

Step-Parenting: Blending Families with Children

Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Becoming a step-parent to your partner's children significantly changes your relationship with them. You were their friend, but now you're stepping into a role of authority and responsibility. This transition requires careful navigation and consideration.

Establishing Discipline

One of the early decisions in step-parenting is determining whether to discipline your partner's child. Ensure that both partners share similar values and beliefs about discipline. Engage in problem-solving and make clear decisions about the "who, what, when, where, and how" of discipline. Consistency and mutual support are crucial. The biological parent should handle discipline initially until the step-parent has established a solid bond with the children. Immediately assuming a disciplinarian role can often backfire and produce undesired results. It's important to proceed slowly and patiently with older children, especially teenagers, to avoid conflict.

Setting Household Rules

Create a set of household rules that apply to everyone. Discuss developmental stages and assign chores, responsibilities, and rewards based on performance and abilities. Both partners should be aligned regarding rules and responsibilities to avoid confusion and ensure fairness.

Addressing Fairness

Children value different things, and perceptions of fairness can vary widely. Decide whether to allocate time and money equally among all children or according to individual needs, developmental stages, and preferences. What might seem unfair to a parent may not matter to a child, so pay attention to the underlying values and priorities.

Managing Sibling Rivalry

Initially, children often see their step-siblings as rivals for time, energy, attention, and resources. Be vigilant about sibling rivalry and take steps to address it proactively. Foster a sense of unity and cooperation among the children.

Communicating Parenting Styles

You and your partner will view each other differently as you work on developing systems and methods for parenting two sets of children. Spend time discussing your experiences and approaches to parenting. Avoid arguments about who is right or wrong. Where there are different styles, keep communicating until you can find solutions and compromises that both of you can live with.

Establishing Routines and Structure

Develop flexible yet consistent routines and structures. Balance time spent together, time spent with your child, time spent with your partner's children, and time spent as a couple. Routine provides security and predictability, essential for children adjusting to a new family dynamic.

Handling Custody and Visitation

If you don't have physical custody of all the children, treat visitation and shared custody like a logic puzzle. Make transitions between households as smooth as possible. Children feel more secure when they know their schedule's who, when, how, and where. Maintain a master schedule for appointments, extracurricular activities, and other family visits.

Encouraging Open Communication

Encourage all children to talk about their feelings rather than acting them out. Sometimes, extreme reactions to events may indicate deeper, unspoken issues. Spend time listening and helping them identify and express their true feelings.

Involving the Family in Problem-Solving

Involve the entire family in problem-solving. Let children have a say in how they want the new family to function. Family meetings facilitate this process, ensuring everyone's voice is heard and considered.

Cooperating with Ex-Spouses

Maintain cordial and cooperative relationships with ex-spouses who have custody or visitation rights. Communication and consultation are key. To collaborate effectively, both sets of parents should have the same information about the children.

Recognizing Individual Backgrounds

Acknowledge that no one in a blended family comes from a vacuum. Everyone brings their baggage, expectations, traditions, and beliefs. Don't expect everyone to fit together perfectly or to love each other automatically. Understand that it takes time to build these relationships.

Patience and Understanding

Blending two families requires patience, communication, problem-solving, and compromise. Focus on empathizing with everyone's feelings and perspectives instead of insisting on being understood. If both partners adopt this approach, the family will reach a comfortable place more quickly and with fewer arguments and hurt feelings. Remember that children are loyal to their other parents and family and need reassurance that they are still loved. Make special efforts to accommodate requests for time from other people who love them.

In conclusion, successful step-parenting involves careful planning, consistent communication, and a readiness to adapt and compromise. You can create a harmonious and supportive blended family by building solid and respectful relationships.

Family Feelings Meetings By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of a successful blended family. One practical way to foster open dialogue and understanding is through regular Family Feelings Meetings. These meetings provide a structured environment for family members to express their emotions, discuss concerns, and collaboratively find solutions to any issues that arise. Let's explore how Family Feelings Meetings can help enhance family cohesion and ensure that everyone's voice is heard.



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