

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Making stepfamilies work

TIP SHEET

Relationships Australia WA's education team have developed a range of tips to help support you during the COVID-19 outbreak. As a free resource, we encourage you to share this with your community.

Living in a blended family can be challenging at the best of times. The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting on so many aspects of family life, and as a result stepfamilies are facing additional stresses, uncertainty and anxiety. With parents working from home, schools closing, and family supports, like grandparents, no longer available to assist, blended families are under extreme pressure.

Here are some tips to help support step and blended families through this time:

- **Understand that heightened tension and conflict is to be expected**
The requirements for social distancing means families are not able to maintain the usual routines and schedules which make sharing time between two sets of parents and households manageable. The guidelines that separated parents and stepfamilies typically follow relating to children, shared parenting and other agreements or situations have been upended.
- **Prepare for the resurfacing of old hurts and resentments**
Under pressure, old hurts and resentments between family members may resurface as people find adjusting to the new circumstances difficult. When this happens, it may help to reflect on the good times that you have had as a blended family, and take comfort in the thought that 'this too will pass.'
- **Resolve to co-operate with your former partners**
Now is the time to 'bury the hatchet' and let go any of old grudges and bitterness with your former partner. Your children need to feel safe to love and have contact with both their parents, whether they get to spend time with them in the other home, or whether their contact is via the phone or video link. Now is the time to put aside any differences you may have and to put the children's well-being first.
- **Review access arrangements**
Stop arguing over whose day or weekend it is, and start talking about what arrangements make the most sense. This may mean temporarily modifying aspects of existing parenting plans and regular schedules, in the best interests of the child.

- **Accept the various PARENTING STYLES in the extended family system**

One of the factors in relationship breakdowns is often a difference in parenting styles. One partner values flexibility and a gentle approach, while the other believes in firm boundaries and consistency. At this time, co-parents in two households may have very different views on how to deal with the COVID-19 recommendations for keeping safe. This is the time to show children that you are able to work together so that they feel safe and loved by both parents.

- **Spend quality time with children**

Spend time doing family group activities. However, parents should also make time for one-to-one check ins with their biological children, to allow them to feel valued and cared for. Stepparents need to remember that children may need more time and support from their biological parent at this time, and must not get into a competition for time and attention from their partner. Back away graciously, and give the child exclusive time with their parent.

- **Leave all disciplining to the biological parent**

Parents and stepparents should agree on rules together behind closed doors. It is best that the biological parent then conveys the rules to the children, with the stepparent supporting. The most successful stepparent-stepchild relationships are where the stepparent strives to develop a warm, friendly way of relating with the child.

- **Modify expectations and make more allowances for 'mistakes'**

There are some benefits to all being at home together, with some of the time pressures for work, school and after school activities removed. Try to enjoy the less rushed pace, finding creative and fun ways to keep occupied. Temporarily relaxing some of the usual home 'rules' can make for a more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere while you are all cooped up together.

- **Allow teenagers more 'space' and leeway**

Your stepchildren, particularly teenagers, are likely to push some boundaries during this time. Emotional outbursts may happen more often, and it is important that parents sometimes take a deep breath, count to ten, not take it too personally, and let the perceived attack or insult pass by.

- **Focus on being kind and generous**

During these difficult times, it is important to focus on what's important to you, and to hold a positive vision for you and your blended family of life 'out the other side'. When a family issue arises, it helps to take a deep breath, say to yourself "*nobody's perfect - we're all doing the best we can*" and then choose to be kind and generous to all concerned as you deal with the issue.

As we journey through these challenging times, please reach out for support and connection amongst your community or if you'd like further support from Relationships Australia WA you can call us on 1300 364 277.

Our Education team will continue to facilitate Relationship Australia WA's seminars, workshops and courses face-to-face once government guidelines allow. You might like to like us on Facebook to keep up to date with support information and details of services we can offer during this time.

If you'd like to register your interest in attending a course on ***Making Stepfamilies Work*** once available, or any of our other courses, please email education@relationships.org.au or call 6164 0200.