



Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

Sexuality in Your New Stepfamily

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A new marriage brings a sexual aura to the household. The newlyweds may hug and hold hands or exchange special glances and murmur “sweet nothings.” They may make obvious efforts to set aside private time behind closed doors. Adolescents can be inordinately embarrassed by their parents’ sexuality at a time when it’s hard enough for them to manage their own newly raging hormones, and may become even more curious about experimenting with sexual behaviors.

Monitor your displays of sexuality.

Studies indicate that adolescents in stepfamilies are at greater risk for early sexual experiences. Monitoring your obvious displays of sexuality may help. Make a special effort, as any parent of a teen should, to tune in to your maturing child/teen and their inevitable questions, and clearly communicate your family values.

Err on the side of conservatism in dress and privacy.

The sexual atmosphere can be heightened in the stepfamily by provocative dress, casual nudity, and inadequate bathroom facilities during peak use times—relaxed behavior that did not present a problem in the single-parent home. In a stepfamily, particularly one with adolescent children, encourage all members to dress appropriately around the house and to allow each member privacy.

Openly discuss the new sibling relationships in the family and expectations for behavior.

Combining unrelated, sexually mature, male and female family members into one household raises the potential for confusion about appropriate roles. A teenage girl may wonder, *“Is this attractive new boy in my life going to be my brother or a possible new boyfriend?”*

A teenage boy may wonder if he’s supposed to make romantic overtures to prove his manliness. Many adolescents are tempted to translate their curiosity, unhappiness, or frustration into romantic experimentation with similarly confused stepsiblings.

Here’s where it gets sticky!

A teen boy and teen girl may already be dating when their single parents meet each other and discover sparks themselves. In this situation, complicated relationships begin long before thoughts of marriage and a stepfamily. If the teens remain a couple and the parents do marry and gather all their children in one household, what are appropriate and reasonable boundaries? Do parents have a responsibility to maintain separate households until the children are grown? Is the teen couple expected to magically transform their relationship from dating to sibling, and, if so, how do parents enforce the new rules? Does this become a stepfamily with two resident couples?

Amid the confusion, there may be legal issues to consider. Family laws vary by state regarding legal relationships between stepparents and stepchildren (incest, marriageability, inheritance, etc.) and ages of sexual relationship consent versus rape with a minor. Family laws are typically silent when it comes to relationships between stepsiblings. However, when it comes to stepfamily dynamics and consideration of all other family members, just because one can legally do something does not mean it is necessarily a good idea to do so.

As parents, it is especially important to evaluate personal circumstances surrounding the timing of your remarriage and decide what your family norms will be in this sensitive area. Talk with your teens and communicate clearly defined boundaries for your new family. If a remarriage takes place when stepsiblings are younger, appropriate boundaries may not be an issue. Parents should remain tuned in to the potential for unclear boundaries as children mature and be prepared to discuss the issues that may arise.