



25 Ways to go from Stepfather to StepDad

By Joe D'Eramo

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A Helpful Guide for New and Soon-To-Be Stepfathers

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Plymouth

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TO Karin, Casey, Chad and Sophia. My life, my love, my heart.

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Introduction

1. "Good morning to you, good morning to you..."
2. "No, I'm his step..."
3. "We are not relations..."
4. Follow Mom's Lead
5. "Want to go to the mall?"
6. "We do."
7. Dad's Day
8. Grandma/Grandpa? Nana/Papa? Sir or Ma'am?
9. "Have a catch?"
10. "It's your turn, Coach"
11. "StepDad! Pick up!"
12. The Courtship of (fill in the blank)'s StepDad: Before and After the Wedding
13. Being an athletic supporter
14. "I know a thing or two about a thing or two"
15. Silence is golden. Let THEM vent
16. Respect all the parents
17. In-laws as allies
18. Hers and ours...Starting your own family
19. When it's showtime, you're there
20. Movie day

21. Getting along in the car
22. Workspace
23. Doctor, doctor.
24. Favorite part of today
25. "He didn't have to be..."

Introduction

In September 2004, I was 40 years old. Never been married, never had any children. But the words “I do” changed all that instantly and I became a husband and stepfather to two children.

This was not a role for which I was unprepared. Six nieces and nephews, four of them around the age of my new children, made for a pretty good training ground. So did the two and a half years of dating the woman whom I now call my wife.

Or so I thought.

Many of the things that were now part of my day were not all that different from what I was doing before (e.g. school pickups, sports practices, school plays). Only now I did it without the long trek back to my one-bedroom apartment.

So, besides a shorter commute, what was different?

Nothing really. And everything.

I was now an official parent with a major role in raising a nine and 11-year-old. We had all gotten along well before, but the change from Mom’s boyfriend to stepfather was a significant one—even though it was something we all wanted. It still meant a lot of adjusting.

For me, the most important thing was that I wanted to be a StepDad, not a stepfather. You know, somebody the kids would look up to, someone who could teach them how to throw a curve or take them to their first PG-13 movie. Yet at the same time, I didn’t want to be a pushover and let them get away with murder. What unfolded has been truly amazing. You can be a StepDad without losing your credibility as a parent. In fact, it can enhance it.

I don’t claim to be any kind of expert in child rearing. I am not. I hold no degrees in psychology, sociology or any other kind of “ology”. The right woman for me turned out to have two children. Everything I thought would be so scary was not because of her. Even dealing with an ex who at times tested our sanity as well as our patience.

This book is for guys like me who find themselves in love with a woman who has children from a previous relationship and who wants to be a special person in the lives of those kids, even if they are not your own flesh and blood.

Here are some things that I've done that have helped in that regard. Not that it's the only way to go about it, just what's worked for me.

Enjoy this challenge and trust in yourself. The place inside you that made you choose the woman you love and embrace her children by saying "I do" is the shining light you need to follow to go from stepfather to StepDad. Trust that and you are more than halfway there.

1. "Good morning to you, good morning to you..."

Perhaps it's a function of being the oldest male in the house. You naturally seem to be the first one out of bed, even on days when you can sleep in. Yet being an early riser can have a beneficial effect on your stepchildren.

With divorce comes uncertainty—and that's just for the grown-ups. Multiply that anywhere from two to 2,000 and you have an idea of how disturbing it can be for the kids (even more so if it's because their father has died). Being the first face they see in the morning offers a stabilizing element that simply cannot be quantified. Yet it's definitely there.

Does that mean you have to be a pleasant morning person? Not necessarily. Quiet will do. It's your presence that's really important.

Prior to getting married, I lived alone. Morning time was a quiet time by definition. So, upon moving in with my wife and our two children, the novelty of having company at the breakfast table was rather pleasant...at least for me.

At first, they kind of liked it, too. But the teenage years have been another story. I like to think that if you polled them separately with their hands on a Bible, they would admit that having had that presence—annoyingly cheerful or quiet—has made a difference in their lives.

2. "No, I'm his step..."

Even with the preponderance of blended families these days, there lies the natural assumption that if you are with your stepchild/children, you are the biological father (unless there's a very obvious difference in your appearance). So, when you are at the supermarket, a restaurant or sporting event and somebody refers to you as "Dad" (e.g. better check with Dad to see if it's okay to order dessert), what do you do?

As a stepfather, one golden rule you try to follow is not to step on the toes of the biological father, living or deceased. This gets a little more difficult if the relationship with the biological dad is strained or dysfunctional because your stepchildren will tend to look at you as their father. Maybe even secretly wish you were.

Perhaps stronger than that wish is a child's desire for normal. Even though divorce is fairly common in our society, it really doesn't matter to a child. It still feels like a stigma, a figurative stain on their clothing that won't rinse clean. So, during the course of normal public interactions when somebody refers to you as dad or your stepchildren's father, do not correct them.

Is this crossing the line? Only if the biological father is standing right next to you. For your stepchildren, not at all.

There is no need to correct a perfect stranger and explain your family's life story. Whether you realize it or not, correcting that error can reinforce insecurity that your children may have with you as their parent...or increase the guilt they may feel for caring for another man who is not their biological father.

I could go on about the emotional turmoil that correcting a store clerk or waiter might trigger. The point here is that it's just easier to play along than to make sure that a perfect stranger has the correct details of your relationship. Especially when they aren't really wrong. Remember, it's the "father" part of "stepfather" that gives it value and meaning. In other words, you are a father, if not *the* father.

