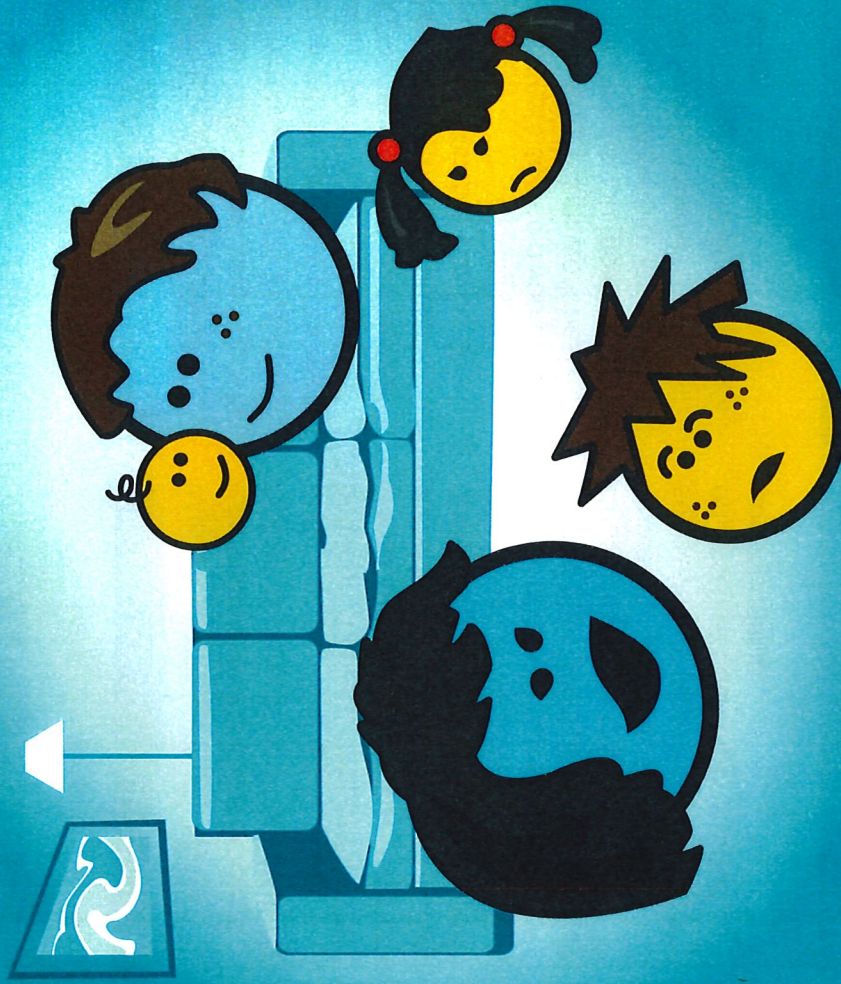


BEING A STEPFAMILY

Part of the STEPFAMILIES' series



Designed and produced by Clarius www.clarius-design.com



Parentline Plus: 520 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, Kentish Town, London NW5 1TL

Free* Parentline: 0808 800 2222

Free textphone for people who are deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech impairment: 0800 783 6783

Web: www.parentlineplus.org.uk Email: parentsupport@parentlineplus.org.uk

For professionals: www.parentlineplusforprofessionals.org.uk

Be Someone to Tell: www.besomeonetotell.org.uk

Got a teenager: www.gotateenager.org.uk

*Free from landlines and most mobile networks

Parentline Plus is the operating name of FamilyLives. FamilyLives is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales
Registered Company Number: 3817762. Registered Charity Number: 1077722.

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Coming together as a stepfamily can be complicated. It might be a time of hope – an opportunity to start again and be a happy and contented family. But a stepfamily is formed when a parent takes on a new partner following a divorce, separation or bereavement. This means children may still be dealing with the absence of a parent and so it may be a long time before a stepfamily feels safe and secure. The best start for a stepfamily is to be aware of some of the challenges ahead. Take things slowly: everyone needs time to adjust.

INTRODUCING A NEW PARTNER

To your child, a new partner is a stranger. They'll need time to get to know him or her and to trust them. Introduce them gradually and try not to push your child into giving your new partner affection. Remember that a new partner can never replace a parent but can be an extra support for your children. New partners can help you all to focus on what might work best for the children. As you move together with your relationship, take time to involve your children in changes in living arrangements and hopes for the future.

FINANCES

In a stepfamily finances can be very complicated. Child support may be going in and out of the household budget at the same time. Try to work out with your new partner how you are going to manage the family budget.

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Within a stepfamily there will be established relationships between biological parents and their children and new relationships forming between children, stepparents and stepsiblings. Children may feel that some family members are favoured above others, while the parent and stepparent struggle with feelings of guilt and not knowing how to spread their affections. Siblings and stepsiblings may argue initially. However, over time, research suggests that stepsiblings can get on and give each other support and friendship.

NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS

Before coming together as a stepfamily it may be worth working out each other's attitude to raising children. It may be that you need to work out new routines and ways of doing things that are unique to

National Family Mediation

The umbrella organisation for local family mediation services and can provide details of local services in the UK.

→ Tel: **01392 271 610**

Monday – Friday,
9.00 am – 5.00 pm

with a 24-hour answerphone

→ Email: general@nfm.org.uk

→ Website: www.nfm.org.uk

National Youth Advocacy Service

Provides advocacy services for children and young people up to the age of 25. They provide specialist help in children's rights, children in care, contact issues, education and youth justice. They have a network of advocates throughout the country and their own legal advice team.

