

## TIP SHEETS

### CHILDREN

Parenting is a source of tension for many stepfamilies. The parenting challenge is best met when both adults reach agreement on how to handle situations. This requires them to jointly plan and adjust strategies until all family members feel comfortable.

See also [Part-time Stepfamilies](#)

## EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

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

### Children in stepfamilies can feel:

- Conflicting loyalties when caught between their biological parents or a biological parent and stepparent
- Sadness that they have less contact with their parent now that he/she is in a relationship. Stepsiblings' presence can further erode the previous close parent/child relationship
- Jealous or resentful of stepsiblings because the stepsiblings are perceived to be favoured or to have a better life
- Confused, angry, powerless with changes over which they have little or no say
- Sad, depressed, unmotivated as a result of the many losses they have suffered
- Rejecting of a stepparent.

### Children's expectations for their stepfamily can be different from the adults:

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

## 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.**

## BASIC TIPS

- Help children to see the move into a stepfamily as part of life's long 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 be getting back together
  - reassure children they were not the cause of the original family breakup.
- 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 usually works best for the biological parent to implement discipline after you as a couple have reached agreement over rules. The biological parent lets the children know that the stepparent will take authority in his/her absence.
- Stepparents, support your 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 consistent.

## 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.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

## TIPS FOR DEALING WITH CHILDREN

- Acknowledge it's okay to feel strong emotions. (Consider how they are expressed).
- Children sometimes feel sad about the past. At these times talk about the past - look at photos, share stories (good and bad) or visit old haunts. Let children know their feelings are normal, and with time they will feel happy again.
- Don't force children to express feelings and avoid probing. Observe body language or hints (in drawings). Say eg. "You look sad, I wonder what you are thinking".
- Help children express anger appropriately eg. use a punching bag. Sometimes it is possible to change anger into laughter if you look at the situation another way.
- Develop your children's trust by not making promises you can't keep.

- Children often feel powerless with the changes. Involve them in decision making.
- Get to know more about each other by sharing information through playing games or talking about your favourite football team, TV shows, computer games, and so on.
- Keep children informed well in advance about plans, eg. to marry or shift residence. Be prepared for angry reactions and leave space for emotions to calm down.
- Don't use children as messengers between homes. (See Ex-partners).
- Every family has different ways of doing things, explain neither is right or wrong.
- Normalise the situation by talking about other stepfamilies. Point out that wicked fairytales or some TV shows do not portray stepfamily life accurately.
- Allow children to decide on the names they use for their step parent or step grandparents, eg. given names or a combination title such as 'Dad John'.
- Respect individuals' need for privacy. Make rules such as knocking before entering a private space, especially bathrooms and bedrooms.
- Adults - be discreet with demonstrations of affection with your partner.
- Establish a dress code such as no running around in the nude or scantily clad.
- Involve children with decisions regarding their bedroom decor and colour scheme. Ensure each child has a space of their own, maybe their own drawer or cupboard.

- When two families combine children may lose their place in the family. Help define them as individuals by highlighting their unique characteristics or skills.
- Don't speak ill of the child's other parent. That parent is part of the child and any criticism could affect the child's image of him/herself.

## DISCIPLINE

- As a general principle emphasise the positives. This enhances children's self esteem - notice and praise appropriate behaviour, develop your child's ability to self praise.
- Don't expect your stepfamily to work like a biological family. Children have a primary bond with their biological parents - allow this to happen. Children accept changes more easily when they have close contact with their biological parent and siblings.
- Because the stepfamily is often combining several families it is important for both the step and biological parents to be involved in planning routines and rules that all children will adhere to. Remember to consider both families and be flexible.



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