3. "We are not relations..."

Being mistaken for the biological father will happen with your stepchildren's friends and peers as well. Usually your stepchild will correct their peer but even that depends on the relationship. As the stepfather, you have to be okay with however they choose to respond.

One of my fondest family stories is the time when I took our oldest child to a music recital at her school. At that point, she was one of the tallest members of her class. Upon seeing me (I'm 6'6"), one her friends commented, "I see where you get your height." Our daughter replied, "No, we are not relations."

Of course, she meant we are not biologically related and everybody involved understood that. It's become a statement she wishes she could take back because

it's been a source of some good natured teasing ever since. Still, it does provide an invaluable lesson for stepfathers and stepchildren.

You married their mother. By definition, that makes you pretty important in their lives. Even though you may never look alike, you ARE related. You ARE family. How well you establish that with your children goes a long, long way towards becoming "StepDad".

4. Follow Mom's Lead

It will probably happen long before you say "I do", but it's a rule you need to adopt from Day 1. When it comes to disciplining the children, follow your wife's lead.

If there's something she lets the kids do or not do, do not impose your values/beliefs by contradicting her. For example, my wife had a rule that homework must be done right after school, before play time. That rule was fairly ingrained in the kids and they were pretty much on autopilot by the time I married their mother. They came home, they had a small snack and then homework began.

When you officially become the stepfather—and there is a real difference between being the boyfriend who watches his girlfriend's kids and being a parent—you will be tested. A friend will ask the child to come over after school or maybe hang out at the mall. How you have lived your life or were raised yourself has to go out the window. Ask yourself, "what would my wife say?"

It may seem a bit severe to let your wife decide everything when it comes to the kids. After all, you do have your own opinions on child rearing, many of which might coincide with your wife's. But there are some legitimate reasons to let her be the supreme final decision maker.

For starters, in the case of a divorce, she's dealing with an ex. In a lot of those situations, the kids are already trying to keep straight two sets of rules at two households. Consistency at yours, if your wife is the custodial parent, is critical.

Being consistent with the rules set by your wife also gives them a level of security in their own minds ("Okay, Mom got married but things around here are somewhat the same.").

This may seem like a minor point but it's a stumbling block for a lot of stepfathers. Part of winning over your wife's heart had to do with how well you got along with the kids. Typically, that involves a lot of fun stuff that you do together—e.g. playing games, going to the movies or out to dinner. These things make the kids feel like a complete family and that's good, but that's not everyday life.

In everyday life, there are chores and homework to do, housework, yard work, bills to pay, and any number of things that are night-and-day from the fun times you had while you were dating. The safest road to travel is to keep the home running as close to the same as possible in the beginning of your married life.

This does not mean you have no say in the household and what goes on with your stepchildren. Far from it. But it has to be discussed between you and your wife and involves a process of really getting to know the kids. Having your wife's backing and vice versa is the key to a smooth transition in becoming a new parent.

The true beauty of this approach is that it erases a lot of insecurities on the part of the children. No matter how good the relationship between you and the kids, there's a legitimate insecurity on their part that things will be drastically different. By following Mom's lead on things, you're creating and reinforcing the stability they seek.

5. "Want to go to the mall?"

Volunteering to go to the mall is foreign territory for most fathers. Yours truly would rather tongue kiss a frozen flagpole. Yet there are times when you should offer to take the children to the mall. Specifically, Mother's Day, Mom's birthday and whatever holidays you celebrate with gift-giving.

Kids being kids, the thought of buying Mom a present for any of these occasions may not strike them until it's too late. So, suggest a trip to the mall to take care of that.

Is this blatantly sucking up to the children to earn favor? On the surface, it may seem that way. Yet time spent together to accomplish a common objective can bond you to your stepchild or children. And taking the kids out to get a present for Mom is something all Dads should do, step- or otherwise.

Most stepchildren strive for normalcy. Nowadays, that may be a little fuzzy. Yet without getting into politics and ideologies, most kids think of Mom and Dad and

the kids as a family unit. The more things you do within that dynamic, the more you become StepDad because there's a consistency—AKA normalcy—that they desire within it.

Who knows, you might ultimately end up enjoying a trip to the mall. Okay, maybe not. But the kids will.

6. "We do."

Including the kids in the wedding ceremony is an important first step in coming together as a family. You may be husband and wife after the ceremony, but now you are also officially a family. So finding a way for the children to be a part of the big day makes sense.

In our case, my stepson and his grandfather both gave away the bride.

As part of the ceremony, the four of us made a vow as a family after which each child received a special gift. In effect, the whole wedding should become your family's wedding.

Now, you may or may not agree with this next part, but here goes.

There will be times, especially for younger kids in the elementary to middle school age bracket, when they will not like being disciplined by anybody, including Mom. But especially, Mom's husband. On a few occasions, my wife has reminded our kids that being a family was what they wanted and that means accepting me as a parent with all that that entails. If that still doesn't cut it with them, she reminds them that they made a vow to God.

This is not the reason for including the children in the ceremony. But it certainly gives the child more perspective at the moment when they are being reprimanded. And it does the same for you, in case you are tempted to overreact (which all parents, step- and otherwise, are guilty of).

One warning about including the kids in the ceremony. It can lead to some rather uncomfortable conversations for your siblings and their children. One byproduct of our wedding was that our eight-year-old niece wondered why she wasn't at her parents' wedding. Of course, that does provide a nice segue to a birds-and-the-bees discussion, but your siblings may not appreciate that.

