

TEN STEPS FOR FATHERS WHO HAVE DIVORCED

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Step 1. Accept that Guilt Is a Prime Mover in Your Actions. Most men feel guilty because they lost their family and their power as father to that family. You may also feel guilty if you believe the mother of your children is not doing an adequate job of parenting.

Step 2. Make the Most Of Your Visitation. The rules of visitation need to be set precisely and specifically. Children need predictability.

Step 3. The Children at Your House Live by the Rules of Your House. Your children need to become part of your household, not just guests in your home. Appropriate behavior and acceptable manners must be decided upon by the couple. Chores must be assigned; making beds, helping with meals, keeping the bathroom clean, etc. Structure equals love. Chaos and unpredictability creates low self-esteem in a child.

Step 4. Don't Be a Wimp Father. Most men—even the strongest and most powerful—wimp out and turn into ninety-pound weaklings when their children visit. They endeavor to be "buddies" to their child. We so often hear fathers saying, "I see them so little; I don't want to waste time being their disciplinarian." Remember, discipline means guidance.

Step 5. Create High Self-Esteem in Your Children. This is done by creating predictable expectations for your children when they come to your house. Predictable rules and regulations will make your children feel safe and secure.

Step 6. Money Is Always a Problem, No Matter How Much There Is. It is often best when children visit to give them a specific allowance for the time they will be with you. In return for the money the child receives, he/she is expected to be a good citizen of the household, do chores, and then use the money as he or she sees fit. If a child needs extra money, we advocate "extra pay for extra jobs."

Step 7. Build and Maintain Couple Strength. Work together with your partner. Discussion is okay, but arguments are not. Be respectful of her reality as well as your own regarding the assignment of chores. Work this out between you, or seek the help of a Stepfamily Foundation counselor. The couple are the two pillars that hold the family together: She is the female head of the household; he is the male head of the household.

Step 8. The Couple Decides the Rules of Discipline. The couple decides the Rules of the House: chores and manners. The biological parent disciplines the child whenever possible. When necessary the stepparent says, "In this house we . . ." in order to avoid the "You're not my mother; you can't tell me what to do" syndrome.

Step 9. Creating a Structure Is Vital for the Children. This requires extending the Rules of the House to all events. This structure makes it easy for kids to know what to do at your house. It doesn't matter that the rules are different than Mom's. Creating a structure means creating high self-esteem. Children like themselves better when they know that they have done a good job and are part of a team.

Step 10. Remember that You Are the Father and the Male Head of the Household. Men teach children the ways of the still dominant, male hierarchical business structure.