

Step-parenting

Stepfamilies are on the increase and, with much love and hard work, a blended family home can be a happy and positive place to be.

You get talking to a mum, dad and their four kids while you're queueing for cinema tickets and - without really thinking about it - you assume Mum is mother of all the children, Dad is father of all the children, and the children are all brothers and sisters. If you gave it any thought, you might guess they'd been married about 16 years - the oldest child looks about 13 or 14.

But maybe only two of the children live with them all the time. The other two stay at weekends - they live

with their other parent. This couple may have only been married for two years - he was a widower and she had been divorced. They may be struggling with the effects of her first husband on this family, resentment from grandparents and lack of space and time. You just don't know.

However second families are made up, it's hard work to get them to blend. It takes time, effort, patience and lots of love. But it can - and very often does - work.

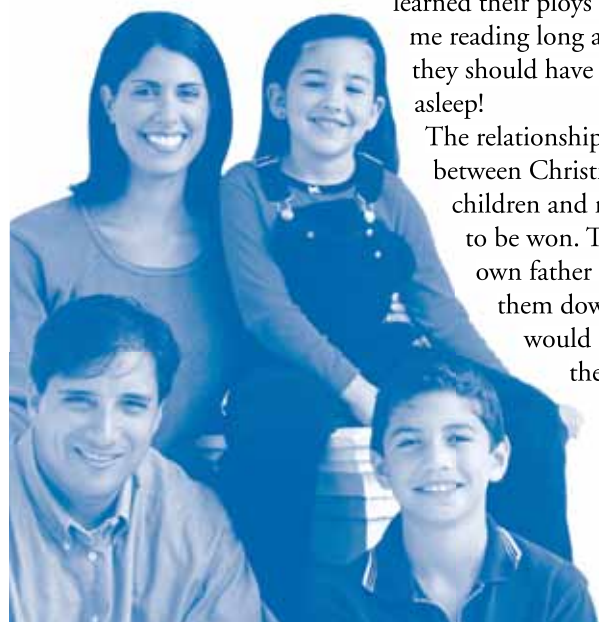
Second marriage stability

When I met Christine she was hugely pregnant with her third child. Her husband had recently left her and their two sons, Andrew (9) and Mark (6), for another woman. I was in a similar position. My wife had left me and my three boys aged 15, 13 and 12. I was going through a divorce and struggling to keep my family together - working a 12-hour day in London, as well as shopping, cooking and washing. Life was a roller coaster of emotions and exhaustion was a daily reality.

It was more than a year before our friendship began. From the outset, I felt a love for Christine. We supported each other and shared each other's pain. Slowly, I was able to build a friendship with Andrew and Mark. Sometimes I would visit their home in time to read the bedtime story and quickly

learned their ploys to keep me reading long after they should have been asleep!

The relationship between Christine's children and me had to be won. Their own father had let them down and would I do the same?



I sensed resentment towards me in the early days. I owe so much to Christine for the way she guided their thoughts and opened the way to their acceptance of me as their friend.

Mutual friends, and one couple in particular, looked after Christine's children and allowed us precious time together. My boys soon got used to the idea of Christine coming and going from the house, and when they realised that she was a much more capable cook than their dad, they saw an advantage in the merging of our families!

By the time of the wedding, the children were used to spending some time all together. Occasional skirmishes occurred, quickly settled by agreement between all concerned. Rules of the house were minimal, but enforced. The boys found Victoria, now four, fascinating and paid her a lot of attention! It was sometimes hard work. Our financial resources were stretched for quite a time and we battled to find quality time for ourselves, as well as responding to the needs of the children.

My eldest two boys became involved in questionable company, which gave rise to concern. We believe the new stability that their stepmum brought to the household had a calming effect. Both came through these difficult times.

Two key things were respect and responsibility. It was up to me to accept responsibility for my new family and for us all to learn respect for each other. I believe that the example of our second marriage has given our children the stability they needed in the home.

As they grew up we have occasionally all met together for a meal out, sometimes including girlfriends and, later, wives. Interesting comments were made as ten or twelve sat at one table. Waitresses would comment on the size and oneness of our family. If they only knew!

Tony

Instant mum

Like many families today, when I said “I do” at my wedding, three came as the package! Gary’s first wife had died of cancer. Sandy and Matt were just six and four years old when we met.

