

TEN STEPS FOR YOUNG MOTHERS WHOSE PARTNERS HAVE NEVER BEEN PARENTS BEFORE

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Step 1. The stepfamily cannot and will not function as does the intact family. It has its own special set of dynamics and behaviors. Once learned, these behaviors can become predictable and positive. The tendency of many is to overly the expectations and dynamics of the intact or natural family onto the stepfamily. Others simply deny there is a problem.

Step 2. Be prepared for the 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 the family in opposite directions.

Step 3. The conflict of loyalties must be recognized right from the beginning. This conflict is particular to step and is a cycle of confused emotions. Often just as the child is beginning to have warm feelings for the stepparent, the child will suddenly 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 4. Discipline styles must be sorted out by the couple. Be aware that he may not dote over your children. Or, he may move right in and become the "new Daddy" the needed disciplinarian. The couple, best with the help of a Stepfamily Foundation trained professional, needs to work out immediately and specifically what the children's duties and responsibilities are. What is acceptable behavior and what are the consequences when the 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. Over disciplining-- WATCH IT! As a biological mother, you can perceive his often-needed discipline as too much too soon. This can bring on the tiger mother or mamma bear protecting her young from the outsider syndrome.

Step 6. Teach him that super stepparenting doesn't work. Teach him to go slow . . . and not to come on too strong.

Step 7. 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 8. Competition often occurs between a new love and her children. He may feel as though he is directly competing with them. He may be . . . HE DOESN'T HAVE TO. Sort that out. Time, energy and money allocations -- as a couple. Recognize that you have had many more years playing mother to them than lover to him.

Step 9. Usually you feel that you have not had enough time with your children and feel the need to catch up when you are together. Guilt may be a motivating factor. But discuss and agree about time spent with your man and time spent with your children.

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 cry. Try humor - for both of you.