

Becoming a Stepparent

Did you know that in the United States, one out of every three marriages is a remarriage? And in one-third of these marriages, both spouses have children from a former marriage?

That means that not only are there many stepchildren, but more and more stepparents are dealing with common family matters and facing special concerns as well. They go shopping, clean the house, and pay taxes.

But unlike most couples, they have to care for a whole family from the first day. The stepchildren and stepparents have to learn to accept each other and get along. Furthermore, the new family has to blend together. Unfortunately, this is not an easy process.

Good days, bad days



At first, both stepchildren and stepparents may feel uncertain and anxious as well as happy and excited.

A stepchild has conflicting emotions. He or she may be:

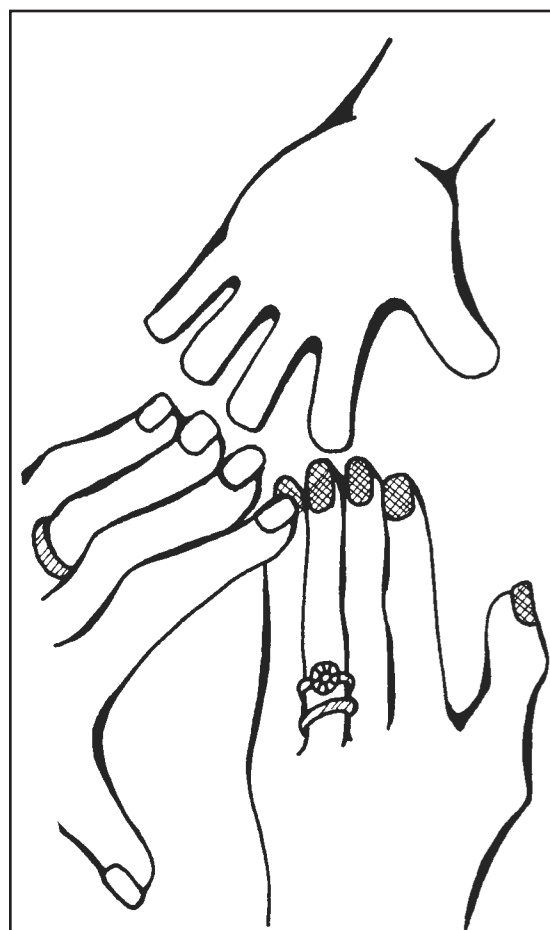
- uncertain about how to act toward a stepparent,
- worried that liking a stepparent means betraying a birth parent,
- jealous of the stepparent for sharing the parent's attention,
- upset because the household "pecking order," habits, and rules have changed; But he or she also may be:
- glad to have two parents like other children, and
- excited about the new family setting.

A stepparent, too, has different feelings. He or she may be:

- unsure of a stepparent's responsibilities,
- unhappy because he or she does not love the stepchild instantly,
- resentful of the stepchild for demanding so much of the spouse's attention, and
- hurt because the stepchild does not show love and appreciation right away; but also:
- elated to be happily married, and
- happy to feel the family growing together.

EC 1314-E

Reprinted February 2006



There are good reasons for the merging family's high hopes. The parents may be better prepared for this relationship. They may be better husbands and wives because they have learned about themselves and the needs of a spouse from their former experiences. Hopefully, they have found a spouse who is right for them. Maybe she has married a man who will be truly a good father to her children. Maybe he has found a woman who will bring out the best in him.

On the other hand, it isn't surprising that there is tension. Old hurts left from death or divorce may strain the marriage. Misunderstandings about the death or divorce may make it hard for children to accept a stepparent. They may resent the stepparent, stepbrothers, or stepsisters for causing changes in their way of life.

At the same time, stepparents may feel awkward about living with other people's children. They may feel pressure to love the children. They may be anxious about whether the children will love them. Despite all hopes and dreams, most stepparents and stepchildren don't love one another instantly. Nor do they automatically know how to behave toward each other.

It takes time to trust, feel part of the group, and learn to work together.

HELPING • CHILDREN • GROW

Putting it all together



here are many things parents can do to bring the new family together. They can:

- Prepare each family member before the wedding.
- Spend time strengthening the marriage.
- Talk about the relationship between the stepparent and stepchildren.
- Help the children continue their relationship with the birth parent.
- Encourage all family members to share their feelings.

As years go by, many families with stepchildren become closeknit. As with any family, they probably will have tensions and problems. However, they also will have much joy and happiness. They can learn how to work together as a family.

A step ahead

Before a family with stepchildren starts living together, all its members are likely to have questions and fears such as the following:

The child's questions. The child will have questions such as these:

- Will we move to a new house?
- Will I have to share my room?
- What should I call my stepmother?
- Will mommy still love me after she marries him?
- Will daddy stop loving me if I love my stepfather?
- Will my stepmother be nicer to her children than to me?
- Will my stepfather leave us too?
- If he and mommy have a baby, will they still love me?
- If I'm mean to my stepfather, will he leave so my real daddy can come back?

The parent's questions. A parent will have questions, too, such as:

- What kind of father will he be to my children?
- How can I help her feel less jealous toward my ex-wife?
- Will he understand the amount of time I need to give to my children?
- Will she feel awkward living with my teenage daughters?
- Will my ex-husband make life miserable for us?
- Will her children and my children get along?
- Will she be willing to adopt my religion?
- Will he be willing to share housework and child care?
- Will my children ever accept her?

The stepparent's questions. A stepparent will have questions like:

- Do the children like me?
- Will they accept me?
- What kind of discipline are they used to?
- How much time will they spend with their birth parent?
- How will I introduce my stepchildren to other people?
- Will he have to send a lot of money to his ex-wife?
- Should I take a job or stay home to get to know my stepchildren?
- Will her children have to spend every vacation with us?
- Will the children get upset if I redecorate the house?
- Is it OK to tell her that her child gets on my nerves?

If stepparents, birth parents, and children discuss these concerns, anticipate problems, and plan for changes before the wedding, it may be easier to adjust afterwards. Some discuss such issues the first time all members of the new family get together. Others plan a casual outing such as a hike or picnic first and discuss plans later.

In addition, birth parents and children talk among themselves. Making physical changes—making a placemat for a stepfather, finding a bed for a stepbrother, or letting the child choose the color of his or her room in the new house—often helps children feel more prepared and able to deal with the changes ahead.

Reprinted from a University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service publication and adapted for use in Oregon by Cindee M. Bailey, former Extension child development specialist, Oregon State University.

This publication may be photocopied or reprinted in its entirety for noncommercial purposes.

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties. Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—without discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

Published January 1988; Reprinted February 2006