

Stepfamilies: an overview

By Stepfamilies Australia

Starting a stepfamily is a major life change. It's as significant as becoming a parent for the first time, and it can lead to negative feelings. It's how you respond to these changes that is important.

Some people enter into stepfamilies expecting that step-parents and stepchildren will naturally grow to love each other. Although this does happen in some stepfamilies, love does not always grow between stepfamily members. If it does develop, it is not always reciprocal.

1. Starting a stepfamily: basic tips

You might be a parent with children who are going to live with you full-time or part-time. You might be an adult about to enter into a relationship with children for the first time. Either way, you will have some expectations and feel emotions that are new to you. Stepfamilies, just like biological families, need to establish clear boundaries for the roles of adults and children.

- Always keep in mind that **being part of a stepfamily is very different from a biological family.**
- Begin with the aim of **respecting and understanding all family members.** Feelings of love may develop given time, but close loving relationships between all family members might not ever happen.
- **It will take quite some time for your stepfamily to run smoothly** and for you to develop common goals and values, as well as a family history and traditions – five years is a common experience.
- 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.
- Children (and sometimes adults) in a combined stepfamily often begin life together as strangers. It takes a long time for relationships to develop. **Don't expect close loving relationships between all family members.**

2. Stepfamily developmental stages

Most stepfamilies go through a series of stages. These stages are not linear and families tend to move back and forth between each. There may be some conflict, some confusion, and your relationships may suffer as family members learn to negotiate the bumpy path to establishing a sense of family with a new set of shared values, routines and goals.

In fact **the journey to becoming a well-functioning stepfamily is a meandering one** and needs lots of emotional stamina and endurance over a long time. Here are the stages:

- **Fantasy:** there is an expectation that this stepfamily will be one big happy family.
- **Confusion:** this begins when family members sense that something is wrong. The step-parent is often the first to notice.
- **Crazy time:** there may be highly emotional times when the stepfamily is divided and members take sides. Issues are out in the open but nothing is resolved. It is often advisable to seek counselling at this time.
- **Stability:** the stepfamily begins to stabilise and there is a sense of 'us' or 'our family'. The step-parent has a clear established role.
- **Commitment:** there is an ongoing commitment to making sure this family continues to work, an acceptance of the past, and of the rhythms of change.

3. Learn more about stepfamilies

You can take several steps to prepare yourself for life in a stepfamily:

- Educate yourself about the realities of stepfamily life – for example, read books or attend stepfamily courses.
- Seek support, join a face to face or online group for stepfamily members or talk to others who are familiar with stepfamily life.
- Get outside help if necessary. Make sure the counsellor is familiar with stepfamily dynamics.

References

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