It was very important for us to include the kids in our wedding ceremony. It set the stage for our marriage and provided security for them. I wasn’t there to take their Dad away, but to help fill a missing part. We not only made vows to each other, but also to the children, as Gary reassured them of his continued commitment to them as well.

We cut the cake as a family and we left the reception together in a horse and buggy. Gary and I had a two week honeymoon, then came back and took the kids for a week’s holiday at the beach.

We came back from the honeymoon and I was literally an instant Mum! I had worked 10 years in corporate training, but nothing prepared me for what was to come! Lessons I learned early on were:

- Love is a choice - it’s our daily gift to others.
- Kids need to be loved, not just managed.
- Love them as if they are yours, not just your spouse’s kids.

Our first Christmas together was a disaster! My family tradition had been to get up at a ‘reasonable’ hour and have a huge breakfast together before opening gifts. Gary’s tradition was ‘the earlier, the better’ to open gifts - who wants breakfast with so much excitement? In the end our children didn’t open their gifts until after 1pm. We’ve compromised now and created new ‘traditions’ together, which work for all of us.

It’s vital to keep focussed on the fact that each family

member is part of the ‘family team’. One isn’t more important than another - everyone shares responsibilities and fun too. This really helped when two more came along into our family. We now have kids whose ages range from 6 to 17. Every family member is important - one doesn’t outweigh another.

Yes, we are a ‘blended’ family. It’s not always easy but it can work! “A sorrow shared is sorrow halved; a joy shared is a joy doubled”.

Penny



Because he first loved me

When I married, I became a stepdad to two children aged five and seven. I had no children of my own to use as a reference point. I found I’d taken on the joint responsibility for two children who’d already had their natural mum caring for them. The children also brought with them experiences of their upbringing so far, including living originally with two parents, and then with one.

I try to give what I can: my time, money, effort, and even love and understanding. Although I’m not too understanding when my stepchildren still haven’t tidied their rooms after they’ve been asked half a million times!

What do I get? Sometimes a stepchild who has a degree in stropiness. Sometimes a stepchild who comes to give me a cuddle, or some other good thing, just because I’m me. Stepchildren come with questions: Will he always wear those hideous trousers? What do I call him? Is it always

going to be like this? Can I trust him?

By the end of every day I think of all the things I wished they’d done differently. I also think of all the things I wish I’d done differently! I consider all the things that I hope will be better tomorrow and all the things I am determined to remember for longer than tomorrow.

Being a step-parent is being a parent. Nothing more and nothing less. I’ve found I have the opportunity to experience all the challenges and all the good things of parenting. As a stepson myself, I’ve found that I can only be the stepfather I am because of the good example of my own stepfather.

I can only be a father because someone chose to be a father to me.

Mark

The other parent

When a stepfamily is made up of children whose parents have previously divorced, there is often another parent - or parents – on the scene. This can add to the pressures on the new stepfamily, financially and emotionally.

“My two stepsons would get dressed up every Saturday morning and wait by the front window for their mother,” says Anita, who has two daughters from her first marriage as well as two stepsons. “They’d wait for hours after the time she was supposed to be collecting them. She only turned up three times. All the other times, we’d have to pick up the pieces.”

“Joe would come back from seeing his Dad and behave atrociously,” says Paul, who has one child by his first marriage, and two stepchildren. “He used to take his pain out on me. Of course, I’d get the familiar line ‘You’re not my real dad!’ thrown at me.”

Children can come into the stepfamily having been used to living with two natural parents, then witnessing the break-up and divorce of their parents, and having experienced life in a single parent family. Now they have to learn a whole new set of skills, as

the children in a stepfamily. They may have been used to Mum or Dad’s undivided attention for years. Then along comes another parent figure and, perhaps, stepsiblings and a new family structure.

Being there for the children, however they behave, is supremely important. Remembering they are in pain, whether because of seeing the other parent or because of the other parent’s rejection, can make it easier for step-parents to accept their behaviour. And it is all-important that husband and wife support each other through the traumas, rather than allowing the child or the ‘other parent’ to drive a wedge between them.

“I wanted my own Mum to love me and I didn’t accept my stepmum for a long time,” says Simon, the eldest of Anita’s two stepsons who waited by the window for his mum to collect him.

“Then I gradually realised how much she did for me and how much she cared for me, whatever I did. When I was grown up and joined the army, she worried herself sick about me - she cried when I was sent to the Gulf. I know she loves me now and I love her too.”

