

Step step-parenting: fitting together as a blended family

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Today's Parent

"mommy, where is Cory going to sleep? I don't think we have any more room." My five-year-old daughter, Tory, stands with hands on her hips, brown eyes serious, waiting. For a minute I don't get it. Cory's just visiting; he's not here for a sleepover. Then it dawns on me. Cory, a friend of my 13-year-old stepson, Angus, might, in Tory's eyes, be another brother just moseying on in. I realize that even though our blended family had been part of her life since she was born, it can still baffle her.

There are plenty of issues that can confuse kids when fragmented families join together to form a whole. It's a delicate dance, and it takes a lot of time to get the rhythm right. We started out doing an awkward two-step, are proud to have survived the mosh pit, and are now enjoying our four-child bunny hop. Our family consists of my stepsons Angus and Kieran, ten, my biological children, Tory and two-year-old Marlon, my husband, Miles, and our ratty cat -- a successfully blended bunch, if not quite of the Brady variety.

Because stepfamilies start out with missing pieces as a result of divorces, split-ups, the death of a parent or the space left by one whom the children have never known, there are tender areas for everybody involved, especially the kids.

"The new relationship can turn a child's world upside down, which often creates conflicts and fears about her role in the new family," says Barbara Thomlinson, a Calgary professor of social work. Hierarchies between step-siblings, worries about parental loyalties, new house rules and disciplinary tactics, understanding who is related to whom, jealousy, competition and the creation of new family traditions can spell a big emotional "Yikes!" for kids.

Making stepfamily life work can take some fancy footwork. But if you learn the steps, you too can do the blended family hustle.

DON'T BE WICKED

As a new step-parent, you end up entering into a relationship where your new mate's ex is likely to be a permanent fixture. Even if the former spouse is Cruella De Vil on steroids, you owe it to the kids to try and make nice. Launching a bitter rivalry will only tear everybody apart. How would you feel if somebody came along and started badmouthing your mom or dad? Defensive, angry and protective? You bet. Children may view such talk as a direct attack, and feel compelled to come to the aid of the absent parent, says Barbara Thomlinson.

Adults who rise above the temptation to slag the ex succeed in making the children feel they can speak their minds, even if it's just to rave about their mom's mashed potatoes without getting the evil eye from their stepmother.

That's what Penny and Fraser Muir of Mississauga, Ontario did by having coffee at the Montreal house of Fraser's ex-wife, Marie Pereira, about a year after getting together. Shawn Muir, now 11, was five when his dad and stepmom started visiting at his mother's place. Knowing the two women got along helped him accept Penny more readily.

"Their divorce was so amicable, there was no reason for me to come in and have guns blazing. I knew she was the past, I was the future. She knew that," says Penny Muir, who has since formed a casual friendship with Pereira, sending e-mails and catching up on family news.

"Shawn sees a bond between us, and it helps him cope with the fact that his dad and I won't be together again. He knows we will all be there for him and want what's best for him," Pereira says.

What Marie, Fraser and Penny have is an unattainable dream for other stepfamilies.

Ken and Tina Buck* of Richmond, BC, for example, say they have had their share of clashes with Ken's ex-wife, Shannon*, in the seven years since building their stepfamily. (Eleven-year-old Brandon and seven-year-old Breanna live with Shannon full-time, and visit Ken and Tina.)

Part of this might have to do with the way Ken and Tina got together. The pair's friendship bloomed into romance very shortly after Ken left Shannon. Tina says she knows it was difficult for Shannon at first, and Shannon resented Tina's presence in her former husband's life while she was still pregnant with the split couple's second child.

In the early years, Tina was faced with the phone ringing on a regular basis with Shannon on the other end of the line, at her wit's end. "She would call Ken and make him discipline Brandon over the phone. 'I can't deal with it,' she would say."

More recently, Tina says the tension has relaxed and the lines of communication between her and Shannon have opened up. In fact, Tina is now the primary contact in matters regarding Brandon and Breanna. "It's easier for her to talk to me, and have me talk to Ken about certain things, so the point gets across," Tina says. Hearing their mom and dad argue on the phone was putting added strain on the children. "Everybody's come to the conclusion that the kids have been through too much already."

BIRTHDAY BOOGALOO AND CHRISTMAS CRUNCH

A child in a stepfamily can get to feeling like a pi[Symbol Not Transcribed]ata on special occasions -- everybody wants a whack at the goodies: biological parents, the step

relations, grandparents on both sides of the great divide, friends. It's up to the parents to come up with ways to avoid bouncing the kids around.

Taking turns is a common practice, especially in the case of children whose parents live in different cities. Alternating Christmas at each parent's place is a good rule of thumb.

