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25 Great Ways to Connect With a Stepchild of Any Age

The stepparent-stepchild relationship can take time to build. Here are tips to start things off on the right foot

By Nicole Pajer, AARP

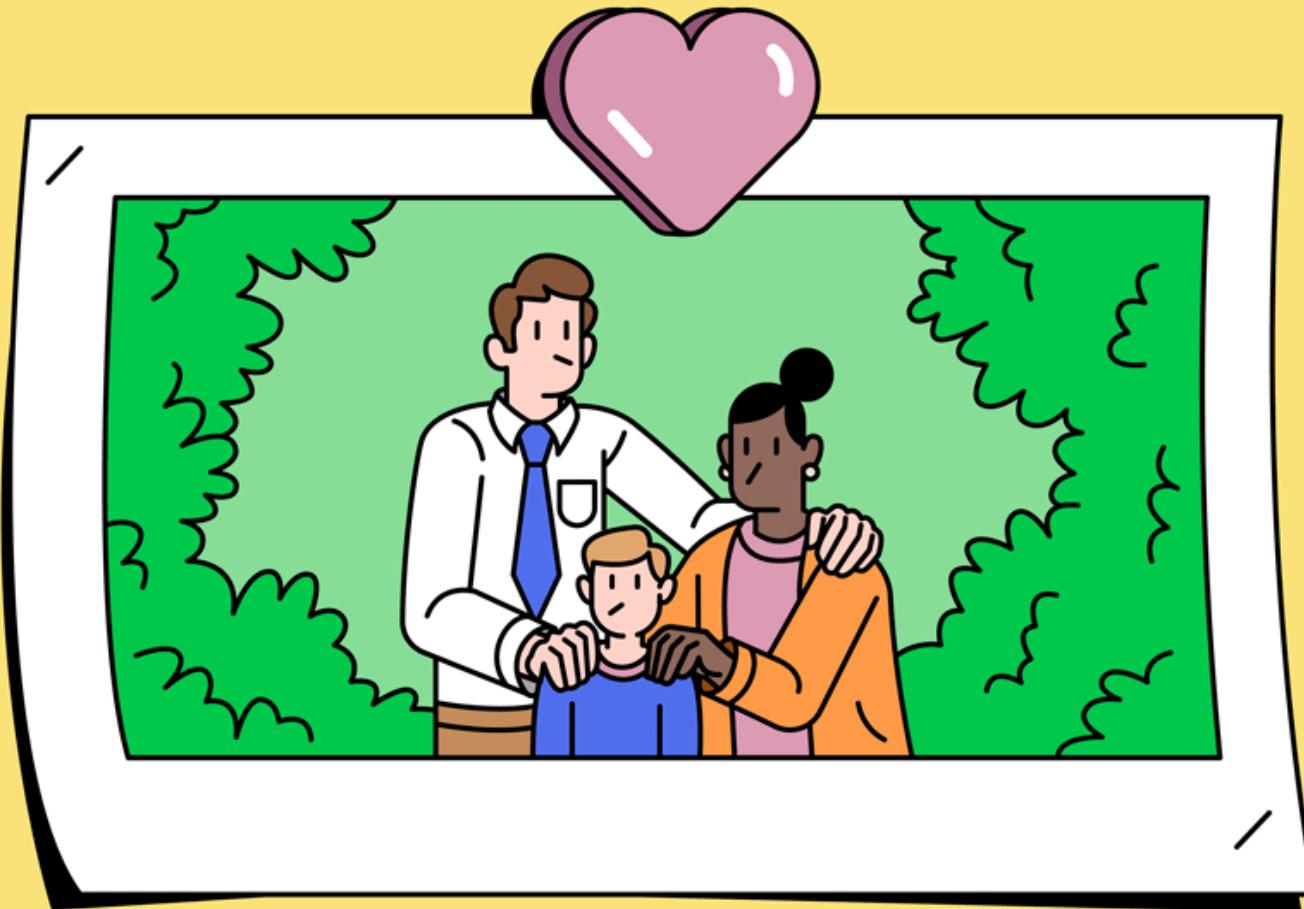
Published May 19, 2025

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Stepfamilies are becoming increasingly common. One in five couples who live together have children from other partners.

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Are you about to marry someone who has children? [Dating a divorced](#), single or separated parent? Are you recently married and have combined families to start your own *Brady Bunch*? Or maybe you just want to make [summer vacations](#) with your new partner's grown kids a little less awkward.

