
Coping with Parenting Step-Children

A LIFE EFFECTIVENESS GUIDE

Published by: J & S Garrett Pty Ltd

ACN 068 751 440



All Case Histories in this text are presented as examples only
and any comparison which might be made with persons either
living or dead is purely coincidental

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Introduction

As children we heard many fairy tales about wicked and evil stepmothers such as Cinderella, Snow White and Hansel & Gretel. But did we ever expect to be part of a step-family or even find ourselves step-parenting someone else's children? It's probable that we expected to end up in what is called a 'nuclear' family, where there is a mum, dad and children.

The fact that you are reading this guide on "coping with parenting step-children" may mean you are considering entering or have found yourself raising step-children. Along with thousands of other step-parents you could be challenged in this role for many reasons including kids who test you, the territory is unknown, and possibly you could have a partner who doesn't realise your challenges.

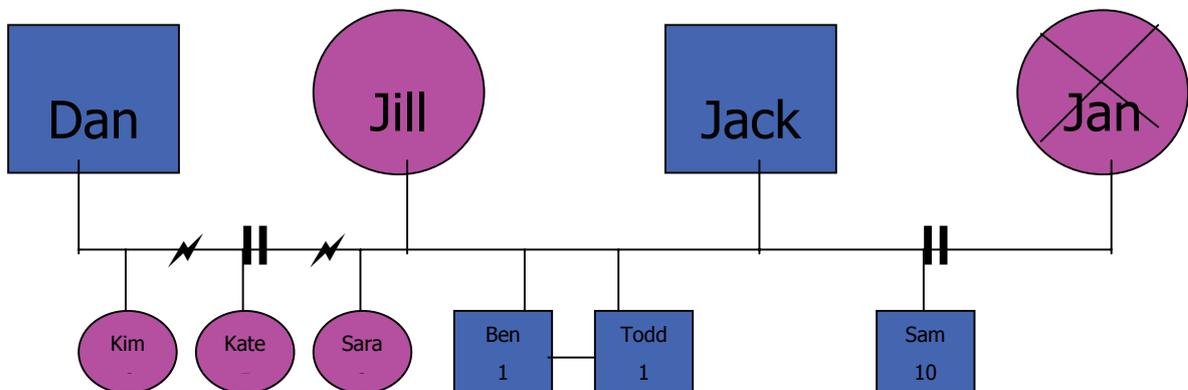
This guide will focus on those challenges and more, but firstly let's look at *your* step-family and reflect on what's happened to get where it is today. The death of a parent or divorce is usually the major reason behind the formation of a step-family. With the divorce rate escalating, being part of a step-family is becoming increasingly common. In fact it was envisaged that one third of Australian children were expected to be part of such a family by the turn of the century.

Your Family

A great way of illustrating your family is by using a genogram. A genogram is a symbolic diagram which distinguishes the genders and relationships of each family member. As you can imagine, some families can be a little complicated but this technique can not only simplify things but can be a fun family activity to do together. Here are the basic symbols to follow:-

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------|----|---|----------------------|
| □ | = | male | □□ | = | male twins |
| ○ | = | female | ○○ | = | female twins |
| ☒ | = | deceased male | ⚡ | = | hostile relationship |
| ⊗ | = | deceased female | | = | relationship ended |

Before illustrating your family, here is an example. Let us introduce you to Jill and Jack Smith. Notice that the lines connect the family members, and the ⚡ and || symbols highlight the relationship between members.



From the above diagram, you should be able to identify that Jill and Jack have twin sons, Ben and Todd aged 1. Both Jill and Jack had previous relationships. Jill was married to Dan who you will notice have a conflicted relationship. They have three daughters together, Kim, Kate and Sara. Jack on the other hand was married to Jan

who died, which left him the sole parent of 10 year old Sam, until he partnered up with Jill. We will be meeting Jill and Jack Smith throughout this guide to help us understand and identify the various issues, strengths and challenges in step-parenting. While Jill and Jack's children from their first relationships go by the surname of their biological parents, we will refer to the family as a whole, as "The Smith family".

Your family genogram could look quite different. Take the time to draw your step-family making it as detailed or simplified as you like. Some people like to take their genograms back a generation or two to identify important relational or health issues. Any other family information of special importance may also be noted on the genogram including religion, education, occupation and location. Remember this activity can be an enjoyable one to do together.

