

## Stepfamily Challenges

Stepfamily members encounter many positive experiences, but they are also faced with many challenges. These challenges include relationships between family members, unrealistic expectations, and cultural myths.

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## Family Relationship Challenges

### • Stepparent role

Stepfamilies often have a difficult time defining the role of the stepparent. It is challenging to figure out how the stepparent should interact with the stepchildren. This relationship is different for every stepfamily, but children usually respond better when the stepparent refrains from disciplining the child at the beginning of the relationship. Building a friendship between stepparents and stepchildren seems to work well for most stepfamilies.

### • Competing for attention

Sometimes children see the new stepparent as a source of competition for their biological parent's attention. They may feel as though the stepparent is threatening the closeness of their relationship with their parent. Building in quality one-on-one time with children reassures them that they are loved and supported.

### • Loyalty Conflicts

Sometimes children struggle with their feelings about both of their parents and their stepparent. Children worry about choosing sides and feel disloyal to their parents if they show feelings of affection toward a stepparent. Parents should support new relationships between children and their stepparent. Children adjust better to stepfamily life when parents do not criticize the new stepparents.

## Unrealistic Expectations and Myths of Stepfamilies

Stepfamily members often have unrealistic expectations about stepfamily life. These can get in the way of building healthy stepfamily relationships. Cultural myths can also be a source of stress for stepfamily members. Stereotypes can make it difficult for stepfamilies to build positive relationships. Communicating about expectations can make the process of forming stepfamily relationships smoother.

- **Nonresidential parent becomes unimportant**  
Most children love both of their parents, even when one of them does not live in the same house. Nonresidential parents can play a positive part in a stepfamily by continuing to stay involved in their children's life.
- **Adjustment happens quickly**  
Building stepfamily relationships takes a lot of time. Many parents expect that positive relationships will form within a couple of weeks or months. In reality, it can take years for stepfamily relationships to form. Approaching this topic with realistic expectations decreases the chance of disappointment.
- **Love happens instantly**  
Sometimes stepfamily members believe that the stepparent and stepchildren will love each other very quickly. In reality, it takes time to develop feelings of love and affection between stepparents and stepchildren. Spending quality time together can help foster these feelings.
- **Stepfamily myths**  
Stepfamily myths reflect cultural values, and are seldom true. Some common myths that stepfamilies face include:
  - Stepchildren will always dislike their stepparents
  - All stepchildren have more behavior problems than other children
  - Stepfamilies are just like other families
  - Stepparents and stepchildren will never love each other
  - Adoption makes stepfamilies just like other families
  - Children should only love their biological mother and biological father
  - Stepparents should love their stepchildren immediately
  - Stepmothers are mean and evil

### Monthly tip for families:

**Play a game or watch a movie that all family members enjoy.**

#### Additional Resources:

[www.extension.usu.edu/stepfamily](http://www.extension.usu.edu/stepfamily)

[www.healthyrelationshipsutah.org](http://www.healthyrelationshipsutah.org)

[www.strongermarriage.org](http://www.strongermarriage.org)

[www.stepfamilies.info](http://www.stepfamilies.info)

[www.twoofus.org](http://www.twoofus.org)

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