Stepfamilies are becoming increasingly common. One in five couples who live together have children from other partners, according to 2021 [data](#) from the U.S. Census Bureau.



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But blending families isn't as smooth as Mike and Carol Brady made it appear, whether it's kids suffering from teen angst or grown children with their own families. A tense stepparent-stepchild relationship is common, says Maria Natapov of Synergistic Stepparenting, a company based in Boston that coaches people on how to stepparent and co-parent successfully. "And oftentimes it becomes a major point of contention in the romantic relationship," Natapov says.

Lacking an initial bond with your stepchild doesn't mean your relationship is doomed, however. Here are some expert-backed tips on ways to find common ground.

1. Go slow, and let the child take the lead

You might be eager to form a bond with your new stepchild, but coming on too fast and too strong won't do you any favors. "I know it sounds so obvious, but truly, it takes time to build the relationship," Natapov says, adding that taking baby steps will help the child adapt to the new parental figure in their life.

A good place to start is to let the stepchild take the reins so they don't feel pressured, says Aurisha Smolarski, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Los Angeles and author of *Cooperative Co-Parenting for Secure Kids: The Attachment Theory Guide to Raising Kids in Two Homes*. "Give your stepchild the space they need, and focus on gradually building positive relationships with them. Let go of control," she says.

To work toward a bond with older or adult children, approach the relationship with patience and openness. "Look for opportunities to gather as a family in low-pressure settings, focus on getting to know each other as individuals, and let the

2. Don't badmouth their biological parent

Your stepchild's parents may be separated, but it's likely that your partner still has to co-parent with their ex. You or your spouse may be tempted to vent about an ex-partner's behavior. That's fine and normal, says Natapov, but don't badmouth a child's parent to that child.

"They are half of their biological parents, and instead of bringing them closer to that person, it pushes them away, because internally they start to feel that they need to defend that other parent, because they have a huge, close bond with them," Natapov says.

Being present as "a supporter, not a divider," as part of the co-parenting system decreases a child's stress and will help the child trust the stepparent, Smolarski says.

3. Make a parenting plan with your spouse

If you become a stepparent, you may be confused about your role. Will you share discipline and childcare decisions for younger kids? Or, if they have their own families, can they drop the grandkids off at a moment's notice?

Natapov suggests sitting down with your partner and discussing how they envision your role in parenting their child so you can devise a plan together. Then do your best to stick with that.

It's natural that your relationship dynamic with the stepchild may change, and you can periodically re-evaluate this with your spouse. But establishing parameters can help you to avoid over- or understepping.

It's also important that you don't come across as trying to take the place of the biological parent. "Make it clear from the beginning: 'I am not your mom or your dad. You have those. I only hope to be another adult in your life that you can count on,' " says Nancy Landrum, a relationship coach at relationship counseling company MillionaireMarriageClub.com and author of *Stepping TwoGether: Building a Strong Stepfamily*.

4. Find a hobby or an activity you can share

Do you notice that your stepchild is into a particular hobby? Is there a common interest you share? Finding something fun

"What is it that they enjoy?" asks Natapov. "What do they like to talk about? Or what do they like to do?" One of her clients noticed that his stepchild was into a game that was the premise of a movie, so Napatov suggested they go see the movie together.

If you don't have a common interest, try to show that it matters to you what the child likes. Ask them about a band they listen to. See if you can get them talking about one of their hobbies or passions.

5. Don't try to buy their affection



Tickets to sporting events, expensive jewelry or a hot-ticket video game may be well received by stepkids, but they won't strengthen your relationship with them. "You can't buy their affection. That's not going to be genuine. It's not an authentic connection," Natapov says, adding that they will see through it, which won't help the relationship thrive.

"Bribery creates a transactional relationship in the best-case scenario, and a controlling one in the worst-case scenario," says Natapov. She stresses that this type of controlling behavior could create resentment toward the stepparent by the stepchild and corrode any chance of developing a meaningful and positive bond.

6. Focus on the positives

While trying to create a bond can be frustrating, Landrum says it's important to appreciate or praise anything positive you see in your stepchild.

She suggests showing appreciation when they help clear the table, or saying "I notice how patient you are with your brother" or "I see how hard you are training for the track event. I admire your will to do your best." Focusing on what's going well with the stepchild will help them feel that you care, and it will go a lot further than noting what isn't going well.

