

Parenting - The Role of the Step-Parent

I often speak with step-parents who are struggling to understand their role. Here are some tips: 1) You can be a powerful force of love in a child's life, but; 2) Do not think of yourself as a replacement for the child's same-gender biological parent- no person is replaceable; you will likely be an extra Mom or Dad, unless one biological parent is totally absent; 3) You are taking on a huge commitment when you co-habitate with or marry someone with a child and you are likely taking on a responsibility to that child forever, even if you see your role as insignificant (loving adults do not just come in and out of children's lives); 4) If you want to have a good relationship with your step-children, be sure you do not become the main disciplinarian. Your job is to support what both biological parents are doing with the children as best you can and refer the child to the biological parents if there is a problem; 5) If you don't agree with the parenting strategies of the biological parents (unless it concerns reportable abuse or neglect), you may express an occasional opinion to your mate, but you should know that you may have to tolerate behaviors in your step-children that you may not allow in your biological children in order to preserve your relationship with your new partner and step-children (and to avoid over-stepping your bounds); 6) Be sure to have a kind and cordial relationship with your partner's ex-husband/wife (this is very important to the children's mental health, so if you have problems with jealousy in this regard, get help); you can stay in your appropriate role by not communicating with the ex-spouse on behalf of your mate about visitation, parenting, or financial matters. Simply refer the ex-spouse to your mate when such topics arise and keep your conversations with the ex-spouse confined to positive small-talk; 7) Finally, if the child you are beginning to step-parent is around 12 or older, understand that your role will likely be much more limited and the child may accept you more slowly (this is when #4 & #5 become most important).