

**HowExpert Presents**

# **How To Become a Foster Parent**

**Your Step By Step  
Guide To Become a  
Foster Parent**

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BJ Min  
Founder & Publisher of HowExpert

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# Table of Contents

Recommended Resources .....	2
Publisher's Foreword.....	3
Introduction .....	7
How to Introduce Your Partner to Your Children .....	9
Tips For Step Parents .....	11
More Tips For Step Parents.....	13
How to Make the Children Comfortable with The Step Parent.....	15
How to Manage & Reduce Family Conflict .....	17
Always Be United.....	17
Example #1.....	18
Example #2: Conflict Between Step Siblings.....	21
Solution for Example #2 .....	22
How to Focus on the Now .....	24

How to Discipline the Children ..... 29

Conclusion ..... 32

Recommended Resources ..... 33

# Introduction

There are more step-parenting situations and blended families now in society than there ever has been around the world and yet the idea of raising someone else's children is not so new.

It is a phenomenon that has been practiced among many cultures but is something that is usually typified by grandparents raising young children so that the parents can either have more children or continue with their own employment.

Blending two family units is usually something that can be quite stressful for all involved. There are not only the dynamics and personalities of the individuals to consider (adult and children) but also the needs and demands of ex-spouses and partners that often bring an unwanted element of stress into the lives of two people who decided to create their own version of the Brady Bunch.

But it is not all bad news. With a little bit of tact, a spot of diplomacy and some strong communication skills not only is it possible to have a happy new blended family unit; but it is something that can be truly enjoyed by everyone in it.

In this guide, you will learn some of the basic steps it takes to first get over the hurdle of meeting your "new" children and then how to deal with them in specific situations when you are all sharing your living space.

Most problems in a family unit can be dealt tactfully and with a lot of love, but we will also cover some situations that do require firmer handling and what you should and should not do if those incidences arise in your own home.

So, let's get started so that you can create some harmony in your blended family home.



# **How to Introduce Your Partner to Your Children**

For those of us old enough to remember, “The Brady Bunch” was a 1970s sitcom about a woman with three girls who meets and marries a man with three boys.

Now they didn't have messy little sidebars like ex-spouses and partners to contend with, but as a viewer I always used to think that even if they did, the six happy children would still take it all in their stride and just accept whatever they were told to do.

Nowadays things are a little different. Children are not usually the primary focus when you first start dating after a divorce or breakup.

You will meet a guy/girl and have at least a couple of dates before the whole "perhaps you should meet the children" option even comes up. This is one of the key areas where a lot of problems in step parenting get started.

So, let's start with the introduction phase first.

## **Parents have two fundamental flaws:**

1. They think their children are perfect in every way.
2. They think that just because they love their partner, their children will love that person too.

Or an alternative version to (2) above might be that because they love their children, they imagine their new partner will as well.

Unfortunately, that is usually not the case and we will talk about letting go of assumptions in a later chapter, but for now let's focus on before the moving in stage even eventuates - preparing the children to meet someone new.

There are a couple of 'do's' and 'don'ts' you should follow that will make this easier.

# Tips For Step Parents

- DO make sure that you want to have a future with the adult before you go introduce them to the children.
  - Too many 'uncles' can really upset the children who will still be fiercely loyal in most cases to their absent biological parent.
- DO talk over the possibility of a meeting with a new partner with the children before you even mention it as a possibility to your prospective partner.
  - Your children should know (where age appropriate) that you are dating someone and that the relationship is getting serious.
- DO listen to your children when they express concerns, or get upset with the idea of you dating someone new.

- Yes you are entitled to a life of your own, but you do have a responsibility to your children that should come first at least while you are only dating your new friend.
- DO let your ex know that you are seeing someone and talk to him/her before you go introducing the children to your new date.
  - It is really not fair to have your ex find out about what you are doing from the children, and this can cause long term problems if it is not handled correctly.

You can see that the key here is in **communication** and preparing your children for the idea that you have someone new in your life.

If you put in the ground work, and if you prepare both your children and your ex for the introduction, then you will have more chance of this going smoothly.