Refrain from any type of action or statement that can make your stepchild feel like they are to blame for a lack of bonding, Smolarski says. "If you make it all about your expectations or if you fault your stepchild, this will push them even further away."

7. Be a good listener

"If you only develop one skill, I hope it is the skill of listening without advice," says Landrum. If you do have advice for your stepchild, ask for permission to give it, she advises. If they say "No, thanks," respect their answer.

Practice active listening, she says, which includes repeating back what you see or hear. Attempt conversation as an invitation and not a demand. "For instance, a child walks in from school looking upset. You say, 'You look upset. Do you want to talk about it?' If they say no, then kindly say, 'I'm happy to listen if you want to talk about it later,'" Landrum illustrates. And make a point to be available if stepkids who live away from home call your house and need a listening ear.

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If you've tried to forge a connection and it doesn't seem to be working, seek the help of a professional. Find a stepparent coach in your area, or get in touch with a licensed marriage and family therapist who can outfit you with tips on improving your relationship with your stepchild. There are also online courses you can take and books you can read on the topic. Check with the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, or do an online search for "stepparent coaches" in your area to find good ones.



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Even if things are going well, Natapov says having backup is a good idea. "Sometimes challenging things happen, and suddenly you go from the frying pan into the fire," she says. "So I always suggest that while things are great and you don't need any support, identify your resources."

9. Don't take it personally

If you're feeling down about the child not instantly taking to you, try your best to remember what they're dealing with, and know that it naturally will take a while for them to recover.

"It's not personal," Natapov says. "They're just really trying to process a lot of painful emotions all at once, and a lot of change, and are trying to adjust." She adds that younger children often lack the skills to identify their emotions and challenges, much less talk about them, but that those things come with time.

A parent's divorce can be equally devastating to adult children, causing them to question the validity of everything about their family prior to the divorce, says Natapov. "Adult children can feel very similar feelings as young children toward their new stepparent: jealousy, sadness, feelings of being replaced, loyalty binds," she explains.



Simply be there for your stepchildren – consistent behavior helps kids of any age anticipate what it will be like to interact with you.

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Children from divorced families have often experienced significant disruption and may have trust issues. Being a predictable presence in their lives can help them feel more secure. "This means following through on promises, maintaining predictable routines and showing up reliably, even when the relationship is challenging," says Aja Chavez, national executive director for Mission Prep Healthcare, a teen mental health care center in California and Virginia. So if you say you'll attend their recital, be there.

"If you've established a monthly family dinner, keep it on the calendar even if they can't always attend," says Chavez. "Or if you've offered to help with their home renovation project, follow through with the same reliability you would for your biological children." Adult stepchildren, she adds, particularly notice when your support remains steady through their major life transitions such as career changes, relationships or becoming parents themselves.

11. Own your mistakes

You're new to this stepparent thing, which means you're not going to get it right every time. And that's OK. The important thing is to acknowledge your missteps. When you lose your temper or say something that doesn't land well, own it. A sincere "I'm sorry I spoke that way. I care about you and I'm still learning" goes a long way in modeling humility and maturity, says Victoria Grinman, a licensed psychotherapist and family therapist in New York City. Grinman says such moments of repair can be transformative for both kids and adults.

"Owning your mistakes and naming them helps kids feel safe," says Carolyn Sharp, a licensed clinical social worker in West Newbury, Mass. She shares that she and her partner have both had clumsy moments with each other's kids but worked hard to repair them. "I got that wrong. I'm sorry. Let's try again" becomes a powerful message: "You're safe to be human here," she says.

12. Validate their feelings

Taking a moment to acknowledge what your stepkids are feeling is an important tool in building trust, says Grinman. "It may be tempting to want to jump in to correct or fix how a child feels, but it's best to resist the urge. They actually do not want that; they just want you to listen and be with them in it. Try saying, 'That sounds really tough. Thanks for telling me.'"

"Validation is a superpower," says Sharp. She recalls a time when one of her stepkids snapped at her during dinner. She paused, breathed, and said, "This must feel weird sometimes." That statement eased the tension. "We didn't fix it all that night, but trust grew," Sharp says. She also made a point to recognize in that moment that she isn't their mother and that it must feel frustrating to have multiple adults policing their behavior. "In turn, I held space for their needs and feelings while reinforcing accountability and respect."