How You Got Here

Looking at your genogram, you are able to see where you are right now. You should also be able to see where both you and your partner have come from, and the various life events and experiences you are bringing into the relationship. One or both of you will be bringing some children into the equation. If it's the other person, then you are becoming or have become an instant parent. This could mean having to cope with adolescence and puberty before nappies and nappy rash! Another scenario could include having gone through a divorce, separation or death of your first partner. This has meant that you have been a sole parent or have shared the parenting role before meeting your new partner. You will have grieved your old relationship and lived through quite a tumultuous series of events in getting to where you are now.

With every life event, we suffer great losses. For example, with a divorce we may lose security, our self esteem, intimacy etc etc etc. With the death of a loved one, we may have suffered losses such as financial ones, friendships – the list can be numerous. Whether your previous relationship resulted in children or not, complete the next exercise which will help you to see how far you have come in order to get where you are right now.

When my last relationship ended, I lost –

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You might also like to think about your current partner and any losses he or she may have suffered. Next, we will look at the children. Whether they are your own children or those of your partner, they too will have endured many losses. Kids' losses can be similar or very different to those of an adult depending on their ages. But some examples can be losing friends through moving neighbourhoods, losing a bedroom and having to share. Once again, the list can be endless. Be really thoughtful and creative when completing this activity, as it is may provide important insight into what is really going on in the heads of your kids or step-kids.

What did (child's name) lose when their parents' relationship ended?

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What did (child's name) lose when this step-family was formed?

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You may be thinking that your children or step-children have gained a great deal since forming the step-family. If so, that's great – but they too would have suffered some losses prior to getting to where they are today. A child's age and stage of development makes a big difference in how they cope with losses and the formation of a new family. We'll take a look now at particular ages and stages of development to gain awareness of how infants, children and adolescents' behaviour can vary in response to the changes they are experiencing.

Kids' Ages & Stages

The Young Infant (Age 0-3)

Children at this age have little or no understanding of their world. The important thing to them is routine and changes to their routine can be bewildering. Attachments are formed early; therefore the young infant will form attachments to its main caregivers whether you are the biological or step-parent. This means that despite your inexperience, the child's attachment to you will depend on how much contact you have with him/her.

Signs such as anger, crying, searching and lack of appetite will indicate that a young infant is experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the step-family. What we do for a child this age is far more important than what we say. Generally, a young infant needs large doses of tender, loving care ... holding, cuddling and stroking.

The Older Infant (Age 3-5)

The older infant has a limited understanding of their world depending on the information that is provided. Children between the ages of 3 and 5 find it hard to tell the difference between what is real and what is imaginary, which means their feelings may include confusion, anger and aggression.

Regression in behaviours such as sleeping and toilet training may occur together with reverting to baby behaviour and clinging. When talking to children of this age about the formation of the step-family, it should be explained simply to avoid confusion. Role playing with animals, toys and puppets can help the child gain an understanding of what is going on.

Age 5 – 8

Slightly older children have a greater understanding of life; however can find it difficult to understand their emotional reactions such as feelings of guilt or fear. The child can sometimes feel anger towards either parent for the disruption or they can lash out at the step-parent or siblings. Behavioural problems such as underperformance at school and

disruptions in friendships can occur and if they interfere significantly with family life, may indicate signs of distress. Many of these responses can be related to growing up, and do not individually indicate trouble.

You can assist the child cope with the formation of the step-family by encouraging separate relationships with each parent and providing reassurance, stability and comfort. Talk about their feelings regularly, listen closely and observe their actions. Always respond with care and understanding.

Age 8 – 12

Children aged from around 8 years and older have a more realistic understanding about life and begin to place greater importance on their world outside the family. Whilst they understand more, they are still not able to deal emotionally with all they experience. They tend to react with similar emotions to adults such as extreme sadness and anger. Their anger can often be directed through physical fighting with schoolmates or siblings or in verbal attacks directed at one or both parents.

Children of this age not only need support and comfort but their questions answered about divorce, death and the formation of a step-family. These answers can be explained in a manner which reflects their level of maturity. Parents should continue to enforce reasonable rules, limitations and curfews as pre-teens need structure and routine in order to feel secure.

Adolescents

The emotionally healthy teenager is learning to define who they are and gain a sense of belonging to the world around them, separate from that of their family. Teenagers try to adapt to change, however more than ever require emotional support, love and firm guidance.

They might be critical of their parents' decisions such as separating or forming a step-family and react with anger toward either biological parent or the step-parent, loyalty to one parent, or even give the appearance that everything is fine. Teenagers are often

overwhelmed by their own anger, and self destructive behaviour such as alcohol or drug abuse may be experimented as a means of deferring the pain. By communicating openly and honestly with the teenager, they feel their maturity is recognised. Be willing to compromise on some issues, while balancing reasonable limits and respect for their growing independence.