# More Tips For Step Parents

- **DON'T introduce your new friend as either "your new Mom" or 'Your new Dad"**
  - That would be disastrous. If the children ask "are you going to be our new..." say "no sweetie, you have one of those, but we can be friends, can't we?" If children ask about this, they are worried about it.
- **DON'T be overly affectionate with your new partner**
  - Firstly, most children aren't used to seeing their parents do that, and it can make them uncomfortable and it can also make them jealous which is not a good start.
- **DON'T have the meeting with the children at your house**
  - Go somewhere neutral and fun for the kids - a park, the beach or at a fast food place. Also arrange for your new friend

to meet you at the place - saves any awkwardness in the car.

- **DON'T spend any time talking about the absent parent.**
  - If the children bring it up then answer quickly and lightly and then change the subject.

Children don't have to necessarily have any specific reason why they don't want to meet your new partner. Even if they give you reasons that you don't think make sense, you should still listen to them.

The more time you take to make this right for the children, the more supportive they will be of you when it is time to all start living together.

# How to Make the Children Comfortable with The Step Parent

The first meeting is always the hardest one because nobody knows what to expect. But even if it goes absolutely splendidly, if you want this situation to work long term, then you need to get the children comfortable with your new friend first.

The simplest way to do this is to arrange "dates" at least once a week or so that include the children. Of course, you are still going to want to spend time with your potential partner on your own as well, and the children should respect that - but they need to be included on a semi-regular basis.

By doing this, your children will start to see your new friend as less of a threat, and more just someone they are at least comfortable to be around.

If you both have children, then the children can also learn to make friends with each other, although don't push anything. Let these friendships develop naturally.

You have to remember that children today are a lot more opinionated and getting them all to "get along" is not going to be a quick process.

Like biological siblings your blended family children are going to have fights and disagreements and it is these issues we are going to learn how to handle in the next chapter.



# How to Manage & Reduce Family Conflict

Remember how I mentioned earlier that as parents we always think our children are perfect and can even be confused sometimes when other people, including our new partner, don't see them in the same perfect light? This is without doubt the single-biggest problem that blended families have to deal with so here are a few tips on how to deal with the issue.

## *Always Be United*

**Never Ever Fight About the Children in Front of the Children** - This is absolutely vital.

Even if you don't agree with each other about which child was at fault in an argument, or who did what to whom, dealing with these issues in front of the children is a huge "no, no".

If you stick up for your children in front of the others, with your partner, you are going to let the children know there is a possible divide going on; and children love to exploit the division. This applies in households where both biological parents are raising their own children, but it is a lot worse in blended family homes.

For some reason children between the ages of about 6 years to 13 years get really protective about their

absent biological parent. Most of this stems from a fear they have of change, and of course their natural parents split up was a huge change factor in their lives.

A new partner moving in (with or without children) is just as bad. So how do they cope with it? **They divide and conquer.**

### **Example #1**

- Joanne and Bob form a typical blended family unit - they both have two kids each and Joanne is pregnant with their first baby together. But Joanne and Bob are having problems because every time Joanne tries to discipline Bob's children, they gang up on her and are really rude. When Joanne appeals to Bob for some help, he brings up things that Joanne's children have done to annoy him. Nothing gets resolved.

The children, seeing this situation and the havoc they are causing think "aha, we get rid of [the step parent] and our own parents will get back together again." And yes, it does not matter how awful the absent parent might have been to the children, they will still want him or her in preference to the step parent - it is just a fact of life.

It also doesn't matter how long the biological parents have been separated, or that the absent parent might already have another partner themselves; children still like to fantasize that their own biological parents will get back together.

So, the children repeat their behaviors that cause the row between the parents, in the hope that the parents will split up and things can go, in the mind of the child at least, back to normal with their biological parents.

Now this isn't necessarily logical - in fact in most cases it isn't. But it makes sense to the child and this is what you, as parents need to understand.

Children have very "black and white" ideal standards. They often don't see the making up part of adult arguments so in their head they are waging a war (and winning) that will see their step parents leave the family home, and the biological parent return. It is honestly is that simple - to the children?

### **Solution for Example #1**

So, here's what you can you do if you have a situation like Joanne's and Bob's scenario.

1. **Choose your battles** - you and your partner need to come up with some set rules that will be applied in your household **without**

**exception.** You need to agree on these in private and make sure that you are both clear on what those rules mean and the consequences for breaking them.

