

The Effective Stepfather: A Check-List to Live By

With over 50% of families experiencing divorce in America, the term “blended family” has now encompassed more than half of America. Anyone who has been a father and then a stepfather knows that the two job descriptions aren't the same. Anyone who has been a single dad and has been “thrown into a father role, much less a step dad role” has found themselves in many challenging positions. While many aspects of these two roles are similar, it is the unique ones that lead to disillusionment. As I primarily work within an African-American church, I hear men say: "I've been to men's conferences and I've studied fathering with my men's group. But nothing has prepared me for being a stepfather. With my own kids I have a natural leadership authority that allows me to teach them and be directive. With my stepchildren I constantly feel like I'm one step behind, like I have to establish myself each time I engage them."

Stepfathering can be challenging. Perhaps that's why many stepfathers disconnect from their stepchildren emotionally and withdraw from daily responsibilities. The unmapped territory seems to have many land mines and it's easier to just retreat than to engage the “enemy.” But stepfathers can have profound and important leadership roles with stepchildren. Like Joseph, who wasn't Jesus' biological parent, stepfathers can offer guidance, love, and encouragement to the children under their care. Here's a road map and some practical action points for stepfathers: *Get a Lay of the Land*. All stepparents need to understand the emotional climate of their stepchildren. Stepfathers are no different. For example, being aware of the child's emotional wounds and hurts from past losses is vital to coping with the sometimes angry or oppositional attitudes of children in stepfamilies. It is also very important that stepfathers recognize that gaining respect and leadership from stepchildren is a process; you earn the right to lead by developing trust and connection with stepchildren. You must be willing, for example, to enter the child's life as an “outsider” who slowly finds acceptance, at the child's pace. For many men it is very disturbing to realize that their stepchildren get to determine the pace at which they find acceptance in the family. And it's true—you don't get to control your parental status—the children do. They will open their heart to you when they are ready. Until then, you must cope with feeling out-of-control and find ways to work within the system as it is. Here are some tools that might help.

Tools for the Stepfather Tool Box

Initially Provide Indirect Leadership

There are two kinds of influence (or power) in relationships: 1) positional power and 2) relational power. Initially as a stepfather you have positional power because you are an adult in the house who is married to the children's mother. Much like a teacher at school, you have positional power. As your relationship with the children grows, often over a period of years, you gain relational power because they now care about you personally. Your opinions matters more, your validation is sought after, and your warm embrace feels safe. In the beginning, when limited to positional power, effective stepfathers provide in-direct leadership in their home by leading

through their wife who holds a great deal of relational power with the children. Work with her behind the scenes to establish boundaries, expectations, and the values that will govern your home. While she might be the one to communicate the values and hand down discipline, you can still be very responsible to set a godly tone for the family.

Express Your Commitment

Articulate your commitment to your stepchildren's mother. Keep in mind, however, that early on this won't necessarily be considered a positive by your stepchildren. In fact, they may be threatened by it. Children who hold a strong fantasy that their parents will reconcile can find your commitment a barrier to life as they would have it. Additionally, mom's remarriage (whether following a death or divorce) is often perceived as another loss to children, not a gain (as you see it). Be patient with their adjustment to your marriage, but communicate your commitment to the permanency of the marriage nevertheless.

Communicate Your Role

It's important to verbalize your understanding of your role. Children need to hear that you know that you're not their dad and won't try to take his place. Communicating that same understanding to their father is also very helpful to him; hopefully this will help him to not fear your involvement with his kids. As his fear decreases, his cooperative spirit about your presence may increase. Finally, tell your stepkids that you are looking forward to your growing relationship and that you know how awkward that can be for the child. Let them know that if they feel stuck between you and their dad, they can make you aware of it and it won't hurt your feelings.

Be a Spiritual Leader

Many stepfathers discover that sharing faith matters is, in addition to spiritual training for the child, a good way to connect emotionally. Processing the moral content of a TV program or "thinking out loud" about your decision not to spend money on a bigger fishing boat helps children see your character and learn important spiritual values at the same time. Show them you are a person worthy of respect and they'll eventually give you respect.

Be Approachable

You might realize you're going to have a tough time when the stepfather is defensive and easily hurt by the typical reactions of stepchildren. Part of being approachable and accessible to stepchildren is knowing that not everything is about you. In fact, most of kid's negative reactions to stepparents are really about the child's losses (stepparents just happen to be the easy target for child's heartache). Until you have worked through the struggles of building a relationship, most of what a kid throws at you is a test of your character. Show yourself not easily offended and able to deal with their emotional ups and downs. This will make it more likely that they see you as someone they can trust.

Show Appreciation

If you want to win someone's heart, give them a thousand compliments (even when they aren't asking for it). Showing appreciation is the quickest way to build someone up and help them to feel comfortable in your presence. By contrast, be

cautious with criticism. Words of affirmation go along way to engendering safety and closeness.

Spend Time Together

Find time to be with your stepchildren, but do so with wisdom. If a child is not welcoming of your presence, join their life at a distance. This means taking them to their soccer game and cheering from the sidelines, but not being too much of a coach. It also means knowing what's important to them and gently inquiring with interest: "You studied for three hours last night for that science exam. How did it go?" "I know you've got a big date this Friday. I noticed a concert in the paper today that you might consider attending. I think she'd like this, but it's your call whether you go." Also, if you say you're going to be somewhere, be there. Don't disappoint a child who is deciding whether to let you in their heart or not. As your relationship grows, you can spend one-on-one time with the child, go on special retreats together, and serve side-by-side in your church's summer work camp. Focused time will deepen the trust and emotional bond in your relationship.

Manage Stress and Your Anger

Children are quick to forgive biological parents when they make mistakes (and we all do). But they aren't as forgiving of stepparents. When stress and conflict arise (and they will!) make sure you manage yourself well. The child's assessment of your character won't include how they contributed to the conflict, even if they intentionally "pushed you." All they will see is an angry person. Keep in mind that one task for children are to determine whether loving their stepfather is worth the risk. Give them every reason to believe it is.

This, of course, does not mean that you can't ever get angry or stressed. But it does mean that you manage your emotions and not overreact toward the child or their mother. Communicate through your actions that it is safe for the child to be vulnerable around you and you'll notice them softening with time. In all things, love, love and listen, listen.