



District I Parenting News

Extension Nutrition Program

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Ten Steps Toward Successful Step Parenting

Blended families-or families created when divorced parents remarry-are common. Many parents hope that creating a two-parent family for children will solve many problems. In reality, the blending of two families may not be an easy process-especially for children. For children, adjusting to the new relationships takes time. Although the adults have fallen in love and have decided to live together, the children may not feel the same! Parents need realistic expectations concerning the children's adjustment to the new situation.

Merging families bring together many differences. A teenager may now be followed around by a five-year-old stepbrother. How holidays are celebrated will change as the new family integrates customs and begins new ones. With the changes taking place in the new household, children need some things to remain the same. Keeping the daily schedule the same can help add continuity to a changing family structure. Do not make unnecessary changes.

Each family has resources in addition to money. They include both time and affection. How you share or distribute these resources can create arguments, hurt feelings or jealousy. Be aware of the possible effects as you work with in your new family.

Children have loyalties to parents. A child may feel that showing affection toward a stepparent is betraying the biological parent. The child who has lived in a single parent household may have difficulty sharing that parent or giving up the role they had with that parent. Adults may also experience

loyalty conflicts. Parents may feel guilty over not living with the biological children. The stepparent may have difficulty accepting live-in step-children.

The new stepfamily creates new relationships. Family members may be unclear as to what their roles and expectations are within the family. Are the stepparents comfortable disciplining the children and enforcing the limits? Do the children know what role the new family members play? Do they know that their stepfather can assign chores to be done? How should they refer to the stepparents' parents? Are they also grandparents?

Researchers who have studied successful stepfamilies have found a few hints that may help other families succeed. Their Ten Steps Toward Successful Step Parenting include:

- ◇ Provide neutral territory. If your budget allows, consider moving to a new home.
- ◇ Don't try to fit into a preconceived role. Be yourself.
- ◇ Set limits and enforce them. The parent and stepparent need to work out disciplinary actions in advance, and then support each other when it is time to enforce the rules.
- ◇ Allow an outlet for children's feelings about the biological parent. The children will maintain affection for their biological parent. Do not take this personally.
- ◇ Expect ambivalence. Feelings of love and hate by the stepchild may change every few hours or few days.
- ◇ Avoid mealtime misery. Mealtime can be full of emotions of "how it used to be." Try to make this time as peaceful as possible.
- ◇ Don't expect instant love.
- ◇ Don't take all the responsibility. The children have some too. There are two people involved in any relationship. Therefore, if things are less than perfect, don't take all the guilt.
- ◇ Be patient. The first few months, or years, may

PARENT-CHILD ACTIVITY IDEAS

Create A Family Portrait Gallery: Dedicate one wall in your home for family pictures. Begin with grandparents and baby pictures of each adult. Add pictures of the couple, including wedding photos. Surround the couple's pictures with photos of each child, whether they live with you full time or only visit. Allow children to select pictures of themselves that have particular meaning or that symbolize something important to them. Be sure you include photos of all of you together, perhaps enjoying an activity or a shared vacation. A picture wall may be a symbolic gesture, but it will encourage the feeling that you are a family.



Celebrate Your Differences and Uniqueness. Your stepfamily may incorporate different ethnic backgrounds, cultural heritages, or races. Set aside some family meetings for learning about each other. Encourage the members of your family to educate each other about their different backgrounds, histories, and traditions. You may want to prepare special foods, tell stories, play music, or share information about your history and cultural traditions. Learning together can be an enjoyable and effective way to create harmony and understanding.

Make A Family Quilt: Give each member of the family a square of fabric to decorate with embroidery, appliqué, glitter pens, or fabric markers. When each person has completed his or her design, join the squares together to make a family quilt. You may choose to make a border from favorite colors or patterns, attach a backing and either quilt or tie it. While experience with a sewing machine may help, even the inexperienced can produce bright wall hanging or blanket under which to cuddle together while reading or watching television.

Create Nonverbal Signals or Sign Language Unique To Your Family: When Brenda and Martin learned that the baby girl they had together had speech and developmental delays, they were devastated and worried about the effect a "special" child who needed extra time and attention might have on the older children each had brought to their new marriage. As little Bethany grew, however, her speech therapist began teaching her sign language and the older children began to pick it up themselves. Y eventually learned to speak quite clearly, but the family continued to use sign language as a way to communicate. Words, they found, sometimes got in the way, while the gestures of

sign language became their family's special language—something they all shared that made them feel connected to one another.

Use family meetings to develop special ways to communicate things you frequently say in your family. First decide on messages that you find yourself saying over and over, such as "I love you." You might decide on a hand over the heart to convey this message. The referee's signal for time-out might be your family's signal for "Let's take a time-out to calm down until we can discuss this respectfully." Wide arms, hulking shoulders, and wiggling fingers might be the signal for "Do it now or the impatient monster will get you." A cheek resting on praying hands might be the signal for bedtime. Your family will be able to think of many more.

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. The humor of nonverbal signals (especially when they have been agreed on in advance) often breaks the tension of a situation that has become too negative. Also, a nonverbal signal is usually more inviting than lectures in a tone of voice that conveys anger or disgust.

Reach Out To Others: Doing something as a family that helps others or improves your community can draw you together in a powerful way. Volunteer for a park or trail cleanup, or "adopt" a less privileged family at the holidays or even year-round. Hold a neighborhood barbecue or a church softball game; visit the elderly or read to hospitalized children. Several organizations provide opportunities for families to adopt a child in another country for as little as \$40 a month. What a great way for the whole family to make a contribution to someone in need especially when the results are shared during your family meetings. Writing letters and sending pictures to your adopted child will have the added benefit of drawing you together as a family. What have you noticed in your own corner of the world that could use some energy? Brainstorm ways to make a contribution at a family meeting.

Remember, becoming a family doesn't mean becoming the same. Recognize and celebrate the unique and valuable contributions each person brings to your stepfamily. The family

