

How to Survive the Festive Season in a Stepfamily

Stepfamily Scotland Helpline: 0845 122 8655



Stepfamily Scotland hopes that your Christmas Holidays will be an enjoyable and relaxing time. However, when you are juggling the various needs and expectations of your stepfamily, it can seem like having a happy Christmas is a difficult goal to achieve.

Being realistic and not expecting everything to be perfect is probably a good place to start. Perfection is rarely achievable in any family and trying to live up to an unrealistic expectation can leave you feeling disappointed.

Instead, be honest with yourself and start thinking now about what challenges may be ahead for your family during the holidays and how you might overcome them.

This leaflet outlines some of the common issues that stepfamilies may face and also offers some tips and hints on how you might tackle them.

Contact Arrangements

Parents

You may already have contact arrangements in place from previous years, but sometimes arrangements need to be reviewed, especially if a new partner comes on the scene. Be open to new arrangements and you will have a better chance of avoiding conflict.

When there is conflict it can be very tempting to put off talking about the issue until the last minute. This will probably make things worse.

Listen and talk to each other. It takes a huge amount of patience, determination and selflessness, but in the long-term it will reap benefits for you and your kids.

Consult your kids about what they would like to do, but after listening to them, make it clear that the adults will make the final decision and share the reasons for that decision. Children like to be consulted, but asking them to make the final decision on where they would like to spend Christmas can make them feel stuck in the middle.

If you find that you just can't compromise or that the process seems one sided, ***consider what might be bubbling under the surface and preventing you and your ex-partner overcoming the issue.***

Ask yourself whether winning the argument is actually going to make your children's Christmas better, or whether you are actually fighting over other unresolved issues.



If you need support you can call the Stepfamily Helpline, or if you can get everyone together you could also consider family counselling or family mediation. Details of other family agencies that you can contact are outlined at the end of this leaflet.

Stepparents

If your partner is spending Christmas day with their kids and you are not included, you may feel isolated and left out. Try to understand that this arrangement has probably been made with the best interests of the children in mind. Negotiate another time with your partner when you can both be together, either with the kids or as a couple.

Alternatively, if you are spending Christmas as a family and don't have kids of your own, it can feel daunting, especially if you have only limited experience with children.

Stepfamily Scotland Helpline: 0845 122 8655

Providing Support for Stepfamilies

If you are meeting for the first time, don't expect that you will all get on from the outset. Building any relationship takes time and a lot of effort. ***If through time you manage to like and respect each other and your differences, then you will have achieved a great deal.***

However, stepparents can unwittingly become the focal point for resentment and anger from their partner's children or their partner's ex. In both cases, if they say hurtful things, try to take a step back and not take it too personally. Feelings can be unusually extreme at this time of year. Talk with someone who can support you, be it your partner, family, or the Helpline.

Family Traditions

Each family unit in a blended family will have their own Christmas traditions e.g. decorating the Christmas tree, presents, Christmas lunch. It can be difficult to please all the people all of the time.

Consider sitting down and creating some new traditions for the new blended family, whilst retaining some elements from the old families. Being considerate of other's traditions will help make everyone feel welcome in the new family.

However if you find that World War III breaks out over what appears to be the smallest detail, then perhaps you need to consider underlying issues.

What is perhaps being fought over is not so much the detail, but rather what it means to everyone. Traditions provide a sense of security and continuity for families. For children, sacrificing traditions may feel like giving up on their old family and how things used to be.

Consider talking together and exploring what underlying issues are being fought over. Explore whether the issues and feelings can

be handled in other ways. See the communication section below for some tips on how to do this more effectively.

Presents

Children & Parents

Gifts can become loaded with emotions in a blended family. For an absent parent, an expensive or large number of presents can become a way of showing their child how much they love them at Christmas. For the other parent, the lavish demonstration of love associated with gifts can be hurtful. Try not to take this as a personal affront. It may be the only way the absent parent can express their feelings of guilt or hurt over the break-up of the family.

