

Six Tips for an Awesome Step-Dad

According to the organization Parenthood in America, about half of the 60 million children under the age of thirteen in this country are currently living with one biological parent and that parent's current partner. Most studies published in the 1990's predicted that after the year 2000, the number of step families would outnumber nuclear families, unfortunately the 2000 US Census did not even mention stepfamilies.

Because most children today live in step relationships, of which two out of three are predicted to fail, it's become even more important for step-Dads to understand their role, step up to the plate, and do what they can to grow a strong step family. If he can't, it can cause the children to lack the crucial support that enables them to thrive or even survive society's cultural, educational, and work systems. Here are 6 tips for awesome step-Dads.

FIRST STEP – CREATING A TEAM

Commit to creating agreements with your spouse. Together, both adults should come together in the very beginning about their positions on discipline and on house behaviors and rules. Once agreements have been made, a family meeting should be held to announce the house rules to the children and these rules should be discussed often and handled with consistency.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ROLE

Accept that you are not a replacement Dad. The children's natural father will always be their father and you are not taking his place. Have a discussion with your new step children early on to help them understand this. Explain to them that your primary role is to be here to love and honor their mother. You can also share with them that you will be responsible for helping their mother set house rules for behavior, enforcing them, and also being available to them when they need help, guidance, or just someone to listen to.

ADMINISTERING DISCIPLINE

Except for situations when the children are very young (toddlers), the biological mother should be the primary adult to administer discipline. Until you have developed a strong bond with the children, you should not be in the forefront of parenting. Keeping this in mind will reduce your chances of hearing the phrase, "You're not my father!" You can however, have a say when established house rules have been broken, such as limiting certain behaviors in certain rooms of the house, inappropriate use of furniture or equipment, or violations of respect for others. The important thing to keep in mind is establishing these rules up front and keeping them fair and appropriate.

CREATING A BOND

In the nuclear family, two people come together and create a family based on blood and nature, but in a step family the adults come together based on love. Because, as they say, "blood is thicker than water," it will be especially important for you to begin gradually developing a relationship with your new children. Recognize that there might be some jealousy on the part of the children as they begin to see that they have to share their mother with someone else. Relax and don't get defensive. See the situation from their

perspective and give them plenty of room. Help preserve some alone time for them to connect with their mother without you and don't take their words or actions personally. Make yourself available to them so they can reach out and look for ways that you can connect with them through fun activities, humor, or common interests.

BE A ROLE MODEL

Begin by committing yourself to always treating their mother with respect. Little boys will grow up learning how to treat girls as they watch their mother being treated. Little girls will grow up learning how to allow them to be treated in ways they see their mother treated. Be mindful with how you handle your own frustrations and anger. Little eyes and ears learn through the model you will offer them. If you see situations that frustrate you, walk away and take a break. Initial feelings may overwhelm you and cause you to speak or act in ways that you may regret. Never scold or correct the children's mother in front of them. If you see something that you must bring up with her, find time away from the children to share your feelings. And always remember to talk about the children's natural father respectfully, even if you feel that he doesn't deserve it.

BUILD YOUR NEW FAMILY

My final suggestion is to invest in your new family. If this is not your first marriage, learn from prior mistakes and concentrate on doing what's right. In the candle-lighting exercise used in many wedding ceremonies, the lighting of the Unity candle represents two people coming together as individuals, beginning the creation of a new family. Similarly, your new spouse and her children are an individual unit coming together with you as an individual. Take an active role with your spouse to create new traditions and rituals. Be patient if the children push back and resist your changes. You will have more success at engaging them in the new family unit if you handle resistance with calmness and forgiveness. And don't forget that you can teach a child so much about self-respect by the way you take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself emotionally, spiritually, physically, and socially will set examples for your new children. From your own behavior you will create a model that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

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