

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



The step-parenting ride of your life

Being in a blended family is a huge learning curve. Writer Malcolm Dix shares seven lessons he's learned in his journey as a step dad.



Parenting is an endless ride of excitement, challenge, joy, adventure, frustration and so much more. Step-parenting and negotiating the tricky world of blended families is another ride altogether.

Six years ago, I unexpectedly found myself being a part-time single dad to my two kids (aged 8 and 6 at the time), sharing 50/50 custody with my ex. Things got even trickier when my new partner and I had our two boys a couple of years later (now aged 4 and 2) though I remember thinking, "How hard can raising a blended family be?" Doh!

At various times over the years I've felt torn between my role as a dad and a partner. I often find myself caught in the middle of family issues between my older kids, between those kids and their half-brothers, between all four of my kids, and between my partner and myself!. All the while also trying to resolve ongoing issues with my ex-wife. Crikey!

What I have discovered out of all this is that step-parenting and raising a blended family is a slow and steady process. Sometimes we all move forward in leaps and bounds and other times at a snail's pace. It is very much a case of 'three steps forward, two steps back'.

Here are seven step-parenting lessons I've learned along the way

1. Find what works best for your new family. Be patient as that process of discovery takes time – often years. *Note:* As with any parenting, what works is subject to change at any given time as kids mature and their needs and interests change.

2. Develop new traditions and rituals and make sure the older children are a big part of these. It gives them a sense of ownership and belonging. In our house, we use our Friday family meetings (the day my older kids arrive at our house) to catch up on each other's news, discuss any issues or concerns (and come up with potential solutions) as well as plan the week ahead.

3. Don't expect to be a modern-day "Brady Bunch". There will be times your new partner won't be overly fond of your kids – and vice versa – but that's life. Let go of unrealistic expectations about playing instant 'happy families' and you're more likely to make it out the other end. Don't expect or force your kids to accept your new partner (or their new siblings) straight away with open arms, but do make it clear from the outset that your expectation is for mutual respect and appreciation.

4. Never 'trash talk' your ex-partner in front of your kids, no matter how angry or frustrated you are. This creates anxiety and makes you look bad. Save those conversations for your partner, trusted friend ... or the dog!

5. Never use your kids to relay messages to your ex-partner. Wherever possible, go direct to the source. A communication book is a good tool to keep both parties up to date with things like school notes, behavioural issues, after school activities, party invitations, expenses, etc.

6. Talk, talk and talk again with your partner (which is not always a natural thing for us guys). Always provide a united front when parenting, particularly around issues of discipline. Don't undermine each other in front of the kids or things will unravel quickly.

7. Never lose your sense of humour or romance. Never.

So if you find yourself on a similar journey then hold on tight, smile and enjoy the ride. It really is the best ride I've ever been on, even if I have felt sick a few times on the odd twist and turn.

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