

Ten Steps for Steps

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Step 1. Recognize that the stepfamily will not and can not function as does a natural family. It has its own special state of dynamics and behaviors. Once learned, these behaviors can become predictable and positive. Do not try to overlay the expectations and dynamics of the intact or natural family onto the stepfamily.

Step 2. Recognize the hard fact that the children are not yours and they never will be. We are stepparents, not replacement parents. Mother and father (no matter how AWFUL the natural parents) are sacred words and feelings. We are stepparents, a step removed, yet in this position can still play a significant role in the development of the child.

Step 3. Super stepparenting doesn't work. Go slow. Don't come on too strong.

Step 4. Discipline styles must be sorted out by the couple. The couple, ideally with the help of a Stepfamily Foundation trained professional, needs to immediately and specifically work out what the children's duties and responsibilities are. What is acceptable behavior and what are the consequences when children misbehave? Generally, in the beginning, we suggest that the biological parent does the disciplining as much as is feasible. The couple together specifically works out jobs, expected behaviors and family etiquette.

Step 5. Establish clear job descriptions between the parent, stepparent and respective children. What specifically is the job of each one of us in this household? We need to be as detailed as we are in business.

Step 6. Know that unrealistic expectations beget rejections and resentments. There is no model for the step relationship except for the wicked stepchild and invariably cruel stepmother of fairy tales. Note the absence of myth around the stepfather. It is vital for the survival of the stepfather to be able to see and delineate expectations for each member of the family, especially the primary issues of upset in step: e.g., money, discipline, the prior spouse, visitation, authority, emotional support, territory and custody.

Step 7. There are no ex-parents . . . only ex-spouses. Begin to get information on how to best handle the prior spouse.

Step 8. Be prepared for conflicting pulls of sexual and biological energies within the step relationship. In the intact family, the couple comes together to have a child. The child is part of both parents, generally pulling the parents' energy together for the well-being of the child. In step, blood and sexual ties can polarize a family in opposite energies and directions.

Step 9. The conflict of loyalties must be recognized right from the beginning. The conflict is particular to step and is a round robin of confused emotions. Often, just as the child in step begins to have warm feelings toward the stepparent, the child will pull away and negatively act out. He/she feels something like this: "If I love you, that means I do not love my real parent." The feelings are normal and must be dealt with. The pulls of "Who am I loyal to first?" go all the way around in the stepfamily.

Step 10. Guard your sense of humor and use it. The step situation is filled with the unexpected. Sometimes we don't know whether to laugh or to cry. Try humor.