Stepfamilies

Summary

- The stepfamily is one of the most common kinds of family in Australia right now.
- Everyone in a new stepfamily will have difficulties at some point.
- It takes time to adjust to all the changes of becoming a stepfamily. Children and young people might feel confused and upset at first.
- Patience, respect, commitment, open communication and time can overcome most difficulties faced by stepfamilies.
- Most children and young people who become part of a stepfamily end up liking it a lot.

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.

Becoming part of a stepfamily involves adjusting to a number of changes, both for parents and children. Young people of different ages tend to feel different things about this at first. They may experience 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 support from caregivers. It is important not to blame a child if they are causing problems or feeling angry, sad or resentful. Instead, they need understanding.

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. Most children and young people who become part of a stepfamily end up liking it a lot.

Advantages of stepfamilies

Many 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 children say they like about being in a stepfamily include:

- It’s good to have extra adults to care for them, as well as their parents.
- It’s nice to be part of a two-parent family again.
- They enjoy a higher standard of living thanks to combined incomes.
- Having extra family members means more people to talk to and other kids to play with.
- It feels more secure and safe.
- It’s great to see parents happy again.
- There are more presents at birthdays and Christmas.

Difficulties for parents in a stepfamily

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

- One or both partners may bring hang-ups and unresolved feelings from their earlier relationship into the current situation.
Disciplining someone else’s child can cause resentment.
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.
One partner may not like the other partner’s children.
Even positive change can be stressful.

**Children’s 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.

Often, a child’s reaction is not deliberately 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.

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 behaviour 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.

**Difficulties for a child in a stepfamily**
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 step-siblings.
- They feel they don’t know their place within the family.
- They resent their change of place in the family.
- They feel left out and uncertain about the new family.
- They dislike having to share their parent with the other partner and stepchildren.
**Preschool children and stepfamilies**
Some of the reactions of young children may include:

- Confusion because they are too young to understand what’s going on and why
- Worrying 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
- Regression in behaviour – or acting younger than they are. Examples include reverting to thumb sucking or bed wetting
- Clinging to the parent they live with and wanting to be cuddled all the time
- Crying a lot.

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

- School grades slipping because they’re too upset to concentrate
- Not playing with their friends as much and wanting to be by themselves most of the time
- Becoming angry and getting into fights at school or arguing a lot
- Feeling ashamed that they have a stepfamily instead of a ‘normal’ family
- Wrongly blaming themselves for the break-up of their family and wondering if their parent left because of something they did.

**Teenagers and stepfamilies**
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.

Teenagers 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 them any secure place to feel safe.

Teenagers aren’t children any more, but they’re not quite adults either. Some of the things an adolescent might go through include:

- Feeling embarrassed about seeing their parents in new relationships
- Not trying to form a real relationship with their step-parent – preferring to talk to their friends instead
- Not liking the new arrangement of having another parent figure in the house, if the teenager was once part of a single-parent family
- Resenting being disciplined or told what to do by their step-parent
- Feeling torn between their ‘natural’ parents and thinking 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 step-siblings**
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. However, 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 step-siblings. Some of the problems they could face in the meantime include:

- Thinking it isn’t fair to have to share a house with strangers
- Having to share their bedroom and feeling annoyed about losing their space
- Finding themselves romantically interested in a step-sibling
- Feeling jealous of their step-siblings because they think the other children are getting a better deal
- Fighting a lot at first
- Feeling left out
- Feeling resentful about the whole situation and desperately wanting their original family back.

**Working things out together in a stepfamily**

The best way for family members to handle fights and problems is to sit down and talk about them. Yelling or sulking do not work and just make things tense.

Some suggestions for young people 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, 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 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. It is also important that children and young people give themselves and everyone else time to adjust.

**Helping your child to adjust to a stepfamily**

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 won’t 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 step-siblings.
- Establish a regular time for family-oriented activities, such as games or discussions.
- Have meals together.
- Set up regular routines to give your 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 resolve 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.

Helping the parents in a stepfamily
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 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
- Relationship counsellor
- School counsellor
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- 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 (24 hours) Tel. 132 229

Things to remember

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