

## Step Families: Supporting your Children as Families are Blended and Living Arrangements Change

Janine Brissett



### We have just introduced our child/ren to their new step-family/ies. What is the best way to support them as they adjust to so much change?

- Do your best to maintain a courteous co-parenting alliance, with their father/mother.
- Make it clear to them that you and their Mum/Dad are still their parents, and will continue to communicate about them and their needs.
- It is best if both Mum and Dad seek their new partner's understanding and support of their co-parenting relationship with their children's other parent.

### My children and I have rarely been apart. How will they manage being away from me for days at a time?

- Ask each child what would make it easier for him/her while you are apart, and listen for their response.
- Some children find taking a photo or letter from you helpful, and others may like phone contact from their other parent's home.
- Keep your focus on ways you can create a stable, nurturing home at your place.

### I had a hard time growing up in a step-family. How can I prevent my children going through what I did?

- Be careful that your experience is not distorting the way you listen to or interpret your child's experience and challenges.
- Remember that many adults are able to create safe, nurturing and stable co-parenting arrangements for their children after separation and divorce.
- Consider joining a step-families support group.

### I would like my children to call my partner Mum/Dad. How should we introduce this?

- It is difficult and confusing for a child, who is already calling their biological parents Mum and Dad to be asked to call their parent's new partner Mum or Dad.
- Encourage your child to call your partner by their first name, and be willing to negotiate with adolescents.
- Remember that what the children call him/her is less important than how caring and supportive a role s/he is able to play in their lives.

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### My child is resisting moving in with me and my partner. When can I expect him/her to be more positive and accepting?

- It is normal for a child to resist such a significant change. Any anger and/or reluctance are likely to be natural expressions of grief and loss.
- This is not the time to cheer them up, but to validate and support them as they go through a whole range of feelings, including anger and sadness.
- Showing more willingness to understand your child's experience is the best way to allow his/her positive emotions to gradually emerge over time.

### I am concerned that my former partner is turning my child against my partner. What should I do?

- Focus more on what your child is feeling and experiencing than what your former partner might be thinking or saying.
- Children hate to be told they sound like their other parent. Allow them to voice their thoughts or feelings about the new arrangements without criticism of their mother/father.
- If the problem continues, address this with your former partner, but not the children.

### What about discipline? Should my partner be involved?

- Allow your partner and children time to build a relationship of friendship and trust, before involving her/him in disciplining them.
- Attend to your children's discipline yourself wherever possible. You may also need to consult with your children's other parent, in certain situations.

### My child seems resentful of my partner's children. How can I help them to get along?

- Children in a step-family are highly sensitive to how the new arrangements will affect their relationship with their biological parent.
- Reassure your child that your love for him/her will not change because there are more children in the family.
- Address any hurt or anxious feelings in one on one time with your child.
- Remember to set time aside, regularly, to enjoy a game or meal with him/her alone.
- Hold regular family meetings, where rules, chores, or any other concern can be raised.

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