

TIP SHEETS

STEPFATHERS

A traditional male role rarely works well in a stepfamily. The stepfather often assumes or is expected to be the disciplinarian in the stepfamily and this can cause resentment from his stepchildren and/or partner. The role of the stepfather during adolescence can be particularly challenging. The task for men is to develop a role that works, as well as providing them with a sense of purpose. This requires innovative thinking and flexibility to accommodate the many changes throughout the life of the stepfamily.

See also **Biological Mothers, Ex-partners, Children, Teens and Part-time Stepfamilies Tip Sheets**

EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Unrealistic expectations for the stepfamily some stepfathers hold are:

- To discipline children as if they are one's own
- To be accepted as the children's father
- To feel love for their stepchildren
- For all stepfamily members to be close and loving

Stepfathers who have no children of their own can feel:

- Isolated or excluded from the relationship between the children's mother and her children
- Sadness that the family is not what he expected
- Competitive for his partner's attention
- Confused, angry and powerless when the disciplinary techniques of his choice don't work or are unacceptable

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 work together to solve issues and it models a working relationship for children.

BASIC TIPS

- Don't expect your stepfamily to work like a biological family. The stepfamily is complex. It is a family built on loss. There are a number of current and past relationships to be negotiated and baggage from the past can 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 STEPFATHERS

- A power struggle can emerge between a stepfather and an older stepson. In this case avoid a head on clash. Acknowledge your stepson's achievements and maybe his usurped position of 'man of the house'. With your partner's assistance, help your stepson develop a satisfying position in the new stepfamily.
- Don't force the relationship with your stepchildren. Take the cue from them. Gradually develop a friendship by becoming involved in different ways: find out about their interests and friends, teach a skill, drive them to activities, help with homework and so on.

- Don't compete with the biological father or try to buy your stepchildren's affection. You will never be the child's biological father so you need to develop a different role. You could become a friend, mentor, coach - the list is endless.
- Be clear from the beginning about how much you are prepared to contribute to the household finances. Discuss how finances will be managed, with your partner.
- When stepchildren continually ignore you, get your partner to prompt them to acknowledge your presence and contribution by saying for example "Say thank you John", or 'Goodnight John'.
- Look after yourself. Work on your self esteem because this can take a battering. Find some time for your own interests and activities.
- Don't automatically expect a close loving relationship with, or acknowledgement and appreciation from your stepchildren. This may not happen for many years. Be prepared for different stepchildren to treat you differently.

Don't feel a failure if you don't develop a close relationship with your stepchildren.

- There are a number of reasons why this might not happen. These include past histories - yours and your stepchild's, individual personalities and different expectations.

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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