

How to Succeed in the Stepfather Role

This article is addressed to the man who is not succeeding in the stepfather role with his wife or girl friend's children with whom he lives. His efforts to join the family by assuming the strong-male disciplinarian role are not working: Either the children ignore him - - especially when their mother criticizes his approach in front of them - - or they submit to his demands with open resentment.

The man is never going to succeed as long as his relationship with the children is limited to giving orders, making threats and administering punishment. The bravest among the children will say, "I don't have to obey you. You're not my father!" And that child will have a point.

If the man in the house expects to succeed with the children in the house, he must build a person-to-person relationship with them, in which he demonstrates empathy, interest and understanding.

Only then will he achieve earned, rather than coercive, authority. And only then will children obey him because they regard him as fair and because they see him as genuinely caring about their well being.

If you are the man in question, you should develop a sensitivity to what living in the stepfamily is probably like for the children. As much as possible find out what they went through during their parents' divorce and how the emotional demands of the current situation are probably affecting them. If you lack an empathic understanding of the children's experience, you can't hope to succeed with them.

Learn the children's strengths. Find something strong in each child to admire and respect - - and communicate your appreciation to that child - - but in real, not exaggerated, ways. You will need to call upon that sympathetic understanding and appreciation when they fail to do what you've asked them to do - - and that may be often.

Do your best not to reflexively take a child's non-compliance personally. E.g., if you ask him to please put the toilet paper roll in the holder and he doesn't, don't automatically treat his behavior as defiance. Otherwise, your honor will be at stake (over toilet paper for heavens sake!), and you will feel compelled to assert your authority in response.

Remember that kids (especially teenagers) live on their own planet and generally only visit ours to eat and ask for money. From their planet, the toilet-paper issue probably just doesn't register.

Find out whether or not your standard of cleanliness, order and quiet in the house is shared by anyone else in the family - - especially if it is shared by the children's mother. If it is, then you two need to work together - - supporting and reinforcing each other - - in pursuit of your shared standard.

On the other hand, if she doesn't agree with you, if she thinks that you're a neat freak, overly sensitive to noise or whatever - - then forget it: You're alone with your standards. It will be you against Mom and the kids if you push. And you won't succeed. So the best thing to do is to adjust your standards. After all, you're more joining their culture than they joining yours.

Monitor your exchanges with the children closely. Make sure that, no matter what the circumstances, you say more positive things to them than negative. Deliberately tilting the relationship to the positive will, itself, contribute greatly to a family atmosphere that is fundamentally relaxed and mutually accepting.

On the other hand, if you can't find anything positive to say to the kids and can't be bothered looking, then you'd better prepare yourself for constant tension and unfriendliness at home - - because that is what you're almost certain to have.

The more the children experience mother and stepfather as a team working positively to make a healthy family, the more reassured they will be. To that end, Mom, do not criticize the man in the house in front of the children. Every alliance you make with the children against him makes the possibility of a healthy family less likely.

Finally, consider making family meetings a regular event. Rotate leadership of the meetings between adults and children. And make the principal purpose the sharing of feelings and experiences in the family - - not discipline issues.

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