

## Being a step-parent

*Penny, Debbie, Lizzie and Steve share some of their insights and tips on life as a step-parent.*

### Penny

Like many families today, when I said “I do” at my wedding, there were more than just two of us in the package! My husband’s first wife had died of cancer and his children were just six and four years old when we met. When we came back from a two-week honeymoon, I was an instant mum!

I had worked for 10 years in corporate training, but nothing prepared me for what was to come! I learned some important lessons about love early on:

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

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. This was followed by time to think about the meaning of Christmas and then open gifts. Gary’s tradition was to open presents ‘the earlier, the better’ then head off to church. Breakfast? Who wants to eat with so much excitement? In the end, it was after 1.00 pm before our poor children opened their presents that day. Over time we have compromised and created new ‘traditions’ together which work for all of us.

To me, it’s vital to keep focused on the fact that each family member is part of the ‘family team’. One isn’t more important than another – everyone

shares the responsibilities and fun. This really helped when two more children came along, as we now have kids whose ages range from 6 to 17 years. Blended families may not always be easy, but they can work!

### Debbie

I’ve been a stepmum for six months. The thing I’ve found hardest so far is to accept that loving someone else’s children is a decision you need to stick to – whether or not you ‘feel’ that love. I make a conscious effort each morning to say two positive things a day to my stepchildren, and I am trying to build a positive relationship (however long that takes) before offering advice, criticism or discipline. I’m learning patience!

### Lizzie

A stepmum should be aware that her expectations need to be realigned! I expected to take on the mother’s role, ‘fall in love’ with my stepchildren, and that we’d all live happily ever after! But now I’ve realised that you can’t expect to feel a birth mother bond with your stepchildren in the way that you do with your birth children. A special bond can grow with your stepchildren, but don’t beat yourself up for not feeling that birth mother bond.

Being a stepmum can be hard and the role grows and changes as the relationship develops. There are tough times, but when they come they allow your connection with your stepchildren to deepen and strengthen. You begin to find that, just like with your own children, you’d give your life for them.

### Steve

You have to have patience with your stepchildren. They will push you to your limits – and even further! When they use



the “You’re-not-my-real-dad-so-you-can’t-tell-me-what-to-do” argument I tell them, “I may not be your real dad, but I love you as if I was.” This normally disarms them.

In the early days, remember that your kids may find the new family set-up strange and confusing. They may well be hurting in some way or other (even if it isn’t obvious). Be tender with them, especially if they are in a fragile state, but don’t hug them at first as this could push them away. Give them time and they will learn to trust you and eventually come to you in times of distress.

Make the most of family time together – walks in parks, board games etc. – as soon as possible to break the ice between you and set the foundations for building a loving and safe environment.

Agree boundaries with your spouse or partner and back each other up when enforcing the rules to give your children a sense of security. As a stepdad, don’t let what I like to call ‘man pride’ get in the way. Talk with your wife or partner about the issues and get her advice; after all she knows her children a whole lot better than you do.

Hug and show your affection to your wife or partner in front of the children as this will give them security and build their trust. Keep the channels of communication wide open and let it be a two-way thing – i.e. listen to them if you want them to listen to you.



Care for the Family’s aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

Care for the Family, Garth House, Leon Avenue, Cardiff, CF15 7RG  
Tel: 029 2081 0800 Email: [mail@cff.org.uk](mailto:mail@cff.org.uk) Web: [www.careforthefamily.org.uk](http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk)

Care for the Family – A Christian response to a world of need.  
A registered charity (England and Wales: 1066905; Scotland: SC038497).