

# BEING A STEP MUM

Being a step mum or a mum in a blended family can be a balancing act requiring some good juggling skills! Walking the line between being a hands-on mum at times and stepping back at other times, can be challenging.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR ROLE

This takes time to develop, so allow for this resettling. If you are caring for your partner's child, slipping into a traditional mother role may not work as smoothly as you imagined. This isn't your fault, it's just that families tend to run along familiar lines. If the kids have been used to listening to their original mum and dad, they usually won't like a new person (however nice they are) telling them what to do.

Many step mums find it works better to be a supportive adult to kids: a mentor or aunt figure, but let their original parents manage most of the discipline. This can be hard if your partner is at work and you are doing a lot of child care. In this case have open conversations and set some rules as to how things are going to work.

*"I used to say to my partner's kids, 'I will give you a warning if you don't do as I've asked, and your Dad will deal with it later'. That meant he managed the consequences and it worked a lot better. Try getting a child who isn't used to you, off his computer when he doesn't want to. Now that's a challenge."*

Design your role as one where you are a loving support to your partner in his raising of the children. You both follow the same rules, but he has the final say and steps in when it becomes difficult. It's up to you as partners to work out what this means on a day-to-day basis.

**Stepfamilies** come with a sense of hope that things can be happier and better, despite what has happened before.

**Optimism** is a major advantage for all step family members so hold onto it!



## THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

A strong couple bond is an essential foundation of a happy step or blended family. It's important to make time alone each week, so you can reflect on how things are going and have some fun as a couple. This helps you to work together to solve issues and also models healthy, respectful relationships for the children.

It can be helpful to attend a stepparenting course to get some guidance and deeper understanding that it is normal for kids to be resistant to change, and time is needed for everyone to adjust to the new arrangements. That doesn't mean there are major problems: mixed feelings and initial problems are normal. However your couple relationship should be treated as precious, requiring nurturing, even in a busy family environment. Small acts of kindness, affection and even the occasional note or text expressing appreciation can make a big difference.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Starting in a new parenting role it's natural to feel some strong reactions or emotions: feeling overworked, under pressure or even left out. When there are kids, often there's no time for a honeymoon. You can still enjoy date nights (you could ban talking about the kids!) and then you can get back to focusing on family goals and kids' arrangements. It's ok to compartmentalise life a bit, so your needs are met. Romance can still continue but it needs space and time to happen. It's also important to have your own interests and supports for some time-out when needed.

*"I still retained Friday nights with friends. This is my relaxation time and it gives my partner an opportunity to reconnect with his kids. I didn't want to set up an expectation that I would cater every meal and be the sole child carer just because I was the female adult in the house. I also didn't want to feel left out when they wanted a night alone. This was key for me, time to recharge and some humour and balance for myself."*

## CREATING REAL RELATIONSHIPS

Sometimes kids and stepparents develop a genuine and deep love for one another. However, that's not necessarily the norm. It's a big ask for anyone to come into a family and "love" everyone else. Aiming for the happily ever after outcome straightaway or at all can set up a situation if you DON'T warm to one of the kids, or your new in-laws.

Aim for respectful relationships with good communication. Having more realistic expectations means less disappointment if your bond with the children is not super close.

At first lots of kids won't become close to their stepmums as it often feels disloyal to their mothers. Don't try to 'fix' everyone, right past wrongs or compete with their other mothers. Just work on what you and your partner do in

creating a positive environment for everyone. The good news is that you, your partner, family dynamics, children, relationships and feelings **will all change over time.**

## SOME MORE HELPFUL TIPS

- » Accept that the past may have been complex, we all have baggage, some more than others. Blame achieves very little, so focus on solutions.
- » Respect existing family traditions and build new ones. Make them health promoting: Saturday bike rides or boogie boarding on Boxing Day.
- » Stay flexible. Don't get too hung up on having to do things "on the right day" like birthdays or anniversaries. When kids are shared between two households they don't need the extra stress. Be creative, take turns and have fun with it, even if it's not your ideal scenario.
- » Try not to be too sensitive. Your role is a challenging one: in responding to criticism, try to remember you are not a wicked stepmother but a concerned, caring individual who is handling things as best she can.
- » Make some 'me time': yoga, walking, gardening, shopping, and pursuing your interests. Don't make being a step mum your sole identity and expect to be happy.
- » Ask your partner to actively support you. If the kids don't say 'good morning' or 'thanks for dinner', have your partner prompt them. Be specific about what you require to play your part in the household. It has to be a united front to establish ongoing respect.
- » Allow your partner to have time alone with their children. In stepfamilies, the children's primary relationships are with their parents.
- » Don't aim for perfection. As a couple in a stepfamily there are the same ups and downs all families experience. Sometimes and about some things, you will have to agree to disagree. Pick your battles and let the little things go. Inform yourself. Speak to others, attend groups and educate yourself about the realities of stepfamily life. Get outside help, if necessary. Make sure the counsellor is familiar with stepfamily dynamics.

## WHERE TO GET FURTHER HELP:

**Stepfamilies Australia:** [www.stepfamily.org.au](http://www.stepfamily.org.au)

**Family Relationships Advice Line:** 1800 050 321

**Family Relationships Online:** [www.familyrelationships.gov.au](http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au)

**Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800, [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

**Lifeline:** 13 11 14

**Men's Line Australia:** 1300 789 978

**Raising Children:** [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)