

# Steps to harmony

Did you know that at least one in five Australian families with dependent children is a step-family?

Being a step-family brings with it a unique set of challenges. Yet television's favourite step-family, *The Brady Bunch*, made it seem so easy.

Why then is it so different in real life? In everyday step-families things don't run so smoothly and roles and responsibilities are not so clearly defined as in the Brady family. The first two or three years have been found to be particularly difficult and statistics indicate that 50 percent of second marriages end in divorce.

A step-family signals the demise of the intact family. The new partnership ends the hopes of children that their parents may eventually get back together again. Often children grieve because both parents no longer live with them. They may also feel they are in competition with the new partner for the affection of their mother or father.

Many changes generally follow repartnering. One parent may move out of their existing neighbourhood, contact with grandparents may be affected and, on top of all this, children are expected to build new positive relationships with virtual strangers who may also have children.

It is crucial that the new couple communicate openly with each other about child-rearing and their values and practices. What are the roles and responsibilities in their new family? It is important that the step-parent does not race in to discipline stepchildren before a relationship is established, because this can lead to acrimony.

Though the biological parent needs to take the lead in terms of discipline, it is critical that they support the partner in front of their children so that the step-parent can develop some kind of authority within the household. If there are disagreements in terms of parenting, do this privately.

Don't expect too much emotionally from the children or yourself because it takes time for bonds of affection to develop.

And be supportive of the other biological parent because all children know they are genetically linked to both their parents and if you criticise the other parent you are in fact criticising them.

## Survival tips

- **Accept that establishing a step-family will have its challenges and allow time for relationships to develop**
- **Openly discuss childrearing and roles and responsibilities with your partner**
- **The Stepfamily Association runs groups that can help. Ph.9481-1500 or visit [www.stepfamily.org.au](http://www.stepfamily.org.au)**