13. Be flexible

Relationships ebb and flow, especially when trying to bond with a stepchild; so it's important to embrace being flexible. You, as the stepparent, need to be able to roll with the punches, says Nechama Sorscher, a neuropsychologist in New York City.

She emphasizes the importance of not overreacting if you feel snubbed or dismissed, adding if a plan you had discussed doesn't land well in the moment, then pivot. For instance, if your stepchild doesn't feel up to doing a planned vigorous activity outside and is more in the mood to engage in something relaxing indoors, go with it, says Sorcher.

Offering up choices and going with the flow is essential to establishing a good relationship with older stepkids as well. "For example, asking the adult stepkid if they want you to join them for lunch or if they prefer to have their parents to themselves," says Sorcher.

14. Respect their boundaries

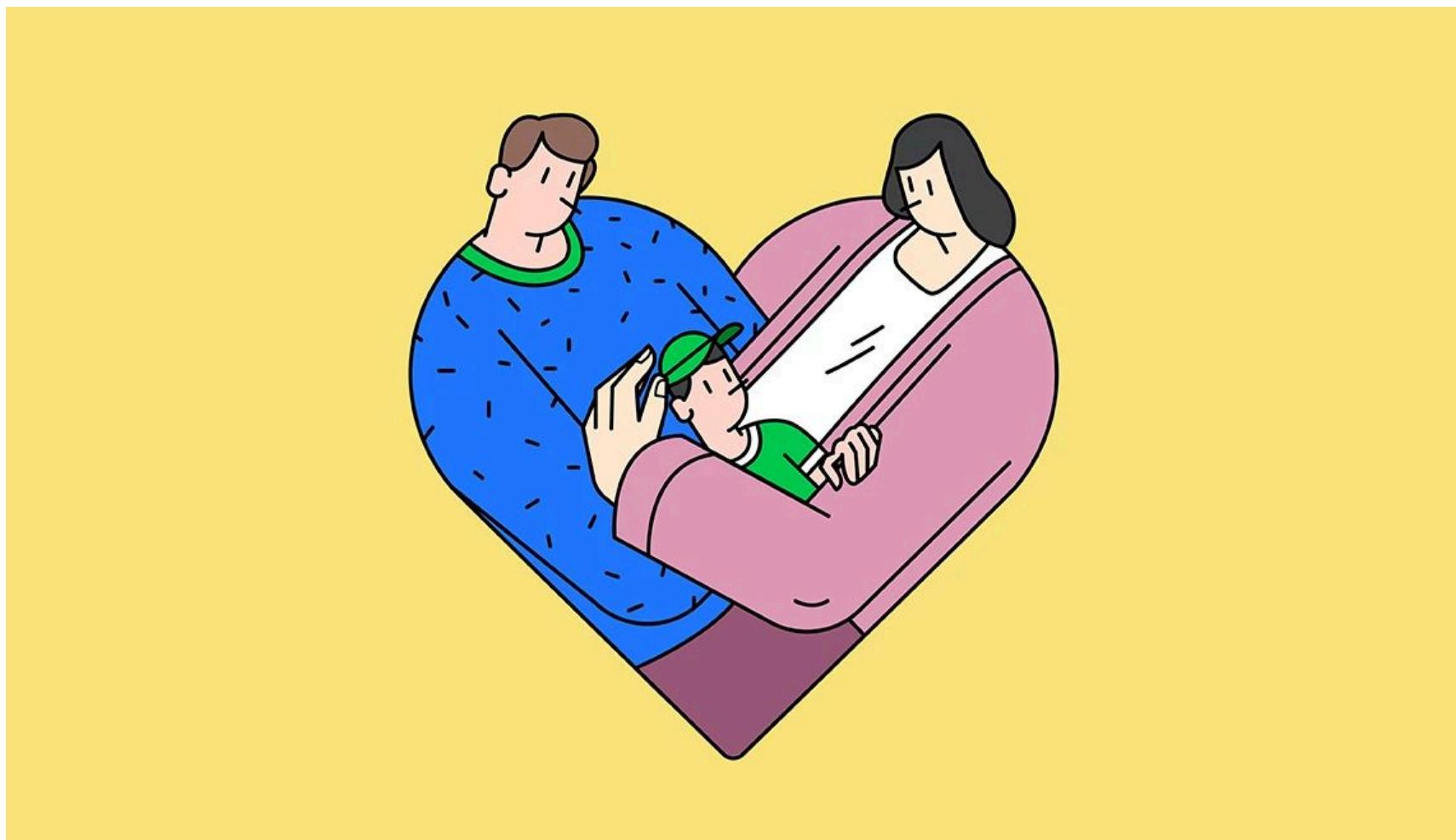
Respecting boundaries is an important part of building trust with a stepchild. "Kids often set emotional boundaries not to push you away but to protect themselves," says Ambrozich. This can be due to many factors, including your stepkids feeling unsure about how much to let you in — especially since they didn't choose you to be a part of their life. "Trust takes time, and children need space to get to know you at their own pace," Ambrozich explains.

