



# Living with **stepfamilies**

SECOND EDITION

*moving in together*

*house rules and routines*

*coping with change*

*roles and relationships*

*family events*



## House rules and routines

Every family develops its own set of house rules. These rules become so habitual and part of our everyday life that often we do not realise our behaviour is based on them.

We become aware of these rules and routines when somebody comes to stay or when we enter another household. Dirty clothes are piled up on the bathroom floor when we always put them in the laundry basket. We eat dinner in front of the television and they all sit down together at the meal table.

This is generally not much of an issue with visitors but when families with two different sets of rules join together permanently there can be problems.

It is useful if you and your partner agree on a few basic points such as:

- deciding which rules will need to change when the two families combine
- deciding which rules cannot be compromised
- involving children in deciding some rules such as watching television, meal times, using the telephone and tidying bedrooms
- working as a parenting team.

Make time to discuss your ideas for raising children with your partner. This means when you have to discipline a child you can be sure you will both do the same thing.

Let the children know you will be working as a parenting team. Children will soon learn they will not be able to rely on their natural parent to let them do things which their stepparent will not allow.

Talk regularly with the children about the house rules and what is expected of them. This gives them a chance to say how they like or dislike the way things are. Encourage the whole family to come up with solutions to everyday problems as this tells them their opinions are valued.



## Teenagers

Are you about to join a family with teenagers? Or perhaps you have been part of a stepfamily for years and now, as the children become teenagers, the house seems full of conflict and angry words.

Teenagers in a stepfamily pose a particular challenge as they change from child to adult.

Firstly, the importance of their family gives way to the importance of their friends and peers. They are striving to break away from parental authority and may not want a new stepparent telling them what to do or asking them to join in family activities.

At the same time the new stepparent may be trying to build a relationship and may be concerned their best efforts are resisted. It is best to accept that the teenager is busy becoming independent of the family. Leave them to their own devices unless they come to you.

If there is conflict after years of harmony you may find that the teenager is revisiting issues about the original breakup of

their parents' relationship. Sometimes they may see their stepparent as the reason their mother and father did not get back together.

It is usual for a teenager to look back at these issues and want to know more about what really happened. Be as open as you can about what happened without being too critical of their other parent. You may want to say that your love for each other had given way to lots of arguments, you had grown apart from their mother or father or that it had become too difficult to get on together.

It will help the relationship with their stepparent if you are clear that the stepparent did not break up the relationship or stop you and their other parent from getting back together.

Finally, check whether your teenager is simply behaving normally for their age. In most families, teenagers go through periods of conflict and tension with their parents.

*"I actually enjoy being with my teenage stepdaughter. She's a challenge at times but we have good talks about music, life, school—anything really."*



## Non resident parents

The non resident parent does not have fulltime care of his or her children. However it is important that the non resident parent and their children have regular contact.

The exception is when the non resident parent has forfeited his or her right, for example because they have harmed or abused the child.

The non resident parent may feel left out if he or she is no longer part of their children's lives. Perhaps the hardest thing for the non resident parent is no longer having a major role in the care and upbringing of their children.

Keep in mind that the way adults act when they are with children teaches children how to act when they grow up. Even brief contact impacts on what children learn is okay and not okay.

Even if you don't see your children a lot, you can still build happy memories together.

Non resident parents may be concerned about their children being raised by someone they do not know or that they will be judged as a less competent parent than the new stepparent.

No matter how well children bond with their new stepparent, the non resident parent will continue to be very important to them. Regular contact visits enable children to experience the love of their non resident parent.

### Common issues for non resident parents

- Some non resident parents feel they must make up for the family breakup by giving their children expensive outings, presents and money. This can sometimes lead to accusations about bribing the children and undermining the children's new relationship with the stepparent.
- Sometimes children are bored when they visit—they don't have their usual toys and books and might not feel really at home.
- Non resident parents may fear they are losing the children's affection if the children complain about having to go on contact visits.
- Children will sometimes complain to their non resident parent about their stepfamily. It is best not to criticise the stepfamily, no matter how tempting this may be. Support the children and offer ideas about how they can talk about their concerns with their other parent.
- Non resident parents should try not to interfere in the parenting decisions and style of the resident parent unless there are serious concerns about the child's wellbeing.

