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Stepfamilies: How to help your child adjust

By Mayo Clinic staff

Original

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Stepfamilies: How to help your child adjust

Stepfamilies can be successful if family members work to build healthy relationships. Find out how to help your child adjust to being part of a blended family.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Relationships in stepfamilies can be complicated, but it's possible to build a successful blended family. Consider the challenges a blended family may pose for your child — and what you can do to overcome these hurdles as you build a new life together.

What challenges do stepfamilies pose for children?

A new stepfamily may have two separate sets of traditions but no shared family history. When a new stepfamily forms, each family member faces a unique set of challenges and potential sources of stress — especially children. A child entering a newly blended family may feel torn between the parent with whom he or she lives and the parent he or she visits. A child may have to figure out how to navigate relationships with his or her stepparent and stepsiblings. In addition, a child must face the fact that his or her parent has to deal with the demands of a new spouse, stepchildren and, possibly, an ex-spouse.

How can new stepfamilies overcome these challenges?

To help your child adjust to the blended family:

- **Acknowledge and mourn losses.** Your child may be dealing with anguish over a divorce or the death of a parent. Your child may have harbored hopes that you and your ex-spouse would reunite. Don't expect these feelings to resolve quickly. Keep in mind that your child may also worry that your new marriage and family situation won't last.
- **Make decisions as a family.** Consider holding regular family meetings to discuss problems and come up with positive solutions as a team.
- **Don't overreact.** If your child criticizes his or her stepparent, try not to overreact. Allow your child to express his or her feelings. Take comfort in the fact that if the stepparent is sincere in his or her effort to build a relationship, positive feelings will likely outweigh negative ones eventually.
- **Nurture existing family relationships.** Be sure to spend time nurturing family relationships that existed before the creation of your stepfamily.
- **Foster new family relationships.** Identify shared interests among members of your stepfamily. Encourage your child to spend time getting to know his or her new family members before and after your blended family forms.
- **Encourage respect.** Remember, it may take time for your child and his or her new stepparent to develop a relationship. In the meantime, encourage all family members to treat each other with decency and respect.
- **Be patient.** Research has shown that it may take two years for stepfamilies to achieve a sense of stability. Don't pressure your child or other family members to make new relationships work right away.

What are some signs that a stepfamily might need therapy?

While most stepfamilies are able to gradually build relationships and work out their problems over time, some families need extra help.

Your child may benefit from talking to a mental health provider if he or she feels:

- Alone in dealing with his or her losses
- Torn between two parents or households
- Excluded
- Isolated by feelings of anger and guilt

- Unsure about what's right
- Uncomfortable with any member of his or her original family or stepfamily

In addition, family therapy may be helpful if:

- Your child shows anger or resentment toward a particular family member
- One child seems to be favored over another
- Discipline is left only to the child's parent, rather than involving both the parent and stepparent
- Your child frequently cries or begins to withdraw
- Family members derive no pleasure from typical enjoyable activities, such as being with friends

Remember, making a successful stepfamily takes time. Encourage your family to get to know each other and develop new traditions together. Over time your stepfamily can build bonds that will last a lifetime.

References

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