

elevate your RELATIONSHIP

Stepparenting Begins with Common Ground

Being a stepparent is challenging. More often than not, it is an instant role, bestowed upon you the moment you say “I do.” Accordingly, the stepparent-stepchild relationship is one of the most difficult family relationships to develop; establishing a positive parental role may take years (it might also never materialize).

Once established, it takes a lot of effort to maintain. Yet despite these challenges, millions of remarried couples find common ground and ways of making it work. Over the years, their trials, errors, and successes have been studied, documented, and distilled into a set of stepparent ground rules. These principles can help you and your partner work together to effectively parent the children in your stepfamily.

- **Prepare for your stepparent role.** Talk with each other about sibling and family dynamics, important traditions and rituals, your child rearing beliefs, established household rules and the other more everyday realities of family life before (if not, then soon after) your marriage. These talks will not only help each of you better understand the children’s current realities, but will also be very important in helping you see potential sources of conflict. When the differences are large, work together to find common ground.
- **Make your marital relationship a priority.** To be an effective stepparent, you need the emotional security, support, and foundation of a strong marriage. However, a strong bond may exist between your spouse and their children from a prior marriage. Sometimes these strong ties can lead to jealousy on your part. One way to avoid allowing jealousy to taint your relationships is to continue to make time for just the two of you.
- **Keep the biological parent, not the stepparent, the primary disciplinarian.** About half of all stepchildren see their stepparent as having legitimate authority over them; the other half do not. Because of this, stepfamilies who fare the best are generally the ones in which the biological parent remains the disciplining authority—setting limits and enforcing the consequences—and the stepparent (initially) monitors and helps to enforce the house rules.

- **Require respect but not love.** As much as any parent would like their children to love them, it isn’t reasonable to require, or even expect, stepchildren to love their stepparent. The children did not choose you, their biological parent did. On the flip side, stepparents shouldn’t feel guilty if they don’t feel love and affection for their stepchildren. It is possible to be caring and nurturing, even in the absence of mutual love. Sometimes, and with some children, a mutually loving relationship never materializes. However, from day one, parents should insist that every member of the family be treated with courtesy and respect to build and maintain common ground.

As with most life transitions, the more you prepare, the more smoothly the transition unfolds. There are no ideal role models for this job. Every stepparent situation is unique, so there is no single *normal* way of doing things. Take time to prepare so that you and your partner are better equipped to smoothly navigate stepparenthood. Define your role based on what’s comfortable for each of you, the children, and the family as a whole.

Activity

Brainstorm with your spouse about good ways to spend time with your stepchildren individually or as a family. If one child likes a certain sport, consider taking that child to a sporting event. If you don’t yet feel comfortable spending time together one-on-one, consider making it a family outing until you and the child feel more comfortable with each other. Remember, don’t try to force a relationship. Showing interest in something that interests the child can provide a connection that you can build on as your relationship grows.

For more helpful advice and tools to strengthen your stepfamily, visit the National Stepfamily Resource Center at www.stepfamilies.info.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

extension.uga.edu

Circular 1052-34

Reviewed November 2022

Published by the University of Georgia in cooperation with Fort Valley State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and counties of the state. For more information, contact your local UGA Cooperative Extension office. The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (working cooperatively with Fort Valley State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the counties of Georgia) offers its educational programs, assistance, and materials to all people without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation or protected veteran status and is an Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action organization.



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