

## TIP SHEETS

# TEENAGERS IN STEPFAMILIES

Teenagers and preteens can display strong, emotional outbursts that are generally associated with hormonal changes. It is difficult to separate these normal adolescent reactions from those associated with changes in the family. Behaviour shown by teenagers in long established stepfamilies can often be linked directly to their (step)family experiences and with their move towards adulthood.

Also see [Children and Part-time Stepfamilies Tip Sheets](#)

## EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

**Emotions experienced by children are often associated with current and past family situations. These emotions are sometimes displayed through unacceptable behaviour.**

**As well as the feelings experienced by younger children, (see [Children's Tip Sheet](#)) teenagers and preteens may also feel:**

- Angry with one or other parent for their perceived role in breaking up the original family either as the protagonist or the 'wimp' who caused the other parent to leave, or anger with the stepparent who they perceive as the cause of the family break up
- Lonely now that a parent has a new partner and the teenager is demoted from a significant role, perhaps as head of the household or as a parent's companion
- Embarrassed with a parent being overly affectionate with his or her new partner
- Rejecting of a stepparent even if they had a good relationship previously.

**Teenagers' expectations for their stepfamily can be at variance from the adults:**

- Many teenagers expect to have little involvement with their stepparent and minimal involvement in their new stepfamily

## ONE IMPORTANT RULE

**Aim to be fair and treat all children the same. This can be difficult when each set of children has a different situation and resources at their disposal.**

- Most teenagers wish to have their parents back together or they wish to continue the close relationship they had when their parent was single.

## BASIC TIPS

- Help teenagers to see the move into a stepfamily as part of life's journey
  - reassure them they are and will always be loved, and have a place in your life
  - be honest and explain that mum and dad will never get back together
  - reassure teenagers they were not the cause of the original family break down.
- Don't expect one big, happy family or for children to love their stepparent or siblings. Remember relationships take a long time to develop.
- It is advisable for biological parents to implement discipline (after you, as a couple, have reached some agreement). Teenagers are usually more receptive to this until the stepparent has developed a relationship with them.
- Stepparents need to back up their partner if he/she has difficulty in sticking to the plans. Following separation or divorce, the biological parent may want to protect children or make up for past hurts and so find it difficult to be firm.

## WHERE TO GET FURTHER HELP:

**Stepfamilies Australia:** [www.stepfamily.org.au](http://www.stepfamily.org.au)

**Family Relationships Advice Line:** 1800 050 321

**Family Relationships Online:**  
[www.familyrelationships.gov.au](http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au)

**Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800 / [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

**Lifeline:** 13 11 14

**Men's Line Australia:** 1300 789 978

**Raising Children:** [www.raising-children.net.au](http://www.raising-children.net.au)

## TIPS FOR DEALING WITH TEENAGERS

**Begin by learning about normal adolescent behaviour - attend a parenting course, read current literature. Then find out what to expect from teenagers in stepfamilies. Teenagers are at a stage where they are loosening family ties and establishing their independence. This stage is incompatible with the new stepfamily, where bonds and relationships are being developed.**

- Invite teenagers to stepfamily occasions and leave the door open if they decline. There might be a last minute change of heart.
- Recognise that teenagers may want to spend time with friends rather than family.

- Help teenagers negotiate change of residence, rather than waiting for them to force the issue. Wanting to live with their other parent is very common and it is not necessarily a rejection of either parent.
- Within reason, allow teenagers to choose the amount of involvement they want in their stepfamily. This will help them regain a sense of control over their lives.
- Use family meetings to involve teenagers in developing household rules and a roster for the family, and to bring up any issues that are bugging people. Keep meetings informal and plan fun times as well.
- When there is a lot of tension in the household, create time out for a teenager at a relative or friend's place. Discuss in advance so that the teenagers does not perceive the arrangement as them being 'thrown out'. OR the stepparent could have time out for a few days.
- Don't expect your teenager to always be organised with school work or their life in general. There are many ongoing changes in their life (see Part-time Stepfamilies Tips sheets).

## GENERAL RULES

- Don't take teenagers comments or reactions to you personally. Their comments are not aimed at you as a person but are part of their move towards independence.
- Don't interfere too much, give teenagers space e.g. allow them time in their room.

- As a stepparent, don't try to be a friend. Show them respect.
- Don't make an issue out of everything. Make sure when there is a fight on your hands, that the issue is really important. If it is not then let it go.
- For teenagers displaying challenging behaviour
  - create strict guidelines about what they are allowed to do and what they are not
  - have a bottom line: three things that are not on e.g. violence is never acceptable
  - don't respond. End communication until both parties are able to communicate without sarcasm or abuse
  - seek counselling.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT STEPFAMILIES

- Educate yourself about the realities of stepfamily life – read books, attend stepfamily courses.
- Seek support, join a group for stepfamily members, talk to others who are familiar with stepfamily life.
- Get outside help if necessary. Make sure the counsellor is familiar with stepfamily dynamics.



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