

Pre-teen and teenage kids can pose a tremendous challenge for stepfathers. As they develop their identity and self-esteem, they are very sensitive to dramatic changes in their family structure and living situations.

Stepfathers can face problems at two distinct levels. First, you must contend with stepfamily issues: inner conflicts your stepchildren suffer as they sort out how they feel about you; their insecurity about the stepfamily; and their distress from shuffling between households, to cite a few examples.

Meanwhile, parenting kids this age has never been easy. Stepchildren face serious developmental issues during these years because of their age, not because they are stepkids. They become more independent and experiment with behaviors which can seem strange, silly, even dangerous.

Breaking loose from family is a normal part of teenage life, and stepchildren are no exception. Given such a tall order then, how can you be most effective?

Keep expectations low, patience high.

Your stepkids probably won't share your dreams of a happy stepfamily. They may be unwilling to trust you. They may differ greatly from you in temperament, interests, values and habits.

Instead of viewing them as "disappointments," remember that you didn't raise them; they are not yours. There is no real basis for your stepkids to fit into any of your pre-conceived notions.

Some stepfathers who have succeeded with stepkids of this age started slowly, yet eventually became trusted confidants. The secret is to not expect much from them right away and to make yourself available to spend time with them. Never be judgmental. Work on being an open-minded listener, a neutral sounding board.

Be flexible.

Establishing and enforcing rules is difficult for most fathers, but you have unique limitations as a stepfather. Your authority does not stem from biological ties; there is no set reason why your freedom-loving stepkids should listen to you at all.

Before you start setting rules, therefore, you have to win your stepchildren's respect. Show them why they should listen to you. Present yourself as somebody worth their attention because of who you are apart from your stepfamily role.

No trick is involved; just display time-honored adult qualities like self-sacrifice and self-control. Be patient, forgiving, kind and polite. Respect your stepchildren's concerns, interests, and need for "space" and time with their friends. Appear self-assured yet flexible.

Expect stepkids to test your rules. Don't be afraid to say "no," but avoid getting angry or jumping to conclusions. Most of all, don't take rebellion to heart; most kids this age, no matter their family structure, challenge their parents.

Be you-not a substitute for the father.

Some stepfathers mistakenly attempt to substitute for an absent dad. Some try to build themselves up by openly criticizing their partner's ex-spouse. Others discourage any discussion of the absent father. You may feel drawn to one of these ways.

Kids this age often wrestle with loyalty questions. If you try to replace the father, you will do nothing to endear yourself to your stepkids and may antagonize them. In addition, if you openly criticize your wife's ex, you could damage your stepchildrens' self-esteem, which is pretty fragile already. Rather than focusing on the absent parent, work on creating your own distinct, healthy relationship with your stepchildren.

Have a sense of humor.

Too often, humor is the last tool parents think they can use when caring for pre-teens or teens. Many assume they must grit their teeth and prepare for one unpleasant and unnerving development after another. This attitude can predominate and foster a self-fulfilling gloom-and-doom prophecy. Stepfathers who get in the rut of just having serious talks or encounters with their stepkids risk turning them off quickly.

A dose of light-heartedness will do wonders. Watch humorous movies or TV shows together. Take up games as a family that produce laughs. Be able to enjoy watching your stepkids having fun. Humor will make you more approachable and interesting. You will be more than a boring adult, always acting the same, saying the same old things in the same old ways.

Humor will tide you over should your stepchildren misuse the car or get one too many ceaseless phone calls. You can shrug off their wild behavior as "kids being kids," rather than taking it as an affront to your own viewpoints.

Caring for pre-teens and teens isn't easy for a stepfather. You are going to make mistakes and they are going to act up. In the long run, though, you will be much better off if you learn from your experiences and then shrug them off with a laugh. Perhaps your stepchildren will be nearby to enjoy what they hear-the warm sound of a very human stepdad.

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