7. Dad's Day

You won't find this card in a Hallmark store. Even Facebook doesn't know about it. But Dad's Day is officially the second Sunday in June (aka the Sunday before Father's Day).

How it came to be an official family holiday is anybody's guess. My stepchildren wanted to celebrate Father's Day with me, but visitation stipulated that they be with their biological father on that day. So, they created Dad's Day.

Let me tell you a little something about Dad's Day. It is by far the best day of the year and it's because it goes beyond what a traditional Father's Day is all about. No cheesy ties, no cookie-cutter greeting cards. An authentic holiday.

Typically, Dad's Day involves some sort of family activity. Given the time of year, baseball usually factors into a Dad's Day. Sometimes it's a game my stepson might be playing in. Or, it could be taking the kids to a minor league baseball game. It always involves a cake made by the kids and a gift that carries more than a little sentimental value. Last year's gift was a keeper--a tie with a photo of all of us on it.

Dad's Day took on a more special meaning the first year our daughter was around. She was born on May 22, so she was about two or three weeks old at the time. I think I cried. Okay, I definitely cried. The children's reaction to their new sister (who was 12 and 10 years younger than her siblings) had truly floored me and it all came to a head on Dad's Day.

A special footnote to that Dad's Day, my stepson was the winning pitcher in his baseball game. The game ball still sits on my mantle.

What truly made this Dad's Day special occurred a week later on Father's Day. The older children were away and my wife had planned a quiet day with the baby and me. She had some small gifts but wanted to do a little more. I said "no".

Why?

When you are a new father and working on far less sleep than you're used to, you often find yourself reacting solely on emotion. This is not a recommended life strategy, but in terms of celebrating a holiday without two of my children, it just felt right.

“No. Either we celebrate with all three or not at all.” Not sure where that came from.

Logically, it made sense as a first-time father to celebrate Father’s Day. But it just didn’t feel right. So, we made the conscious decision to celebrate Dad’s Day only. That’s all our youngest has ever known and she loves it every bit as much as her brother and sister.

On the surface, Dad’s Day may seem like a slap at the biological father. It’s really not intended that way. Let’s be honest though. Many stepfathers willingly accept their wives’ children and, in some cases, walk into some pretty sticky situations with the ex-spouse. You pretty much expect to be picking up the slack for somebody else. It sometimes seems like a thankless job and at the end of the day they are still not your children, at least in one very significant way.

Though it may not always seem like it, your stepchildren do appreciate you on some level. They may know it now or it may not dawn on them until they are older but Dad’s Day gives them a day to say thank you. Just as a birthday is as important to parents as to the child whose birthday it is, Dad’s Day is your kids’ day, too.

Whether it’s the Sunday before Father’s Day or some other time, celebrate Dad’s Day once a year. Make it a special time with you and your children. You will find, as I have, that it’s the very best day of year.

8. Grandma/Grandpa? Nana/Papa? Sir or Ma’am?

The relationship you have with your parents can play a major role in your transformation from stepfather to StepDad. If you are close to your children, they naturally are drawn to people who you are close to. The largest factor in this scenario is the level of acceptance that your parents and siblings have for your new family.

In my particular case, there was never any question. My parents welcomed our children and my then-girlfriend with open arms. Family functions and gatherings always took place with consideration of when the kids would be at home. My nieces and nephews pestered me about when I was going to get married so that the kids could officially be their cousins.

I realize this is not always the case and that extended families do not accept at the same rate of speed or enthusiasm. If you do have a family that embraces your

new family, it makes things a whole lot easier with your own relationship to your children.

The key to all these relationships is force nothing on your stepchildren. Plan short visits with your parents at first. Let them get used to each other. If it's comfortable for them, great. If it's not, do not push it. What you might find is that the same structure they seek in you as a parent will extend to your family as well. If it doesn't gel right away, that's okay. Relationships in blended families will find their own levels.

One cute story involving our children occurred a few months into our marriage. We had my wife's holiday party to attend and needed a babysitter. My folks came over, which the kids were looking forward to.

The four of them went to dinner. My parents could tell by the pensive look on the kids faces that they had a topic they wanted to discuss.

"We don't know what to call you."

To date, they had referred to my parents at "Mr. D'Eramo" and "Mrs. D'Eramo". They tried to shorten it to "Mr. D" and "Mrs. D" but it just didn't take. Now that they were officially family, they wanted something a little more personal.

They ordered their food and started to brainstorm. After batting a few ideas back and forth, they decided that they couldn't decide on anything. The formal names of Mr. and Mrs. D'Eramo didn't feel right; neither did calling them by their first names. So, they settled on "Grandma" and "Grandpa", which is also how they address my wife's parents.

Does it cause some confusion when we're all together? Sometimes. But the important thing is that it was their decision and made them feel like family, which they are.

9. "Have a catch?"

In the early days of my relationship with my wife, having a catch with her son was our thing. This was no reflection on what was or was not going on at his father's house. There is just something special about having a catch in your own backyard.

This is grand generalization/stereotype, but most women do not get *Field of Dreams* and the famous "have a catch" line that Kevin Costner utters to his father.

One can take it on a surface level and surmise that the character didn't play catch with his father enough and longed for that second chance. I know people who actually did play catch with their fathers who bawl at the end of this movie.

Why? Playing catch is a metaphor for connecting. Fathers and sons connect by some sort of activity. Throwing around the baseball or football are a few. Playing backgammon or chess could be a few others. It really can be almost anything.