Stepparents

A child may also reject a present given to them by their stepparent. Again, this may be the only way that a child feels they can demonstrate their anger and sadness at the loss of their original family. Try not to take it personally.

Grandparents

Grandparents may feel unsure about what they are supposed to do. They may not know whether to include stepchildren in the present giving or may feel caught in the middle of a difficult separation. If you are a grandparent and you decide that you prefer to only give to your own grandchildren, do consider the implications that this may have for the whole family. Children are acutely aware of 'fairness' and may become resentful or jealous.



Your own children may also feel hurt if you do not acknowledge the reality of their new situation and the people who share their lives. Talk with your children and seek their advice on your wishes and concerns.

Stepfamily Scotland Helpline: 0845 122 8655

Providing Support for Stepfamilies

How to survive Christmas: Some simple steps

1. Anticipate the pitfalls

It may be the last thing you want to do, but it helps if you start thinking now about your Christmas arrangements and be honest with yourself about what challenges may be ahead for your family. By not leaving things to the last minute you will have plenty of time to negotiate the arrangements and you can ensure that everyone knows what the plans are.

Next year you might also want to consider negotiating the arrangements for Christmas at a different time of year. The heightened emotions around Christmas can make it more difficult to negotiate and come to a compromise.

2. Communicate

Once you have thought about all of the arrangements, start talking to everyone involved. Here are some tips on how you can communicate effectively:

- Agree a convenient time for everyone involved in advance, ideally when there are no other distractions or demands on the other person's time.
- Using open questions will help open up the conversation beyond simple 'yes' or 'no' answers. Open questions will also minimise leading children to answer the way you would like them to.
- Open questions begin with the words **what, when, where, and how**. e.g. consider asking "how do you feel?", rather than "do you feel sad?"
- When the other person is responding, try using active listening skills. Active listening involves attending to the meaning of the person's words and what they are feeling. It

is not just listening to the words that they are using.

- When the other person responds to your question, don't respond immediately with another question or what you would like to say. Check your understanding of what they have said by repeating back the key words, messages, or feelings that they communicated to you. This will demonstrate to the other person that you are listening to them, and will also give them the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.
- Take it in turns to talk and listen.

3. Negotiate and Compromise

It sounds obvious, but it isn't always easy to do. If you can negotiate and come to a compromise, despite unresolved past issues, everyone will benefit and none more so than the children. Again this may take a great deal of patience and selflessness, but it's worth it. If you need support, you can contact the stepfamily helpline who can help you talk through the options.



4. Look After yourself

You've considered everyone else; now consider your own needs. Whether you are a parent or stepparent, plan some time alone for yourself and as a couple – it is going to be hectic so you will need some down time. Also, be realistic – don't set yourself up to fail by expecting too much of yourself.

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. Our Helpline Workers will listen, be non-judgemental, and help you explore your situation.

Stepfamily Scotland Helpline: 0845 122 8655

Providing Support for Stepfamilies

You can contact us at:

Stepfamily Scotland
Gillis Centre
113 Whitehouse Loan
Edinburgh
EH9 1BB

Helpline: 0845 122 8655
www.stepfamilyscotland.org.uk
info@stepfamilyscotland.org.uk

Other Contacts:

Family & Relationship Counselling

Scottish Marriage Care
Telephone 0141 222 2166
www.scottishmarriagecare.org

Provide relationship counselling services throughout Scotland to couples or individuals who are married, living together, living apart, divorced or separated. They also provide counselling services to families who are living with conflict.

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.

Recommended Reading

Suzie Hayman, (2006), *Stepfamilies: Surviving and Thriving in a New Family*. Simon & Schuster: London.

Suzie Hayman, (2001), 3rd Edition, *Stepfamilies: Living Successfully with Other People's Children*. Vermilion: London.

Suzie Hayman, (2001), *Your Kids, My Kids: How to cope when there are children from a previous relationship*. Hodder & Stoughton: London.

Flora McEvedy, (2007), *The Step-Parents' Parachute: The Four Cornerstones to Good Step-parenting*. Time Warner Paperbacks.

