

## Stepfamilies - adjusting to changes

Becoming part of a stepfamily involves adjusting to a number of changes. Children and young people of different ages tend to feel different things about this at first. They may feel a range of feelings including anger, jealousy, hate, confusion, hurt and despair. These are all natural and part of the loss and grief process. They will pass, with appropriate support from caregivers.

Many divorced or separated parents in Australia form new relationships within five years, so stepfamilies are very common.

Most children and young people who become part of a stepfamily end up liking it a lot. There are many good things about having a stepfamily, like extra nurturing and security. There are problems too, but these problems can be solved with patience and plenty of talking to each other.

### Emotions and behaviour in stepfamilies

It takes time for a child or young person to adjust to all the changes that moving into a stepfamily brings. It can be hard for the child to share a home with people they don't know very well and harder still if it involves moving to another house in a new neighbourhood.

Children show their feelings through their behaviours so observing children's behaviours during this time of change can help parents understand what is happening for their children.

Often their reaction is not bad behaviour but a sign that the child is not coping with the changes. It is important for this behaviour to be understood. The child needs to be comforted and assisted to feel loved, supported and secure. Being punished for their behaviour will only make them feel even more isolated.

### Pre-school children and stepfamilies

All children have a hard time dealing with change, so it's no surprise that things can be difficult for them at first. Some of the reactions of young children might include:

- They may be confused because they are too young to understand what's going on and why.
- They may worry that the parent who has left the house won't love them any more because they don't live together or that it is their fault the parent has left.
- Their behaviour might regress and they may start acting younger than they are. Examples include reverting to thumb sucking or bed wetting.
- They may cling to the parent they live with and want to be cuddled all the time.
- They may cry a lot.

### School-age children and stepfamilies

Children in primary school may understand what's going on, but they still feel upset and stressed by all the changes. Some of the things they might go through include:

- Their school grades might slip because they're too upset to concentrate.
- They might not play with their friends as much and may want to be by themselves most of the time.
- They might become angry and get into fights at school or argue a lot.
- They might feel ashamed that they have a stepfamily instead of a 'normal' family.
- They may wrongly blame themselves for the break-up of their family and wonder if their parent left because of something they did.

## Adolescents and stepfamilies

The period of adolescence is a vulnerable time for young people, as they are questioning every part of their existence – who they are, how they fit in, their body image and self esteem. There are many pressures on them from both school and society. Adolescents can really suffer with changes in their family circumstances at this time of 'identity crisis' in their own lives. To feel unstable in their own life and also have an unstable home life does not give an adolescent any secure place to feel safe.

Adolescents aren't children any more, but they're not quite grown-up either. Some of the things an adolescent might go through include:

- They might feel embarrassed about seeing their parents in new relationships.
- They may not try to form a real relationship with their step-parent and may prefer to talk to their friends instead.
- If the adolescent was once part of a single-parent family, they may not like the new arrangement of having another parent figure in the house.
- They may resent being disciplined or told what to do by their step-parent.
- They could feel torn between their 'natural' parents and feel they have to 'choose' loyalty to one over the other.

Further down the track even a well-established relationship between step-parent and stepchild can be disrupted. It may need to be renegotiated as children reach adolescence.

## Getting along with stepsiblings

With new stepsisters or brothers in the house, a child or young person may not be sure of their place in the family. For example, they might have done certain chores or been used to certain routines. Having other people in the house means their usual day-to-day life has to change. In many cases, children and young people grow to like and even love their stepbrothers and stepsisters.

It is important to give children enough time to get to know their stepsiblings. Some of the problems they could face in the meantime include:

- They may think it isn't fair to have to share a house with strangers.
- They might have to share their bedroom and feel annoyed about losing their space.
- They could find themselves romantically interested in their stepsibling.
- They might feel jealous of their stepsiblings because they think the other children are getting a better deal.
- They might fight a lot at first.
- They might feel left out.
- They may feel resentful about the whole situation and desperately want their original family back.

## Work things out together

The best way for family members to handle fights and problems is to sit down and talk about them. Yelling or sulking doesn't work and just makes things tense. Some suggestions include:

- Explain how you feel as honestly as you can. Remember every family member has a right to their feelings. Start your conversation with 'I feel' – this allows your feelings to be heard and isn't blaming anyone else. This technique can allow others involved, who are also hurt and upset, to be better able to listen to you.
- Try to stay calm.
- Remember that you're trying to solve a problem, not win an argument.
- Be prepared to listen as well as talk.
- Once you've worked out what the exact problem is, try to find solutions together.
- Be reasonable. It's not always possible to get what you want – you may have to compromise.

## The good things about being part of a stepfamily

Lots of children and young people feel confused and upset at first, but most end up happy that they're part of a stepfamily. Once everyone gets used to the changes and comes to know one another, there can be plenty of good things to like about the arrangement.

Some of the things that kids say they like about being in a stepfamily include:

- It's nice to be part of a 'real' family again.
- Having extra family members means more people to talk to and other kids to play with.
- It feels more secure and safe.
- You can get double the support and affirmation from two sets of parents.
- It's great to see parents happy again.
- There's more money to spend.
- There are more presents at birthdays and Christmas.

## **You're not alone**

The stepfamily is one of the most common kinds of family in Australia right now. A child or young person might feel like no one in the world could understand what they're feeling, but this isn't true. Lots of other people have had the same experience and got through it okay.

Children need to know that there are plenty of people they can talk to about their thoughts and feelings. The most important people to talk to are family members. The more they can talk and listen to each other, the better things will be. It is important that children and young people give themselves and everyone else time to adjust.

## **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Family and friends
- Other parents or step-parents
- Relationship counsellor
- School counsellor
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 551 800
- Stepfamilies Australia (03) 9663 6733 – for information about one-to-one support, support in a group situation, counselling and online discussion groups
- Relationships Australia Tel. 1300 364 277
- Facebook Stepfamilies Australia

## **Things to remember**

- The stepfamily is one of the most common kinds of family in Australia right now.
- It takes time to adjust to all the changes of becoming a stepfamily. Children and young people might feel confused and upset at first.
- Children and young people of different ages tend to feel different things when they first become part of a stepfamily.
- Most children and young people who become part of a stepfamily end up liking it a lot.

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

Stepfamilies Australia

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