



Step-parenting

The do's and don'ts of helping to raise a step-child...and how to help if you know a step-parent



If you are one of the millions of Canadians who are in a relationship with a partner with children from a previous relationship, you may have found adjusting to step-parenthood to be a bit more challenging than anticipated.

While every situation has its own unique difficulties, in this newsletter we take a look at some of the do's and don'ts a step-parent should keep in mind when helping to raise a step-child.

Do get some education on step-parenting. Read a good book, check out one of the many websites devoted to step-parenting, or talk with a counsellor (Human Solutions™ Plan Smart Services™ has some good information and coaching available).

Do try to see the situation from the child's perspective. In most cases, having a new parent can be stressful for children and they need time to adjust emotionally. Having a new step-parent impacts children differently depending on their age and personality.

Don't assume the role of primary disciplinarian. Effective discipline comes from a strong emotional connection. Allow this to develop along with the relationship you are building.

Do encourage the child(ren) to call you by your first name. Don't confuse the child by expecting to be called mom or dad, unless the child is very young and the biological parent is not involved.

Don't speak poorly of the child's other parent. Doing so will put the child on the defensive, and by putting the parent down, you hurt them and your chances of building a healthy, positive relationship.

Don't impose your rules on your step-children. If the children have grown up with a different set of rules, they may rebel at having to do things differently. You and your spouse may need to compromise on parenting styles and then agree to support one another in this compromise.

Do be involved. As a step-parent you may think it best to detach and not interfere in the children's lives. If you do so, the children may think you don't care about them. Even if they resist your efforts to be involved at first, over time you will develop a much better relationship if you are an involved and interested in them. Start by being a friend and let the relationship evolve at the child's pace.

Do strive to be as compassionate, understanding, and accepting as possible. You are the adult and your step-children will learn from the example that you set.

Do maintain your sense of humour. Humour helps keep matters in perspective and it helps build intimacy when you laugh with someone.



The bottom line

The key to developing a good relationship with a step-child is patience. Keep in mind that becoming a part of an already existing family structure will be challenging for everyone.

Depending on the situation and their age, children may take longer to accept a step-parent (and teenagers will take longer than children under eight). Even if a child is hostile at first and not interested in developing a relationship, don't give up. It takes time for people to develop positive, trusting relationships. Just continue to be friendly and available to them...and above all be patient.

The good news for step-families is that things tend to get better after the first couple of years. If a new family can work through any initial shakiness, family members can usually succeed in creating a solid, harmonious family structure. It will take education, patience and understanding on the part of both parents, and the support of the people around them, including their managers and co-workers.

If you know a step-parent

As a friend, relative, or co-worker, you may well know someone who is dealing with the trials and tribulations of being a step-parent. If you would like to know how you can best support them, here are some approaches to consider:

Appreciate that a new step-parent may be on a roller-coaster with things going well one day and dreadfully the next.

If appropriate, offer to baby-sit so the couple can go out on their own and have the opportunity to nurture their own relationship and keep it healthy and happy.

Be a good listener and only give advice if it is asked for. If you have gone through a similar experience you may share what your situation was like, keeping in mind that everyone's experiences will be different.



We want your questions, comments, and suggestions.

E-mail us at healthyfamilies@humansolutions.ca.

For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

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