These kinds of activities do not build relationships as much as knit them. It's as if each toss is another stitch and with each stitch, you're creating something. You're not sure what exactly, but it's something that the two of you are creating and you both have a stake in it.

Why baseball can be such a catalyst in darning relationships stems from the nature of the game for little boys and girls. It's a game you play with a group of kids, but you can practice on your own. And in that practice, it's not just about working on a particular skill. In your mind, you work on that skill during the seventh game of the World Series with two out and the bases loaded. Or, perhaps, it's on the mound at Fenway Park, Yankee Stadium or Wrigley Field.

When we're young, we play baseball in our dreams every bit as much as our backyards. Joining your stepchild in this literal field of his or her dreams can only bring you closer. And that dream can extend to kicking a soccer ball with your stepdaughter as she pretends to be Mia Hamm on the U.S. World Cup soccer team. Really, it can be any activity that involves you both and connects the two of you.

One cute story regarding "have a catch". The first summer together with my wife/ then girlfriend, we spent a week at her parents' rental on a lake in Maine. The boy who never remembers to pack a toothbrush or more than one pair of underwear packed my glove.

Have a "catch" with your stepchild/children, whatever that might be. It will shorten the journey to StepDad by light years.

10. "It's your turn, Coach"

Okay, this may have nothing to do with the movie *The Rookie*. You know, the Dennis Quaid movie where the players told Quaid's character, Jim Morris, that he had to try out for the big leagues after the team won States. Yet it's a great segue to another very effective way to bond with your stepchildren: coach.

If your child or children are athletic, there are numerous opportunities to volunteer your time. Even if you're not an expert in the particular sport, all coaches, particularly male coaches, appreciate a volunteer who wants to help rather than stay on the sidelines.

Again, it's about having something in common. It's another conversation at meal time. It's an opportunity to work together on improving your child's skills in that sport. Most importantly, it's a memory you will share and one day look back on.

There are some caveats. If it's a sport you really know nothing about or have zero interest in, limit your involvement. A lot of teams just need a chaperone. Use your judgment about whether coaching will make things easier or worse for your child.

Do not try to relive your glory days vicariously through your child or his or her team. This is their moment. Help, cheer, even give them a figurative kick in the pants when necessary. Just remember that it is their game and you're not playing.

Make it a stress-free time. Easier said than done. If you're a competitor or your child is competitive, things can get a little intense on the playing field. Again, remind yourself and your child that it's okay to compete, but when the game is over leave it on the field.

Finally, expect the unexpected. Take, for example, the season I volunteered to help out with our son's Little League team. Having played baseball in high school and worked with our boy on his pitching, it seemed harmless enough. Well, the head coach of the team had a work assignment that prevented him from coaching during the week. The entire managing of the team, including bringing all the equipment, making out lineups, etc. fell on yours truly.

In short, I loved it.

That's not to say things always went swimmingly. We lost more games than we won. There were times I had to speak to my son about his behavior and other times when I could not have been more proud. At the end of it, we both took from the experience a newfound appreciation of each other and a season neither one of us will ever forget.

11. “StepDad! Pick up!”

Pick-up day. That’s when you either drop off the children or pick them up from their father’s home. It may seem like you’re merely providing a taxi service. Yet it can be as defining as any one thing you might do as a parent. It all comes down to the relationship your spouse and children have with their father.

Even if your spouse and her ex have the best of relationships, you cannot dismiss that the marriage ended and there will be some small amount of animosity. More importantly, there will probably be two different sets of rules in each home (which I spoke more about earlier). All this can make transitioning from one place to the other challenging—and that’s in a good situation.

In some of the more stressful situations, parents limit their communication to an as-needed basis so the tension in their relationship doesn’t impact the children. Of course, the kids can sense that, too. So, you, as the “third party”, must be aware of all this and become the facilitator instead of a factor.

In other words, you need to be able to gauge the situation—including your wife’s, the kid’s and your own mood—and act accordingly. If things are a little hot between your wife and the ex, dropping/picking up the kids by yourself might be a good idea.

In my experience, the ride to and from has been a bonding time, particularly before long visits. Merely being out of your home environment for a prolonged period can cause anxiety in the children and the four of us being together in the car helped alleviate the tension.

Humor was always our thing. If you had a joke, good or bad, that eased some of the tension. Fortunately, yours truly had plenty of the latter.

As the stepparent, your job during this time is to be Switzerland: remain neutral. This is much more difficult than you could ever imagine if the situation between the kids’ father and your wife is strained. It is not always easy to remain the cooler head. In fact, if it’s a really bad situation between your wife and the ex, you could be the one to get your dander up more than your wife. It can be extremely difficult to sit idly by while somebody causes your wife or kids pain. But that is often required in these situations.

So, what do you?

Be honest with yourself and your wife. Discuss your feelings before pickup. If you sense that she's not up for controversy, drive the kids yourself. If you're not up to it, be forthcoming and say so.

What if both of you are in no mood?

That will happen. The answer is: you suck it up. You do the best you can and, at all costs, avoid confrontation. One thing I've found is you get in far less trouble for what you don't say than for what you do. In other words, pretend you're a Boston cab driver picking up a fare. If you've ever had a ride from one of those guys, you know that outside of destination conversation is kept to a minimum. And since you already know that, getting the kids becomes strictly a matter of opening the doors or trunk.

