

How to Build a Healthy Relationship With Your Stepchild

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Parenting holds a great many challenges. Little is more challenging than the role of Christian stepparent. In short, the stepparent joins the biological parent in raising his or her child, but does so initially without a clear bond with the child. Parental authority is based on the depth of relationship between adult and child. The stepparent-stepchild relationship is weak due to little emotional connection and only a brief shared history (developed while the adults were courting), making the stepparent's role very difficult and frustrating.

Consider the email I received from a biological father looking for help: "Jean is the stepmother to my seven year old son. In the past ten weeks, a very intense relationship has developed between them. Once inseparable, Jean now wants nothing to do with him and has told him as much. This has strained our marriage, and she has talked about leaving. Our marriage is as perfect as one can get when my son is visiting his mother, but when he returns it is very uncomfortable for everyone. My wife does not understand why God is doing this to her, and she is questioning her faith."

Stepparenting is Tough!

I can just imagine this stepmother explaining her situation. She likely feels confused about her role, displaced from her husband when her stepson is around, and helpless to change the situation. Despite all this, my experience tells me that she is also feeling guilty, because she knows that God is expecting her to love this boy. It's a tough situation to be in.

Finding an effective stepparent role is indeed a challenge. Yet, with healthy expectations and a specific strategy to build relationship, a satisfying bond can be nurtured.

Realistic Expectations

Stepparents and biological parents alike frequently expect too much from the stepparent, especially early in the stepfamily's development. Research confirms, for example, that stepparents and biological parents generally assume that the stepparent should be affectionate with stepchildren and attempting to assert authority (to establish their position as "parent"). However, stepchildren report-even five years after the wedding-that they wish the stepparent would seek less physical affection and back away from asserting punishment. The challenge, then, for biological and stepparents alike is to lower their expectations and negotiate a relationship that is "mutually suitable" to both stepchild and stepparent. Let's examine some key principles that may help.

1. Give yourself time to develop a workable relationship. Realize that love and caring takes time to develop, especially with pre-adolescent and adolescent children. Some research suggests that children under the age of five will bond with a stepparent within one to two years. However, older children-teenagers in particular-may take as

many years as they are old when the remarriage takes place. In other words, a ten-year-old may need ten years before they feel truly connected with you. Try to imagine your stepfamily in a crock-pot-it's slow cooking, so don't rush it. Besides, crock-pots do gradually bring all the ingredients together so trust that the low heat will eventually do its work. Here are some "low-heat" crock-pot cooking recommendations:

- Do not expect that you or your stepchildren will magically cherish all your time together. Stepchildren often feel confused about new family relationships-feeling both welcoming and resentful of the changes new people bring to their life-so give them space and time to work through their emotions.
- Give yourself permission to not be completely accepted by them. Their acceptance of you is often more about wanting to remain in contact with their biological parents than it is an acceptance or rejection of you. This realization will help you to de-personalize their apparent rejections.
- Give your stepchildren time away from you, preferably with their biological parent. The exclusive time stepchildren had with their biological parent before he or she married you come to a screeching halt after remarriage. Honouring your stepchildren by giving back this exclusive time will help them to respect you sooner.

2. Children's loyalty to their biological parents may interfere with their acceptance of you. Children are often emotionally torn when they enjoy a stepparent. The fear that liking you somehow hurts their non-custodial, biological, parent is common. The ensuing guilt they experience may lead to disobedient behaviour and a closed heart. In order to help stepchildren deal with this struggle:

- Allow children to keep their loyalties and encourage contact with biological parents.
- Never criticize their biological parent, as it will sabotage the children's opinion of you.
- Don't try to replace an uninvolved or deceased biological parent. Consider yourself an added parent figure in the child's life-be yourself.

3. The cardinal rule for stepparent-stepchild relationships is this: Let the children set their pace for their relationship with you. If your stepchildren are open to you and seem to want physical affection from you, don't leave them disappointed. If, however, they remain aloof and cautious, don't force yourself on them. Respect their boundaries, for it often represents their confusion over the new relationship and their loss from the past. As time in the stepfamily crock-pot brings you together, slowly increase your personal involvement and affections. Together you can forge a workable relationship that grows over time.

Recently a gentleman told me that it took 30 years before he could tell his stepfather he loved him. Undoubtedly, his stepfather struggled through those years for his stepson's acceptance. But despite his godly attitude and leadership, his stepson simply couldn't allow himself to return that love. Eventually, however, love won out and was able to express appreciation to his stepfather for being involved in his life. Trust that doing the right things in the name of Christ will eventually bring you and your stepchildren together. In the meantime, set realistic expectations that don't leave you feeling like a failure (until that day arrives).

Relax and Build Relationship

Relax. It's an interesting word to hear when you feel like you're not making any progress as a stepparent, yet that's exactly the word I continue to use in therapy with stepfamilies.

The crock-pot will eventually bring you closer together with your stepchildren, but you can't force their affections. So relax, accept the current level of relationship, and trust the crock-pot to increase your connection over time. In the mean time, use the following suggestions to help you to be intentional about slowly building your relationship.