Every child is unique and may or may not fit their age categories exactly. The way each child responds and the way you react will depend not only on their stage of development but on other factors going on inside and outside the family environment.

Time Management

The best relationships are the ones where the people involved spend good quality time with each other. For a step-family to be successful, it is no different. Each individual family member needs time with the family, time alone, and time with each parent alone. Now this is a concept which makes enormous sense, but sometimes is extremely difficult to organise.

Case Study

It might be a good time to use the Smith family as an example. But firstly, you need to have a bit more background information. Prior to Jack and Jill getting together, Jack was sole parenting Sam for 4 years after losing his wife, Jan. Jill, much to her dismay, equally shares time with the three girls, with her ex-husband, Dan. This means Jill has the girls one week on, one week off.

So, when Jack and Jill remarried, Sam had his father and new step-mother to himself every second week. This all changes every other week when the girls come to stay, and now that the twins are around, things are hectic. The girls share a bedroom, Sam has his own bedroom and the twins have the bedroom closest to their parents. Sam and the girls do not get along.

Just for practise, try to reflect on the previous exercise about 'losses'. Chose one of the aforementioned children from the case study and write a brief paragraph about what you think might be going on for them. Focus on the losses they have encountered and the challenges they are feeling as a result of the formation of their step-family.

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Jack and Jill made a choice to spend their lives together and the kids somehow must fit in. Sam could have issues in adjusting from being the only child to 'just a number'. Kim, Kate and Sara may not like sharing together when they each have a bedroom back at Dan's house. And the twin boys, Ben and Todd may miss the girls when they are at their Dad's house. All of these issues are relevant, but in reality kids do adjust.

Despite which child you chose to write about in the above exercise, you may have also identified that they are wanting more time with their biological parent. Take away the bedroom issues, birth order, and personalities, the formation of a step-family means more people, less time.

Remembering that relationships work when time is invested, somehow we have to learn to juggle our lives to fit in time with each and every individual family member. Whilst divorce rates are higher in step-families than in nuclear families, it is important to note that the divorce rate decreases after the first three years, because family members have usually adjusted to the change during this time.

On the next page is an illustration of how time is spent in the "Smith family". We invite you to examine Jill's version of how she spends her time and who with. It also highlights who is not spending time with Jill and may identify why certain members are behaving in certain ways. We've firstly asked Jill to put "an egg" into each basket to represent the time she feels she spends with her partner Jack, alone, the whole family, and the children in the step-family.

This exercise helped Jill to see that she had no time for herself and little time for Kim, Kate & Sara. She feels that she spends quality time with Sam when the girls are with their Dad but most of her time is taken up with the twin boys, Ben and Todd. When the family has all six children, they endeavour to go on picnics and outings together but Jill once again sees her time mainly spent with the twins. Jack and Jill make time together

after the kids have retired for the night, but she would dearly love more time with her husband.

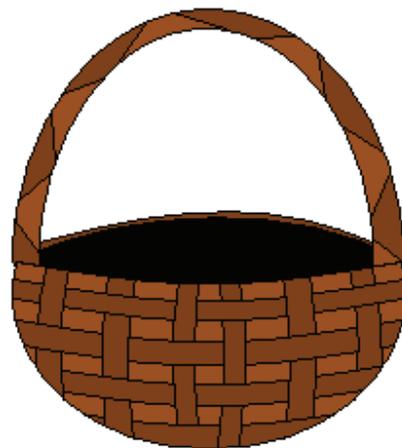
When Jack did the same exercise, it showed that he was doing what Jill could not and felt that his time was taken up with caring for Jill's girls and sorting out their fights. This meant that he had little time with both Sam and the twins. He felt he has plenty of time to himself but would also like to spend more time with his wife, Jill.

This exercise helped Jill see that she needs to relinquish some of her parenting responsibilities of the twins to Jack which will give her some time to spend with her girls on their week with their mum. This will possibly lessen their behavioural problems as they are more than likely fighting with Sam and each other, to get their mum's attention. By taking a more prominent role with the twins, Jack gets to spend much needed time with them. He should also endeavour to find time with his son Sam. As the twins get older, Jack together with Sam and the twins could enjoy football and fishing outings. Jack and Jill might consider occasionally hiring a baby-sitter to have more time with each other.