Once you have the kids in tow, it's imperative to assess their moods. There could be a range of possible reactions. They could be extremely excited. Or subdued and withdrawn. Start with, "it's good to see you, how was the weekend?" and see where it goes. If that doesn't get much of a response, talk about your weekend. Try to draw them into that discussion. Eventually, they will decompress but it's a process that will take the next 24 hours or so. Acknowledge that and practice a little patience over the next few days.

Being a parent means taking the good with the bad and the same holds true for being a StepDad. Maybe even more so. The good always outweighs the bad. Remember that.

12. The Courtship of (fill in the blank)'s StepDad: Before and After the Wedding

Older folks like yours truly may remember the TV show, the *Courtship of Eddie's Father*. It starred Bill Bixby, before he was David Banner in *The Incredible Hulk*. It tells the story of a widower and his son's search for a new mom. That's not to imply that your stepchildren "recruited" you for their Mom, but there's a certain amount of courtship on each side of the equation.

What makes this courtship significant is that, like your relationship with your girlfriend/fiancée, things change with the children after you are married—for better and worse. In many cases, you go from the buddy to the parent; the guy who played catch with them to the guy who now tells them to put their dishes in the sink. On your side of the ledger, they may not always be excited to see you when you walk in the door or hang on your every word.

All of that is okay. You are in a parent-child relationship now and it's okay to evolve. But do not forget the things you did during the courtship period. If it was playing catch or a card game or going to a certain store or restaurant, do not let too much time go between doing those things. It's actually pretty good advice for a marriage, too.

Relationships and people mature but you should never forget the things that made you fall in love and care about each other. Revisiting those things on a regular basis, for couples and stepparents, adds depth to your relationship. Plus, remembering to have some fun now and again is just a plain healthier way to live.

When I was dating my wife, my freelance writing practice was in its infancy. Translation, I wasn't quite as busy and was paying rent on a one-bedroom apartment. So, I could play a lot of catch with our son. After the wedding, looking at a mortgage and three additional mouths to feed made it a bit more difficult to break away from the computer and have that catch.

It took some time for him to realize that I was a parent now, not a playmate. It also took more than an occasional reminder to myself not to forget to play catch because it was fun for me, too.

The post-wedding transition poses a major adjustment for an adult. Can you imagine what it's like for a kid? Make a point of remembering to do those fun things you did before. You'll both be the better for it.

13. Being an athletic supporter

As the principal at Rydell High said in the movie *Grease*, "If you can't be an athlete, then be an athletic supporter." As a StepDad with a son, being an athletic supporter means going to the store to help your boy purchase one.

Typically, youth leagues will start requesting participants to wear adequate protection when boys are around seven or eight. At this age, kids may still believe in Santa Claus but they look at you like you have three heads for suggesting that wearing a jock strap and a cup is critical for their well being and continuing the family name. As the male figure in their household, the task of persuading them falls on you.

That's not to say that you may not have some assistance from their father with regard to this issue. But if your stepchildren live with you and visitation is your

standard every other weekend, those visits tend to be more activity-oriented. Budgeting time to shop for jocks doesn't usually make it onto the to-do list. So, it will probably fall on you.

Okay, that last line is really just a figure of speech. Nevertheless, the stepfather becomes the StepDad when he makes these types of chores less mortifying and, in a way, a bonding experience. Yes, difficult to believe that such an activity could achieve that. But it does.

Boys of divorce who don't live with their fathers feel a sense of loss, even if they have the greatest relationship with their fathers. Errands like buying an athletic supporter, teaching them how to shave, and other stuff "normalize" things. The stepfather who can fill in those gaps that a son feels has a great chance of being a StepDad.

14. "I know a thing or two about a thing or two"

Hollywood has not been kind to stepfathers over the years. Some, like the entire *Stepfather* series, you can take with a grain of salt. (It's a horror movie and the stepfather is as good a villain as anybody.) Yet the one stepfather we could all learn something from is based on a true story, Robert DeNiro's Dwight in *This Boy's Life* (the film also starred Leonardo DiCaprio and Ellen Barkin).

Robert DeNiro's character marries Ellen Barkin's character, almost specifically to rehabilitate her juvenile delinquent son (Leonardo's character, Jack). Dwight is bound and determined to provide the discipline and structure every young boy needs. Well, at first Jack aims to please but he soon realizes there's no pleasing Dwight.

Not that Jack is a saint. Far from it. But one of the surest ways to fail as a stepparent is to point out the shortcomings of the father.

In the movie, Jack's real father had walked out on his mother and Dwight felt the only way to save Jack was to try and break him. The "I know a thing or two about a thing or two" is a line Dwight says several times in the movie when lecturing Jack on how his father is nowhere to be found and how he's actually trying to make a man out of Jack.

One of the worst things you can do as a stepfather is bash the biological father—even if he deserves it. There are certainly many fathers out there who leave or

divorce their wives who need a real wakeup call when it comes to parenting (or not parenting). But telling your children you're doing something because their real father won't do it is a huge mistake. It's also one of the more difficult challenges you'll face as a stepparent.

Remember, you are a parent, too. Parent the way you and your wife have agreed to parent the kids. Resist any temptation you might have to bad mouth their father. And for God's sake, do not ask if there's any mustard left in that jar (you have to see the movie).

15. Silence is golden. Let THEM vent

There will be times when your kids want to vent about their father. This is a natural occurrence that would happen in a home where both biological parents were raising the kids. As the stepfather, you are in kind of a weird position because the children will probably feel comfortable venting about their father in front of you.

