

Surviving Step Families

Professor Matt Sanders

While an increasing number of Australian couples are seeking divorces, marriage and long-term relationships still remain the preferred lifestyle choice for most parents.

Unfortunately, second marriages are no more likely to succeed than first time marriages, and a key factor in these failures is children. Research reveals lower rates of breakdowns for second marriages where there are no children than remarriages with children.

It is for this reason that psychologists working in the area of family therapy are continually developing new methods to assist step families survive and thrive as a healthy family unit providing a safe, stable environment for children.

Past research has shown children from step families are more likely to show aggression, have problems at school, suffer depression, be sexually active at a younger age, and leave home earlier than children from families with both biological parents.

The obvious stresses experienced during the transition phase toward a new family structure may deeply effect children.

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On the one hand the child may be pleased for their parent and excited about the idea of having a new “dad” or “mum”. On the other, they may feel uncertain, sad, angry and rejected. They may feel left out of the new family or view their previously established position within a single parent family as threatened.

For parents, a second marriage represents a welcome relief from loneliness, as well as providing financial benefits, and an extra pair of hands. However some mothers react to this new relationship by emotionally withdrawing from their children, providing less supervision and being less consistent in dealing with misbehaviour.

But parents are also naturally protective of their children and many couples end their second marriage because a parent feels their children’s relationship with their step parent is poor, even though the couple themselves get on well.

So what are the essential skills that will help children, parents and step parents survive the transition to a new family?

The key seems to be good communication and the ability to resolve family conflicts in a positive way.

For example, the issue of discipline is often a source of friction between new marriage partners in a step family. A new

step parent enters without an established role in dealing with misbehaviour. Unless both parents are able to agree on an acceptable approach to discipline, conflict between partners may lead to inconsistent messages and the undermining of each parent in front of the children.

Because step families don't have a shared history, family celebrations such as holidays and birthdays, and even just common daily rituals need to be recreated with their own identity without threatening old and familiar patterns that children may want to hang on to. Therefore, extra concentration on communication and consultation among step family members is vital to the success of the new family.

Family meetings are a helpful way to aid this communication. They work best when they are kept short (no more than 15 minutes), where an agreed list of topics to discuss is kept to, and when fun issues as well as problems are discussed.

Meetings encourage children to express their opinions and to contribute toward solving problems. It is important though to avoid family meetings becoming "nag" sessions and to ensure that solutions agreed to are carried out.

Parenting Tip: Step parents should not expect to develop a close loving relationship with their step children overnight. Be patient — it will take time and effort. Remember, it is normal for children to feel somewhat insecure and resentful about newcomers to the household.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.