



# Quick Steps

Information to Help Your Stepfamily Thrive

## Stepparenting of Teens

This may come as a shock to some, but stepparenting is not easy! When children are born they don't come with a manual for parents, and they certainly don't come with a manual for stepparents! When you have young stepchildren it is more likely that as a parent you will grow into a role similar to that of a biological parent over time. However, a lot of stepfamilies begin when kids are teenagers, a time when relationships between any parent and their child is under more strain. Developing a relationship with a teenage stepchild is probably one of the most difficult tasks in forming a stepfamily.

### Why is my stepchild being so difficult?

First of all, as a normal part of growing up, family relationships are more difficult during the teenage years. For kids in first marriage families and stepfamilies, it is a time to pull away from family members in order to gain the independence that

will be needed to succeed as an adult. Because of this, teenage stepchildren are less likely than younger stepchildren to want to put effort into forming new family relationships.

However, not all of your stepchild's resistance is just about being a difficult teenager. Some of the struggles you face are because of normal issues related to gaining a new stepparent. Experiencing such big family change is especially hard on teens. A lot is going on inside their minds that might not be obvious to stepparents. Understanding where their struggles might come from can help you to empathize with their position and be a better stepparent to them. Three common issues facing teenage stepchildren are:

**Jealousy.** Before you came along, your teenage stepchild probably enjoyed the benefit of having all of their biological parent's attention. When a new stepparent enters the pic-

ture, naturally that parent's attention must be shared. Such changes can lead to feelings of loss and resentment for your stepchild, who might see you as a threat or competition for the other parent's love and attention.

**Loyalty.** The introduction of a new stepparent can sometimes create loyalty conflicts for stepchildren. They might be afraid that you are trying to replace their other biological parent, especially when they are close to that parent. Opening up to a relationship with you can mean betraying their biological mom or dad. Unfortunately, the other biological parent may do things to encourage loyalty issues, such as saying negative things about the new marriage or stepparent. If you know this is happening, it is important for you or your spouse to handle the issue privately with the other parent, to keep the stress on your stepchildren to a minimum.

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*Uncertainty.* Some stepchildren have had relationships with other stepparents or serious partners of their parent's before you came along. When those relationships end, most children experience the loss of their relationship with an important adult in their lives, making it hard to trust new partners. In this case, your stepchild might not accept you as an important figure in his or her life for fear that you won't be around very long anyway.

### So how do I begin developing a relationship?

Many stepfamilies with teenage stepchildren struggle with these common teenage and stepfamily issues in the beginning, but there are things that stepparents can do to help ease the transition and pave the way for stronger relationships down the road. Here are some tips for moving forward with your teenage stepchild:

*Become friends first.* Teenagers have a hard time accepting the authority of their biological parents, and so they probably won't respond well to the discipline of a new stepparent. Focus on developing a friendly relationship in the beginning and leave the heavy parenting to your spouse.

*Go slow.* Ease into this new relationship. Overeager stepparents tend to be a turn off for

teens. Make sure you put yourself out there, but try not to force the issue with mandatory "bonding time". When they are ready, your stepchildren will let you know. However, when the time comes for bonding activities, try to spend time one-on-one and do something that they are interested in.

*Don't get too physical.* Some new stepparents are unsure of their role and they want to create a bond with their stepchild so quickly that they move right into expressing a lot of physical affection. It can be awkward for teenage stepchildren, who are at the peak of sexual development, to receive physical affection from adults who are not related to them. Don't shy away from a hug from your stepchild. Again, be available and let them decide if and when they are ready.

### References:

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