And it's good to let them know you respect their boundaries by saying something like, "It's OK for you to have privacy in your room, and I will respect that," says Sorscher. Or, if an adult stepchild does not want to be called "son" or "daughter," do your best to respect that and call them by their name. "These gestures help children feel safe and supported."

Remind yourself that boundaries aren't necessarily about you. They're often a child's way of protecting themselves from more change, loss or uncertainty.

15. Let the relationship take its own shape

From Hollywood movies with stepparents to the blended family next door, it's important not to compare your own situation with others'. Ambrozich stresses that each stepfamily's journey is unique, and the bond between a stepparent and stepchild often develops on its own timeline.



Be patient – each stepfamily's journey is unique, and the bond between a stepparent and stepchild often develops on its own timeline.

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next, as the new family dynamic is worked out.

16. Include stepchildren in decisions

Stepkids often hold back at first, especially if they're still adjusting to a new family dynamic. "Instead of pushing for closeness, give them small choices that help them feel in control, like picking the recipe for dinner or choosing the playlist in

“Giving the child a say in everyday choices builds agency, confidence and shared ownership of the family environment,” says Grinman.

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You can also let them weigh in on larger decisions such as planning a family vacation, says Kathryn Smerling, a family therapist and author of *Learning to Play Again: Rediscovering Our Early Selves to Become Better Adults*. “Ask your stepchildren what might be fun for them. Where would they most like to go? What are the things they want to do while there?” This helps them feel included and gives you an opportunity to get to know them better.

17. Open up

Sharing something about yourself can be a great way to extend the invitation for your stepchild to talk about themselves. “Children are more likely to open up when they feel they aren’t the only ones being vulnerable,” says Grinman. Try sharing stories from your own life that are relevant and age-appropriate for the situations they may be going through. Mention something you struggled with at their age, or talk about what made you laugh today. “This builds relatability and softens the dynamic,” says Grinman.

18. Support their relationship with your partner

Remember that your partner is your stepchild’s biological parent, and they have a relationship that existed before you entered the picture. It’s important to respect that. “Although it may be tempting to be around your stepchild as much as possible, especially in the beginning, allow space for the child to have some quality alone time with their parent,” says Jolee E. Vacchi, an attorney with Foundations Family Law & Mediation Center, based in Seekonk, Massachusetts. A new stepparent is a big adjustment, says Vacchi, and time alone with their parent can create a sense of comfort and familiarity and allow the child to speak openly while in a safe space.

Smerling suggests letting the parent-child relationship be the priority, though you can provide gentle reminders that you are always available should the child ever need to talk about something, and that you are a friend and resource.

19. Focus on rituals, not roles

Sharp and her husband both worked to develop special connections with each other's kids based on shared interests and recognition. "My husband and my daughter shared a deep love of science, and that shared interest became the foundation for a relationship that's entirely theirs," she says. Sharp used daily school pickups as bonding time.

"For those who marry later in life, especially into families where the children are already adults, this dynamic can feel particularly delicate," says Sharp. In her clinical work, she's witnessed how confusing it can be for adult children when a widowed or divorced parent begins a new relationship. "One adult child described how grateful she was that her father's new partner didn't try to insert herself into the family as a parent figure," Sharp says.

20. Celebrate the small stuff



Celebrate the small victories – a shared laugh, requested opinion or being included in a story they tell.

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Many stepparents enter the relationship with specific hopes about how the relationship will unfold, often setting themselves up for disappointment. Instead of measuring success against a *Brady Bunch* standard, Chavez suggests recognizing that healthy stepfamily relationships often look different from first-family relationships.

