

# Keeping Your Relationship Strong When You're in a Stepfamily

1st April 2022

It can be difficult to find the time and energy to focus on your relationship with all of the other responsibilities in your life. But making your partnership a priority will help you feel loved and supported and will give you the energy and strength to deal with the unique challenges of stepfamily life.

## Adjusting your expectations

Be willing to make compromises and adjustments. Make a commitment to solving your problems together.

Have a strong commitment to making your relationship work. Many couples start out with a strong commitment to their relationship, but after a while, they begin to give it less attention. In strong relationships, both people continue to make their commitment to each other a top priority, regardless of what else is happening in their lives.

Be forgiving of less-than-perfect parenting skills. Managing the complexities of stepfamily life takes effort and some getting used to. There may be mistakes along the way. One of you may lack parenting experience and be "learning on the job." Accept that you are learning together and make a commitment to help each other. Keep in mind that it is the role of the biological parents to set the expectations and guidelines for parenting the children; the stepparent's role is to support that.

Accept each other as you are. Nobody is perfect, and long-lasting couples accept this and learn to cherish each other. One of the biggest challenges stepparents may face is being compared to ex-spouses by children, relatives, and even friends. Avoid comparisons, and ask children and others not to compare, either. Remind yourselves of what brought you together in the first place. Try to presume good intentions all around, especially with one another.

See yourselves as equal partners. Regardless of which parent has primary authority over the children, successful stepfamily couples view one another as equal partners. They don't see one person's views or interests as more important than the other's. Each person's contribution to the relationship is vital. One of the best ways to foster this kind of equality is to ask for your partner's opinion frequently and show that you value it. Make joint decisions on big issues—such as deciding how to save for retirement or how to divide the household

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responsibilities—and learn to find creative solutions or make compromises when you can't agree. Try to share the load with one another; offer help where and when you can—and ask for help when you need it.

## Resolving conflicts fairly

Even in the strongest relationships, it isn't usually possible—or healthy—to avoid all disagreements. A desire to avoid conflict can lead couples to ignore problems until they become too big to handle. In a stepfamily, children, ex-spouses, and even former in-laws may create tension in your relationship. A spirited discussion can help to clear the air and clarify different points of view.

Keep disagreements private. It's always a good idea to avoid arguing in front of children. But when you are a stepfamily, it's especially important. Young children may fear that you and your spouse will divorce. Children may also side with their biological parent, which leads to an "us against them" mentality that keeps the stepfamily from bonding. If you and your partner disagree on a matter, wait until you can discuss it without the children present.

Fight fairly. It's hard to show restraint in the heat of an argument, but it's important that you both try. Quarrels are part of a relationship and they can actually be productive. As a stepfamily, you may have more than your fair share of issues to work out. But when fights include words designed to hurt, they can poison a relationship. Think about what you say in an argument. Even when you're angry, avoid using words that you know will hurt your partner. Focus on the issue that needs to be addressed or resolved.

Take turns explaining why you're angry—and listen to each other without interrupting. When you are talking, make an effort to keep your tone neutral. Remember that your goal is to resolve your conflict, and that can only happen by keeping your emotions in check.

Be respectful. Listen courteously while your partner expresses feelings and needs, and acknowledge them. Rather than belittle your partner's perspective or seek to prove it wrong, try to stand in your partner's place and see how it looks.

Make "I" statements that express your feelings. Be honest and straightforward about your own feelings and experiences. Avoid blaming or accusing. Using "I" statements tells your

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spouse how their behaviour affects you. Say, "I feel like my opinion doesn't matter when you tell Olivia she can have a sleepover without consulting with me" instead of, "You care more about your daughter than you do about me."

Keep your focus on the issue at hand. Avoid the temptation to resurrect events and "evidence" from your history as a couple or your partner's previous relationship before you came together as a stepfamily. Rather than nurture resentments, work through the issues directly as they arise; don't allow them to fester into grudges.

Find the strength to apologise after a fight. It's likely that you both may have said things you wish you hadn't. It can be immensely helpful to put aside your pride and apologise first. This strategy can help heal bad feelings after an argument.

After you've had an argument, talk about what happened. When you are both calm and relaxed, talk about the fight, why it happened, and what you can do to avoid similar conflicts in future. It may help to get out of familiar surroundings to review a conflict. Find a time when the kids aren't present, and consider going for a walk, going for a drive, or sitting in a café to further discuss the conflict.

## Building intimacy in your relationship

Some studies have shown that as little as 15 or 20 minutes of private conversation each day can make the difference between whether a couple stays together or breaks up. Find opportunities to connect. Here are some tips:

Schedule regular time alone together. Make time for dates, and schedule them in your planner. If you have different tastes in food or entertainment, take turns selecting where you'll eat or what you'll do. If your schedules make it hard to find time alone, have "dates" at home after the children are in bed. Watch a sunset, cook a fancy meal, or just order pizza and watch a favourite movie together. Whatever you do, leave the housework and daily stresses behind for a few hours and focus on each other.