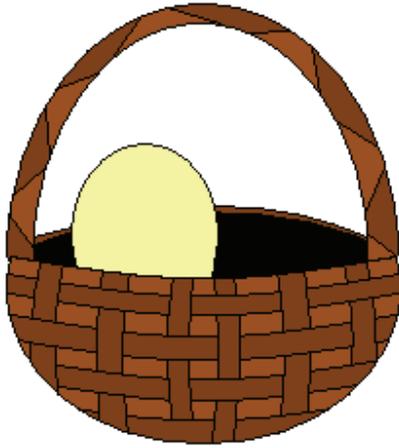
Try out this activity yourself, using various headings for each basket such as "whole stepfamily", "myself", "my partner", "my children", "my partner's children" and "our children".



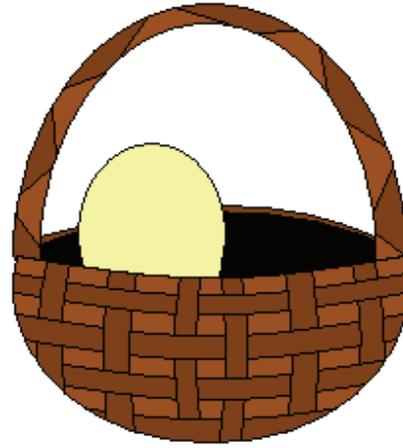
time for Jill



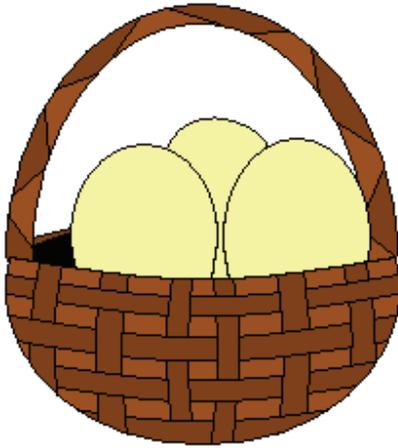
time for Kim, Kate & Sara



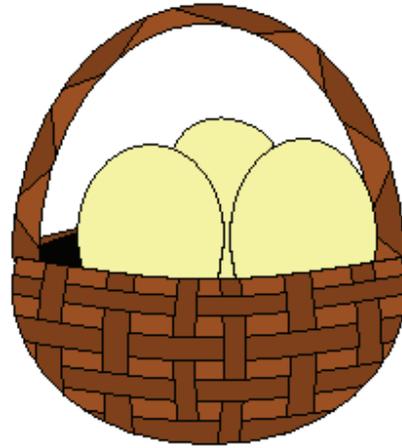
time for Jack



time for Sam



time for Ben & Todd



time for whole step-family

Family Meetings

It is no secret that kids operate better when there are clear rules and responsibilities. But how are these rules established, and who is responsible for whom? Very early in the piece the family should be encouraged to establish its ground rules and the best way of doing this is to sit all members down together and do it collectively as a group. When all members have been part of the rule making process, they are more likely to stick to the rules.

Family meetings are fairly popular in step-families and usually take place in an informal environment such as the kitchen or dining room. To avoid these meetings being threatening, some families think of creative and fun names for them and use them for planning family outings and keeping each other informed of timetables etc. Below are some guidelines to make family meetings successful and worthwhile.

- Have a box for family members to place ideas for family activities in, and any problems they would like discussed
- Set aside a regular time each week for your family meeting
- Plan a specific amount of time depending on the age of the children
- Encourage each family member to use "I" statements rather than "you" messages. This reduces blame and encourages feelings to be shared.
- Family meetings are for everyone to bring up issues, not just adults
- Use an agenda, so each issue is addressed
- Use the family meeting to arrange for fun activities
- Ensure meetings are not just to complain
- Always end the meeting with positive and encouraging comments

Household Rules

Whether you are just forming your step-family or it has been in place for some time, you need to have some set rules and guidelines. You have probably heard the old saying “rules are made to be broken”. Well that’s probably the case for the children, but some rules that should always be adhered to, are the rules that parents make together in parenting their children.

Most of us can recollect our family of origin and what it was like to grow up in that family. You may have come from a large family or you may have been an only child. You may have been firmly disciplined or you may have been brought up by parents who quite often turned a blind eye to bad behaviour. Whatever childhood you may have had will have a huge impact on how you hope to raise your children. You may wish to emulate your parents in some areas and in others you feel a different approach would be better.

This next exercise will look at certain rules you had as a child. They may or may not apply to your step-family, but it is interesting to reflect on where your ideas have come from. Place a tick or cross in the box next to statements that refer to your childhood.