Now, you can easily infer their dissatisfaction with their father to be an endorsement of you. Big mistake. An even bigger mistake is joining the "Daddy bashing".

Insulting their father, even if they are doing it, does very little to enhance you in their eyes. It's kind of like the person of Italian descent telling Italian jokes. It's only funny when they do it. When the Jewish guy tries to join in the levity, it's no longer funny—maybe even insulting.

You need to let them vent and let it be their way of blowing off steam. You also want to retain a sense of fairness and respect. After all, allowing your children to trash an adult, deserving or not, does not set a good precedent. It could be you on the chopping block with their mother or friends on another day.

The practice I've found to achieve a nice balance is to let them have their rant. Yet if there's something you hear that sounds disrespectful or even unfair, say so. You need to be the voice of reason because, bottom line, they will still be going back to their father's house. You want to help achieve that happy medium between letting them get it out of their system and an all-out mutiny.

Playing a little devil's advocate can help diffuse the rant and keep it from becoming destructive. By asking the kids to see it from their father's side, you reel

them in a little. In many situations, kids might bear some hostility towards their father and they will have a tendency to blow things out of proportion and be unfair to him. In others, they could be dead on and completely justified in their criticisms and complaints.

It really doesn't matter. As the StepDad, you want them to be fair to everyone. They may not like or agree with you "defending" their father. But they will respect you for making them see that there are two sides to every story.

16. Respect all the parents

Can we all agree there is no closer bond than between mother and child? Biological fathers play their part, no doubt. But you cannot compare their role to all that goes along with carrying a child for nine months and nurturing that child into a person that walks, talks, thinks, etc. That said, you cannot underestimate the uphill battle faced by stepmothers.

Most stepmothers are not even trying to take the place of the birth mother. Yet they face resentment from their stepchildren, whether stated or underlying, from pretty much Day One. Simply put, it's a tough gig.

Like stepfathers, a stepmother has the mandate to forge a relationship with the children and do so in a way that's non-threatening to the children's mother. I'm going to state right here that it is far more difficult than being a stepfather, especially since many children do not live permanently with their stepmothers. The question is, "how does this affect you as the stepfather?"

Essentially, you want to follow the same rules you would for your children's father. You let them vent if need be, but point out when they are being unfair or disrespectful. When relevant, ask them to look at things from their stepmother's point of view.

This tactic usually works. If not, then try comparing the role of parent—step or otherwise—to that of the president. You may or may not like the person, but you have to respect the office and act accordingly.

Like I said, being a stepparent is not always an easy job. As one yourself, you owe it to other stepparents to point this out to your children when their criticisms cross the line.

17. In-laws as allies

In-laws, particularly mothers-in-law, tend to be good material for jokes. Case in point:

A man in a bar says to another, "My mother-in-law is an angel." The other replies, "You're so lucky. Mine is still alive."

Ba-dum-dum.

That out of the way, your in-laws are your best allies in developing the kind of relationship you want with your children. Why? Because chances are they have played a large role in their daughter's post break-up life. In a lot of cases, the grandparents act more like actual parents of their grandchildren. Their acceptance of you is important to the kids and vice versa.

It would be naïve to think merely wanting to get along with your in-laws means you will. You do have something pretty special in common: a love of their daughter and grandchildren. If you show that love through how you treat your wife and children, that's usually enough for most parents. At the very least, it's a strong foundation on which to build your relationship.

Of course, if you do get along with your in-laws and actually enjoy their company, even better. It's amazing how well you can get along with people if you share the love of the people in their lives.

In my case, I pretty much disagree with my in-laws when it comes to politics, religion and coffee-making. Yet we get along because we share a love of my wife and the kids and, most importantly, have a sense of humor about things.

Sharing a laugh with your in-laws goes a long, long way with your children because it puts them at ease. Even in the best ex- relationships, there's still some inherent tension by definition. Getting along and enjoying your in-laws gives them one less thing to worry about. For many children of divorce, it makes spending time with grandma and grandpa even more enjoyable because everybody gets along.

Again, part of that is being able to laugh, particularly at yourself. So, in fairness to my dear mother-in-law, here's a classic son-in-law joke:

A very successful businessman had a meeting with his new son-in-law. "I love my daughter, and now I welcome you into the family," said the man. "To show you

how much we care for you, I'm making you a 50-50 partner in my business. All you have to do is go to the factory every day and learn the operations."

The son-in-law interrupted, "I hate factories. I can't stand the noise."

"I see," replied the father-in-law. "Well then you'll work in the office and take charge of some of the operations."

"I hate office work," said the son-on-law. "I can't stand being stuck behind a desk all day."

"Wait a minute," said the father-in-law. "I just made you half-owner of a moneymaking organization, but you don't like factories and won't work in an office. What am I going to do with you?"

"Easy," said the young man. "Buy me out."

That's for you, Mom.

18. Hers and ours...Starting your own family

You and your wife may decide to add to your family with children of your own. While clearly a decision for the adults, it greatly involves your stepchildren. It will alter their lives almost as much as it will change yours. Do not lose sight of that.

Does that mean they should be part of the decision? Not necessarily, but hypothetically asking them how they would feel about a baby brother or sister is not a bad idea. If they put up unusually strong opposition, that's something you have to consider.

Once you're expecting, you should involve them to a certain degree. Ask them about baby names. Maybe run it by them what toys to pick out for the new baby or how should you decorate the room. Make them part of the anticipation of this wonderful event.

