

Stepdads Can Teach All Fathers Some Lessons

A study released earlier this year points out that being affirming and attentive is important for all dads, but particularly for stepdads. Researchers at the Institute of Education, University of London, found that stepdads are more likely than stepmoms to have conflict with a teenager.

The stepdads reported more behavioral problems in their teens, and they admitted that they spend less time praising their children in comparison to biological dads. Generally, the relationship is worse if the teen is a boy.

What the study does not tell us is the root of these issues: Do teen stepchildren behave worse, or are stepdads more critical and less encouraging of their stepchildren? Either way, it underscores the complexity of the challenges that stepfathers face. If you're a stepdad, remember to also understand the upside potential: the researchers found that being attentive to your children—stepchildren or not—can have a big, positive impact on them.

With all this in mind, here are three suggestions for stepdads—and we can all find something to apply here:

- **Set a positive tone.** Be proactive about it. Practice the discipline of putting yourself in your kids' situation; really consider what they are going through and, as the researchers said, be attentive to what they need from you.
- **Recognize the vital importance of communication.** The tension points are going to be there. Recognize them when they're still minor, bring them out in the open and talk them out in a healthy way. If this doesn't come naturally for you, or you don't really know how to do

it, make the effort to learn. Don't let minor conflicts become major.

- **Build strong teamwork with your wife.** Your marriage needs to be a source of stability for the kids. There should be no doubt that you're working together as parents to do what's best for them. There should be no inconsistencies or signs of doubt for the kids to exploit. Work out any parenting differences in private, so you can be united when dealing with the kids.

Many men have become huge, positive forces in the lives of their stepchildren, their teenagers, and in the face of other challenges. There's no reason you can't be a strong influence, too. Read more of our articles for dads in specific situations.

ACTION POINTS

- Work on making positive comments to your children. Try to focus on the good that you do want from them, instead of the negative thing they need to avoid, or the negative thing they have already done.
- Whenever your children or stepchildren decide to talk, restrain yourself from correcting them. Just listen and get to know them.
- Let your stepchildren know that you aren't trying to replace their natural father, if he is still in their lives.
- Join your children and their mom in an activity they already enjoy doing together—maybe a game night or going to a favorite pizza place.
- Read a book about stepparenting with your wife. One great one is *Winning the Heart of Your Stepchild* by Bob Barnes.

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