1. We always ate dinner together as a family
2. We always ate breakfast
3. I always did my homework in my bedroom
4. I was allowed to eat in my bedroom
5. I had a regular bedtime
6. I was allowed to watch TV whenever I liked

7. I was allowed to play loud music
8. I was allowed to have friends over
9. I was allowed to sleepover at friends' houses
10. I had a curfew when I went out
11. I was allowed to smoke at home
12. I was allowed to drink at home
13. I was allowed to have my girl/boyfriend sleep over
14. I was allowed to be disrespectful
15. I was responsible for cleaning my own room
16. I was responsible for my own washing/ironing

If possible, have your partner also complete this exercise and compare answers. At first glimpse you may find that you had very different rules as children, but it is a good starting point for discussion. Using this list as a guideline, make your own relative for your individual step-family. You will find your list will be guided mostly by the ages of the children, but it is useful to think ahead to make sure you are thinking on the same wave-length.

If both or either of you grew up in a step-family, you will have insight into how things worked well and not so well. Nuclear families have the same task ahead, but the challenge for step-families is sometimes bigger because they have been used to rules enforced by their biological parent as well, prior to you coming onto the scene. What is

important to note, that once you have formulated your list of rules, those rules apply to *your* household, regardless of what applies when the kids are staying elsewhere. You may hear “mum doesn’t do it that way” or “we are allowed to at dad’s house”, to which you should gently repeat that the rule applies at your home and whether it does not apply elsewhere, is of no concern.

Discipline

Sooner or later you will be reminded by your step-child that you are not their parent. One very important item to discuss between your partner and yourself is “who disciplines who?” In coming to a decision on discipline it is helpful to look at nuclear families who equally share this role. The reality about nuclear families is that discipline evolved slowly. Often the first sign of disciplining a child is at toddler age when the child touches something it shouldn't. Both parents actively protect their child from harm and thus discipline is enforced because both parents have an equal stake at raising a successful, well adjusted young adult. The child accepts the discipline from either parent having been conditioned from day one that either parent will love, care for and protect them.

On the other hand, the step-parent usually enters into a system of discipline already established well before any chance of a relationship has been formed. This is where the step-parent is challenged over how much involvement there should be in matters concerning discipline.

Given that both parents more than likely have had a period of sole parenting before repartnering and entering into the step-family, a good place to start is to continue that role for a short time. Reflecting on the “Smith family” and the concerns identified in the basket exercise, Jill's three girls Kim, Kate and Sara have been acting out during their week spending time with Jill and Jack. The exercise showed that Jill needed to spend more time with the girls, but maybe they were not responding to Jack disciplining them. By reversing their roles, Jill will be spending more quality time with the girls and thus taking on their behavioural problems. It will be good to see if their behaviour changes with the new roles that Jill and Jack plan. Interestingly, Jill and Jack equally discipline Sam which he dutifully accepts. This could be due to the fact that Jill has slowly introduced disciplinary strategies which Jack supports.

Below are some guidelines for both parents to follow.

- Get together often as a couple to talk about how you will raise the children
- The step-parent should avoid the disciplinary role initially until relationships have developed
- The biological parent needs to support the step-parent's authority in front of the children, if that's what you have agreed to do
- Both parents need to reflect on the importance of discipline and ask themselves questions such as "is it that important?" or "am I being too accommodating?"
- Don't expect your feelings to be the same for your step-children as your own children - relationships take time to be formed
- Spend time alone with your step-children if possible - be prepared if the children aren't ready for this
- Always remind your children and step-children that their other parent still loves them.
- Children will benefit from good role models whether they are accepting of you or not. Therefore always act responsibly and in good faith.
- Explore all roles available with your step-children. Eg they might be more accepting of a mentor or friend, long before one of a step-parent.
- Decide on how involved you want to be with your step-children and how much responsibility you want to take.
- Be patient.