Take up a sport or hobby together. Find something that you both like to do and make it a regular activity. Walking, painting, going to garage sales—any activity that you can share helps you stay connected and close. If you can find something that your children and

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stepchildren enjoy as well, doing it together will help you all feel closer.

Enjoy some activities that keep you physically connected. Research has shown that there can be physical and emotional benefits from gestures as simple as holding hands or stroking someone's arm in a comforting way. Cuddle together while watching TV, take a couples' dance class, or find other activities that involve physical contact. Keep your physical contact nonsexual when you're with children and stepchildren, who may feel uncomfortable by such displays.

Give each other praise. Praise both the qualities that first drew you to your partner (a great sense of humor or a smile) and the small things they do often (making a great meal or helping your child or stepchild with a tough homework task).

Ask about your partner's day and really listen. Show that you care by giving your full attention. Avoid interrupting, changing the subject, or finishing sentences. If a child interrupts, gently remind them that you're talking and, unless it's an emergency, to please wait until you've finished.

Stay in touch. Both of you may feel closer if you make quick calls or send texts to touch base during the workday, and have video chats when one of you is away. Regular communication can give you a sense of continuity and remind you that your relationship is a top priority.

Create rituals. We know that traditions with a strong emotional component can strengthen family relationships and lead to greater feelings of wellbeing. They can also help you grow closer as a couple. It doesn't matter what your rituals are as long as they have meaning for both of you. They can be as simple as going for a walk together in the evening or spending a few minutes talking before bed.

## Maintaining your relationship

"Maintenance" might sound like something for your car, but, in fact, anything you value and want to last needs attention and care. If you want your relationship to stay solid and run smoothly for years to come, the biggest part of maintaining your partnership may be awareness—noticing how each of you feels and acknowledging the things that need to

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change to keep things functioning well.

Take the pulse of your partnership. Just as you take stock of your career periodically, look carefully at your relationship from time to time, and work towards making the changes you want and need. What makes each of you feel close as a couple? Is it physical affection? Relaxing together? Sharing the joys of bringing up children and stepchildren? Also, communicate clearly, honestly, and frequently about things that bother you and begin making the compromises that will bring you closer together.

Respect the parent-child relationship. It's common for couples to feel tension when they are part of a stepfamily. Divided loyalties or angry or resentful children can take a toll on even the strongest relationships. It's important that you respect the special bond between your partner and child and recognise that your stepchild is part of your relationship, too. Each parent needs to enjoy time alone with their respective children. This time is precious to children. It is also important should a child need to talk about issues they may be having within the stepfamily or outside of it.

Stay out of conflicts between your partner and their children. You can support your partner without taking sides in an argument. If you take a position, you may be perceived as teaming up against either your partner or your stepchild. Remember, the role of the stepparent is to support both biological parents with the goal of fostering the child's wellbeing. Allow the biological parents to be the primary parents and stay out of triangulation by the child or other parents.

Plan for roadblocks. It's helpful to discuss in advance situations you already know cause friction between you. For example, you may have disagreements about phone calls from a former spouse or where your stepchildren will celebrate Christmas. Mapping out a game plan in advance will help you deal with such occasions when they arrive. Remember that compromise and teamwork are essential. Empathy and understanding can open doors for problem-solving.

Share housework. Especially in two-income households, make sure one partner isn't spending more time on the housework or more involved with bringing up children than the other partner. The result is often a mountain of resentment. Running the household takes

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work on the part of both partners. Look for ways to help one another.

Be flexible. No matter how well you and your partner talk about your differences, you won't agree on everything—especially when children and stepchildren are involved. Recognise that not all differences of opinion have to be resolved. Sometimes you just need to agree to disagree—and be willing to listen to your partner's point of view.

Give each other space. Your relationship will be stronger and more interesting if you give your partner time and space without you. Remember that one person can't possibly meet all your needs. Both you and your partner must keep and nurture outside friendships and interests. While this is true in any relationship, it is important to remember that in stepfamilies, your partner's external relationships must include contact with the ex where their children are concerned.

Remember why you are together. The reason you are together is easily lost when you and your spouse or partner get caught up in the busyness of your lives. Whenever things feel bad, take a deep breath and try to put things in perspective. There were specific things that brought you together as a couple. If there were not some basis for trust, you would not have made the commitment to one another.

Finally, if you and your spouse or partner are having trouble connecting or compromising, consider getting help from a professional therapist or couples counsellor. A counsellor, particularly one who has experience working with stepfamilies, can help you both work through issues and learn new ways of communicating and getting along. Your organisation's assistance programme may be able to help you find one. You can also find more guidance on navigating parenting concerns as a stepfamily at [Relate](#).