

Answers (continued)

- They have the capacity to focus on what others think. They may feel embarrassed by the divorce and the remarriage.
- They are most susceptible to loyalty conflict dilemmas (feeling caught between their parents). Developmentally, teens are very focused on relationships and actively process and think about what they mean.
- Younger children think with less complexity. They are often more willing to be inclusive and open to accepting more than two parents.

3. False: It's important to know that most children of divorced parents (more than 80 percent) do well despite increased risks to their well-being. There's a lot of variation—and there's a lot that families and communities can do to support children's development after they've experienced divorce and/or remarriage.

4. False: Stereotypes can set up expectations and affect everyday life. Parents should discuss preconceived notions and stereotypical thinking with their children.

5. True: Instant love or instant blending of a stepfamily does not exist—that is an unrealistic expectation. Most stepfamilies take years to adjust.

6. False: When a child has no contact with a parent, he or she may build fantasies about that other parent. Unless there is abuse, a child benefits from contact with both biological parents.

7. False: A child who has had a parent die may build fantasies about that parent and may have a standard that the stepparent cannot live up to. The child may also feel jealousy or resentment toward the stepparent. It's important to allow a child time to process a parent's death. Most will need some professional help.

8. False: The role of the stepparent is usually even less clear when stepchildren are part-time residents of a household. It works best if the biological parent is the primary parent and disciplinarian and the stepparent supports this role.

9. True: The couple relationship is the newest and the weakest link and therefore is the most vulnerable. Taking time together as a couple and working to build strengths in the couple relationship are key to successful stepfamily living.

10. False: Stepparents are not automatically recognized as legal caretakers of their stepchildren. Stepparents cannot sign consent forms or authorize medical services. Authorization can be given by the biological parent, but it is not set up by law. Also, there are no legal ties to stepchildren if the biological parent dies or if the couple divorces.

❖ **Strategies for Stepparenting**

Because the “baby carriage” came before the “love” and “marriage” in stepfamilies, it's vital that couples discuss the approach they'll take in parenting their children. Below are some tips developed from studying the patterns of successful stepfamilies.

Develop realistic expectations for a stepparent/stepchild relationship. Don't expect instant love from stepchildren. *You can expect respectful behavior, and your spouse should help you emphasize this,* but you cannot expect a child to care for you the way he or she cares for a parent they've spent many years with. In turn, behave respectfully toward your stepchild by acknowledging his or her feelings, concerns, and desires. Modeling this behavior usually results in a stepparent's being treated respectfully. *There is rarely a perfect blending in stepfamilies, where everyone in the family feels the same level of connection to each other.* There can be different levels of closeness for each pair. In stepfamilies, it's most important that family members are *satisfied* with the level of closeness they have with each family member and realize that it's okay to feel closer to some than others.

Discuss your role with your spouse. Stepparents sometimes feel compelled to step in as a “savior” for the parent who's been having a hard time with the children, taking over to provide order and discipline and often the biological parent is in favor of this. *The couple should realize, however, that children are often not ready for a stepparent in a disciplinarian role, so this is usually doomed to failure.*

Sometimes stepparents see their spouses as too easy on the children and want to enforce stricter discipline in the home right from the beginning. A discussion is necessary. Biological parents need to take time to hear and understand the stepparent's input, but stepparents need to take a more gentle, nonjudgmental stance and hear the biological parent's point of view. *A helpful model is that the stepparent gives input into how things are done, but the biological parent retains the final say*

until the children are ready for the stepparent to take a larger role in their lives.

Determine the roles of the primary parent and the secondary parent. Parenting usually includes having disciplinary power. A stepparent should take his/her time with this, especially with older children and teens. The biological parent should remain the primary disciplinarian in the early years of stepfamily development. When both biological and stepparent are present, discipline is best administered by the biological parent until the child is ready to accept the stepparent as a disciplinarian. When the biological parent is not present, the stepparent operates much like a babysitter or an aunt or uncle. You are an adult in charge, but you are not a parent. You enforce the rules of the house; for example, you say, “This is the rule of the house. Homework is done before television.”

You can respond to “You’re not my parent,” with “Yes. You are right. You have a mom and a dad, and I’m not going to replace either one of them. You and I are going to get to know each other a bit at a time. Meanwhile, though, I’m the adult in charge here tonight, and the rule is no television until homework is done.”

As children get more comfortable, a stepparent can become more of a primary disciplinarian. *Follow the child’s lead—do not force parental status.* As time goes by, you and your spouse can help the children understand that just as a parent can have more than two children and care for each in a special way, *so can a child have more than two parents and respect and care for each in a special way.*

A rule of thumb is that a child’s age is the number of years it may take for the stepparent to transition into full parental status; therefore, for children who are adolescents when the stepfamily forms, it’s probably not realistic to expect that a stepparent will ever serve in a full parental role—and that’s okay. The stepparent can still be an important, loving, respected adult in the child’s life.

Even if the children are young when the stepfamily is formed, it’s not always a straight path toward two primary parents. *It’s not uncommon for a couple to choose to revert to primary/secondary parental roles during adolescence.* This can serve to protect the stepparent/stepchild relationship. Adolescence is usually a challenging time for parents, and the biological parent/child relationship is usually more resilient in the face of these challenges.

