

# Talk about stepfamily challenges early and often

**I'm about to become a stepmother of a 13-year-old girl who sometimes seems to like me and sometimes seems to hate me. Any advice to make this relationship work?**

Welcome to the wonderful world of stepfamilies. And that's a bigger world every day: It's estimated that, currently, one of every four children nationwide is a stepchild. Good for you for doing what you can to make it work.

Family life experts say that stepmothers have the most difficult role in stepfamilies, partly because of the "wicked stepmother" myth that permeates our culture, and partly because of a converse myth that suggests stepmothers and stepchildren should be able to form an instant loving bond. Of course, neither is true, but these beliefs can make the life of a stepmother more difficult.

The first thing you can do to prepare for this role is to understand the dynamics of the family you're entering and the issues your new stepdaughter is dealing with. Children in new stepfamilies must make many adjustments, and they often must cope with strong feelings of loss, divided loyalties, and lack of control. Even as a new family unit is forming, children often feel the loss of the parent from the first marriage and miss not being able to see both parents every day. They may feel caught in the middle between the two birth parents, and adding a new adult to the mix could cause added stress.

Compounding the challenge is that children



often don't know how to articulate their feelings, or, in some cases, even know what those feelings are. Try to be a patient listener, and look for clues in your new stepdaughter's behavior that might indicate what she's feeling inside.

Often, it helps to make sure children have regular one-on-one time with each birth parent. Even if only for a few minutes each day, having this kind of undivided attention lets them know their parents still consider them special. On weekends, plan for more extended periods of time together. As a stepparent, consider establishing your own period of one-on-one time with your new stepdaughter — make it part of the routine. Having special time together can help your new relationship to develop.

Family life professionals also caution against taking on a disciplinary role too soon -- that can lead to disaster. Allow a strong, caring relationship to develop first. That said, it's important that you have a voice in the family, and that you are treated with courtesy and respect from day one. Be sure you and your new husband openly communicate about any issues that may arise, and that you have each other's love and support. Make functioning as a loving, strong team a priority, and new family relationships can be strengthened on that foundation.

*Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).*



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**Dear Subscriber:** This column was reviewed by Nancy Recker, Ohio State University Extension educator in family and consumer sciences in Allen County.

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