→ Website: www.nyas.net

→ Free helpline for children and young people: **0800 616 101**

→ Email advice for children and young people: help@nyas.net



**CAN'T GET ONTO THE
INTERNET AT HOME?**

Visit your local library
which will have computers
and internet access.

Relate

Offers courses on parenting post-separation as well as books, advice and local counselling services. Find details of their full range of support and your nearest Relate Centre on their website.

→ Tel: **0845 456 1310**

Monday – Friday,
9.30 am – 4.00 pm

→ Website: www.relate.org.uk

→ Email: enquiries@relate.org.uk

FURTHER HELP

Parentline Plus

- Free*, confidential, 24-hour Parentline: **0808 800 2222**
- Free telephone for people who are deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech impairment: **0800 783 6783**
- Email support: **parentsupport@parentlineplus.org.uk**
- Website: **www.parentlineplus.org.uk**

ChildLine

The UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children in danger or distress.

- Helpline: **0800 1111**
- Website: **www.childline.org.uk**

* Free from landlines and most mobile networks.

"It was really hard for everyone to start with, but now we've got past that there's a big sense of achievement. We're proud of the family we've made."

National Association of Child Contact Centres

Promotes safe child contact within a national network of child contact centres. A child contact centre is a safe, neutral place where children of separated families can spend time with one or both parents and sometimes other family members. Please call the information line for details of local centres.

- Website: **www.naccc.org.uk**
- Tel: **0845 4500 280**
- Monday – Friday,
9.00 am – 1.00 pm

National Debtline

A national telephone helpline for people with debt problems. Offers expert advice over the phone and via email. The service is free, confidential and independent.

- Helpline: **0808 808 4000**
- Monday – Friday,
9.00 am – 9.00 pm
- Saturday, 9.30 am – 1.00 pm
- Email advice via the website: **advice@nationaldebtline.co.uk**
- Website: **www.nationaldebtline.co.uk**

this new family. You will all be learning to share time and space with each other:

- Your child may have to learn how to share you and your ex-partner with others, like stepisters or stepbrothers.
- Sometimes they may feel that they're not being treated fairly.
- Your child may also have to share their house and possessions with others.

THE EX AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Working out how children stay in contact with your ex-partner can bring additional stress to the stepfamily. Children may react differently to the new relationship, some may welcome the stepparent, and others will feel hostile to them. Some may even reject the biological parent who is absent from their home for the stepparent.

In most stepfamilies children will be feeling hurt and angry. Try to make arrangements with your ex for your children to see them and with as little conflict between you as possible. Don't get children involved in taking sides. They need to know they are still loved by both their parents. Not to be made to feel guilty that you've split up.

DISCIPLINE

How to tackle behaviour that upsets the family is really tricky. It helps if both of you agree on how to handle situations and be consistent in your approach. If you are not the biological parent it is best to invest time in getting to know the children and gaining their trust and respect before attempting to get involved with discipline. Research suggests that how stepdads cope with initial hostility towards them is key to how the relationship develops.

THE GOOD STUFF

There are very real plus points about stepfamilies. Children and adults can flourish – evidence suggests that living between two households can make a real difference to children's sociability, flexibility, independence and resilience. For parents, sharing the care of their children can provide welcome breaks and a sense of shared responsibility.

Stepfamilies also bring with them new relationships – stepgrandparents and step (or half) brothers and sisters. This means children have more people around who can give them support and guidance.

Parentine Plus tips on stepfamilies

- Give children their own space. When you set up home again with a new partner it is important that all the children have some privacy and a space they can claim as their own.
 - Be patient – your children will need time to get to know and trust your new partner and their children.
 - Keep a fair approach to all the children – there will be arguments but try not to side with your children rather than your partners.
 - Keep talking – with families joining together it is important to make time to listen to everyone's views and see if there are new ways of doing things that will keep most people happy.
 - Allow children to be unhappy sometimes – it may be a new life for you and your new partner but for the children involved it will signal an end. Allow them time to grieve for the old way.
 - Involve older children in decisions around sharing two households; take their views into consideration when making future arrangements.
 - Listen to your children even if the things they say are negative, it is important that they feel heard. Seek support for yourself if you find it hard to hear the things they say.
 - Try to spend time alone with your child to reassure them your love for them has not changed.
 - Be prepared – sometimes it may seem that young children have adapted easily to the change in their family but things may come up again when they hit their teens!
- "It used to feel a bit lonely sometimes when it was just me and Mum. Now it's fun because there's a lot going on."**

BEING A STEPPARENT

It takes time to build a new family – for new relationships to develop and existing ones to feel secure again. But children often have a greater capacity to adapt to new lifestyles and with time and effort it's possible for the new living arrangements to feel completely natural to them.

Parentine Plus tips on being a stepparent

- Remember that if the children aren't welcoming towards you, it might just be because your presence suggests to them that their original family is never going to get back together again.
- Learn from past mistakes. Remind everyone that relationships need to be worked at and a key ingredient is to value those around you.
- Teenagers can be difficult, especially when it comes to discipline, so don't always assume that the problems arise from your role as a stepparent.
- Family obligations like caring for elderly or frail relatives can be particularly complicated for stepfamilies. Make time to plan what you have to do and what you can share out with others.
- If you're getting married, try to find a role for the children in the wedding arrangements. This will make them feel included in the changes to their family.
- A death in a stepfamily can act as a reminder of the different relationships in the extended family. Try not to resent it if you're excluded from any events that you can't reasonably be a part of.
- Remind your stepchildren that they could gain additional friendship and support through your friends and family.
- Make time for yourself. Time is needed for you both to be alone to strengthen your relationship – the key to the stepfamily's success.

