

SCHOOLS SUPPORTING STEPFAMILIES THROUGH CHANGE AND TRANSITION

Schools are often the first place to recognise changes in children's attitudes or behaviour.

More often than not, schools are in the frontline, as one in three families with school age children undergo some kind of transition or change (i.e. separation, divorce, re-partnering/stepparenting).

Children in these families experience many changes in their home lives and this can impact on their ability to engage in the classroom and manage socially. Schools can be an important constant for these children, providing stability, familiarity and consistent routines.

A FEW THINGS FOR SCHOOLS TO CONSIDER

- » While stepfamilies can provide a lot of positives for children, they also present some ongoing challenges. Schools can often recognise the warning signs of struggling children and provide opportunities for discussion with families.
- » Schools often function as a 'changeover venue', which can allow children valuable adjustment time between homes.
- » Schools and teachers often provide a framework and language for children who are learning to define their new roles within the family and in their parents' lives.



SCHOOLS SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

- » While not counsellors or mediators, teachers can be a really important impartial connection between primary/biological parents, their partners and children.
- » Children in stepfamilies may feel different and isolated from their peers for a while. Teachers are in a powerful position as they can reduce these feelings, and facilitate connections with other children in similar situations.

BECOME A STEPFAMILY-FRIENDLY SCHOOL

- » Teachers can use and acknowledge a variety of family structures when discussing families and/or doing family studies (e.g. nuclear or biological family, adoptive family, foster family, sole parent family, stepfamily, rainbow family, grandparent family, extended family).
- » Check if student enrolment forms have all relevant contact details for both primary/biological parents and their partners.
- » Ensure that all staff are aware of any relevant court orders.
- » Encourage parents to keep staff updated about parenting arrangements. This makes it easier for schools to contact the relevant family members in case of an emergency.
- » Try not to leave anyone out – develop clear policies ensuring staff communicate with and be respectful of, the wishes of both parents.
- » Ensure that all caregivers have access (e.g. via email) to relevant and up-to-date information in the form of school newsletters, reports, teacher interviews, etc.
- » Don't assume that children will act as the go-betweens or that parents/ex-partners will be able to keep each other in the loop.
- » Recognise that many caregivers, including grandparents and stepparents, might collect a child from school. Authority to sign activity participation forms is a grey area legally which will require clarification in each family circumstance.

- » Although time consuming, offering two parent-teacher interviews per child in a stepfamily is a great idea. Otherwise you will need to invite and expect up to four parent figures for interviews.
- » Try to provide enough tickets for graduations/special events to include stepparents as well as biological parents.
- » Encourage children to purchase or make extra gifts from the Mothers'/Stepmothers' Day & Fathers'/Stepfathers' Day Stalls.
- » Understand that children in a stepfamily usually have to move between two homes, so they might occasionally forget school books, parts of uniform, etc.

Seeking more information

There are a number of relevant resources on the **Stepfamilies Australia** website, including training for parents and professionals.

www.stepfamily.org.au

If you are concerned about a child and need some practical anonymous advice, the **Family Relationships Advice Line** 1800 050 321 is helpful.

If children don't want to talk to a teacher and are old enough, you can refer them to the **Kids Helpline** 18000 55 1800 or www.kidshelp.com.au

My Mob App is a positive family and child-focused app supporting communication with children no matter where family members are. Go to www.mymob.com

If a child in your class is finding the transition difficult and you have tried everything, there are many resources within the Department of Education and Training and other services that you can draw upon if necessary. Talk to an experienced person you can trust, and lessen the burden, or seek professional help and advice. Contact Stepfamilies Australia on 9663 6733.