



Simple Steps to Stepfamily Success

By Holly Robinson

With time, patience, and realistic expectations, a blended family can work!

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It can take several years for a stepfamily to become a cohesive family unit, says Houston psychologist James Bray, Ph.D. Although you should prepare yourself for conflict, the following tactics can help bring you closer together:

Put your marriage first. Because a strong stepfamily depends on a strong marriage, you need to nurture your relationship by spending time alone with your spouse. Of course, you don't want to neglect your kids' needs; happy children in stepfamilies contribute to a happy marriage, whereas the stress of dealing with unhappy kids contributes to the breakdown of a marriage.

Acknowledge the families within your family. Plan activities just for you and your kids, and your spouse and his. The activities can be simple -- a Friday night when they play board games while you and your kids go to a movie -- but shouldn't be forgotten within the chaos of a larger blended family.

Go on group outings. Even after they start living together, children may feel awkward doing activities alone with their stepparent. They may worry about being disloyal to their biological parent, or they may feel anxious about spending time with someone who still seems like a stranger. Taking at least one other sibling or stepsibling along will help defuse any of your kids' worries and ease the self-consciousness on both sides.

Discuss discipline. "A stepparent needs to develop a relationship with his stepchild before he begins to play a role in discipline," Dr. Bray says. However, it's crucial for you and your spouse to work out a list of house rules that will apply to all kids equally. Both of you can then enforce them.

Create one-on-one time. After you and your stepchildren feel more comfortable with each other, try to grab some time alone together. Start with routine outings -- walking the dog or taking a quick trip to the market -- and work up to planned activities, such as going out for a miniature-golf game or a movie.

Share in your stepchildren's interests. If your stepson plays soccer, go to the games and treat him and his friends to ice cream afterward -- win or lose. By showing an interest, you're demonstrating your respect and affection for him, so it's worth making an effort even if he initially resists.

Develop your own rituals. Every family has its special routines: Sunday pancake breakfasts at a local diner, Friday pizza-and-video nights, Saturday-morning bike rides in the park. Though it's important to maintain and perhaps share the rituals important to each of your two families, you'll want to



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