Rituals

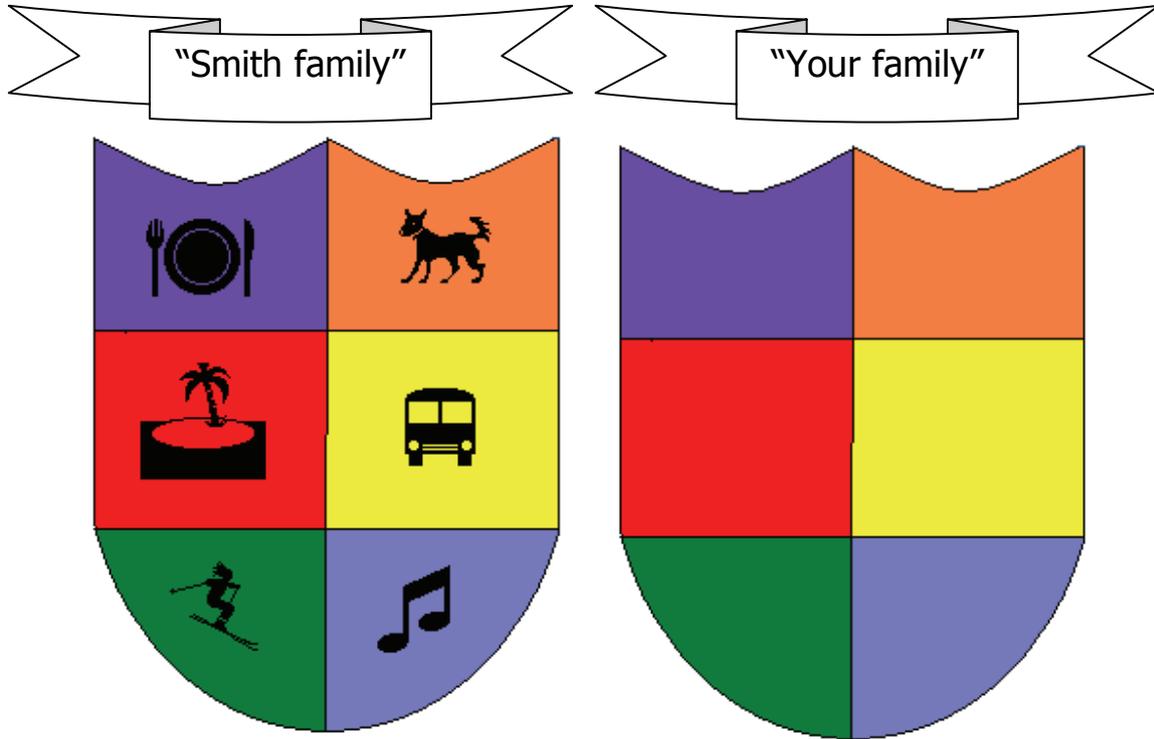
Rituals are a great way of helping family members to feel that their family is special and unique. Nuclear families gradually establish their own traditions and rituals based on the respective childhood of both parents. Because children are so familiar with their rituals, they expect that other families do things exactly the same way as their family.

So when a step-family forms, the potential for conflict can be high, simply because it is expected that things will operate the same way. Both groups come together with different sets of traditions and rituals, and for this reason, it is valuable to combine and adapt traditions at the early formation stage of a step-family.

A fun thing to do is to sit down together (during family meetings) and create a brand new set of rituals. Have each member put in their input and make sure that the decision making process is fair. If you are having trouble thinking of rituals, once again refer to your own childhood and remember what things were important. Ideas for forming new family rituals can range from where you spend holidays to when you decorate the Christmas tree. One suggestion is to take on board each family's diversity and alternate. For example, take your holiday one year by the beach and the next year, go camping.

On the next page is an activity for you to complete with your children and step-children. On the left side is a family shield of the Smith Family. They identified that Jill's family had holiday rituals such as going to the beach with Jack's side having holidays snow-skiing. Together they made a new ritual of buying a campervan for future holidays. They also noticed differences like Sam having a family pet, while the girls have never owned a pet. Kim, Kate and Sara, on the other hand, have always taken singing and dance lessons. Another new ritual adopted is the idea of having meals together each night.

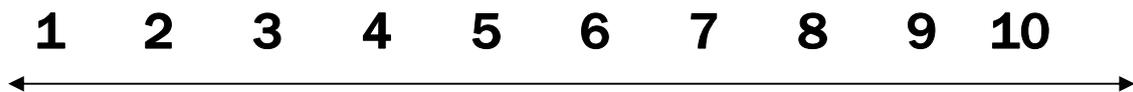
On the right side is a blank family shield for your family to complete. Be as imaginative as you like.



Building Relationships

One of the most common reasons for not-so-good step-family relationships is lack of communication. We have mentioned the importance of including the children in family processes such as formulating rules and new rituals. This is a great start! The next thing to do is to encourage communication. Talking is the best way to strengthen relationships, understand emotions and keep informed of what's happening with the entire family. However, talking can sometimes have a negative effect if feelings are ignored or people are misinformed.

