

Stepfamilies

Many divorced or separated people in Australia form new relationships within five years, making stepfamilies one of the most common types of family unit. Establishing a stepfamily or 'blended' family can be challenging, but the challenges depend on the people involved and their circumstances. Generally, there are advantages and disadvantages to stepfamilies. Patience, respect, commitment and time are necessary to overcome any hurdles. It is important not to blame a child if they are causing problems or feeling angry, sad or resentful. Instead, they need your understanding.

Advantages of stepfamilies

Some of the advantages of stepfamilies may include:

- The child now has extra adults to care for them, as well as their parents.
- The child has extra brothers and sisters.
- The adults are happier in their new relationship.
- The family members may enjoy a higher standard of living thanks to combined incomes.
- There is an opportunity to feel part of a two-parent family again.

Difficulties for the parent and their partner

Parents can face problems adjusting to their new family, including:

- One or both partners may bring hang-ups and unresolved feelings from their prior failed relationship into the current situation.
- Disciplining someone else's child can cause resentments.
- There could be unexpected problems with child maintenance or access visits.
- The partners may have conflicting visions of family life or different rules for the home.
- A parent/partner may not like their partner's children.
- Even positive change can be stressful.

Difficulties for the child

A child can face problems adjusting to the new family, including:

- They may be still mourning the break-up of their original family. Children generally want the return of the original family, even if it was not a happy family.
- They may have been hoping their parents would reunite, and the new relationship crushes their dream. The child may try to (unconsciously) sabotage the new family in an effort to regain their old family.
- Confusion and jealousy may arise if their absent parent establishes a new relationship and has their own 'new' family too.
- The decision to make a stepfamily is decided by the two adults and not the children, who may not want a new arrangement.
- The child may resent or even hate the new partner, at least for a while.
- Moving to a new home, new neighbourhood or new school can cause insecurity.
- They have to share a house with people they don't know very well.
- They resent being disciplined by the new partner.
- They don't get along with their stepsiblings.

How the child may be affected

Adjusting to a new family can be difficult for a child. Some of the effects may include:

- Not knowing their place within the family.
- Resenting their change of place in the family.
- Feeling left out and uncertain about the new family.
- Confusion or resentment about the change of dynamics within family and/or sibling group.
- Having to share a parent with other partner and stepchildren.

Children act out their feelings through their behaviour. They may not be able to talk about how they feel about their new situation but they will show you through changes in their behaviour.

Confused feelings can manifest themselves through changes in behaviours such as:

- Difficulties in sleeping or settling at night or nightmares.
- Difficulties at meal times – your child may be disruptive or not eat.
- Problems at school, especially if it is a new school where they need to make new friends. Schoolwork standards may drop initially.
- Loss of interest in hobbies or sports.
- Changing behaviour from quiet to throwing temper tantrums.
- Nagging, whingeing and other attention-seeking behaviour.
- Becoming withdrawn.

Helping your child to adjust

A child needs to feel their problems and feelings are taken seriously, no matter how trivial their complaint or worry may seem to an adult. Children are trying to tell you something through their behaviour. Rather than punishing them, try to understand. Some suggestions to help your child to adjust include:

- **Listen** to your child when they want to talk to you. Make time to listen to them and make sure you will not be interrupted.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings or troubles.
- Don't try to force a relationship between your child and their step-parent or stepsiblings.
- Establish a regular time for family-oriented activities, such as games or discussions.
- Have meals together.
- Set up regular routines to give the child a sense of security.
- Make time to spend with your child, one-on-one.
- Regularly reassure the child of your love and support.
- Discuss and decide problems that affect the family as a whole, such as discipline, with everyone, including the children.
- Decide about new family traditions, such as how to celebrate Christmas or birthdays, as a family.
- Make sure your child gets some privacy, even if they have to share a bedroom.
- Encourage access and contact with the absent parent.
- Give your child time to come to terms with the changes, and don't expect adjustment to happen in just a few weeks or months.
- Seek professional help if you need it.

It is important for parents to look after themselves while the new family is forming. Parents' own needs can get lost as they look after their children's needs. Most parents find the transition into a stepfamily stressful and difficult. Seek counselling, attend a stepfamily group for support or join an online discussion group to share your problems with others in the same situation and seek advice.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family and friends
- Other parents or step-parents
- Stepfamilies Australia Tel. (03) 9663 6733 – for information about one-to-one support, support in a group situation, counselling, education courses and online discussion groups
- Relationships Australia Tel. 1300 364 277

- Maternal and Child Health Line Tel. 13 22 29
- Professional counsellor

Things to remember

- Your situation is not unique.
- Everyone in the new situation will have difficulties at some point.
- Patience, respect, commitment, open communication and time can overcome most difficulties faced by stepfamilies.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Stepfamilies Australia

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