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Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

Stepdad as Father's Ally: Mission Impossible or Great Idea?

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Is it possible for a former husband and current husband to set aside whatever differences may exist between them to become fathering allies? While it may sound like a script for a science fiction thriller, sociologist and fathering expert William Marsiglio, Ph.D. from the University of Florida, and his colleague Ramon Hinojosa, Ph.D. from Marquette University believe that not only can it happen, in many stepfamilies, it actually *is happening*.

Stepfathers Join the Family Dance Late

When a man marries a woman who has children, he has to catch up and fit himself into a family culture where his wife already has an established relationship with her children and, in most cases, their father. Daily rituals and routines, special events, and shared knowledge define this family dance—one where the stepfather must learn the steps long after everyone else is dancing with ease. As a result, stepfathers can sometimes feel like outsiders. Part of their task in learning the family dance is to determine what kind of relationship they will have with their stepchildren's father.

Co-Daddies or Fierce Competitors?

Some people might say that "real men" would never be able to be involved with the same children and birth mother without being fiercely competitive with each other. Marsiglio and Hinojosa's study suggests another option. They state, "Some stepfathers are willing to act, to varying degrees, as a supportive force, making the biological father's life as a father a bit easier." When acting as an ally, a stepfather directly and indirectly expresses himself in ways that are likely to help the biological father sustain, and sometimes, improve his relationship with his child.

Stepfather Ally Behaviors

In his role as father's ally, the stepfather may: 1) discourage others from making negative remarks about the father in front of his children; 2) speak up to defend the father; 3) give advice to the kids on how to better communicate with their dad; 4) be open to hearing and perhaps participating in discussions about the father; 5) encourage the children to have photographs of their father displayed in their rooms or other parts of the home; and 6) create opportunities for father and children to spend time together.

Conditions That Help a Stepfather Become a Father's Ally

A stepfather is much more likely to act as an ally to the biological father when:

- He is able to **connect with the father through shared masculine interests** such as sports, military or work .
- **There are healthy boundaries in place** so that the stepfather is not pushed past his emotional comfort zone. He is able to choose the amount and type of involvement he has with the biological father.
- He feels **secure in his relationship** with his stepchildren's mother, and therefore doesn't see the bio-father as a threat to the relationship.
- He **sees the biological father as worthy** and respects his role as the children's father.
- He **has children of his own**, and is therefore better able to understand how nonresident fathers may feel about living away from their children.
- **His wife supports her children's relationship with their father and doesn't badmouth him.** How she talks about her children's father is often the stepfather's first source of information, thus shaping his early opinions.
- **He can see the benefit** not only for his stepchildren but also his marriage.

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Benefits for Children

When a father and stepfather act in ways that remove the conflict and competition from their relationship, there are benefits for the children as well as the father-child relationship and the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Children are released from the uncomfortable and difficult position of thinking they must choose to be loyal to one man to the exclusion of their relationship with the other.

When father and stepfather treat each other with civility and respect, they model for their children how to handle situations that have the potential of being very awkward. Additionally, they model healthy ways to resolve conflict and solve problems.

Benefits for the Couple Relationship

There was a bumper sticker floating around a few years ago that said something like: "If the mama's not happy, nobody's happy." When a stepfather acts as an ally with the biological father, he releases his wife from the burden of being in the middle between her husband and her children's father. It will very likely have a positive effect on their relationship.

Being an Ally is a Mindset

A father and stepfather don't have to be friends to be allies. In fact, in many stepfamily situations, it is more likely that the men would not be friends. Even so, it is entirely possible for them to treat each other respectfully and support the children's relationships with both of them. It's a mental choice, or mindset, and then a series of actions that allow a stepfather and father to be co-fathers.

Getting Started

If the idea of stepfathers and biological fathers ending conflict and competition in favor of becoming fathering allies appeals to you, here are some suggestions to help you get going.

For Stepfather:

- If you find yourself judging the father or his actions, literally say the word "stop," and then replace your judgment with a more respectful statement. For example, instead of, "I can't believe

he's too busy to even call his own kids," replace it with "Ted must be swamped at work because it's not like him to miss a chance to talk to the kids."

- Look for opportunities to make positive comments to your stepchildren about their father.
- Never participate in conversations that tear the father down.
- If you believe that your relationship is threatened by the father's involvement with his children, talk to your wife about your feelings. Work as a team to strengthen your marriage. Deal with your feelings of jealousy so that they don't interfere with your ability to support the father and his relationship with his children. Remind yourself that she picked you!

For Mother:

- Be aware that how you talk about your children's father will influence your current husband's opinion of him. Make sure your comments don't set them up to dislike each other.
- Support your husband's interest in being an ally to your children's father.

Marsiglio, W. and Hinojosa, R. (2007). Managing the Multi-father Family: Stepfathers as Father Allies, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 845-862.