

Successful stepfamilies

Advice and guidance for stepfamilies



Becoming a stepfamily is a complicated and emotional time. While you may feel delighted at the chance of a new beginning, a new stepfamily can be a devastating blow for children, as it signifies the end of the family they lived in before.

At Family Lives, we speak regularly to stepfamily members and we know that, while stepfamilies are fast becoming the norm, the process of feeling safe and secure in a new family can be difficult and takes time.

Whether you are new to stepfamily life or are struggling with long-term issues that seem impossible to resolve, you can talk them through with us – either through our free, 24/7 confidential helpline, our live chat, or our personalised email support service.

Challenging issues for stepfamilies include:

Adapting. You'll need to work out new routines and ways of doing things in your new family, calling for a lot of patience and compromise from all of you.

Divided loyalties. Children may feel torn between parents, while parents may worry about being seen to favour some of the children over others.

Sharing. Stepfamilies require a great deal of sharing. Your child may have to learn how to share you and your new (and ex) partner with others, as well as their home and their possessions.

Ex-partners. Working out how children stay in contact with ex-partners can be stressful and upsetting. Be careful never to criticise the ex-partner in front of the children: doing so is devastating for children as they'll feel you're blaming them too.

Money. Finances can be very complicated within a stepfamily. There could be problems with child support and money may be tight. It may be difficult to ensure all the children are treated equally. You'll need to work out ways of managing the family budget, taking these things into account. Organisations like National Debtline www.nationaldebtline.co.uk can help. The Consumer Financial Education Body (CFEB) offers free and impartial information and advice to help people consider the financial impact of divorce or separation. Its divorce and separation website, www.moneymadeclear.org.uk/divorce, includes an online calculator, information and advice to help people with their finances during a difficult time in their lives.

Jealousy. Partners may be jealous of each others' relationships with their children; stepsiblings may be jealous of a new baby or of each other. However, research suggests that, given time, stepsiblings can get on and support each other well – and, in the long term, the new relationships formed in a stepfamily mean children have a wider range of support and advice available to them.

Discipline. Stepparents may worry about disciplining their partner's children. It's a good idea to let all the children know that there are house rules which everyone must follow. Present a united front and back each other up.

Don't forget to visit the stepfamily area of our website to pick up tips and advice on stepfamily life at: www.familylives.org.uk. You can also share your feelings with other stepfamilies on our messageboards.

TIPS...

...for a successful stepfamily

- ✓ **Be patient.** You can't make your children like your new partner, but one way to make this easier is to be clear that a stepparent isn't a substitute for their real parent. Don't rush things. If you are finding it difficult to get on with your stepchildren, remember it can take time to build these relationships.
- ✓ **Keep in contact.** Ensure children stay in touch with both parents if possible. Make contact easy – by phone or email if it's not possible face-to-face. Children often play up in stepfamilies because they are unhappy about not seeing both parents.
- ✓ **Swallow bad feelings.** Avoid being rude about your ex in front of your child. This may make them blame themselves for the break-up.
- ✓ **Give children their own space.** When you set up home with a new partner it's important that all the children have some privacy and a space they can call their own.
- ✓ **Be fair.** Try not to side with your children rather than your partner's.
- ✓ **Make sure you spend some time alone with your child to reassure them your love for them hasn't changed.**
- ✓ **Talk together.** Listen to everyone's views. Even if children say things you don't want to hear, having a say makes them feel involved in the new family.



...for stepparents

- ✓ *Make time for yourselves.* Stepfamily life can be overwhelming and you can suddenly realise you aren't spending any time with your partner. Time alone together strengthens your relationship.
- ✓ **Be patient.** *Even if your partner's children are cool towards you at first, it doesn't mean they'll always be this way. Don't take it personally – it's the situation they object to, not you. As time passes, they may come to value your friendship and support.*
- ✓ *If remarrying, make sure you include the children in the wedding arrangements. This will make them feel included in the changes to their family.*
- ✓ **Ask for help.** *If you don't, others may not feel you need it. Talking to others outside the family could help you manage difficult feelings, like struggling to bond with stepchildren. Don't forget you can call our Parentline free, at any time, to talk about any stepfamily issue on 0808 800 2222. If you prefer, you can email your problem for a personalised reply to parentsupport@familylives.org.uk*
- ✓ **Accept support.** *Grandparents and stepgrandparents offer children stability and will probably be keen to help during this period of upheaval. If they're not nearby and you have at least one child under five, Home Start UK can offer free, hands-on support. Visit www.home-start.org.uk for details.*




New baby – new challenges

A new baby may bring a stepfamily closer – but there may also be new pressures. Parents may feel their love for the new baby overshadows their feelings for the older children, while children may feel that the new baby has replaced them in your affections. It's easier to adapt to this if you:


- Let children know about the baby yourselves – or else they could feel left out
- Tell them they are as loved as they ever were
- Talk to each other before the birth about the impact the baby will have
- Give children opportunities to help care for the baby if they want to
- Spend time with older children to reassure them that your love hasn't changed
- Encourage the children to talk about how they feel
- Spend time together as a couple regularly
- Ask for help if you need it, particularly from grandparents
- Avoid talking about the baby as a symbol of your new stepfamily. This puts pressure on the new child for the future – and can stir up jealousy.


Family problems? We can help.

 Free¹, 24-hour, confidential **Parentline** on **0808 800 2222** for advice, information and support on any aspect of parenting and family life

 Or Skype us via our website – **www.familylives.org.uk**


We offer advice and information as well as extended support for complex and difficult issues.

 **Free textphone** for people who are deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired – **0800 783 6783**²

 Personalised email service at – **parentsupport@familylives.org.uk**³

¹ From landlines and most mobile networks. ² Please note, this service is available from 9-5pm Monday to Friday.

³ Guaranteed reply within three working days.

 **Online advice and information** on all aspects of parenting and family life

Live chat at **www.familylives.org.uk/livechat**

Give and receive support and advice from other parents and adult family members experiencing similar problems – **www.familylives.org.uk**

Advice and information for professionals working with families at – **www.familylives.org.uk/professionals**

 Face-to-face support groups and workshops. Find out what is available in your area at – **www.familylives.org.uk/localsupport**

Further help –

National Association of Child Contact Centres offer a safe, neutral place where children of separated families can spend time with one or both parents. Call **0845 4500 280** or visit **www.naccc.org.uk**

National Family Mediation – umbrella organisation for local family mediation services. Call them on **01392 271 610** or email **general@nfm.org.uk** or visit **www.nfm.org.uk**

Consumer Financial Education Body (CFEB) runs the Money Made Clear website and has a dedicated divorce and separation section offering free and

impartial information. Visit the website at **www.moneymadeclear.org.uk/divorce**

National Debtline – a national debt helpline, offering free confidential expert advice on **0808 808 4000**, via email **advice@nationaldebtline.co.uk** or online at **www.nationaldebtline.co.uk**

Home Start UK – free, hands-on, local support for families with at least one child under five: Visit **www.home-start.org.uk** for more information or call free on **0800 068 63 68**