The clan of seven-year-old Phoebe* of Duncan, BC, gives priority to the biological families first, where holiday visits are concerned. Mark Rusk* and stepmother Linda,* and Phoebe's mom, Marla Thompson,* thought this was the fairest compromise, and that it showed Phoebe that her biological family comes first in her life. Phoebe's step-parents' families (Thompson has also remarried) and various aunts and uncles have to understand and accept other times for visits rather than overwhelm Phoebe with social obligations. The back and forth between two parents' homes is quite enough for most kids.

Important points: Arrange visitation over the phone and when the kids are not present, and don't ask the kids to decide whom they'd prefer to be with.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

For non-custodial stepchildren, getting comfy in their "second home" can take a little while. Most of their stuff is at mom's or dad's, and it's not practical to be carting it back and forth each visit. Maybe you don't have space for a whole bedroom, but there are ways to make kids feel like they aren't just guests.

Linda took what toys her husband already had on hand for his little girl, and refinished a toy box, adding Phoebe's handprints to it. She gave Phoebe her childhood collection of stuffed animals, and amassed a collection of Barbies from garage sales.

If your child lives with you most or all of the time, it is ideal if you can provide him with his own room, which can act as a much needed hideaway from the difficulties of stepfamily life. So says Ray Heinrich, who, along with his wife, Lynne, heads up the Ontario Stepfamily Association. The Heinrich household includes Ray's 13-year-old son and Lynne's two children, ages nine and 11.

"It gives them a place to go when the stresses get too much. At one time we had our boys in one room and bunk beds. They'd just fight. One wanted to read, another wanted to watch TV. One goes to sleep earlier, the other preferred later, and so on," Heinrich says.

John and Lori Herchak of Birch Lake, Saskatchewan had no small task in creating a space for each of their five children -- his three from a previous marriage, ages four, five and eight, and her two, ages 11 and 15. The couple built an extra bedroom and converted the rumpus room into another, and each child has been taught to respect the others' space.

"Nobody can enter anybody else's bedroom without knocking and getting permission," Lori says. Schedules have been devised for computer, video game and TV time as well, which helps keep the kids from feeling squeezed out.

TAKE IT EASY

Once children have experienced the failure of their parents' relationship, they may not rush to roll out the welcome mat when mom or dad starts seeing someone new.

The first thing six-year-old Adam Prosk of Calgary did after meeting his mom's new boyfriend? Pack his bags with thoughts of moving in with his grandparents.

Adam, who doesn't know his biological father, had just gone through his mother's painful divorce from his stepdad a year previously, and was scared of the deep-voiced new guy, Barry Britto, on sight.

Marnie Prosk had waited six months before introducing Adam to her suitor. Then, slowly, Britto won the boy's trust by spending one-on-one time with him in a "big brother" sense.

What did they do? "Guy stuff" -- peruse hockey-card shops, kick the soccer ball around and, in what Barry calls "the most famous example of our outings," get into trouble with the law.

"One time we went fishing down at the Bow River, and it was quite comical. I didn't have a fishing licence -- Adam was fishing, and I didn't realize that I needed one just to accompany him. We ended up getting a \$30 ticket for that, and Adam thought we would go to jail. So here he was writing on the side of the wildlife guy's dirty truck. He was banging mud off his mud flaps with a stick, and I'm just hoping the officer doesn't turn around."

Still, Adam's bond with Britto was slow to develop. Most therapists agree that it takes around seven years for a new adult -- official step-parent or reasonable facsimile -- to become a secure part of a child's world.

YOURS, MINE...

Casual outings on neutral turf are a good way to help potential step-siblings get to know each other. For the Herchaks' crew, tobogganing, shopping and video nights at each parent's house helped the kids and adults get acquainted. But it can take a while to transform them from friends to siblings.

One tip for helping step-siblings adjust is to let the kids know it's OK if they don't like each other right away, says Susan Wilkins-Hubley, founder of the online support community The Second Wives Club.

Wilkins-Hubley's family in Tantallon, Nova Scotia, includes her husband, Kevin, his two kids, Adam, ten, and Emily, eight, her son Jordan, nine, and the couple's child, three-year-old Dale. "We allow our children to not love each other if that is what they are feeling," Wilkins-Hubley says. "We don't force them to behave in that way. Doing so

would be promoting unrealistic expectations of the children and possibly lead to deeper problems."

Meanwhile, childless adults entering a relationship with a parent have to go easy as well - they can't expect to be loved instantly. Tina says that when she first moved in with Ken, Brandon, then four, refused to talk or listen to her. Her presence made him realize that his dad wasn't coming back home. But a box of Smarties and a heart-to-heart helped Brandon realize Tina wasn't all bad. "One day I grabbed his hand and took him for a walk and talk." On that stroll, Tina says, she explained to Brandon that she understood why he didn't like her, and that she knew it hurt that his mommy and daddy didn't live together any more. "I had been through the same thing when I was a kid. I told him I wanted to be his friend and not take anybody's place. He took a few minutes to mull it over, and that was it. I think he understood and accepted it."

