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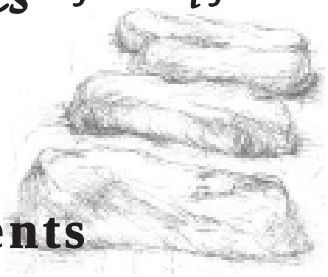
Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies



For Grandparents

Stepfamilies are becoming one of the most common family forms in the United States. When stepfamilies are formed, many new relationships are created. You may become an instant grandparent with step-grandchildren. You may have both grandchildren and step-grandchildren in the same family. Consequently, grandparenting can offer the same challenges, uncertainties, conflicts and rewards that exist in other stepfamily relationships.

You're a New Step-grandparent. What Does This Mean?

You probably have many thoughts and feelings about this role. You may think:

- I'm not old enough or ready to be a grandparent.
- This interferes with dreams about the birth of my first grandchild.
- Will my step-grandchild like me? Will I like my step-grandchild?
- What expectations do my daughter or son and new son or daughter-in-law have?
- The relationship I have with my other grandchildren is great. I don't want it to change.
- Is it okay to feel differently toward my step-grandchildren than my real grandchildren?
- I feel like I'm expected to treat my step-grandchildren the same as my grandchildren, especially around gift-giving times.
- Will "our" family celebrations and traditions have to change?

These questions and thoughts often create feelings of resentment, loss, uncertainty, sadness and confusion. Understanding the differences between stepfamilies and biological families may help you in your new role as a step-grandparent.

Realities of Stepfamilies

- *There is no such thing as instant love.* Relationships build over time. To expect step-grandparents and step-grandchildren to instantly love each other is unrealistic.
- *Stepfamilies are not like first-time married families.* First-time married families grow up together, while stepfamilies do not. Stepfamilies are confronted instantly with different traditions and values in everyday living.
- *Stepfamilies are born of loss (divorce, death or separation).* The feelings that come with that loss have to be taken into consideration.
- *Conflict and change are normal.* Recognizing this reality can help stepfamilies understand that it takes several years for stepfamilies to become a solid family unit.
- *Personal histories of individuals in stepfamilies are different.* The parent and children have lived together longer than the new stepparent. The new stepparent can feel like an outsider, but the children also can feel like outsiders as they see their parent with a new mate.

Stepping Stones for a Grandparent

- *Remember that relationships are built over time.* Your relationship and role as a step-grandparent will take time

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to develop. The important first steps in building a meaningful relationship with your step-grandchildren are communication and spending time getting to know each other.

- *Recognize the vital role of grandparents and step-grandparents in today's families.* Today, a majority of families with children are busier than ever before. You can offer children in these busy families companionship time and a listening ear. Grandparents are described as "significant others who have a great deal to do with one's view of life."

  Grandchildren who are exposed to such contact are less fearful of old age and the elderly. They feel more connected to their families.
- *Create the grandparenting role that is comfortable to you and rewarding for your stepfamily.* Step-grandparenting, like other stepfamily roles, is challenging and undefined. It is up to you to carve a role for yourself that fits your son or daughter's new family. Here are some things to consider:
  —What are the ages of the step-grandchildren? A teenager has different grandparenting needs than a toddler.
  —How available are the biological grandparents to the grandchildren? You may have more free time or easier access than others.
  —Does a strong relationship exist between the biological grandparents and the grandchildren? You do not want to be a competitor for time and attention, but want to give support that fits the needs of the stepfamily.
  —How do you and your step-grandchildren feel about your role as grandparent? Step-grandchildren tend to have less contact with their step-grandparents, and consider this relationship less important than grandchildren do with grandparents. However, research has shown that children indicate a desire for more contact with step-grandparents. Talk with your step-grandchildren. You may find that all of you are wanting the same things, but have been afraid to communicate.
- *Share these gifts with your grandchildren and step-grandchildren.*
  —Spend time one-on-one with them.
  —Teach them a game or skill.
  —Joke and kid with them.
  —Listen for their concerns, as well as their joys.
  —Talk about family disagreements, but do not criticize the other adults. Use your listening skills.
  —Offer companionship for activities they enjoy.
  —Share your history and family traditions.
  —Show them acceptance.
  —Give hugs and plenty of love.

Want to Know More?

A home study course for stepfamilies with children in the home, a video, and other stepfamily resources are available through your local county extension office listed below.

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