

PARENTING young teens

Parenting in Stepfamilies



Does this sound familiar?

Kathy and Phil were married 18 months ago and have children from other marriages. Kathy's children live with them and Phil's two children visit twice a month. At first, everyone seemed happy.

Phil and Kathy thought that they would be a big, happy family. Now Kathy's children resent Phil, especially when he disciplines them. One day Phil's son said to Kathy, "You don't have any right to tell me what to do."

Single parents often look forward to remarriage as an answer to problems they face on their own. Two parents can share the load, handle discipline, and earn income. When adults are in love, they may assume that children also will welcome a newcomer. However, most single parents who remarry discover that stepfamilies pose unique challenges.

Typical stepfamily problems

Knowing what is normal in a stepfamily can help you accept some things and make changes when needed. Most stepfamilies deal with these problems:

Divided loyalties. Children can feel torn in their loyalty between the biological parent and the stepparent. A child who accepts a stepparent may feel that she is disloyal to the first parent.

Belonging to two households. Even if children only visit the other parent, they belong to two households. This means two sets of rules, activities, and values, which may cause problems after a visit.

Building relationships. Love, trust, and respect may take years to develop. A child or parent who is pushed to express affection also may feel guilty or pressured.

Stepparent discipline. The new stepparent often feels that he can help by taking over some of the discipline. However, children may resent stepparent discipline.

Being caught in the middle. Parents feel great loyalty for both their children and their new spouse. When a mother sticks up for her children, she may upset her new husband, but when she lets her husband change the rules, she can cause her children to feel betrayed.

Rivalry among stepsiblings. Getting along with new brothers and sisters is more difficult than getting along with siblings in first-time families.

Discipline in Stepfamilies

Here are some guidelines to make discipline easier.

1. If you are the stepparent, let your partner handle most discipline during the first few months and, in some cases, years. Children accept guidance and discipline more easily from someone they trust, love, and have lived with than from a newcomer. As a stepparent, focus on building a strong relationship with the child.
2. Parents need to discuss rules and consequences as a couple. Talk about behavior problems and expectations with your new partner. This allows the stepparent to also be involved with discipline.
3. Leave the stepparent in charge when the child's parent is gone. Tell your children before you leave, "I've asked (stepparent's name) to take over while I'm away." This helps children understand that the step parent carries out rules both parents have agreed on. If possible, wait until the child's parent returns to enforce the consequences.
4. Remember that a stepparent's ability to handle discipline improves with time. Allow time for a positive and loving relationship to develop before stepparents share equally in discipline. It may take longer with older children.

Stages in stepfamily life

Researchers have found that most stepfamilies go through seven predictable stages as they learn to live together. Families vary in the amount of time to complete the stages. Some families complete the cycle in four years, while others may take 10 to 12 years.

Stage 1: Fantasy Adults sometimes fantasize that they are rescuing children from the problems of a single parent family. Children may hope that their parents will get back together again or that the new guy will go away if they ignore him.

Stage 2: Back to reality The fantasy begins to crumble during this stage. The stepparent may feel loneliness or rejection from the children; the children's parent may feel close to them but interpret a spouse's problems as lack of desire to be part of the family.

Stage 3: Awareness Stepfamily members gradually make more sense out of what is happening and can name their painful feelings. At this point, adults might talk to other stepfamilies or read articles and books to help them understand their experiences.

Stage 4: Airing differences Spouses show more energy and strength and express their perceptions, needs, and feelings. This stage can bring conflict when the stepparent talks openly about issues and the children's parent feels distress.

Stage 5: Working together Once differences are aired, spouses can work together to build a solid relationship and discipline plan. Other family members can affirm differences between this family and original families.

Stage 6: Intimacy Spouses can relate both honestly and intimately with one another. Stepparents and children can talk openly about issues without feeling resentment or control.

Stage 7: Resolution—Holding on and letting go Relationships begin to feel solid and reliable. As a stepparent and child become close, the child can feel pain at letting go of the other parent.

A nurturing stepfamily

Be patient and flexible. Building relationships takes years, not months.

Let children choose what name to call a stepparent rather than demanding the child call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."

Talk to other parents in stepfamilies. Read books and articles to learn about stepfamilies.

Try to accept your feelings and gradually discuss them with your spouse.

Remain consistent with your spouse about discipline, rules, and consequences.

Establish new family rituals and decide which former traditions or rituals will be continued in the new family.

Get outside help. Talking to a counselor can help you deal with problems and build a strong, caring family.

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