So how would you rate yourself as a communicator? Rate yourself on the scale below which ranges from 1 (pretty ordinary) to 10 (absolutely fantastic). Remember to rate yourself on your ability to communicate with your children and step-children, as it's a lot harder than talking to adults.



Hopefully you have been honest in assessing your communication skills. Now let's try to improve them. We'll discuss the differences between adults and kids, and then look at some do's and don'ts in dealing with children.

Adults and children think and speak differently. Adults tend to think logically and rationally while children have very basic thinking ability which develops over time. Language also develops gradually and until about age 12, children are only able to understand "concrete" words which relate to things they can see, hear, feel, taste or smell. Adults use language in a more indirect way and are able to follow and interpret the meaning of indirect conversation. Keeping this in mind, parents need to create an environment where children are encouraged to freely communicate without feeling confronted.

You can be sure to have noticed in your dealings with people, certain communication barriers which have annoyed or upset you. This may have occurred in certain jobs you've held, in friendships or even as a child when a parent or adult spoke to you. Here are some communication blocks which parents need to avoid.

- **Avoiding the real issue**

This happens when we are in a conversation which is usually important to us, where the other person either ignores your feelings or changes the topic.

- **Invalidating emotion**

This can be done in several ways. Some examples are

- discounting "that's nothing"
- contradicting "you don't feel like that"
- reassuring "don't worry about that"

- **Providing solutions**

Sometimes people don't think we can think for ourselves and provide solutions such as –

- Ordering "you have to"
- Threatening "you better Or else"
- Moralising "you should"
- Suggestions "why don't you"
- Closed questions "did you"

- **Judging**

Whether we mean to or not, we are judging others and their actions when we

- Criticise "why did you"
- Label "you idiot ..."
- Diagnose "your problem is"

Do you recollect being on the receiving end of any of the above communication blocks?

Or even worse, are you guilty of using these not so helpful techniques when speaking with your children? Don't worry – it's never too late to change. Before re-assessing your communication skills, let's look at some tips to becoming a better communicator with your children and step-children.

1. Always show interest in what they are talking about. This can be done by physically getting down to their level, making eye contact and repeating what they have said.
2. Always use simple language and don't assume that your child understands you. The younger the child, the more direct, brief and specific you need to be.
3. Always be gentle when communicating. Don't bully him/she into agreeing with you – this will make him/her reluctant to talk with you in the future.
4. Don't feel you always need to fix the problem. The best response is to just listen.
5. Always be truthful when talking to your children. You are a source of information on important topics such as death, God, sex, drugs etc and your input will assist your child to develop their own ideas and values.
6. Don't talk for too long. A child's attention span rarely lasts more than a few minutes, so keep your conversation brief.
7. The best conversations are those that are lighter and have humour. Don't make all

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Make a list of the things you would like to improve on when communicating with your children and step-children.

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Overcoming Problems

We have previously talked about preventative measures such as scheduling family meetings, formulating rules and rituals, and how to discipline and communicate with our children and step-children. But what happens when we have done all these things, and problems still occur.

Sometimes the route of all evil can be jealousy. There are many players in the average step-family, and jealousy can be evident between siblings and step-siblings, the step-children and the step-parent, and even between the step parent and the biological parent. Jealousy can sometimes occur over tangible items like bedrooms and holidays when one person sees their situation to be less fortunate than another in the family.

Another type of jealousy is imagined jealousy. This is where there is no real basis for the jealousy but is imagined. Children are often jealous of a new baby brother or sister thinking that their mother or father won't love them anymore. Jealousy can often stem from having low self esteem, and the child compares themselves to the other children, believing he or she is less important, less loved or less valued.

If you suspect that the children in your step-family could be jealous of other children, the first thing to do is acknowledge the jealousy by saying things like "I know it must be hard to have to share things". Avoid statements like "don't be jealous" and "you'll just have to learn to share".

Recognise the huge adjustment for the child and the losses he or she has experienced. Those losses won't matter to the child as much if parents and step-parents make the child feel loved and secure. Be interested in what the child is doing, make special time together and work on building a one on one relationship with each child individually.

Imagine how it would feel for a child to see their mum or dad with a new partner. Some kids respond well and some don't. This is largely because the child may feel the need to compete with the new partner for time, affection and attention with their parent.

If you are on the receiving end of a child's jealousy, the first thing to do is understand and normalise it. Feeling jealous doesn't make a child bad or naughty, just normal. The biological parent must ensure that the child gets the time, affection and attention they require.

