
STEP-PARENTS

A step-parent can be a positive addition to a child's life. This handout contains helpful suggestions for constructive step-parenting.

1. The child needs time alone with his/her parent. Respect this and give both parents and children room for this.
2. Develop your own relationship with the child. Play games together, help with chores, read a story, show interest, and help them with schoolwork or other projects, if the child wants. Never force a child to spend time with you, but always be willing and available to your step-children.
3. Do not try to take the other parent's place. Telling your step-children to call you "Mom" or "Dad" is inappropriate. Allow them to choose something comfortable for them. Do not intrude on the other parent's role at school events and extracurricular activities. This helps keep your relationship with the other parent neutral and the children will not be placed in an uncomfortable situation.
4. Be polite and cooperative with the other parent. Some step-parents are a good buffer between parents who may not have learned to communicate with one another.
5. Recognize that a step-parent's role is different from a parent's role. You may do more for the child and even spend more time with and money on the child, but the parental role can never be replaced. You are a third adult providing love, needs, etc. for the child, but are not replacing the parent, even an absent one.
6. Provide household structure along with your partner, but leave discipline to the parents. You can remind children of the household routine and rules and expect them to listen to you and your mate, but physical punishment should always be left to the parents. You may intervene when an immediate problem comes up, but take the least intrusive approach. Consult with the child's parent before making any major decisions for the child.
7. Respect and follow parenting decisions made by the parents. Decisions need to be made between the parents. Respecting the parent's choices about limits and guidelines for the children will not only encourage the parents but allow them to be in the appropriate parenting role.

The step-parent can be a supportive, nurturing, adult friend, an ally, a confidant, and a positive role model for the step-children. Remaining aware of the distinct role a step-parent has in a child's life and not overstepping the appropriate boundaries can help the step-parent and children to develop a positive, mutually rewarding relationship.