

The Step-Parent's Role in Parenting

An unprecedented number of families in America are blended families, those involving a step-parent. As early as possible in a new child/step-parent relationship, the biological parent and new spouse need to plan together what role the step-parent will take in applying discipline with the children involved. For some time, probably years, the biological parent should be the primary disciplinarian. The step-parent will need time to develop a trusting relationship with each child. Involving the new step-parent in the role of disciplinarian too soon will likely build resistance and resentment on the part of the child.

As with any couple, there may be differences in how the step-parent and the biological parent think discipline needs to be handled. It is important to discuss these differences as a couple, while leaving the actual role of applying discipline to the biological parent whenever possible. This is often complicated by the need for the biological parent to work outside the home during evening or weekend hours. Nevertheless, the biological parent cannot abdicate this important responsibility.

If circumstances often make the biological parent unavailable to be the disciplinarian, he or she must take an active role in developing structure for the child and communicating expectations to him or her. This will help the step-parent serve as more of a monitor for the child's compliance with the rules established by the biological parent.

If you are a step-parent, here are some ideas to keep in mind to build your relationship with the child in your family:

1. Be careful not to criticize the child's biological parent. In the child's eyes you are attempting to take the parent's place, and criticizing the other parent only proves it. This will most likely provoke a negative reaction toward you, no matter how much the child may dislike the other parent.
2. Depending on the age of the child at the time of the re-marriage, he or she may never accept you as a parental authority. The older the child, the longer this will take. A child who is an adolescent at the time of the marriage may never make this transition.
3. Allow the child to be open with you about feelings concerning divorce, re-marriage, loss and grief. The child has experienced a great deal and your patience and listening ability can lay the groundwork for a strong relationship. The key is to be non-judgmental and remain non-critical about the child's feelings, though you do have the right to expect the communication of these feelings to be respectful toward you.

4. As much as possible, maintain a cooperative relationship with your spouse's ex-partner. Though these relationships can sometimes be stressful, the less defensive you can be and the more you can focus all of your interactions on the needs of the child, the less opportunity there will be for conflict.

Larry Deavers is Executive Director of Family Counseling Service.

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