



## TIP SHEETS

### EX-PARTNERS

One of the most challenging aspects of living in a stepfamily can be coping with an ex-partner. An ex-partner might be physically absent (in the case of death, or where they have no contact with the family), emotionally distant, hostile, antagonistic, overly friendly, intrusive and anywhere in between. Each circumstance provides different dilemmas.

See also Children and Teenagers Tip Sheets

## EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Ex-partners are often seen as the 'the baddie' yet most adults in stepfamilies are ex-partners themselves. It can be helpful to acknowledge the range of emotions you feel as this will help you understand some of your ex-partner's reactions. (see also Step/Biological Mothers and Fathers Tip Sheets).

### Ex-partners can feel:

- Guilty for leaving the relationship or anger at the ex-partner for breaking up the relationship
- Angry, particularly if an emotional divorce has not yet been finalised
- Sad and depressed because of the losses they have experienced
- Resentful or threatened by the new stepparent
- Lonely when their children go on contact visits
- Critical of the way things are done in the other family.

The continuing contact that parents have through their children complicates boundaries between ex-partners and this leads to some unreasonable expectations.

### ONE IMPORTANT RULE

Put the children first. The children's welfare is most important. Keep that uppermost in your mind when you and your ex-partner have any contact.

### An ex-partner might expect to:

- Continue the same relationship with their ex-partner as if he/she was still single
- Have a significant amount of control or say over children's lives both when they are in their own household and when they are in your household.

### BASIC TIPS

- Remember that the ex-partner is, and will always remain, the parent of the children.
- Don't get caught into a battle with your or your partner's ex-partner. Avoid this as much as possible. Remain polite and stick to information about the children.
- Aim to develop a working relationship with the ex-partner. Be aware of the way you communicate. By using 'I' messages you are less likely to invite an angry defensive response.
- Don't use children as messengers, or to gather information.
- Keep your current partner informed about arrangements made with your ex-partner.

## 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 EX-PARTNERS

**Remember that it is important to see the other's point of view, so try to put yourself into the ex-partner's shoes:**

Try to recall some times when things were OK between you and your ex-partner. This can help you to be less uptight now.

- Don't expect the relationship with an ex-partner to be resolved quickly or maybe ever. Be aware that when the ex-partner's life is going wrong, the stepfamily is likely to be effected
- Encourage the other parent to be involved with their children (unless you have strong evidence for not doing so). Children are less resentful of a stepparent when both their biological parents are involved.

- Even if the relationship with an ex-partner is amenable, or where an ex-partner is over involved or intrusive, both you and your partner need to decide how much contact with the 'ex' is acceptable. The ex-partner may be unaware of how intrusive his or her behaviour seems. Decide where, when and how much contact is OK. For example, do you want the ex-partner to 'simply drop' the children outside your house, or are you comfortable with them coming in for a cup of coffee?
- Create appropriate boundaries with your ex-partner. Previous flexible arrangements are likely to need changing once you are in a relationship. The stepparent can feel resentful if the ex-partner is too friendly or has too much freedom within your territory. Remember that you and your ex-partner are no longer partners but you are parents to your children
- Children usually adjust well when their parents are not caught in a battle and when the children are free to visit each parent without any pressure
- When you are making arrangements with your ex-partner consider how your step-family will be affected. Don't give in to unreasonable demands from an ex-partner
- Be prepared for the ex-partner to criticise the way you do things. Reassure yourselves you are doing a good job and that you have a right to maintain your own household rules and standards. Rather than rejecting their criticism out of hand consider whether it is reasonable and respond if appropriate
- Seek counselling if you are unable to develop a working relationship with an ex-partner.

## 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.



Generously sponsored by Paul Newman's Own, Bokhara Foundation Pty Ltd and Sunshine Foundation

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