Find resources and use them early on. Read about stepfamily development together. Discuss how you each see the other’s role. Discuss your parenting plan and philosophy. Take a class especially for stepfamilies. Take a marriage education class. Utilize family therapy or counseling early on when issues present themselves. Make sure the counselor or therapist is someone knowledgeable in stepfamily formation and dynamics.

Millions of adults in this country are parenting nonbiological children—and the numbers are growing at such a rate that estimates are that half of all Americans will be in a step relationship in their lifetimes. Some experts believe that soon stepfamilies will be the most common family form. Because stepfamilies are formed differently from first families and because they are usually more complex, it’s important for a stepparent and his or her spouse to think through and plan their interactions with the children in the family based on models of successful stepfamilies, not first families. These actions can help a stepfamily run more smoothly and can create a healthy environment for the adults and the children in the family.


Recommended Resources

The National Stepfamily Resource Center
www.stepfamilies.info
Successful Stepfamilies
www.successfulstepfamilies.com

Coparenting with Expartners

In many new marriages, one or both of you will continue to deal with the other biological parent of a child (usually an expartner or exspouse). These coparenting relationships can often be challenging. One parent may make it difficult for the other parent to visit the child. Another parent may use late child-support payments as a form of getting back at the other parent. Conflict between households is stressful for the children, stressful for the adults, and stressful for your marriage. It’s important for everyone, therefore, to build cooperative relationships with your children’s other parent(s).

An important first step in managing the coparenting relationship is to ensure that you are appropriately separated from the other parent and appropriately connected. In healthy patterns of partner and family transitions, two biological parents who are no longer together move from an intimate relationship to a nonemotional, more businesslike relationship.

Intimate
• Many assumptions
• Unspoken/unwritten expectations
• Informal
• High emotional intensity and personal involvement
• Low personal privacy
• High personal disclosure

Businesslike
• No assumptions
• Explicit agreements, contracts
• Formal courtesies, structured interactions, meetings, specific agendas
• Low emotional intensity and personal involvement
• High personal privacy
• Low personal disclosure

*Adapted from Mom’s House, Dad’s House, Ricci (1997).
It is also useful to consider the range of coparenting practices. Although a cooperative coparenting relationship is ideal, the reality for most parents is that they move up and down a continuum of coparenting, depending mostly on how they manage the inevitable conflicts that can arise. The main difference between parallel parenting and cooperative coparenting is the amount and type of interaction between parents. Parallel parents communicate only when absolutely necessary and have little direct communication, such as face to face or by phone. Instead, they put things in writing or ensure that someone neutral is present or they’re in a neutral place when they’re communicating directly. Cooperative coparents can speak directly to each other more frequently about the business of parenting.

There may be times when direct communication is going well and then something occurs that initiates conflict (such as a remarriage), and all attempts to communicate effectively repeatedly fail. You should consider moving toward more
parallel parenting and make attempts over time to re-establish your previous level of cooperative coparenting.

A cautionary note: Cooperative coparenting is not appropriate when domestic violence has occurred between parents. Cooperative coparenting requires face-to-face contact between parents and should not be used if one parent feels he or she may be in danger. Safety is the primary goal.

Tips for Coparenting
The following are some suggestions for all coparents, no matter what the level and style of coparenting.

Tip #1 • Agree to keep conflict away from your children.
Tip #2 • Use respectful words, and don’t put each other down, particularly in front of the children. Don’t use sarcasm or make snide or hurtful remarks.
Tip #3 • Say positive things about each other, particularly when the children are present.
Tip #4 • Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
Tip #5 • Don’t make the children feel they must choose between you.
Tip #6 • Encourage your children to love and respect the other parent. Encourage their connection with the other parent.
Tip #7 • Send messages to each other directly; don’t use the children as messengers.
Tip #8 • Respect each other’s new relationships.
Tip #9 • Communicate directly with each other about the children instead of with the other parent’s new partner.
Tip #10 • Call a time-out when a discussion becomes too intense. Stop and separate so that you both can calm down. If this pattern continues, it’s best to take a longer time-out from direct face-to-face communication for a while and use other methods of communicating information.
Tip #11 • Allow for each other’s parenting styles. Pick your battles. As long as the child is safe, emotionally and physically, he or she can adjust to different parenting styles and rules between households.
Tip #12 • Practice good communication skills if you need to discuss an issue.
Tip #13 • Ask new partners and members of your family to respect these guidelines as well.

Often, parents who are following these types of rules become frustrated if the child’s other parent is not. The recommendation is to just keep doing what you’re doing. This is what is best for you, your children, and your family. You cannot control the actions of the other parent. If you keep doing the right things, chances are much greater that the other parent will start following the guidelines as well.