Along the way, expect bumps, and plenty of them. This is normal. Be very clear in reassuring them of their place in your heart and how everybody in the household is going to have to adjust. Emphasize the importance of their role as a big brother or sister.

The age of your children plays a huge part in the transition to having a baby in the house. In my case, the kids were 10 and 12 respectively. At that point, they were quite secure in their place with their mom and me and probably didn't see the baby as much of a threat but truly a blessing.

While I can't say it was a conscious thing on any of our parts, having our daughter solidified our connection as a family. While vows before God connected us before—not to underestimate that—a live human being has become our bond. It's something neither child has verbalized to me, but I can certainly feel it.

After the baby comes home, you face more challenges. If you have never had a child of your own, this is a new experience for you as much as it is for your older children. Positioning it as a "we're all new to this, but we're in it together" can comfort them and you.

I've often referred to my older kids as co-parents. This is not because they watched the baby as much as I did, changed diapers or anything like that. As any new parent can appreciate, taking care of a baby can feel like a very isolating experience at times. Having your children come in to sit with the baby, read to him or her, play with him or her just to give you a modicum of privacy while you take a bathroom break is gold.

Besides giving you a break, these moments make them feel like they are part of raising the baby; like they have a stake in it. And they really do.

One of my favorite images is of our son holding the baby in his lap, feeding her, while he reads a book. My favorite photo of all-time is the reaction of both older children as they view their baby sister for the first time. Many photos can give you a sense of what's going on but few capture the moment. This photo does.

There will still be bumps along the way. After the baby arrives there are tons of adjustments to make. While you want your children to be part of things, you really should leave things like changing diapers, cleaning up vomit and many of the other wonderful things about parenting to the grownups. Unless the kids really want to do these chores.

The reasoning for that is you want their experience with their sibling to be a positive one, not one of drudgery. Making them responsible for that sort of thing can create resentment and that's the last thing you want.

What's incredibly interesting about this process occurs as the baby gets older and gets closer to the age of your stepchildren when you first met them. You begin to notice not only how the "baby" takes after you or your wife, but how he or she reminds you of the siblings. That's when the description of "co-parents" really gains validity.

When my wife and I made the decision to have a child, my expectation was that my stepchildren would warmly receive their new brother or sister. There was also the expectation they would grow tired of the baby or find it an annoyance at times. And that would have been perfectly fine. What actually happened exceeded anything I could have possibly imagined.

Our "baby", now five, has been a blessing for all of us. She brings us endless laughter and joy. She's also at various times been a binky for all of us when we're feeling down and out. It's quite common to see the older children go up to "the baby" and just ask for a hug, which she willingly delivers.

I wish every stepfather could experience what I have been blessed to have gone through with our children. You take a great leap of faith when you marry somebody with children and you can never be sure how that will go after you say "I do". Yet the rewards, and the feeling you get inside, can exceed your wildest expectations.

19. When it's showtime, you're there

If you have children, they WILL have plays, recitals, science fairs, games, practices, you name it. It just comes with the territory. Being a Dad, step or otherwise, means making it to these events. Or at least attending as many as you can.

The infamous "we are not relations" line uttered by our oldest came after attending a band concert. Ironically, I was the only one from the family who attended because our son had a baseball game at the same time. I took one for the team.

Perhaps it's today's lifestyle, but we organize everything from basketball games to games of kick the can (with adults as scorekeepers). Perhaps I'm kidding about that last one, but there does seem to be more importance on adults attending their children's events, particularly sports. For children of divorce or those who have lost a parent, it becomes even more important to have their parents at these events.

Does it make you more of a Dad to attend? Yes, it does. Even more so if you are happy to attend and it shows.

20. Movie day

Consistency may be the hobgoblin of simple minds, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson. It's an absolute essential for being a Dad.

Routines and rituals build a comfort level with your children and ease insecurities. That does not necessarily refer to household chores and what you have for breakfast. Creating a fun, just-for-us ritual can have a wondrous effect.

A few years ago, our son and I started going to the movies on New Year's Day. Movie prices and schedules being what they are, we typically don't go to the theater and when we do, it's as a family. So, a special movie day with the two of us has become a ritual that both of us look forward to.

You can do the same for your daughters, too. Whether it's a weekly trip to the library or just-us time at a coffee shop, these outings again build your relationship and create a sense of ease.

While you're scheduling just-us time, be sure to save plenty of that for your wife. What puts the mind/s of your children at ease the most will be the relationship between you and your spouse.

Speaking of movies, Hollywood has not exactly been kind to stepfathers historically. Then again, most movies do quite enjoy making all parents look ridiculous. The aforementioned *This Boy's Life* does quite a job on stepfathers. While Tobias Wolff's stepfather Dwight may have been abusive, I'm guessing the screenplay took a few liberties to emphasize that point.

One movie that actually treats the stepfather with some dignity and respect is *Table for Five*. It stars Jon Voigt with Richard Crenna as the stepfather. It tells about a father who's trying to regain favor with his children by taking them on a cruise. The father bought a fifth seat, sort of in hopes that he can win back his ex-wife's heart.

During the course of the cruise, the father learns of his ex-wife's death in a car crash. The stepfather joins the cruise to take the children home. Without spoiling the end for those who haven't seen it, the father and stepfather decide to work

things out about who gets custody of the children. As Jon Voigt's character says while trying to reason with the stepfather, "Come on, Mitchell, they need us."

Your children need you to be an active part of their lives. Special things like Movie Day reinforce that. Try it.

