

The Role of the Step-parent

At times, being a step-parent brings with it more challenges than can be anticipated. Despite a step-parent's financial contributions and emotionally supportive actions the appreciation expressed by the step-child can be sporadic and underwhelming. Making the step-relationship work involves an intricate balance of knowing where everyone in the household stands, including the maternal or paternal parent's expectations. This article hopes to highlight some of the ways to avoid step-parenting minefields and give readers ideas of how to shift the dynamics within a step-parenting household.

You're not my mum/my dad

Inevitably the most common reaction to discipline by step-parents is the child refusing to co-operate because they are not their 'real parent'. But the truth of the matter is that children will also use a slightly different version of the same claim to their natural parents, that being, "You're not the boss of me!" As such, it is helpful to remember that what comes out of a child's mouth is little more than a knee-jerk emotional reaction to express their displeasure about something else entirely i.e. consequences put in place for their poor behaviour.

Before venturing into the step-parenting world it can be important to consider what the step parent's role will be. For example, is the step-parent there to support the children and discipline them or are they there in a less hands on way? Knowing what the role of the parent and step-parent are will help lay the framework under which everyone can operate efficiently.

Parenting styles

Parenting styles reveal a lot about how child behaviour will be dealt with. Approaches that are too soft lead children to discover they can tip the balance of power in their favour, manipulating situations via emotional and/or psychical means. Too firm a parenting attitude can drive children to resent the parent and rebel in secretive ways. Therefore, just like in the tale of Goldilocks, it is about finding a parenting style that is 'just right'.

Frequently adults living under the same roof have opposing parenting styles. These styles can complement each other or create greater tensions. In the case of the latter, it can be imperative to work on understanding and accepting each other's parenting style and expectations. A brief description is outlined next to support the reader's ability to identify their own style.

Uninvolved parent, or as MJ calls it - blasé parenting

Uninvolved parents are as the name suggests – not involved. Rather than their focus being on the child they tend to concentrate their efforts on themselves and other matters. There is a lack of rules and consequences, mainly due to children not being monitored. The result of this parenting style (when it is the dominant style) is that children become unruly and overly dependent upon themselves. They can also develop tendencies to ignore authority figures and have mood swings.

The permissive parent, or as MJ calls it - the maybe parent

This type of parent is typified by their tendency towards inconsistent rules. Their decisions are based upon the way their heart feels and/or the degree of energy they have to pursue a child-related matter. This parent typically will make threats of consequences but rarely follow through. Children

with this type of parent quickly come to understand that they do not necessarily have to follow the rules to get what they want. As such, they learn how to pester, yell and have tantrums (no matter their age) to get what they want.

The authoritarian parent, or as MJ calls it - the “yes, Sir” parent

When parents have this type of dominant style they have high expectations. Unlike the permissive/maybe parent they do not shy away from enforcing consequences. Their rule list is typically long and they have a proclivity for seeing things in a black and white manner, making few allowances for circumstances that may drive a child to act in a particular way. While children with this type of parent know how to behave, they can develop a desire to rebel when the parent is absent. Another possible eventuality is that because this type of parent can be overly controlling the child learns not to listen to their own voice of reason and will end up looking to others to be told what to do. At worst, this type of self-doubt can influence a child to be led, in less than desirable ways, by their peers.

The cossetting parent, or as MJ calls it - the concerned parent

The definition of cossetting is to pamper or coddle. While parents with this style always act out of concern for their children they fear that heartache will hurt the child too much. As such, they try to protect the child from disappointment, upset, heartache, or from taking risks. Protecting the child from experiences, especially those that create uncomfortable emotions, mean that children learn how to repeatedly avoid similar emotions and/or look to others to fix problems for them. Expecting or wanting others to fix their problems can hinder their ability to develop resilience. A lack of reliance means that children are less likely to figure out ways to solve their own problems, a habit which they take into adulthood. Most troubling is the current research indicating that this type of parenting style may be a contributing factor to the increased child anxiety and depression rates.