“I wanted my own Mum to love me and I didn’t accept my stepmum for a long time.”

Stepfamilies blending

“We were in love and, wearing rose-coloured spectacles, believed that everything would be wonderful after we married. When his father and I had been just friends, Joe was fine. I didn’t anticipate the negative feelings I would have towards him after I married his father, or the guilt that followed those feelings. But I was determined to do something about it. Relationships don’t just happen; we need to form them. We had chosen to take on each other’s children, and now we must choose to make it work out.” *Lynn*

“We cannot make another person like us or love us, but we can do all in our power to reach out to a hurting child. They may reject us, but we should never reject them. They did not choose us, but we chose a package of partner and children when we married. It’s ‘hang on in there’ time.” *Christine*

“It’s like starting a relationship bank account with the child. You must put in credits - care, concern, attention, affirmation, fun, respect, friendship. Only then can you draw out the right to respect and discipline.” *Tony*

“You mustn’t force yourself on your stepchildren. Physical contact isn’t natural at first. You have to earn the right to have that sort of relationship. I tried so hard to build up my relationship with my stepchildren - which went from strength to strength - that it began to seem I was leaving out my own son. To redress the balance, I took him away for a father and son weekend.” *David*

“We wanted to build on the time we spent together as a family, so we began to sit together every evening with a cup of hot chocolate, taking turns to say what had been one good part and one bad part of our day. We played board games at weekends, and splashed out on a three-week holiday, ensuring that it was just the five of us without contact with anyone else.” *Lynn*

“At the time it was rough going. The break-up of my parents’ marriage was bad news. Then I came to accept it, and the remarriage of my Dad. Gradually the relationship has grown and I now see my stepmum as a blessing.” *Daniel*

Stepfamilies blending

- Remember that step-parenting couples are in a vastly more complex situation than parents in first-time relationships. Try to be a listening ear for them, or be able to suggest where they might get specialist help.
- It is assumed that when a couple get married and begin a 'blended family', all is well. It 'solves the problem' of the single parent family. People don't often realise how many problems come with new stepfamily life. Check with the couple that they are OK, and offer practical help if necessary.
- Look after the children for an evening or a weekend, to allow the couple time for themselves. The marriage is being built in front of the children, so the couple need space for themselves. Their relationship is paramount to the success of the stepfamily.
- If you work with children or young people, be sensitive to the situation of stepchildren. They may live in two homes with very different standards. Allow them time to voice their feelings.
- On Mothering Sunday, for example, allow children to make two cards if they want to - one for their Mum and one for their stepmum. Children may call their step-parent by their first name but consider them and relate to them as a parent.
- When welcoming new parents and children, don't ask questions about why there are different surnames. It is a personal matter and they may feel awkward and embarrassed about how their family was formed.
- Be aware that there may well be less money in a stepfamily - especially in the case of a divorce where there may be another parent to support - and less time, too.
- There are many different forms of stepfamily. Don't treat them or each member as the same.
- Remember that many of the parenting issues are the same for all parents. Toddler tantrums and teenage trials are not the result of being in a stepfamily.

Quotes and stats

"Second families are first and foremost the expression of the adult partners' love for one another and their desire to create a 'safe haven' for their children and for themselves. They offer us strong evidence that family values are alive and well in our society." (Derek Hill writing in the foreword to *The Relate Guide to Second Families*)

"Give it time: stepfamily relationships can take from two to ten years to settle." (Parentline Plus website)

More than one in ten dependent children in the UK live in a stepfamily – that is 1,284,000 children. This doesn't include families with older children, or children who visit their 'absent parent' but don't live with him/her. (UK 2001 Census)

Extra help

Support groups

Parentline Plus

520 Highgate Studios
53-79 Highgate Road
London NW5 1TL
Tel: 020 7284 5500
Helpline: 0808 800 2222
Web: www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Stepfamily Scotland

Gillis Centre
113 Whitehouse Loan
Edinburgh
EH10 1BB
E-mail info@stepfamilyscotland.org.uk
Helpline: 0845 122 8655

Bookshelf

Making Friends with your Stepchildren

Rosemary Wells, Sheldon Press,
ISBN 0859698467

The Relate Guide to Second Families

Suzie Hayman, Vermillion

Step-parenting in the 1990s

Family Policy Studies Centre report by Elsa Ferri and
Kate Smith

The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family

Ron L Deal, ISBN 9764226576