

## **Guidelines for becoming an effective stepparent**

### **Jeff and Judi Parziale**

One of the most important tasks facing a stepfamily is determining what role the stepparent will play and when he or she will begin playing that role. In general, effective stepparents develop their role gradually. Children and biological parents adjust best when they are involved in the shaping of this role. Stepparents are most effective when the role they play is a natural one for them, utilizing their strengths and gifts in the family. Below are some guidelines that we have gleaned from listening to other stepcouples and from the wisdom of those involved in stepfamily ministry. Use this list as your family hammers out an effective stepparent role.

#### ***Start small***

Stepparents enter the family with very little status compared to the biological parent. This status grows gradually as the child begins to view the stepparent as someone who can be trusted. Spouse and kids do better if you are sensitive to the needs of the children. The best approach to take early on is to 'hang around' and observe the children. Stepfamily expert Ron Deal suggests that the most effective first role should be that of monitor, someone who watches but does not become too involved, too soon. Let the children relax and feel safe when you are there. Keep your agenda simple—"I'm here to be your friend."

#### ***Timing is everything***

Resist the temptation to parent too soon, no matter what your spouse says or does. Your effectiveness as a parental figure is in direct proportion to the quality of the relationship you have developed with the child. Instant parenting is a myth. Give yourself and your stepchildren time. Being patient and allowing a role to develop gradually is one of the hardest but most important things a stepparent will do. Generally speaking, the younger the child, the more readily the stepparent is accepted.

#### ***Do not usurp or compete with the parental role of the same sex parent***

Children need acknowledgement of their special relationship to the absent parent, whether that parent is dead or alive, loving or abusive. Pressure to abandon, to demean, or to ignore the existence of a parent places the child in an intense loyalty bind that will inhibit his or her ability to form a relationship with the new stepparent. You are not there to replace the non-custodial or absent parent. Find a role that complements the role of the same-sex biological parent. Don't attempt to exclude them from important events in their child's life.

#### ***Support the role of the biological parent***

Stepparents should find a role that compliments the biological parent. They can become a neutral sounding board for their spouse, for example, someone who listens to their frustration about the children without criticism. They can also provide input and observation to the biological parent. Sometimes a stepparent

will spot problems that the biological parent is not ready to acknowledge or deal with. In such cases, the stepparent must give the parent time to move through the issues. Forcing views on the biological parent or openly disagreeing with them will inevitably bring conflict.

### ***Get 'buy-in' from the biological parent***

Developing an effective stepparent role is not the individual task of the stepparent, but a task of the entire family. This is a key task for the biological parent, who must assume leadership in the development and implementation of the stepparent role. Effective stepparenting is not simply an extra activity that takes place in an unused corner of the family. It is critical for the new family's survival. The biological parent must pass on the parenting role to the stepparent in front of the children. Be sure your role has your spouse's blessing.

### ***Allow the role to reflect your unique strengths***

The stepparent's role is an expression of his or her personal style and strengths and can complement the style of the other parent. It is not unusual for the strengths of a stepparent to be appreciated several years later; strengths that earlier may have been regarded as detrimental. Be patient, there will be opportunities where your strengths will be valued. Be yourself, allow your role to develop gradually.

### ***More than discipline***

Parenting is far more than discipline or punishment. Unfortunately, some stepparents wrongfully focus on this activity and thereby narrowly define their role. The stepparent should enter the area of discipline very slowly. Most children take 1-2 years before they are ready to accept discipline from a stepparent. At first, allow the biological parent to administer discipline. Gradually co-parent with him or her until the children see you as a viable authority. In the meantime, develop other roles—friend, mentor or coach. The purpose of discipline is to build character. Discipline and punishment have very little in common.

### ***Find your niche***

Roles such as teacher, role model or coach seem to be ideally suited for the stepparent to express his or her special qualities, while maintaining an intergenerational boundary and remaining noncompetitive with the absent biological parent. The stepparent should approach the role of "parent" only after a genuine relationship with the stepchild has been achieved. Start with a role that makes it easy for the child to move toward you.

### ***The role should be mutually suitable***

The best predictor of stepparent success seems to be the development of a mutually suitable role between the stepparent and the stepchild. The amount of closeness or distance, the content of the role, the amount of discipline and nurturance given by the stepparent must be a good fit for both. Involving the child

in the development of the stepparent role increases the likelihood that a bond will develop. What kind of stepparent role is the child looking for?

***The mature stepparent role often places the stepparent in an 'intimate outsider' position with stepchildren***

Even in the most intimate relationships, the ongoing presence of another same-sex biological parent (dead or alive) leaves the stepparent in a somewhat more distant position than the biological parent usually holds. At times this role can enable a stepparent to be a special resource. Because they have more emotional distance than biological parents do, they may be more objective and much less likely to overreact on sensitive subjects. The *intimate outsider* role is so important to understand and become comfortable with. Some stepparents focus on the outsider part and become distant, both physically and emotionally. Some focus on the insider part and assume too much too soon in the relationship, often resulting in rejection from children and huge disappointment. With time and patience, you can make a real difference in the life of your stepchildren and play a valuable role that often the biological parent cannot play. Be yourself. Be an observer and a partner.

***Let Christ be your role model***

Jesus was a great friend. He was secure, kind and compassionate. He was generous with his love. He looked deep inside and saw the best in others. He came to serve not to be served. He never took advantage of others because of his status. He forgave completely. Love your stepchildren with a pure heart.

For more information:

Ron Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*

Natalie Gillespie, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide*

Jeff and Judi Parziale , *The Journey*