

Making stepfamilies work

TIP SHEET

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

It is very clear that family life, involving re-partnered couples and the children from one or both partners, can be complex and hugely challenging at times. Many adults embarking on these new arrangements may be unaware of the challenges that may present.

However, if a stepfamily follows some specific strategies, they will have the greatest chance of success. Our Making Stepfamilies Work course provides information and coaching around how to achieve such success.

Here are some suggestions to help you address the challenges of living in a stepfamily:

1. Resolve to co-operate with your former partners

Now is the time to 'bury the hatchet and let go of any old grudges and bitterness with your former partner. Your children need to feel safe and loved. Now is the time to put aside any differences you may have and to put the children's well-being first.

2. Talk to your children directly

Tell your children what is happening and why. How you tell them will vary according to their ages and comprehension, but keep it simple and do it without drama. Encourage your children to talk to you about their fears or worries. Even relatively small worries like whether they can continue to afford to go to soccer or water polo can build up to a breaking point in a child's mind, but don't push for them to confide in you.

3. Spend quality time with children

Whilst it is great to spend time doing family group activities, 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 certain times, and must not get into a competition for time and attention from their partner. Don't see this as a threat to the couple relationship. Allow the child one on one time with their parent.

4. 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 them. The most successful stepparent-stepchild relationships are where the stepparent strives to develop a warm, friendly way of relating with the child.

5. Maintain boundaries around your curiosity!

Never pump your children for information about your former partner's lifestyle. Children must feel that the love they receive from both parents is unconditional and not dependent on giving the "right" or "wrong" answers.

Discourage children's attempts to gain approval by telling tales and acting as a spy.

6. Discuss problems away from the child

If you are concerned about any problems arising from access visits or any matter relating to the wellbeing of your child, discuss them with the other parent away from the child. The worst thing for your children is to witness open conflict between the two people they love most, especially if it appears they have been the cause of the conflict.

7. Learn more

Having read some of these tips, you may be realising just how complex life in a stepfamily can be. If so, try and learn more. In the long run, it may save your new relationship and your family a lot of stress and it could increase your chances of enjoying a happier family life.

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 are continuing to facilitate Relationship Australia WA's seminars, workshops and courses face-to-face and online.

If you'd like to register your interest in attending a course on [Making stepfamilies work](#) or any of our other courses, please email education@relationshipswa.org.au or call 6164 0200.