Some kids respond badly because they have not been appropriately informed about what is going on. A child copes better when their parent sits down with them and tells them about their new relationship and how happy this person makes them feel. Create opportunities, gradually, for the step-parent to be included but recognise that the child will always want one-on-one time with his parent.

The formation of a new step-family can be likened to a field filled with landmines. Once you clear one path, then another problem presents itself.

Something that is quite often overlooked is the child's birth order, or the age position he or she sits in the family. Birth order is considered to influence personality characteristics which usually stay with a person for life. Let's look at the characteristics of the various categories briefly. They are not absolute truths, but you may be surprised at the similarities.

The oldest child usually develops a sense of responsibility. They have had some experience with the raising of their younger siblings which makes them more likely to be nurturing, critical, independent and even bossy.

The middle child can have the perception that they are "second fiddle" and treated unfairly. They are more than likely to be followers than leaders, lack in confidence, quiet and shy. They can also be highly competitive.

The youngest child is given more freedom and therefore develops a sense of adventure and creativity. They are usually playful and friendly, but sometimes irresponsible and dependent on others.

The only child is more often around adults than children and therefore tends to be self sufficient, independent and selfish. They are generally high-achievers.

So what happens to these characteristics with the formation of the step-family? Taking into consideration things like birth order, jealousy and relationships, we will return to the "Smith Family" who is still having problems. As you will remember from their genogram there is intense conflict between Jill and her first husband Dan. They do not see eye to eye over disciplining the girls. Kim, Jill's oldest girl, is still behaving badly during Jill and Jack's week causing the family great worry and strain. Her temper tantrums are beginning to be replicated by her younger sisters and even the twins. Sam has become despondent and hardly joins in when the girls come to stay.

The "Smith family" is an imaginary family as you may have guessed, but many families have similar problems and similar structures. We have created a checklist of possible individual and systemic factors going on within the family. Below our list is a space for any ideas you would like to include.

- Jill's children may be reacting to their parents' disputes
- Kate may have noticed that she is no longer the eldest child
- There may be jealousy amongst the children
- Sam may be feeling the pressures of being the "oldest child"
- Jill may not be spending enough time with Kate
- Kate may not be responding to Jack disciplining her
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Co-Parenting

It goes without saying that children need both a mother and father in their lives where possible. Having to adjust to more than one “mum” or “dad” isn’t an easy task. It’s often just as hard for adults to accept this fact when our children are suddenly placed in this situation.

Your children’s step-mum or dad could be the person that ended your relationship with your first partner. It could be someone twenty years younger than you who doesn’t have any parenting experience. Your partner could have different parenting styles than your own or made lifestyle choices which you are challenged by and disagree with.

Despite your individual history, the needs of your children must come first. This means that they have a right to not only know the other parent but to spend time with them. It may sound harsh, but sometimes, parents hold onto their anger and upset and act inappropriately toward each other in the presence of the children. Looking back on the “Smith family”, the ongoing conflict between Dan and Jill may be having an indirect affect on their children.

Once separated, biological parents need to adopt certain parenting strategies in order to co-parent their children. The ideal arrangement for children is to have equal input from both parents, but if this is not possible then they should do their utmost to parent co-operatively and jointly make decisions about their children.

Many biological parents can’t find a way of parenting together and instead choose to stay locked in bitter conflict. This conflict is damaging for all concerned, especially the children – and may contribute to the problems in the step-family. If this is the case with you, acknowledge that this is happening and take steps toward leaving the past behind. Not only will your children benefit, but your relationship with your new partner will profit.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of step-parenting, many families are reaping the rewards for the hard work and challenges of the first few years. They realise that they have become experts in advanced communication along the way, together with having acquired healthier negotiation skills. They have learnt to make adjustments to their roles and broadened their knowledge in areas previously unfamiliar.

Step-families can have fulfilling and loving relationships, particularly when those relationships are consistently nurtured. They are not too different from other relationships which require ongoing attention and encouragement. Pay particular thought to the key relationship in the step-family - that is the relationship between yourself and your partner and if that continues to blossom, then the step-family can only succeed. Good luck!

Further Reading

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- Newman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily life: Why it is different and how to make it work*. Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Wallerstein, J. & Kelly, J. (1996). *Surviving the breakup: How children and parents cope with divorce*. New York: Basic Books Inc.

Support Agencies

Lifeline (24 hours)	☎ 13 11 14	http://www.lifeline.org.au/
Centacare	☎ 3252 4371	http://www.centacare.org.au/
Relationships Australia	☎ 1300 364 277	http://www.relationships.com.au/