



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #6

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Step-parenting

Step-families are formed whenever parents remarry, and establishing happy and positive step-families is hard work. According to figures collected by the Stepfamily Foundation, some fifty million Americans are involved in a step-family relationship. Approximately one-third of all children in the U. S. under the age of 18 are living in a step-family. One out of three Americans is now a step-parent, a step-child, a step-sibling, or some other member of a step-family. Relating to a step-parent can be difficult for a child, but parents and step-parents can do much to create a happy step-family.

Guidelines For Step-parents:

- ✓ Be yourself (your own actions are your best defense)
- ✓ Be a spouse first and step-parent second (your first responsibility is to yourself, then spouse, then stepchildren)
- ✓ Be honest (love and affection take time to develop)
- ✓ Assert yourself (ask for 100% acknowledgment of your role as step-parent)
- ✓ Define your limits (this is the role I play)
- ✓ Respect the children's loyalty to the absent parent (children love the absent parent and may feel that it is disloyal to enjoy themselves in a new step-family)
- ✓ Be open to compromise (children need space and freedom)
- ✓ Be honest with yourself before marrying a person with children (if you don't want to be a step-parent don't sign on)
- ✓ Ask for understanding and venting time (you need a sounding board)
- ✓ Allow children to express their feelings in appropriate ways (children may not feel as happy about the new family as you do)
- ✓ Be realistic about the past (accept the past and don't make it a forbidden subject)
- ✓ Ask your parents to accept the step-children (grandparents are very important to the unity of the step-family)



Guidelines For Step-family Planning:

- ✓ Seek professional help (don't hesitate seeking professional help before or during the marriage)
- ✓ Attend step-parenting courses if possible (this promotes cohesive step-family relations)
- ✓ Get support (join support groups)

Don't try too hard. This can cause stronger resistance from the step-children. Relax and take things slowly. It takes time for meaningful and loving relationships to develop.

Spouses should discuss blending family beliefs:

1. What was your childhood view of family? (family systems your parents modeled for you as a child)
2. What types of family systems did you and your ex-spouse create?
3. As a single-parent, did your ideas of a family change?
4. How will your idea of "family" blend with your new spouse's perception of "family"?

Step-families, sometimes called “blended” families, are unique in many ways. Because at least one-third of all U.S. children are expected to live in a step-family before they reach the age of 18, the blended family is becoming more and more common. It takes careful planning, open discussions of feelings and expectations, mutual respect, and patience, but most blended families are able to work out their issues and live together successfully.

Allow time for mourning and adjustment. By the time children enter a step-family home, the children have been in three family units:

- 1) the biological parents’ home,
- 2) the separate or single unit with the custodial parent, and
- 3) the step-family home.

Children must be given parental permission to mourn the losses before embracing the new family system. If not, anger, outbursts, and hostility may occur. Accept the fact that remarriage is usually a gain for the adults and a loss for the children. Allow children to love both biological parents and be careful not to force a relationship with the step-parent(s). Let children set the pace for these new relationships which may take years, not months, to build.

Discipline ideas for blended families:



- Discuss discipline early in the relationship.
- Early on, set up a relationship with the children in which the step-parent is more like a friend or camp counselor than a disciplinarian.
- Let the biological (custodial) parent remain primarily responsible for control and discipline of the children until the step-parent has developed a solid bond with them.
- Until step-parents take on more parenting responsibilities, they can monitor the children’s behavior and activities according to the biological parent’s guidelines.
- Together with the children, parents might develop a list of household rules. For example, 1) We agree to respect and be kind to each family member; 2) We agree to clean up after ourselves; 3) We agree to sit down and talk when we feel lonely, or angry, or afraid, etc.
- Be open and honest with feelings and emotions, and leave room for respectful disagreement.
- Get adolescents to think like adults. Straight and direct questions “hook” the budding adult in the adolescent. Ask “How will you solve your problem?”
- Be direct and firm, yet kind. Use “I want” instead of “you need to” messages.

Absentee Parents should always:

1. Make sure your children can count on you. Visit them often and on time. If you can’t be there, call them.
2. Be flexible. As children get older there are more demands put on their time. Support them in their activities.
3. Be firm. Don’t use money and gifts in place of time with your child.
4. Be creative. *Quality* of time is more important than *quantity* of time.
5. Be considerate. The absentee parent can provide contact for the children with other relatives (grandparents, cousins, etc.)

Step-families need to give family-building proper priority. Everyone needs to make the effort to blend as a family and spend time together. This is important for all children whether they live in the step-family home or not. Step-parents must have empathy, understanding, and patience; they must be willing to spend time with the children. Playing with the younger ones and talking with the older ones helps to build trust and compassion. The most successful blended families are those who are involved with each other.