...AND OURS

"Great news, kids, we're going to have a baby!" Blank stares, slamming doors, a few hoorays. Babies definitely have a way of shaking things up, but they can also pull a family together.

Adam Prosk, now ten, thought Barry and Marnie were joking when they announced that Mom was expecting. But reality set in when he noticed his mother's protruding tummy. The couple drew Adam in by telling him how the baby was developing at different stages, encouraging him to feel the kicking and asking for his suggestions for names. The siblings have formed a close bond, and Keira, one, lights up like a firefly when Adam pays attention to her.

Incidentally, in families where the kids are brought up together (even part of the time) the terms "half-brother" and "half-sister" are rarely -- if ever -- used. It's brother and sister. Often half-siblings don't feel differently about one another from the way they would if they shared the same bloodlines.

That closeness can mean tears and upset at separation time. Videos, pictures, phone calls and e-mail between siblings can help soothe the pain of separation during absences.

For the children who remain at home while their siblings go off to visit their other parent, life is a series of shifts in the household hierarchy. For example, our daughter, Tory, is the eldest child in the house until her brothers arrive for their weekend. They can dominate with their need for attention and stream of silly jokes and character voices. She needs to make more of a presence when they are here, so she tends to kick up bigger fusses and fall apart more often.

Once they leave, our house is calmer and quieter, but there is a definite feeling that something is missing. Then Tory wants to know how many more sleeps until the boys return, and she takes part in the countdown.

DISHIN' THE DISCIPLINE

United front. Consistency. Fairness. See a theme? It's of the utmost importance that children in the same household are governed by the same rules, and treated to the same kind of respect and consequences. It doesn't matter what the rules are at their other house. Forming a parent coalition and coming up with family guidelines that apply to all kids is key to avoiding big-time conflict. Ray Heinrich says it's awkward at first, but important. "As a step-parent you tend to be much less patient and tolerant with a child who is not your own," he points out. "You have to step back and say, 'Would I have reacted to my own child in that same way?' You have to treat them the same."

Where only one parent is bringing a child into the union, the new step-parent needs to tread lightly. It's important to watch and wait for a while instead of trying to change things right off the bat. Taking parenting or step-parenting classes together can help open up a dialogue, as can just talking about feelings and expectations.

The step-parent should dare to discipline only once the couple relationship is solid, advises Wilkins-Hubley. Kids can smell a shaky relationship a mile away, and probably won't take a step-parent seriously until they are sure he is in for the long haul.

STEP LADDER TO SUCCESS

Do you wait for trouble to come knocking, or do it now. Do what? Consider counselling. Before the stepfamily forms, before the clashes over discipline arise, before one more phone call from the ex screaming your beloved is a no-good louse -- look up some local resources and go for it. Knowing what you're in for and how to face it together can make the difference between success and failure for a stepfamily.

I have to admit, if I'd known what I was in for when I embarked on this journey, I likely would have hightailed my cowardly butt far, far away. Now that I'm steeped in it up to my eyeballs, I truly feel like we've made ourselves a fine family of six, and I can honestly say that I love my stepsons, and their siblings worship them. And while Cory didn't come to stay, Tory has now decided that her two kinder-garten buddies Colyn and Tanner are her newest brothers. "I want them to be in our family, too," she says. Time for another chat.

* Names changed by request.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Stepparenting: The Best Resources to Help Blend Your Family, edited by Patricia W. Stevens, Resource Pathways, 2000.

Wonderful Ways to Be a Stepparent, by Judy Ford and Anna Chase, Conari Press, 1999.

Cinderella Revisited: How to Survive Your Stepfamily without a Fairy Godmother, by Peter Marshall, Whitecap Books, 1996.

Divorce and New Beginnings: A Complete Guide to Recovery, Solo Parenting and Step Families, by Genevieve Clapp, John Wiley & Sons Canada, 1992.

FOR KIDS

Who's Who in My Family, by Loreen Leedy, Holiday House, 1995.

Living in a Stepfamily without Getting Stepped On, by Kevin Leman, Nelson Word Canada, 1994.

WEB SITES

The Stepmoms Network: <http://www.stepmoms.net>

An online support group for stepmothers with related articles, research, support boards and pen pals.

The Stepfamily Network: <http://www.stepfamily.net>

Advice, support, articles, boards and stuff for kids, too.

The Second Wives Club: <http://www.secondwivesclub.com>