



Stepfamilies Australia
Strengthening Stepfamilies

TIP SHEETS

GRANDPARENTS

Changed family circumstances, caused by the death of a parent or divorce can mean grandparents have either a greatly increased or reduced involvement with their grandchildren. Grandparents rights are enshrined in law. The Family Law Act (1975) states "except when it is or would be contrary to a child's best interests: children have a right of contact, on a regular basis with both their parents and with other people significant to their care, welfare and development". Sadly, not all grandparents have ongoing contact with their grandchildren.

EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Feelings that grandparents experience can be an outcome of their children's actions or the changed relationships the grandparents are now dealing with.

Some typical feelings are:

- Anger with their adult child or daughter/son in law for breaking up the family, or anger at a new partner for their perceived role in the family break
- Confusion about what role they have as a grandparent, when their stepchildren have children. Their stepchildren's biological parents have the position of the 'real' grandparents
- Rejection / isolation from grandchildren when their child's ex-partner moves away or does not maintain contact with them
- Being torn between loyalty to one's own child and emotional ties to the ex-daughter/son-in-law
- Sadness that they don't see their grandchildren any more.

Grandparents sometimes hold conflicting expectations. They may fail to acknowledge the new stepfamily relationships yet expect that:

- Their children's new stepfamily will be inclusive
- contact with their grandchildren will continue as before

ONE IMPORTANT RULE

Be supportive of the stepfamily and the new step-relations. Don't make too many demands or be judgemental.

BASIC TIPS

- Be accepting of your child and stepchildren's circumstances and relationships. You may have less contact with them now they are in a stepfamily.
- Remember that although you are important in your grandchildren's lives you may not be a primary player.
- Take the lead from your own children, observe the way things are done and avoid the temptation to come on strong. Relationships in the stepfamily can be delicate.

Grandparents have an important role to play in their grandchildren's lives. Being a grandparent in a stepfamily can be complicated:

- Your biological children could have children of their own
- Your stepchildren could have children of their own
- Your own children or stepchildren might have formed a relationship with someone who brings children from a previous relationship
- You may still want to maintain contact with an ex-daughter or son-in-law.

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 GRANDPARENTS

The changes that have occurred in their children's lives can make it difficult for Grandparents to adjust. The following suggestions may not suit every situation:

- Try to negotiate some contact time with your grandchildren, either through visits, phone calls or by sending letters, post cards or emails, particularly at Christmas and birthdays
- You may want to seek legal advice if things don't work out, but remember it is best if you can work out the issues without getting the law involved. Maybe you have a friend or other relative who could act as go between, or mediator

- Don't expect to have the same feelings for your different grandchildren/step-grandchildren. While personalities and situations can generate a range of emotions, sometimes grandparents expect to feel closer to their step-grandchildren than is possible
- Acknowledge you may be disappointed or angry with your own child following the break up of his/her marital relationship but accept that, given time, life will settle down into a normal different pattern of relationships
- Give the new stepfamily and relationships time to develop
- Try to be inclusive to all family and extended family members
- Aim to be fair to everyone, particularly with gift giving when your step-grandchildren are present
- Some grandparents retain a close relationship with their ex-daughter or son-in-law. If this is your situation, remember to support and acknowledge the special bond you have with your own child so that he/she still feels part of your family
- Consult with the biological parents regarding names they would like their child to call you. There are a variety of special names or variations, for example your biological grandchildren might call you Nan and Pa while your step-grandchildren opt for 'Nan Mary' or 'Pa John'.

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. Be accepting of your child and stepchildren's changed circumstances and relationships. You may have less contact with them now they are in a stepfamily.



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