

# NINE STEPS TOWARDS A HEALTHY STEPFAMILY

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1. Avoid the "Divide and Conquer" strategy employed by children. Children are often the cementing force in troubled biological families. They are often the trouble in non-biological stepfamilies. Protect the couple relationship. Keep in mind the reason you got married, nurture each other, and continue to grow.
2. Develop a sense of "WE". Carefully consider the living arrangements. Everything being equal, it is best to move into a neutral house. Develop your own family traditions and rituals. Sharing common experiences tend to bring people together. Traditions and rituals are what many memories and future anticipations are made of.
3. Avoid the "Brady Bunch Syndrome" and don't fall prey to the "Cinderella and Hansel and Gretel Stereotype." Children have two parents and probably enough siblings. They usually don't want more imposed upon them. In your attempts to "make" the stepfamily one happy family you risk being viewed as Hansel and Gretel's parents. The blending process takes 3 - 5 years. Be patient. As a stepparent you should interact with your step children like you would if they were the children of a very precious friend and you were in charge to take care of them. You would expect responsible behavior but you probably would be careful with what privileges you remove as a way to enforce rules.
4. Remember, the parent bond predates the couple bond. Acknowledge it, accept it, and appreciate it. The biological parent has a history of the child which the step-parent doesn't. Parent/child interaction patterns develop over a period of time, for particular reasons. They don't change easily nor should they.
5. Apply the Serenity prayer to your relations with ex-spouses, ex-inlaws, and ex friends. "Grant me the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Divorce gives children options that they may try to take. Furthermore, you probably cannot control how your "ex" interacts with your children. Children are often living in two households where there are two different expectations. It is hard on them - they certainly don't need to get in between your disagreements with your "ex". There are some things that you will need to accept because you have no control.
6. Respect Children. They are people too. Take the time to understand the incredible amount of stress and disruption which has been imposed upon them. Often they were raised in a two parent family, then a single parent family, and, now, another two parent family. Usually all this has occurred without their input or desire. Take time to interact and communicate with them.
7. Celebrate the individuality of each family member and the family itself. Each person has their own individual temperament. Each person responds differently to similar situations. Members need to set "preconceived" notions about the "right" way to conduct a family aside. They need to develop a new "right" way to conduct their stepfamily based on the individual needs of all members and the whole family.
8. Do not compare a stepfamily with a two parent biological family. Don't use traditional family behavior as a way to measure the "normallacy" of a stepfamily. As evidenced by the above, stepfamilies are qualitatively different from two biological parent families.
9. Extol the benefits which being in a stepfamily offers. Not only do stepfamilies offer many of the advantages that two biological parent families do; such as, companionship, emotional and social support, education, recreation and financial assistance, they also have other advantages. Some of these advantages are:
  1. Members of stepfamilies develop creativity as they devise alternative plans for accomplishing desired goals.
  2. Because stepfamily members need to negotiate their many differences there is an increased opportunity for intimacy.
  3. Members learn effective strategies for dealing with diversity, such as negotiation, cooperation, sharing, etc.
  4. Members are exposed to various different traditions and rituals. This broadens their appreciation for individual differences.

This information is provided as a service to inform individuals and to promote strategies for healthy families.

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