2. **Hold a family meeting** - explain the rules that you and your partner have created; explain why they are important in your household and then explain the consequences if those rules are not applied.
3. **IMPORTANT: Do not give your children the idea that the rules are negotiable in any situation, or they will exploit that loophole unmercifully.**
4. Be **fair**, be **firm**, be **consistent**.

**Some examples of the rules you might want to implement could be:**

- Everyone keeps their hands to themselves - no hitting allowed at all
- No-one is allowed to engage in any name-calling, sarcastic commentary or rude language - no exceptions
- No-one is allowed to steal from any other family member - and this includes 'borrowing' -

no exceptions. If something is offered then speak to a parent about it first.

- No derogatory comments are allowed about absent biological parents - children are not old enough to understand the dynamics of adult relationships.
- No lying - self-explanatory. People who lie can't be trusted; so, do not allow it or excuse it for any reason.

### **Example #2: Conflict Between Step Siblings**

Let's look at a common household situation between step-siblings and their parents.

- Joanne's daughter, Amy (8 years old) had been given an arcade game from her biological father. Her step brother Josh (11 years old) took the game and won't give it back to Amy. When she asked him for it, he yelled at her that she was "dumb" and "you don't even know how to play it."
- Joanne just wants Amy to have her game back - it is hers after all. Bob can't see the harm in

sharing toys and points out that Josh could probably teach Amy how to use it. What do you think?

## **Solution for Example #2**

The way to solve this situation is to firstly, take the game away from Josh and give it back to Amy. It is a present from her father and a lot of children in blended families get very protective about their things. That needs to be upheld.

Secondly, explain to Josh (in front of Amy) that his choice of words (when he was yelling at her) were hurtful and unhelpful. He has to apologize to her for saying those things.

Thirdly explain to Josh and Amy that maybe if Josh could help show Amy how to play the game, she might be inclined to let him play with it himself sometimes.

And what is the consequence for Josh? No television that evening. He can spend his time writing a story about why you shouldn't call people names because it upsets them - a page of writing will do.

**Now although this is a hypothetical situation it contains some crucial elements.**

1. The children are **dealt with fairly**.

2. The situation is **not confrontational** - despite their ages Josh and Amy are being treated like mini-adults and are spoken to firmly but nicely.
3. **The initial problem is resolved** – Amy gets her game back.
4. **Amy learns** that she can share in a situation where it is beneficial to her to do so (gets lessons from Josh).
5. **Josh is given some responsibility** (giving lessons to Amy) in return for something he wants (compromise).
6. **Josh also has a consequence** that makes him think about what he has done, but that is over quickly so the whole drama of the situation can be **kept in perspective**. It was not a huge deal after all.

Can you see how this situation can be dealt with in a sensible and fair way that does not result in either child feeling resentful or picked on, and both children learn something constructive from the situation. And in less time than it takes to read this, the situation is sorted without negatively impacting the parent's relationship either.

# How to Focus on the Now

Another really common problem that can cause long term damage to the adult relationships in a blended family, and the relationship between all family members is the habit of turning a simple situation like the one outlined earlier, into a major drama because either one or both of the parents involved starts bringing up past issues instead of resolving current ones.

## **Example #3**

- Bob's daughter Janina (14years) is having problems at school and because Joanne is home all of the time (because of her pregnancy) it is her that the school keeps getting in touch with about Janina's problems.

*Joanne tries to help where she can and promises to talk to Bob about her step- daughter's behavior and what they can do as parents to help solve the problem.*

- When Bob comes home Joanne explains that the school has rung about Janina but before she can say much more, Bob turns round and



says "what, just because Janina is not as perfect as your little Amy the school has to bother you now? And you want to bother me with it? Don't you remember when Amy got sent home from school for nicking that other kid's lunch - you didn't see me make a big deal out of that do you?"

Okay I am sure you can see just how unhelpful this is. All of a sudden, the school becomes the problem, and Amy becomes the problem, but Bob hasn't addressed anything to do with Janina. He didn't even ask what she had done before he launched into his tirade against Joanne. And it certainly wasn't Joanne's fault that the school had called and she had spoken to them: but she is the one that Bob is getting angry at.

None of what Bob said was directed at helping the problem at hand. Sure, Amy might have been a little tyke at school too - no child is perfect; but Bob is performing a classic "divert and attack" strategy that is played out in millions of blended family homes every day.

