

Being a Step Dad ... top tips

1. Don't expect to be the disciplinarian of the family. You might expect that your partner and her children/child will put you on even footing now that you have moved in together. You expect that they welcome your ideas about disciplining and about how a family should function. But, be careful. You can find yourself resented for the very role that you thought you were to fulfil.

Research tells us that a stepparent should not be the primary disciplinarian until he has built a level of trust, love, and care with the children. That may not be for several years if the children are young, and it may never happen if the children are older.

Instead, work with your partner to develop household rules with consequences. These rules should include what everyone in the house needs to do (i.e., keep the living room clean and clean up the dishes after eating) and rules for each child. Keep in mind that living together may represent changes children were never ready to make, so changing how they do things might be met with resistance.

Be sure to meet as a family and talk about the rules, and include the children/child in the discussion so they can participate. When a rule is broken, you can then talk to the child about breaking a rule instead of disciplining him.

2. Don't take it personally if your step child acts out. It is likely, at some point, you will feel like your step child are rallying against you. It could be when you move in, when you try to take on the role of the dad, when you appear "better than" their bio dad, when they assume you hate their bio dad, or when they come back from a visit with their dad and feel loyalty binds.

They may act out if/when you get married because then they will know for certain that their fantasy of their parents ever getting back together will never happen (and, remember, deep down all children/child have this fantasy). Turbulence between you and your step child can come in the forms of acting out, defiance, talking back, and not adhering to rules. Rarely is a child evolved or mature enough to handle the complex feelings that come from being in a stepfamily.

Of course you are going to feel your feelings of hurt and anger. And when the children/child act out, you are going to feel a loss of control – and no one likes to lose control. I cannot tell you how many times anyone in the role of stepparent will throw their hands up in the air and say, "I cannot take this one more day!"

But take a deep breath, and then take a step back and breathe again. Rather than saying to yourself, "What an XXXXX," just think about what might be going on for the child at this time. Is what appears to be resistance an expectation that he or she will just accept all the changes in family roles and not have a chance to be heard? If you can talk to your stepchild without being accusing, you might be very surprised with what you end up hearing.

3. Don't take on the role of the bad guy, even if your partner wants to put you there. Some women want to be the good parent and don't want to be the heavy with disciplining, and will put you in the role of the bad guy. You may come in and take that role as a stepdad, but more than likely it will backfire on you, and either your spouse or your stepchild will hate you for it.

If you feel like you are the bad guy and really don't want that role, talk to your partner about the problem without criticizing her or accusing her of being a "bad" parent. Talk about how you are going to handle this "together." The strongest parenting happens when there is a team in the household.

If you and your partner develop the rules and the consequences when those rules are broken, then you can support one another to implement the consequences. You certainly get to have a say in what goes on because you live there, too. Your partner needs to know that if she leaves you alone in implementing the rules and consequences, it can only hurt your relationship.

4. Don't expect that your stepchildren will like or appreciate everything you do for them. Children/child are usually disrespectful anyway. They may learn to say "please" and "thank you," but most are ruder to their own parents. Once you move from the role of being the new guy or the boyfriend into the step position, guess what? There's a good chance they'll be rude to you, too! Congratulations! You're now in real life with children/child.

What you have to remember is that most children/child didn't want their parents to part/divorce because it makes life much harder on them in ways you probably don't even think about. Research shows that most children/child wish their parents stayed together so they don't have to live in two different households, so they don't have to feel split and loyalty binds that are uncomfortable, and so they don't have to "hear" one parent (or stepparent) talk badly about their other parent. These pressures are often far too difficult for children.

Also remember a golden rule of parenting, and especially of step parenting: don't take things too personally. If this were that easy, I wouldn't have to say it. It's hard but, trust me, it helps. So bite your tongue, click your heels together, and say your mantra ("I won't take it personally, I won't take it personally") over and over until you calm down.

When you are calm, you and your partner can talk (either alone or together) with the children/child about respect. Say something along the lines of, "I treat you with respect. I wouldn't be rude to you or not thank you. And I would like you to treat me the same way."

5. Don't live in the fantasy that you will have the role of the dad like you expect. Your expectations will often be unrealized, and you will be unhappy. Children/child in stepfamilies who have a dad around will often feel disloyal if they love you. Children/child think in very black and white terms — "If I like Jack, then that means I don't love dad." It becomes uncomfortable and confusing for them. This is often an intolerable position, and you may be trying to develop a relationship only to find you are being rejected. While this hurts, and I know it does, it often isn't personal.

Instead of trying to be or compete with their actual dad, keep trying to develop a friendship with your step child. If your step child goes to football games with his dad, you can develop something else to do with him – something that can be just about you two. This may take your step child out of a loyalty bind because children/child can handle other relationships, they just can't handle the ones that cause them to feel disloyal.

6. Don't let your stepchild feel rejected by you. Try to consider that when you are upset at the behaviour of your step children/child, they feel your dislike far stronger than they will feel the same anger from their own parents. This is because you don't have the history or the bond with them that tells them, deep down, that you love and care for them.

Children don't like to not feel loved and cared about, and they are always ready to feel rejected. None of us like to feel rejected – in fact, it's often why we, as the adults, become angry in a stepfamily system. But, really, we cannot expect a mere child to figure this out and do the right thing.

Just for a second, imagine that when you were a child you were living with an adult who you knew didn't really love you. Then imagine how it would feel if that adult was angry at you or gave you the "glare" we give when we're mad at someone. When our parents are angry with us or give us the "look," we at least know they love us. The parent-child bond goes a long way. But this bond doesn't extend to you and your stepchildren/child, and can leave them feeling rejected. Try to talk with your stepchild about their behaviour in a way that makes them feel heard and understood. When you can talk to your stepchild from a place of understanding, it can go a long way to developing a bond between you.

Remember, raising someone else's children/child is very, very hard. What is most important is that you can talk with your partner and express your hurt and frustration. Be sure to do that in a way where you aren't blaming her, but so you can problem solve together. I know you could not have known how hard the role of stepfather would be. But you got involved because you love your partner, and this is the most precarious and important connection.

So take the time to remember why you love her and recommit to one another. The stronger the love, the more you can survive any turbulence with your stepchildren/child. With enough patience and time, a relationship with your stepchild will follow. Just don't give up!