Early on, monitor⁽¹⁾ your stepchildren's activities. Know what they are doing at school, church, and in extracurricular activities, and make it your aim to be a part. Take them to soccer practice, ask about the math test they studied for, and help them to learn their lines in the school play. Monitoring seeks to balance interest in the child without coming on too strong.

A second suggestion also seeks to build relationship, but slowly. Throughout the first year of remarriage, stepparents should be involved with stepchildren when another family member can be present. This "group" family activity reduces the anxiety children feel with one-on-one time with a stepparent. Adults frequently assume that the way to get to know their stepchildren is to spend personal, exclusive time with them. This may be true with some stepchildren; however, most stepchildren prefer to not be thrown into that kind of situation until they have had time to grow comfortable with the stepparent.

Honour that feeling until the child makes it obvious that he or she is okay with one-on-one time.

Another suggestion for building relationship is to share your talents, skills, and interests with the child and to become curious about theirs. If you know how to play the guitar and a stepchild is interested, take time to show him how. If the child is interested in a particular series of books or a video game, become interested and ask her to tell you about it. These shared interests become points of connection that strengthen trust between stepparent and stepchild. Sharing the Lord through dialogue, music, or church activity is another tremendous source of connection. For example, service projects are wonderful activities for parents and stepparents to experience together. Little brings people together like serving others in the name of the Lord. Discussing values through the eyes of Christ and having family devotional time can, also, strengthen your relationship, as well encourage spiritual formation in the child.

Find Your Role with Discipline

Perhaps the most confusing role for a stepparent is how to set limits, teach values, and enforce consequences. Indeed, the most common pitfall for stepfamilies is when the biological parent hands off too much responsibility for child rearing, and the stepparent begins to punish the child for misbehaviour too quickly. Rather, a unified team approach that involves both biological and stepparent is best.

Early on, teamwork for the biological and stepparent begins with the acknowledgment of the stepparent's lack of authority due to a weak-although growing-relationship with the children. Until parental status⁽²⁾ is attained (and that can take 18 months to many years) the stepparent should focus on building relationship (see section above) and being an extension of the biological parent's authority. Initially, this is done by through two tasks: 1) negotiating a set of household rules and a standard of conduct for all the children (whether biological or step) and 2) putting the stepparent in the role of "baby-

sitter."

Negotiating a household set of rules and conduct involves both adults, but takes place (initially) outside of earshot of the children. As all effective parents, the couple must discuss rules, standards, consequences, and a system of discipline for the children.

Then the biological parent can communicate this to the children. When either adult acts outside these negotiated rules (or fails to uphold them), children can divide and conquer the couple. Conflict and resentment are sure to result.

On the other hand, when a baby-sitter cares for children, it is understood that they have authority because the biological parent has put them in charge. Likewise, once rules are communicated, the biological parent must pass power to the stepparent by communicating to the children the expectation that they obey and respect the stepparent. If a rule is broken, it is the "household's" or the "parent's" rule, not the stepparent's. If a punishment is executed by the stepparent, it is the "biological parent's" punishment. Later, when the biological parent enters the picture, they should support the stepparent's decisions (hopefully they are in line with the pre-determined system of discipline), and then reinforce their expectation that the child obey the stepparent in the future. This baby-sitter role thus creates space for the stepparent and stepchildren to build relationship and, at the same time, empowers the stepparent to have influence in the home.

If children have struggles accepting the stepparent's position, compare their obedience to the stepparent with their obedience to a teacher, coach, or camp counsellor.

Sometimes, the fear of betraying a non-custodial, biological parent keeps children from being cooperative with a stepparent. However, their fears might be reduced if they view the stepparent "just like a teacher."

Eventually, the stepparent may move from a baby-sitter role to that of an uncle or aunt (where the children consider the stepparent "extended family," but don't offer them the full authority of parenthood). In addition, because stepparents will bond with younger children much sooner, they may be "extended family" to young children and "the baby-sitter" with older children. As you can tell, keeping open communication about the stepparent's changing role with children is an important task for couples.

The Value of Stepparents

Did you ever stop to notice that the God of the universe entrusted His son to be raised by his stepfather, Joseph? Yes, in that sense, Jesus was a stepchild. Despite little scripture about Joseph's character, we can rest assured that God picked him for a reason. He must have had a tremendous influence on Jesus during his early years. I suppose we could say that Joseph's impact on Jesus' growth in wisdom, stature, and favour with God and man (Luke 2:40, 52) is immeasurable.

The challenges of stepparenting are very real. The importance of your role in the life of your stepchild is invaluable. Commit yourself to the Lord, as did Joseph, and offer His love to your stepchildren (to whatever degree possible). You may never realize how important you are.

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(1) Bray, J. (1998). *Stepfamilies: Love, marriage, and parenting in the first decade*. New York: Broadway Books.

(2) Gamache, S. (2000). *Parental status: A new construct describing adolescent perceptions of stepfathers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, British Columbia, Canada.