

STEPFAMILIES

Tasks for Stepfamilies to Accomplish

The "bottom-line" task for all stepfamilies is to establish a new family identity. There are a number of tasks that need to be accomplished in order to do this. Some tasks are more difficult and take more time, even years, to accomplish.

1. They must deal with loss and change.

- Each person in the new stepfamily experiences loss since all change involves letting go of something.
- Some strategies:
 - Identify losses for all individuals.
 - Support expressions of sadness.
 - Help children talk about feelings.
 - Read stepfamily books for adults and children.
 - Make changes gradually.
 - Keep children informed.

2. They must negotiate different developmental needs.

- Adults and children will all be at different places in their lives. Individual needs will not usually fit together easily. It will take a lot of flexibility, tolerance and talking to understand and meet each others needs.
- Some strategies:
 - Take a parenting class.
 - Learn about developmental tasks of children.
 - Communicate needs clearly.
 - Be tolerant and flexible.

3. They must establish new traditions.

- Children and adults need to affirm each other's past traditions and together build some new ones. Communication and compromise are essential.
- Some strategies:
 - Recognize that traditions are different, not right or wrong.
 - Use family meetings for problem solving.
 - Retain and combine some old traditions.
 - Together, create some new traditions.

4. The couple relationship must be solid.

- Making the couple relationship strong is a stepfamily's number one priority. Without that, the stepfamily will not succeed.
- Some strategies:
 - Nourish the couple relationship
 - Plan for couple "alone time."
 - Support one another regarding the children.
 - Expect and accept each other's different feelings.

5. Stepparents need to work at developing a personal relationship with their stepchildren.

- Stepparents and stepchildren need time alone to develop their relationship. This takes time - even years - so be patient!
- Some strategies:
 - Make one-on-one time.
 - Do not expect "instant" love or acceptance.
 - Always be fair to stepchildren even if caring is slow to develop.
 - Do some fun things together on a regular basis.

6. Stepparents need to have a "civil" relationship with ex-spouses.

- Having a businesslike relationship that is respectful and civil toward ex-spouses helps the children feel more loved and increases their self esteem.
- Some strategies:
 - Deal directly with adults.
 - Keep children out of the middle.
 - Never talk negatively about ex-spouses.
 - Avoid power struggles.
 - Keep lines of communication open.

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