



**Stepfamilies Australia**  
Strengthening Stepfamilies

## Schools supporting families through change and transition

Schools are often the first place to recognise changes in a child's conduct. More often than not they are in the frontline as one in three families with school age children undergo transitions ranging from death, separation or divorce to repartnering.



Children in these families experience many changes in their home life, which can impact on their ability to engage in education. Schools can be an important constant for these children, providing stability and consistency of routine.



While stepfamilies can provide a lot of positives for children they also present some ongoing daily challenges. Schools can often recognise the warning signs and provide opportunities for discussion with families. Schools also often function as a changeover venue, which can allow children valuable adjustment time between homes.



Schools and teachers often provide the framework and language for children struggling to define the new partners and their roles in their parents' lives. While not counsellors or mediators, teachers can be a really important impartial connection between biological parents, their partners and children.



Children in stepfamilies may feel different to and isolated from peers. Teachers can reduce these feelings, and facilitate connections with students in similar situations.



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**Stepfamily savvy teachers can significantly improve a child's experience of home and school, and Schools can become even more stepfamily-friendly by:**

1. Using a variety of family structures for any themes on family studies eg nuclear or biological family, adoptive family, foster family, sole parent family, stepfamily, rainbow family, grandparent family, extended family.
2. Checking if student enrolment forms in your State record relevant contact details for both biological parents and their partners; and ensure that staff are aware of any relevant court orders.
3. Encouraging parents to keep staff updated about parenting arrangements. This makes it easier for schools to contact the relevant family in case of an emergency.
4. Developing clear policies ensuring staff communicate with and be respectful of the wishes of both parents; and that all care givers have access (eg email) to relevant and up to date information in the form of school newsletters, reports, teacher interviews, etc.
5. Not assuming that children will act at go-betweens; or that parents/ex-partners will be able to keep each other in the loop.
6. Recognising that many caregivers including grandparents and stepparents also have roles in collecting a child from school. Authority to sign activity participation forms is a grey area legally which needs clarification.
7. Inviting and expecting up to four parent figures for parent-teacher interviews or providing opportunity for two interviews per child in a stepfamily if necessary.
8. Providing enough tickets for graduations/special events to include stepparents as well as biological parents.
9. Allowing and encouraging children to purchase extra gifts from the Mothers/ Stepmothers Day & Fathers/Stepfathers Day Stalls, and make extra gifts for 'significant others' in a child's life.
10. Understanding that children in a stepfamily usually have to move between two homes, so they might occasionally forget school books, parts of uniform etc.

