

# Steps in the Right Direction

## Your Child's Other Father



**A**t a recent graduation ceremony, a father looked around as parents, family members, classmates, and friends hugged and took photos with the graduates. Through the crowd, he saw a man crying openly as he waited to give a girl a hug. As the two embraced, the father saw the tremendous emotion on the man's face and heard him say to the girl, "I am so proud of you!" The father was surprised by the man's reaction, not because the girl's achievement didn't deserve recognition, but because the man was her stepfather. For the first time, the father truly realized the remarkable impact this stepfather had had on his daughter's life. The father finally understood the depth of the stepfather's love, even though the girl was not his flesh and blood.

In the United States, nearly half of all children will live with a stepfather, foster father, uncle, or man other than their biological father sometime during their childhood. Yet many fathers are concerned when a new man enters the life of their children's mother. They know of, or have heard stories about, stepfathers who abuse their stepchildren. And many biological fathers view the new man as a threat to their relationship with their children. Tradition may contribute somewhat to this confrontational attitude.

**A**s boys, many of us played competitive games in which someone wins and everyone else loses. So as boys grow, they often see the world like the games they played. When another man comes into their children's life, he is viewed as a rival for the children's affection. Instead of talking to the stepfather or writing him a letter about working cooperatively to raise the children, many dads go out of their way to make sure the new man appears inferior in the children's eyes. That way, dads believe they will remain in "first place" in a contest for their children's love. They may not stop to think about the added benefits of a stepfather's involvement in the children's life. But when a stepfather or foster father is considered a partner, rather than an adversary, extended co-parenting can be mutually beneficial, not only for the men involved but especially for the children.

Remember that building a parenting partnership might be as frightening for the stepfather as it is for you. You might begin to establish a positive relationship simply by communicating through e-mail or a letter. Putting your words on the computer or on paper gives you time to think about what you want to say and how you want to say it. Ask him to send you a note just to say he received the e-mail or letter.

Once communication is launched, talk about your children's needs. What are their strengths and how can both of you encourage your children to develop them? Where are they struggling and how can both of you help them through the difficulties? A good area to work on together is school and homework. If you agree on routines, rules, and expectations related to school and homework—and you agree to aim for consistency in enforcing the rules—you will jointly create a more stable environment for the children's development. The children will feel twice as important as they see two men working together toward their best interests. Your cooperation with their stepfather also will help reduce or eliminate potential feelings of betrayal and guilt your children might have if they show they care for their stepfather.

Having a stepfather or foster father in their lives does not mean your children need you any less. In fact, as a separated or divorced dad, your involvement is particularly important to your children. Take the time to really get to know them so you become more skilled at sensing when something is bothering them. Become aware of their needs, moods, personalities, and overall development as they grow. If your children believe you have a genuine interest in their lives, and not simply going through the motions of caring, they may be more open with you and confide in you if something is bothering them. They will find talking to you easy and will share their thoughts and emotions as they face life's successes and challenges. Your involvement and openness also can pave the way for your children to have an equally honest relationship with their stepfather or foster father.

Many men are working very hard to be good stepfathers, foster fathers, uncles, and role models to today's children. If your children are lucky enough to have one of these good men in their life, try to get past any insecurities or jealousies you might have in order to work with this man for the sake of your children. Both you and the stepfather will need to have patience, understanding, and often a sense of humor. But as with any potentially long-term relationship, the benefits will come if you stick with it.

One man can make a difference in the life of a child. But two working together with the children's best interests at heart can more than double the positive effects.

## For Discussion

- Other than your father, who were some of men who had a positive influence on your life?
- Other than your biological children, who are some of the children you have influenced in a positive way?
- What has been your attitude or relationship with the other men in your children's life?
- How have your relationships with these men helped your children?
- As a stepfather or foster father, what would you like to say to your children's biological father if you had an opportunity?

### Check your local public library for these recommended titles:

#### BOOKS

**Better Dads, Stronger Sons:  
How Fathers Can Guide Boys to Become Men of Character**  
by Rick Johnson

**How to Really Love Your Child**  
by Ross Campbell, M.D.

**Whose Kids Are These Anyway?**  
by Ken Swarner

**Wisdom of Our Fathers: Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons**  
by Tim Russert

**Chicken Soup for the Father & Daughter Soul: Stories to Celebrate the Love Between Dads & Daughters Throughout the Years**  
by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Patty Aubery, and Nancy Mitchell Autio

#### MOVIES

**Brother Bear**

**October Sky**

**Stand by Me**

**Treasure Planet**

**Prancer**

**Secondhand Lions**

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Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Family Assistance



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