your nuclear family. Do NOT compete with the children’s other parent. Stay with “We’re

- different. When you grow up, you can decide which you like better.” Not, “We’re better.”*
- Even if the other parent is unavailable, was abusive, or has died, children carry that parent in their hearts and minds. The pull of attachment combined with hurt and anger can be deeply confusing for children. Telling them to turn away from an abusive or unavailable parent often leaves them feeling more alone. The “language of parts” can be helpful: *“Part of you loves your daddy. That makes sense. He’s your dad! And part of you is so upset with him because he forgets to call/comes late/yells at you. Those are totally opposite parts in the same person. They’re both part of you. I’ll help you hold both.”*
 - When a parent has died or disappeared, stepparents may believe they can, and their partners may want them to, replace the missing parent. Stepparents will do best helping children remember and grieve their missing parent. On birthdays and holidays, for instance, *“Mom is missing. What do you think she’d do with you today?”* (See Diane Fromme’s excellent book, *Stepparenting the Grieving Child.*)

13. Bottom Line: Forming a stepfamily is a process not an event.

- Even “fast” families take a few years to form a solid sense of “we’re a family.”
- Struggling stepfamilies (i.e., those with fewer skills or less good evidence-based information about what works and what doesn’t) may need longer.
- Stepfamilies with vulnerable children may feel like a “we” in some parts of the family and more like an “us and them” in others. That’s normal. As in any two cultures coming together, differences will remain. That’s also normal.
- Do keep finding easy fun things to do together as a new family. AND carve out regular one-to-one time for the couple without kids present, for the parent-child relationship, and for stepparents and stepchildren. If “family time” is tense, keep it short and spend more one-to-one time throughout the family.

For more details and for citations see: *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn’t* (Papernow, 2013). For more resources see www.stepfamilyrelationships.com

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