The authoritarian parent, or as MJ calls it - the mindful parent

The authoritarian parent is someone who is firm but fair. They understand their own rules and expectations and are not afraid to enforce consequences. They have the ability to over-ride the tugging of the heart strings and act in a rational manner that sees the child is well supported and encouraged to experience a range of feelings when things do not go the way they wanted. This type of parent knows how to move between the other parenting styles at will, aware that some situations call for increased firmness (i.e. enforcing consequences) or when to disengage (i.e. ignoring children when they are trying to pick a fight). This type of parent talks and listens to children but refrains from asking unnecessary questions. They focus more on getting the child to figure out the solutions to their own problems. They also know that if a child is being disrespectful, regardless of the problems the child is facing, the focus switches to the child’s disrespect rather than making allowances and excuses for the child’s behaviour. The result of this parenting style supports children to develop resilience and bounce back when things become challenging. Children also learn how to problem solve and take responsibility for their own actions, resulting in developing their self-worth, self-esteem and moral compass.

Reflecting on parenting styles

Having conversations with the child/children’s biological parent about your own and their parenting style can help to clarify what types of parenting behaviours the other is likely to demonstrate.

Discussing the pros and cons of each style can help to readjust parenting approaches, providing each person is open to the idea that their style (except the authoritative/mindful style) is not perfectly suited to every situation.

Reflection is not something that needs to occur in the presence of others. Instead adults can reflect upon the situations they find themselves in and decide if they dealt with things well or if they would do things differently if the same situation was to reoccur. Individual reflection promotes self-growth, allowing the person to better understand how their efforts impacted everyone in the household.

Coming to the defense of the parent

One of the most common problems faced by step-parents is their desire to defend their partner when a step-child is being disrespectful. While it is natural to want to protect the parent, stepping in and acting in defensive ways creates situations whereby alliances are made and fought. Best case scenario, the parent appreciates the support and rises to the challenge, using the support to forge on and ensure that the child's behaviour desists. Worst case scenario, the parent reacts emotionally towards the situation, venting their frustrations and blaming the step-parent for making matters worse.

In the worst case scenario, the good intentions of the step-parent are often overlooked by the parent in the heat of the moment, not because they do not appreciate having someone come to their defence but because their maternal/paternal instincts kick in, meaning that their natural response will be to defend the child. When parents defend a child's poor behaviour it can create all sorts of emotions in the step-parent – for example, frustration at the parent for defending the child when the child's behaviour was inappropriate; hurt because their intentions were misread; exasperation because it feels like there is always a no-win outcome for them etc.

When blips in life happen

Bad things can and often do happen, thus bringing grief and loss reactions with them. In these instances the grieving process can heighten moods and emotions. Getting teary or angry are naturally occurring parts of the grieving process, meaning that there is little that can be done to avoid them. Implementing strategies that allow emotions to be released in healthy ways e.g. blowing frustrations into a balloon before letting it go, will support adults and children alike to overcome the grieving process.

While it could be tempting to be lenient and relax the rules when hardship strikes, it is these times when children need rules and consequences most. When things happen that rock a child's world they need to know that while one thing may have changed nothing else has. This type of stability helps to prepare the child for being able to deal appropriately with future emotions and negative life situations.

Giving it time

Like the forming of any new relationship, it takes time for everyone to know how and where they fit in. While relationships and roles are explored and practised there will be many ups and downs. When the idea of blended family life does not meet individual expectations it can be important to remind oneself it does not mean that the future is bleak. Once everyone's roles are established and the family unit figures out how to work together, things often improve.

Building the relationship between child and step-parent

Discovering how to become a family when step-parents are involved is not a linear process. There will be ups and downs, and that is without taking into account the reality that children, regardless of the living circumstance, can challenge adults. As such, it is important to build the relationship and develop a sense of trust and respect. Forcing the issue of bonding tends not to yield results. Instead, the step-parent needs to slowly build the relationship, learning how to connect with the child through the child's interests and hobbies.

