

*by Michelle Richards, UPAT Parent Educator*

Being a parent comes with continual challenges and rewards. Being a stepmom adds a new dimension to your parenting that requires some forethought and skills. As a stepmom, you may face difficulty fitting into your new family. It's important that you and your spouse decide together the best way for you to be involved as a stepparent. For example, in our step-family, we learned that taking on a less "parental" role initially worked well for us. Even though we cared for each other's children, as in any new relationship, it took time to get to know each other, to build trust and love, and especially, for the children to come to realize we were both there to stay. There was a lot of trial and error, but we eventually settled into a rhythm that worked well, though it took continual adjusting. It's a lot of work, but it is well worth the effort. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Your role is not to overshadow your step children's mother. No matter what the situation is, treat and speak of her respectfully. Spend time getting to know each stepchild without competition from the biological parent relationships. Share an interest or skill that your stepchild may be interested in. This will allow a relationship to develop that will be beneficial to you both.
2. Be clear and consistent with "our family" rules that you and your husband agree upon. Give yourself time to learn what those are. Communicate often as parents to chart out this new territory. Include the children as much as possible. For example, ask "What kind of family do we want to be?" "Who will be responsible for what?" "What are some fun things we can do together?" "How should we treat each other?" "What can we count on?"
3. Hold realistic expectations of yourself. Resist the myth that you will automatically love your stepchildren or that they will love you. Both of you likely will have come from experiences of significant loss. Aim for mutual respect and wait for love to develop naturally.
4. Let the children decide what to call you. Our children chose to call their stepparent by their first name.

5. Leave the disciplining role to the biological parent. As respectful relationships form, the time may come that you can successfully share this role with your spouse. Take a parenting class together and take an approach that fits your family's needs.
  
6. Don't play favorites. You will naturally feel a closer bond with your own children than your stepchildren, but you must separate your actions from your feelings if you want to build connections with your stepchildren. Even though real caring may not have developed yet, show equal respect and consideration.
  
7. Show interest in and be involved in your stepchildren's school, religion, sports, etc. Look for ways to send messages of love and trust to them. Find ways to tell them you are proud of them.

Children will always benefit from genuine love. So do adults. I appreciated it so much when my children's stepmother called or wrote to me in an effort to establish a positive relationship and inquired how she could best serve my children. It made all the difference and made a challenging situation easier. Your efforts to make your home a safe, loving and respectful environment where there is room to learn and make mistakes is an invaluable gift to your family. You can be a positive influence in the lives of your stepchildren. Choose to be a good role model and a resource of goodness that they can look to and draw from. Your rewards will come unexpectedly, but will be well worth the effort. My four stepchildren are adults now, with their own children. My life is richer and fuller for having them in my life. After 20 years we continue to build on our relationship and find ways to be a stronger family.