

Grandparents and Stepfamilies

Stepfamily Scotland Helpline: 0845 122 8655

A stepfamily has many challenges that other families do not have to deal with. In particular, stepfamilies have to balance and negotiate the different traditions, values, and emotional needs that each family brings to the new one. However, what is often not appreciated is the impact a new stepfamily can have on the extended family. This leaflet focuses on grandparents in particular, and the challenges that they might face as members of a new or established stepfamily.

Neutral ground

It is worth knowing that grandparents can make a definite difference during the strains of separation from an absent parent, and the early success of a second marriage depends on support from other family members.

If you are in close touch with your grandchildren you can be invaluable to them. You can provide the stability and uncritical attention that children badly need during these changes in their lives. With you they will be on neutral ground, as long as you guard against taking sides. If your grandchild complains to you about the new family arrangements, suggest that they talk to their parent instead. Beware of becoming a go-between or there may be stress and divided loyalties to cope with.

The instant love myth

If stepchildren have joined the family, don't feel rejected if, in spite of all your efforts, they don't show you any affection. It isn't possible for them; they need time to adjust to their new situation. Imagine what they have just lost: their 'old' family, their closeness to their parent in the temporary single-parent family, and perhaps a definite role as helper, or carer of younger siblings. They will probably still feel loyal to their absent parent,

so accepting a new person into their lives immediately may seem to them like betrayal. Your feelings towards the step-grandchildren will probably not be as warm as they are towards your own grandchildren. This is quite natural. Even so, try not to let the difference show by openly or subtly rejecting them.



Presents and treats

Let's talk about giving presents; a very difficult subject and liable to cause misunderstanding or hurt whatever you decide to do. For example, think what silent message you are sending to your own son/daughter, as well as to *all* the children, if you don't give presents to your step-grandchildren. And if you do give them presents, don't take it personally if they reject them. To the stepchildren, the presents may be a symbol of a situation they haven't accepted and don't like.

When an outing or other treat is planned, it is also wise to consider your own grandchildren's feelings. They may resent it if they never have you to themselves. They will probably be happy to share occasional outings with their stepsiblings, but not every time. Talk with your children and seek their advice on your wishes and concerns.

Discipline

If you usually discipline your grandchildren when you are in charge you may have to re-

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think your approach when step-grandchildren are present. They cannot be expected to accept discipline from someone they haven't known since childhood. If they are old enough, they may rebel, and you won't be any further forward. On the other hand your grandchildren mustn't be treated unfairly or relations between the stepsiblings might suffer. Discuss and agree with their parents the method of discipline for all of the children.

The new partner

Are you finding it very difficult to accept your new son- or daughter-in-law, or their children? It might help you to think about and explore *why* it is so difficult:

Could it simply be a fear of the unknown?
Or that the new spouse doesn't match up to the old one?

Perhaps deep down you resent a stranger replacing your own son or daughter in your grandchildren's lives?

Were you your grandchildren's chief carer during their time in a single-parent family and now you feel sidelined by the stepparent?

Are your grandchildren being moved away from your district making it harder to see them as often as you would like?

Becoming aware of the underlying reasons for our feelings can help us handle them better.

Grandparents at arm's length

You may feel that you are being kept at arm's length from your grandchildren deliberately. There may be several explanations. One of them could be that the remarried couple wishes to start the new family afresh and resents intrusions from the family of the previous partner. Children, on the other hand, tend to be torn between their two families, especially if they are strongly

attached to one or more grandparents and don't want to be cut off from them.

Family festivals

If members of a stepfamily insist on keeping to their own family traditions they can become disproportionately important. For instance, agreeing on who goes to whose house for Christmas, and where the present-opening comes in the running order for the day, will need everyone to be willing to compromise.

It helps to accept compromise if you understand that underlying this determination to hang on to the old ways is the need to feel secure in the family. It's as though by doing so they can somehow bring back the time when the original family had been together. Most people find it difficult to accept changes like this but because a big family occasion is about the most frequent cause of a real breakdown in stepfamily relations, it is worth thinking carefully about why people try to cling to their own family's customs.

Grandparents and divorce or separation

Arrangements made for the children after divorce will affect their grandparents too. Contact orders can be made that allow the children to continue to visit or talk to you on the phone.



Scottish Registered Charity No: SCO 22444. Registered Company No: 184249

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If you are being blocked from seeing your grandchildren you could 'claim an interest' and apply to the court for a Parental Responsibilities and Rights Order. Of course it would be better to reach an amicable agreement with the parents and avoid this, but if this isn't possible and you are sure that the children want to see you, it might be better for them if you get legal backing for them to do so.

Childminding

Perhaps you are asked to look after a grandchild regularly for a short time, after school for instance? Without a court order giving you Parental Responsibilities and Rights, you could not consent to medical treatment if it were needed. However, in an emergency, as long as you are sure that the parent would have given consent, you may do so without an order. (Children over 12 are entitled to give consent for themselves.)

Adoption

The brutal fact is that if your grandchild has been adopted by a stepparent, he or she is no longer related to your side of the family, including grandparents. This does not mean that you cannot have contact with your grandchildren; it simply means that you don't any longer have a *right* to see them. However, when the court considers the application for adoption it does take into account close ties the child has with the original family.

Stepfamily Scotland offers support and information to anyone in or related to a stepfamily. If you feel you need some additional support, or just need to talk to someone about some of these issues, then you can call the Stepfamily Scotland Helpline and talk to one of our fully trained helpline workers. They are non-

judgemental, will listen, and can help you explore your situation.



Useful Contacts:

Citizen's Advice Bureau
www.adviceguide.org.uk

The advice guide offers online independent advice and a 'find your local CAB' tool. If you do not have access to the internet you can find the number for your local office in the Yellow Pages.

Family Mediation

Family Mediation Scotland
Telephone 0845 119 2020
www.familymediationscotland.org.uk

Family mediation services enable separated parents to meet together with a trained mediator to achieve agreement on future parenting. Family mediation also provides contact centres across Scotland where non-resident parents can enjoy contact with their children where no other arrangements have succeeded.

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