Remember, though, that *secondary parenting doesn’t mean “second-class.”* This is an important issue for stepparents. Within the implementation of these suggestions for the primary/secondary parenting team in stepfamilies, *the biological parent should ensure that the stepparent is treated respectfully.*

Learn about child development. If you are not a biological parent or if your own children are younger than your spouse’s children, read up on child development. *Realistic expectations for children’s behavior is an important starting point when dealing with children.* It’s not an excuse for inappropriate behavior, but it often provides *some understanding* of what might be going on and what the child’s capabilities are.

This information might help you determine what are stepfamily issues and what are developmental issues. Often, stepparents assume that inappropriate behavior is directed at them because they are the stepparent. If you look closer, the biological parent is probably receiving similar treatment, and the child’s developmental stage has more to do with the behavior.

Develop the relationships in the family one on one. In the early years of the stepfamily, the stepparent should focus on building a relationship with *each* of the stepchildren individually. Although doing things as a family seems like a good idea, for stepfamilies, it’s actually better to plan one-on-one activities to build and strengthen relationships. Try to find activities that are unique—that can become “your” activity with

your stepchild—such as being the adult partner in your stepson’s Boy Scout group or being the one to take your stepdaughter to basketball practices and games. *Also, remember to allow the biological parent to maintain regular alone times with each child as well.*

Empathize. Although it can be normal to feel defensive, it’s important to try to *put yourself in the other person’s place—to empathize*. Both adults and children in stepfamilies should try to empathize with the other’s feelings and situations. This can go a long way in easing conflicts and reaching compromise.

Stepfamily living brings together different histories, and family members usually deal with many differences—from seemingly small (“What do you mean you don’t sort the small forks from the large ones?”)—to major (“You’re turning your child into a spoiled brat!”). When dealing with different views and patterns of behavior, first, *spend as much time and energy trying to understand other stepfamily members as you do trying to get them to understand you*. When your spouse or child tells you something threatening (“I’m jealous.”), take a deep breath. Calm yourself; then tell them what you do understand before you respond with your point of view. This is not the same as agreeing. It is simply letting the other person know you hear and understand him or her. It’s then easier for them to hear what you have to say. Try to imagine yourselves in each other’s position.

Acknowledge that a child can be part of two households. In order to prevent loyalty conflicts for the children, *it’s important that both you and your spouse not badmouth the other parent*. As long as there’s no threat to the child either physically or mentally, the child should spend time with the nonresidential parent and *should be supported in that relationship*. Even if the other parent does not return this support, continue to validate the child’s feelings for and relationship with the other parent. This approach has a much better

chance of enhancing your relationship with your stepchild than if you speak badly of someone he or she cares about. *In addition, don’t involve the children in conflicts with the nonresidential parent or quiz them about the other parent’s activities.*

If the other parent behaves badly, acknowledge the behavior in a neutral tone; for example, “Your dad does say bad things about me sometimes. That must be really confusing for you. Most kids would find that hard. I’m sorry he feels that way. Hopefully, with time that might change.”

Also talk in a neutral tone about differences between households. Consistency of household rules is rarely achieved. Children can adjust to two separate sets of rules. “In your dad’s house, you can watch as much TV as you want, but you can’t eat in the family room. In this house, your TV time is limited, but you are allowed to have snacks in other rooms if you clean up afterward.”

You and your spouse should continually speak in ways that help your children sort out feelings of “split loyalties.” “You’ll always love your daddy, and he’ll always be your daddy, no matter who else you love or like. I know I’m brand new to you. We’re getting to know each other a step at a time, and over time, I hope we’ll become closer and closer.”

Strengthen the couple relationship. The couple relationship creates the family, yet it’s the newest relationship in the family and therefore the most vulnerable. One of the main reasons couples redi-
vorce is due to problems with stepchildren. To avoid becoming part of this statistic, it’s important that you *build in time to nurture your couple relationship* and that you communicate well with each other. Work on the marriage itself, and you’ll find that the negotiations around stepfamily issues go much more smoothly. Often, the issues presented as stepfamily issues are actually markers of the quality of the couple relationship.

Most of the information in this section is adapted from “Smart Steps for Stepfamilies” by F. Adler-Baeder (www.stepfamilies.info).

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.

*Adapted from Papernow and Adler-Baeder, (2003).
www.saafamilies.org/yourstepfamily

Recommended Resources

The National Stepfamily Resource Center
www.stepfamilies.info

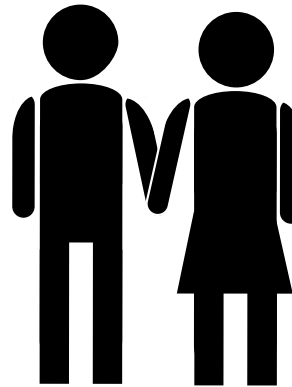
Successful Stepfamilies
www.successfulstepfamilies.com

❖ 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

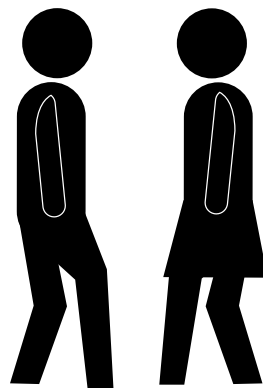
getting back at the other parent. Conflict between households is stressful for the children, stressful for the adults, and stressful for your marriage. It's important for everyone, therefore, to build cooperative relationships with your children's other parent(s).

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).