



Stepfamilies Australia
Strengthening Stepfamilies

TIP SHEETS

BIOLOGICAL MOTHERS

Traditional parenting roles can create special issues for women and men in the stepfamily. The biological mother's central position which includes nurturing and protecting her children, can make it difficult for the stepfather to find a place or role for himself.

See also **Stepfathers and Ex-partners Tip Sheets.**

EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

A biological mother's desire to create a new family and to have a mate can be complicated by maternal instincts to protect her children. Expectations some mothers hold for their stepfamily that may not be met are to:

- create a close family that will make up for past hurts
- acquire a parent for her children
- protect children from further hurt
- have the stepparent discipline her children
- have the stepparent support her children financially.

Many biological mothers experience mixed feelings. These may include feeling:

- loyalty to her children over her partner and/or
- torn between her partner and her children
- sadness when an ex-partner is not involved or has died
 - protection of children from their stepparent
- concern for the welfare of children visiting their other parent.

ONE IMPORTANT RULE

A strong couple bond is essential to the success of a stepfamily. Spend time alone as a couple on a regular basis, so that you develop a strong relationship. This will help you to work together to solve issues and will also model a working relationship for children.

BASIC TIPS

- Don't expect your stepfamily to work like a biological family. Because the stepfamily is a family built on loss, there are a number of current and past relationships to be negotiated and possibly baggage from the past can also intrude.
- Don't expect close loving relationships between all family members. Stepfamily members might grow to love each other given time, but this might never happen. Encourage an environment of respect and understanding.
- Don't expect the stepfamily to run smoothly from the beginning. It takes time to develop common goals and values, and to develop a family history and traditions.
- Remember, yours is a complicated family made up of ex-partners and new partners. Try to be accommodating and communicative with members of each household. This can only benefit all children and yourself.
- Work with your partner to enforce rules and discipline.

WHERE TO GET FURTHER HELP:

Stepfamilies Australia: www.stepfamily.org.au

Family Relationships Advice Line: 1800 050 321

Family Relationships Online:
www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 / www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Men's Line Australia: 1300 789 978

Raising Children: www.raisingchildren.net.au

TIPS FOR BIOLOGICAL MOTHERS

- Create appropriate boundaries with your ex-partner. (Refer Ex-partners Tip Sheet).
- Don't assume your partner will want to support your children or have a close relationship with them. Discuss with your partner the role he/she thinks will work.
- Allow relationships between stepparent and children to develop at their own pace and accept that all children might not want a close relationship with their stepparent.
- Remember the stepparent can never replace the dead or absent biological parent. However, in these circumstances, the stepparent's role often becomes more like that of the biological parent. Allow children to keep photos or talk about their absent parent.

- In the early days, continue to discipline your children, and ask your partner for support when you find this difficult. Children are usually more accepting of their biological parent doing the disciplining.
- Resist the temptation to do everything as 'one big, happy family'. Spend time with your own children. This frees your partner to follow up interests of his or her own.

BIOLOGICAL / STEPMOTHERS EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

See also Stepmothers Tip Sheets

Combining the role of biological mother and stepmother can lead to some conflicting emotions. These could include:

- Resentment of stepchildren for depriving your own children of time and affection
- Feeling torn or guilty when balancing fairness between your own children and stepchildren
- Upset when visiting children are perceived as having more attention or leeway than resident children.

One common but unattainable expectation when combining two lots of children is:

- For the family groups to be equal.

TIPS FOR BIOLOGICAL / STEPMOTHERS

- Acknowledge to yourself that you have closer feelings for your own children and allow expression of these, particularly when on your own with your children.
- Balance time between different groups within the family, for example, set aside time with your children, the whole family, stepchildren and with your partner.
- Work with your partner to set the same household rules for all children. This may not mean that everyone is equal but aim to be fair to all.

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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