Learning how to read a child's behavioral cues can also help to extinguish any potential problems. Taking a step back, especially in the early days, and allowing the parent to take the reins can prevent unnecessary damage being done to the step-parent-step-child relationship.

In instances where it is agreed that the step-parent is to adopt a disciplinary role, the step-parent can do well to highlight their pride in the child when they get things right just as much as they do when they get it wrong. For example, saying something along the lines of, "Thanks, I really appreciate that you put your dishes in the sink." When children hear a disproportionate level of negative comments they will learn that there is little point in trying to please. Hearing the positive will motivate children towards increased, ongoing co-operation.

Allowing for parent-child time can be another way of helping the child to appreciate that while the dynamics of the household have changed their relationship with their biological parent has not. If more than one step-child exists an opportunity can be used whereby the parent takes one child to bond while the step-parent takes the other. The next time the children can be swapped over.

When step-parents are trying to stop or start a particular behaviour (e.g. children taking their lunchbox out of their bag) it can be beneficial to teach children how to get such requests right in times of calmness rather than when the child is likely to resist. Waiting for a perfect opportunity when the adult has some sort of currency can help them to succeed, for example, instead of badgering the child to take their lunchbox out of their bag until they do it, wait until they have asked to do something, like watch TV. Telling them that TV is on the table once their lunchbox is out of their bag can be a way to enforce a rule without escalating the problem.

Attitudes towards the other (non-present) parent

There are occasions where the child's/children's other parent does not warrant the step-parent's affections. Despite the other parent's behaviours or attitudes towards the step-parent, a tit for tat approach can end in disaster.

Children have a natural loyalty towards their parents (regardless of the parents' behaviours, actions or attitudes). As such, talking negatively about the other parent to or around the children can create loyalty conflicts and damage the step-parent-step-child's relationship.

You are loved

It can seem cliché but letting children know that they are loved is important, despite the presence of any undesirable behaviour. When any relationship changes, especially in instances where children have to allow their parent to share their affection with a third party, everyone needs time to settle into a new way of being. Providing consistent messages about behavioural expectations whilst reminding children they are loved and remain the priority of the paternal/maternal parent is

important. When people know they are wanted their natural tendency will be less resistant and cause less discord.

Allowing for child-parent only time

No matter how hard you try to be part of a step-child's life and no matter how good you are at it, children will always need some child-parent only time. Child-parent times require the step-parent and other step-siblings to step aside and allow for the children and their biological parent to spend some quality time together. These types of times can create a range of negative feelings but part of the unwritten step-child contract that was set up when the relationship with their parent began was that they need to do special things with their parent that do not involve you or others. It may be hard to stomach watching the children dance out the door to enjoy a day at a local theme park or attraction but it is necessary if the child/children are to feel as though time alone with them is valued as much as the new family situation.

The general gist

Becoming a step-parent is challenging. Just because a step-parent can be both financially and emotionally supportive does not mean that children will always show their appreciation. Children often say things in the heat of the moment to both their parent and step-parent. The purpose of such comments is to try to get what they want and the words they speak are not necessarily indicative of how they feel once emotions have settled. In order to help stabilise a blended household adults need to have discussions about what parenting responsibilities the step-parent will take on. Agreeing on the roles each adult will adopt can help to create a united front and prevent alliances forming. An awareness of parenting styles and the benefits and limitations of each parenting style can help to highlight where potential problems may occur.

When children are disrespectful towards an adult it can be tempting to come to the defence of the parent. Being aware of the possible pitfalls of these types of actions can help prevent situations from occurring. When negative things in life happen it can be tempting to throw passes at children, making allowances and excuses for their behaviour. When rules and expectations are a constant they help to provide children with stability and manage their emotions.

Time is one of the things that is needed most to develop the step-parent-step-child relationship. Building the relationship between the child and step-parent is essential. Using their hobbies and interests can help to develop common ground and develop the trust and respect needed for step-parenting relationships to succeed. Avoiding negative talk about the child's/children's other (non-present) parent helps to prevent loyalty conflicts and helps the step-parent-step-child's relationship to grow.

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