This usually happens in households where there are clear differences in behavior between one set of children and another.

If you are the parent of the typically "naughtier" children it is often easier to get defensive about your children's behavior because in a lot of cases you are

not sure what to do about the problem anyway. But this doesn't help your child or your relationship with your new partner.

### **Solutions for Example #3**

The most effective way of dealing with a situation like the one outlined above would be as follows:

1. If you have something unpleasant to discuss with your partner, then **mention it when they get home from work, but then ask if it is okay to talk about it later** once dinner is done, and the children have gone to bed. In our example this would Bob a chance to wind down after a day of working, and he will be more receptive of what Joanne has to say.
2. If you are the one recounting the story of what has happened **don't over dramatize anything or offer your opinion on anything**; simply explain the facts of what has happened quietly and calmly.
3. As the two of you discuss the situation **do not bring up anything to do with any other**

**children in the household** unless it is directly related to the matter at hand.

4. Discuss how the situation should be handled **so that you are both clear on what is to be done**, and then speak to the child concerned together so that the child cannot use her own tactics of "divide and attack".

**This can work for a number of reasons:**

- Bob is **allowed to relax** after coming home, so he is **more receptive** to bad news and is better able to think clearly about what has happened and what needs to be done.
- Joanne is able to be **heard** when she explains the facts to Bob without bringing her own thoughts or opinions in on the situation - she can offer suggestions and advice on what she might do, but ultimately in this example it is Bob's daughter that is the issue and it should be **his decision** as to what is done about it.

- The child is talked to by **united parents** who are both in agreement with the problem and the solution so there is no way in this case that Janina could manipulate the situation in the household to create issues between Bob and Joanne.

Now if you don't have teenage step daughters then you might wonder why Janina might be inclined to use a situation that involves her problems at school, to further an aim of splitting up Bob and Joanne - but if you are already a step-parent of teenagers then you will already understand that this is what they do. Teenagers are very good at shifting the blame for their behaviors to somebody else.

# How to Discipline the Children

A lot of parenting books will tell you that only the biological parent should discipline their own child; but as a mother and step-mother myself I know how unpractical that rule can be.

Firstly, it undermines the authority of the step-parent. In Bob and Joanne's situation for example she is the one that is home with the children most often because Bob works outside of the home full time. If Bob's children play up while he is not home then Joanne is left with a rotten situation;

- Her step children are not going to listen to her, or obey her instructions (even if it is detrimental to their health to keep doing what they are doing - a safety factor).
- If she tries to talk to Bob about the situation when he is home, he is just going to think his new lady is just a nag who can't handle children which is not good for the adult relationship (it does happen believe me).
- Bob's children are not likely to play up nearly as much with him, as they might with Joanne; so, Joanne loses credibility and is made to think the problem is her fault.

- Children lie when confronted with an allegation of bad behavior later in the day. This means either Bob is going to have to deal with that lying as well as the negative behavior (which he is not likely to do) or he starts to think that Joanne is lying (bad for the adult relationship).

So, using the rules guidelines that we suggested earlier, the parent that disciplines the children is the one that is there at the time in most cases.

The one exception to this would be in a situation like the one we highlighted earlier about the school complaining about Janina's behavior. In this case Joanne doesn't have to talk to Janina directly about this until after she has talked over the problem with Bob.

Schools phoning home about children's behavior problems, especially in relation to teenagers, are often the symptom of a deeper problem and this is something that should be handled by both Bob and Joanne and if necessary (depending on custody and access agreements), may include Janina's biological mother as well.

Any other similar situations, that can be left until both of you are ready to deal with the issue, and after some serious adult discussion first, are things that can wait for a short while at least. If Bob was away on a conference for a week, then a nightly phone call from Joanne to find out how he would prefer the situation handled would be the best idea.

In the more daily problems that are common in most family households, the parent who notices the behavior should be the one that disciplines the child. Rules and consequences are already laid down; the children know what is expected of them and the consequences if they don't behave; so, with that in place, discipline should not be an issue.

# Conclusion

Raising a family has never been an easy task and trying to raise children in a step-family situation can be even harder.

But if you take the time to understand what your children are going through and treat them with love and respect; while taking the time to nourish the relationship you have with your new partner, then you should weather any storm that comes your way - from inside the home, or from outside.



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