

Making Your Blended Family a Success: A Message to Step-parents

By Larry Deavers

Blending two families together, even when there is only one child involved, comes with special challenges that can strain any home. Being inserted into a child's life as a newcomer often generates uncertainty, fear and resistance from both the child and the step-parent. These take a great deal of time, patience and grace to work through in a positive way. Step-parents usually enter a situation where expectations and rules for the child have already been established, and there is also another home the child is a part of that has its own set of standards that may not be the same.

Feeling your way through this relationship can be fraught with pitfalls that can escalate tensions. A child is not going to have the same ability to cope with these stresses as an adult, so these apprehensions may come out as anger, withdrawal, or acting out. The best (though not the easiest) way to get

through this period of uncertainty is to keep your own emotions in check and not allow your own uncomfortable feelings cause you to react to the child's emotions in a way that may have long-term damaging effects.

It is important that you and the biological parent discuss the approach you will take in parenting. Different parenting styles exist in any parenting relationship and always requires compromise in order to be successful. Discussing these differences should be done privately so that the child sees both you and their biological parent supporting each other. This minimizes mixed messages and lessens opportunities for manipulation by the child.

Once agreement is reached on parenting priorities, expectations should be explained to the child by their biological parent. The primary role of disciplining the child, ideally, should come from the biological parent. If that parent is not present, as the step-parent, your role is to enforce the biological parent's rules for the child. This can help minimize the resistance the child may feel towards having to accept you as a new authority figure in their lives. If both parents have children in the family from previous relationships, rules for the children should be as similar as possible, depending on ages and past behavior. Having drastic differences in expectations, without just cause, will create animosity between step-siblings and also towards parents.

A reasonable standard is to expect the child to behave respectfully towards you. A key component in helping the child be successful in this is for you to also be respectful. This may require acknowledging the child's feelings and desires, keeping in mind that the child has a family experience that



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is different from yours and values that may be different, as well. Having a conflict in values can be a sensitive issue, but demonstrating respect and creating a non-defensive atmosphere can improve your chances of developing a positive relationship.

There may come a time in the child's life where he or she is ready to accept you as a disciplinarian. However, this does not happen right away, and may not happen at all. When you attempt to take the lead in discipline too soon, it most often leads to problems in your relationship with the child, as well as with the biological parent.

The biological parent may have to take an active role in protecting your relationship with the child. They can do this by being careful to avoid putting you in the role of disciplinarian or asking you to deal with a child's emotional, behavioral or school issues before you have firmly established a relationship with the child.

You need to remember that a child's inappropriate behavior may not be directed at you, personally. A child may have unresolved issues about the separation of their biological parents and the loss of their home, friends, school relationships, etc. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is be supportive of the child as they work through these emotions, while being sensitive to how much involvement they welcome from you. In this regard, follow the child's lead, being careful not to overstep bounds, give unwanted advice, or press the child to accept you in a way they are not able or ready to do.

It is normal for a step-parent to sometimes feel left out due to not sharing a history with the child. Rather than trying to fit into the child's life the same way his biological parent does, you may have to find a place in your relationship where you are satisfied to be a support for the biological parent. Over time, you may be able to find your own way to relate to the child. It will take patience and effort on your part to find the best way to be supportive of both the child and the

biological parent.

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