

TEN STEPS FOR STEPFATHERS

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Step 1. The Stepfather Can't Function as Does the Biological Father. He is not the father and never will be. The stepfather is the male head of the household. Together with his wife, the children's mother, he can be a guide, a mentor, and even a psychological father to the stepchildren, over time. Go slow.

Step 2.2. Structuring the Household Is a Shared Task Between Husband and Wife. How is the time, energy, and money used? What are the duties, responsibilities, and contributions of each member of the household? This must be sorted out and decided by the couple.

Step 3.3. The Norms and Forms of Discipline Must Be Discussed and Agreed to by the Couple. Generally, the biological parent does the disciplining and the stepparent reminds, "In this house we . . ."

Step 4.4. "Overdisciplining Your Stepchildren" <Watch It! The biological mother can perceive it as too much, too often. This can bring on the mama-bear-protecting-her-young-from-the-outsider syndrome.

Step 5.5. "Underdisciplining Your Own Children" <Watch It! The biological father without custody misses his kids and fears the loss of affection and his personal input to his children. This is a legitimate fear. The less time he has with them, the less he wants to discipline. Children need parents even visiting parents to set up predictable structures and limits. Set up the rules quickly so you spend less time disciplining.

Step 6.6. Predictability and Organization Create Intimacy. In a home with structure parents and children spend less time negotiating and arguing. Parent/child power struggles over repetitive issues waste time and undermine the child's self-esteem. Talking about real issues and creating intimacy should be the goal during these limited times together.

Step 7.7. If Things Don't Work, the Tendency Is to Withdraw. Don't. Stepparenting is complicated, and the notion of not being the "master" of your own household is tough. Indeed, the mother may be lax on discipline. Indeed, you want to change things. Stepparenting has to do with parenting. You and the mother must, together, work out the forms and norms.

Step 8.8. Unrealistic Expectations Beget Rejections and Resentments. There are few models for stepfathers. Learn the dynamics of step and divorce. Know what to expect and what not to expect.

Step 9. Be Aware of a Conflict between Sexual and Biological Pulls in Stepfamily Relationships. In the original family the couple comes together to have a child, and together their energies focus on that child. The child is an extension of themselves. In step the child is connected to only one person in the couple. The blood ties and sexual ties can be polarized and can pull the couple in opposite directions.

Step 10. Guard Your Sense of Humor and Use It.