

Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet 1999
 Family and Consumer Sciences
 Campbell Hall
 1787 Neil Avenue
 Columbus, Ohio 43210

Strong Families ... Strong Futures

Surviving the Weekend as a Stepfamily

Nancy Recker

Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences
 Allen County

Weekends can be a stressful time for stepfamilies. While the natural parent looks forward to seeing a son or daughter, the stepparent may face the weekend with mixed feelings. The visiting child can cause dramatic changes in the family structure by demanding constant attention of the natural parent, and may even arouse feelings of jealousy on the part of the stepparent.

It can be difficult to establish a workable relationship among parents and stepchildren. If the stepparent is willing, he or she can play a variety of roles during the visit—helping plan activities, allowing his or her spouse to have some time with the children, etc. Consistency is the important factor. A child who visits regularly can be absorbed into regular family routines more easily than the child who only visits on holidays and in the summertime. When a child only visits occasionally, it may be helpful if the stepparent steps back some and lets the parent spend some time alone with the child.

Make Children Feel at Home

Children are not guests even though they may not spend all their time in the family. They need to have a place of their own for their clothes and other belongings. If they don't have some of this personal space, they won't feel like they belong in the family. Encourage children to meet other children in the neighborhood. Having neighborhood friends helps them to have fun with others like

they would be doing if they were back "home." Make sure visiting children understand the rules of the family and follow them the same as everyone else. If children don't know the rules, they can't be expected to conform to them.

Focus on Responsibilities

It's easy to get priorities turned around. Although a new spouse may feel he or she should have all of his or her spouse's attention, it is important to realize that there are children to consider too. Children have a big effect on a marriage and play a big part in the relationship between husband and wife. If a husband or wife has difficulty getting along with the stepchildren, it will affect the marriage. If a parent seems to be pampering the children to make their weekend better, it's probably true. It may be uncomfortable for the stepparent, but good communication and a little understanding can go a long way toward easing frustrations.

Relationships Take Time

Weekend visits make it difficult to establish long-lasting loving relationships. It isn't essential to love stepkids, but it is important to show kindness and honesty. Don't try to force a loving response from them. If stepparents "try too hard," they can end up driving their stepchildren away.

Don't Get Stepped On

Many stepparents are so afraid of being rejected by the kids or disapproved of by their spouses that they become a doormat. Stepparents have every right to be treated with respect and expect certain behavior from children. If parents don't get involved, it is easy for the children to think the stepparent doesn't want a relationship with them. If a stepparent refuses to take part in the control of the children, they really shouldn't criticize them to the other parent. It takes a lot of compromise and it's easy for the natural parent to end up in the middle. An important question to ask is, "Is my way of doing things important enough to jeopardize the relationship with my spouse?"

Other Problems

Some natural parents just don't want to have relationships with their children and no matter how hard they try, the stepparent can't make a family. It is ultimately up to the natural parent to establish visitation and then follow it. If the children are seen as a burden and ties are broken, then the stepparent's options are limited.

If husbands and wives work on their marriage and maintain a strong relationship, issues related to stepchildren will be easier to handle. The stepparent should remember that children need to spend time with their parents. Don't be jealous of this time they have together. Instead, work together to strengthen all relationships within the family. Remember, you didn't just marry your spouse, you married a spouse with children.

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>