

TIP SHEETS

STEPMOTHERS

A traditional mother role does not usually work well for a stepmother. The stepmother often has the unenviable job of being a mother figure and yet not a mother to her stepchildren. Her role requires her to balance active involvement when required by her partner and stepchildren with peripheral involvement at other times.

See also [Biological Fathers and Ex-partners Tip Sheets](#).

EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

As a stepmother you can expect to have some strong reactions or emotions. Remember these sometimes result from holding onto unrealistic expectations. Feelings experienced by stepmothers include:

- Powerlessness, feeling exposed, anger because of involvement or interference from an ex-partner
- Isolation, feelings of being left out or invisible when ignored by stepchildren, unsupported by your partner
- Sadness for what you are missing or have missed out on by being in a stepfamily
- Guilt that you feel antagonistic towards your stepchildren
- Frustration because you can't achieve what you want in this situation
- Resentment of stepchildren for the time or cost involved
 - Anger at the biological mother and/or your partner and/or your stepchildren
 - Jealousy at time spent between your partner and his ex-partner and the decision-making they may do together.

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 to work together to solve issues and will also model a working relationship for children.

Some expectations for your stepfamily which may not be met are to:

- be a mother to your stepchildren or to make up for an unsatisfactory mother
- make up for children's past losses and hurts or protect stepchildren from further hurt
- love or like and be loved or liked by your stepchildren and have a close unified family
- prove to your partner that you are more capable than the children's biological mother.

BASIC TIPS

- Don't expect your stepfamily to work like a biological family for the reason that the stepfamily is a family built on loss. There are a number of current and past relationships to be negotiated and possibly baggage from the past can also 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.
- 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.raising-children.net.au

TIPS FOR STEPMOTHERS

Your role in the stepfamily will not be as straight forward as that of a biological mother. You will need to be flexible and open while still maintaining a sense of self:

- Be prepared for different stepchildren to treat you differently. Consider the age of the children. Many adolescents (in particular girls) do not want a close relationship with their stepmother. Closeness may grow given plenty of time
- 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
- Don't get bogged down by your responsibilities - arrange some fun in your life. Do something frivolous, watch a comedy, go away for the weekend with friends

- See the stepmother role for what it is and separate you, the individual, from it. When you receive criticism remember you are not a wicked stepmother but a concerned, caring individual who is handling a difficult situation
- Address issues openly with your partner. Explain how you are being affected and work together to change the situation. If you are unable to change your situation channel your anger into physical activities such as yoga, walking, gardening
- Don't set out to replace the biological mother. Explain to your stepchildren that you are not their mother and will never replace her. Stepmother roles that can work are benevolent aunt, friend, mentor, protector, mother figure amongst others
- A power struggle can emerge between a stepmother and an older stepdaughter. In this situation discuss the role you might take, and with your partner's assistance help your stepdaughter develop a satisfying position in the new stepfamily
- Work at developing a relationship with your stepchildren. Don't rush the process but take the cue from them - teach a skill, follow their interests, cook special foods, play games, have fun. You may need to reach out to stepchildren who are shy or reserved
- Back up the biological parent with disciplining the children, after you, as a couple, have reached agreement on what will be accepted in this household. Older children in particular may reject any attempts by a stepparent to discipline them
- When stepchildren continually ignore you, get your partner to prompt them to acknowledge you, for example 'Say thank you Sue', or 'Goodnight Sue'

- Allow the biological parent time alone with their children. The children's primary relationship is with their biological parent, and that parent needs to remain involved
- As a couple, present a united front to the children and sort out disagreements behind the scenes. You might 'agree to disagree' on some issues.

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 stepfamilies.
- 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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