



# Surviving the Weekend as a Stepfamily

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Weekends can be a stressful time for stepfamilies, especially if a child isn't regularly involved with one of the parents. 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 parents, and may even arouse feelings of jealousy on the part of the stepparent. Weekends together are supposed to be a time to blend and be a family, but instead it may be filled with stress and dread.

It can be difficult to establish a workable relationship among parents and stepchildren. Although there are a variety of custody situations, the majority of weekend stepparents are stepmothers so they must make an effort to work on the three-way family. If the stepmother is willing, she can play a variety of roles during the visit—helping plan activities, allowing her spouse to have some time with the children etc. Consistency is the important factor. There are many things families can do to cope with a visitation weekend.

## Be Consistent

Sometimes it helps if the stepparent arranges to be away the first few hours when the stepchildren arrive to give the parent time to reconnect and share some time alone together. 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. Sometimes it helps to have some routines to follow each time the children visit, such as the same meal or a particular activity everyone does.

## 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 in their other 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.

## Know the Schedule

Find out in advance what the schedule is for each child—ballgames, practices etc. If stepparents know ahead of time that certain events will involve the children and require their participation, they can plan ahead. The fewer surprises, the smoother the weekend will go.

## Focus on Responsibilities

It's easy to get priorities turned around. Although a new wife may feel she should have all her husband's attention, she needs to realize he has his 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.

## Know the Rules

Children often bring habits and rules from their other parent's home—things that aren't allowed in your home. Be consistent. Children can adjust to different rules at different homes, but they may need some transition time. Go over the rules and the consequences so there are no questions later on. They don't have to like the rules, but do need to realize they are there for a reason.

## Relationships Take Time

Just because a person loves his spouse, doesn't mean he has to love her children. Weekend visits make it difficult to establish long-lasting loving relationships. It isn't essential to love stepchildren, 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 children 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. Ask yourself, "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 ties are broken between the natural parent and the children, then the stepparent's options are limited.

If husbands and wives work on their marriage and maintain a strong relationship, problems with 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. If parents don't work together, their marriage could be at risk.

## Resources

- Berman, C. (1986). *Making it as a stepparent*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Eckler, J. D. (1993). *Step-by step-parenting*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books.

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