“This might mean accepting that your teenage stepdaughter may never confide in you the way she does with her mother, or understanding that your elementary-age stepson might need several years before he’s comfortable with physical affection,” she says. And you may never have the type of relationship with your adult stepdaughter that involves her asking you to be present when she picks out her wedding dress.

Chavez stresses the importance of celebrating the small victories. “Whether it’s a shared laugh, a requested opinion or being included in a story they tell, these are all things that help build your connection,” she says. With time, these small moments can add up to a stronger bond.

21. Prioritize your partnership

Nurturing your romantic relationship can strengthen the new family bond, as kids thrive when they see their parents in a healthy, connected partnership, says Ambrozich.

“Modeling respectful communication, problem-solving together, and showing up as a united parenting team teaches children what healthy relationships look like,” says Ambrozich. “In the short term, children feel more secure when the adults in their lives are steady and supportive of one another.” That healthy relationship depiction, she adds, can lower a child’s anxiety about their new stepfamily and help them feel safe, relaxed and more confident that their home is a dependable, loving space.

Sharp and her husband prioritized this by scheduling regular date nights. “It gave the stepsiblings a chance to bond, to create their own inside jokes and form relationships that were just theirs,” she says.

22. Invite them into everyday activities

When Luse became a stepparent, she invited her stepkids to join in their family tradition of cleaning up after dinner. "That word – 'tradition' – made it feel like an invitation into something meaningful, not a demand," she says. Luse focused on making it fun, saying things like "See how clean you can get this pot!" or "Can you guess where this goes?" "At the end, my stepson said, 'This was fun!' – music to my ears," she shares. For older stepkids, the same goes: Bring them into your day-to-day when they come to visit.

23. Don't be a doormat

Stepkids adjusting to a changing family dynamic don't always make it easy on stepparents. "Some disrespect, ignore or even actively try to push stepparents out of the picture. I've seen it. I've lived it," says Luse. She acknowledges that those moments of being sidelined don't exactly feel great, and it's easy to wonder if you're the reason for it. "But sacrificing your self-respect to keep the peace? That's a no-go," she says. There are times when you should stand up for yourself with your stepchild. Just avoid dramatic displays, and instead give calm reminders that you are a human with boundaries.

"Say something like, 'I feel hurt when you ignore me. I know you wouldn't like that either. I promise to listen to you when you speak, and I hope you'll do the same for me. I'd love for us to enjoy being around each other,'" Luse suggests.

24. Try not to let them feel left out

If you have your own children and are moving in with stepkids, try to avoid making them feel left out. "Avoid favoritism, and do your utmost to treat your stepchild as if they are your biological child," says Carla Marie Manly, a clinical psychologist in Sonoma County, California.

"Whether giving a gift or sharing time, do your best to be as inclusive and fair as possible," she says, adding that this can be more difficult than it may seem, since unconscious factors often pull us toward being more or less partial to certain children. "As a result, you might want to journal about any ongoing issues and seek therapy if you want support," Manly says.

A stepparent, for instance, might naturally be more interested in their biological child's milestones, such as a birthday, or, for adult stepchildren, an engagement or a wedding. But to "foster positive energy," says Manly, it's important to give all the children the same attention. And when grandchildren arrive on the scene, stepparents would be wise to give equal treatment to their stepchildren and step-grandchildren alike.

Family traditions, including how holidays are celebrated, often hold deep meaning for children. "What's important is to approach these moments with curiosity and care," says Ambrozich. She stresses the importance of respecting your stepchild's existing traditions to help preserve their sense of safety and stability.

Ambrozich notes that stepparents should be especially mindful not to take over a tradition your stepchild shares with their other parent. "Even with the best intentions, this can feel like overstepping, and may create inner conflict for the child," she says. Instead, let that parent have that moment with the child, and focus on building new traditions that reflect your unique family story. "It takes time to figure out what feels right, but with openness and patience, new traditions can emerge that everyone looks forward to."

And don't be afraid to invite adult stepkids into your home to become a part of your new traditions. Says Ambrozich, "Over time, shared experiences, like holidays, celebrations, or even grandparenting, can foster warmth and trust in meaningful ways."

Nicole Pajer writes about health for The New York Times, Woman's Day and other publications.

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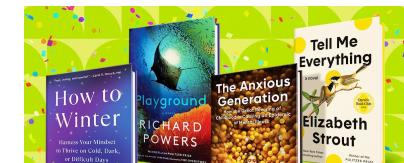
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