21. Getting along in the car

If you did a breakdown of how much time you spend with your children, how much of that would be spent in the car? If your children's father does not live in the same town, that can be a significant amount of time. How you spend that time can be a defining part of your relationship.

We covered pick-up days earlier, but the time you spend shuttling kids to activities can also contribute to your conversion to StepDad. Sure, they may have their iPods going or be texting their friends, but you are there live. It's a great time to inquire about their day. Or tell them about yours.

You actually have an advantage over most "traditional" parents. When you pick up your children from their father's, there's a positive association with the car ride: going home.

Use those trips to school, sporting events or the mall to your advantage. It may mean listening to their CD or radio station, but if you can get the earphones off, you can connect.

22. Workspace

In the early days of my stepfatherhood, our family lived in a small, three-bedroom house not very well equipped to run a home business. My office space was actually in a corner of the dining room. Who knew those cozy confines would build the foundation of my relationship with our oldest.

At the time, she was in middle school and on an earlier schedule than her brother. She would arrive home about an hour or two before him. As someone working from a home business and not seeing another soul for hours, I found her face a most welcome part of the day.

Beyond a pleasant diversion, her arrival prompted discussion of our days. With her brother still not home from school the conversation had the feel of two co-

workers at the water cooler rather than a parent and child (with the exception of her beverage of choice, milk).

That feeling was reinforced when she sat down at the dining room table to commence homework while I would go back to writing at my desk. Occasionally, there would be a glance up to see what the other was doing. I have a habit of laughing out loud at some of the things I write. Her curiosity would get the better of her and she would ask what I was laughing at.

This scenario repeated itself many times over the course of that first year. Prior to the wedding, I really hadn't had that much one-on-one time with our daughter. Those afternoons helped us form a bond that we share to this day. While the days she comes directly home on the bus become fewer and fewer, I still look forward to them.

Does that mean you should set up space in your home office for your kids? It really depends on how much you use the office. If you have a home-based business, it may not be practical. Yet if you have a space you use to pay bills and do occasional odds and ends, you might want to consider setting up a desk/work station for the kids. The benefits can be well worth it.

23. Doctor, doctor.

I began writing this section in the waiting room at a doctor's office with my daughter. Nothing serious. Now that she's 18, it gives me cause to reflect on the number of doctor visits we've made over the years and how those visits have helped foster a closeness with all my children.

When you are sick, you are at your most vulnerable. Being the person to take the kids to the doctor, get medicine afterwards, and then get them settled and comfortable creates a bond like no other. Yet it's a tricky area for a stepparent.

Yes, you think of them as your children. The fact remains they are not your biological children. You may not have all the answers when it comes to history and other things and you always kind of wonder whether you have the right to consent to treatment or does your wife have to make that call. That's why a lot of stepfathers leave it to their wives to take the kids to the doctor to avoid any potential hassles.

Is it best for your wife to take the children to the doctor? Probably. Yet don't run away from the responsibility. If it makes sense for you to be the one to take a sick child to the doctor, do it. It's what all parents do.

The relationship you have with your children is based on trust. You tend to trust people who will care for you when you're sick. While most stepchildren have a certain level of trust for the person their mother chose to marry, it's a relationship that needs nurturing and periodic reinforcement. A trip to the doctor may seem inconsequential to you, but to them, it goes a little deeper. It's another brick in the foundation of your relationship. Really.

24. Favorite part of today

A neighbor told me of this ritual he has with his daughter. Every night, as he puts his child to bed, they ask each other, "what was your favorite part of today?" This moved me so much I started doing it with my youngest. Now it's our ritual, too. You might want to try it with the people in your life, especially your stepchildren.

Why? Two reasons. First, the key to developing any kind of bond with anybody is communication. This ritual is like a daily appointment to have a one-on-one conversation. With families as busy and strapped for time as they are nowadays, you can't underestimate the importance of a few minutes of quality time with your children.

Second, it's not always easy to have a favorite part of the day. Some days are just plain tough. What this exercise does is help you find the good in every day and teach your children to do the same.

For example, I had a particularly difficult day with a number of issues circling around in my brain. Nothing extraordinary—bills, clients, etc. And for the life of me, I couldn't think of a thing that happened that day that I even liked, never mind was my favorite. When I thought about it a little more, I realized the favorite part of my day looks back at me every single day.

So, on those days when I was stumped, my answer to "what was your favorite part of today" was "when I woke up and realized that I was still married to your mother and that you, me, Mom and your brother and sister were still a family."

My daughter smiled. She liked the answer and filed it. Though her favorite part of the day still ends up being some video game she played or candy she ate, the message gets through.

Many stepchildren feel a void by not having a father living with them. Divorced parents can do a remarkable job in helping kids adjust, but it's something that they naturally feel. By marrying their mother, you complete the circle. The outside world may consider the wife and children the lucky ones for having somebody to take on another man's family. The outside world is wrong.

Truth be told, you are the lucky one. The person you chose to spend the rest of your life with entrusted you with her most valuable possessions: her children and her heart.

You can still have a favorite part of the day like a great meeting with a client or going to the movies or something like that. Just remember that for days when things might not seem so rosy, you have a built-in favorite part from the moment you wake up.

25. "He didn't have to be..."

My first Christmas as an official stepparent came with an incredible gift. The kids gave me a copy of the Brad Paisley song *He Didn't Have to Be*. The song tells the tale of a boy from when he meets his StepDad to the time he has a child himself and can't wait to show his stepfather the new baby.

The CD came with a book filled with stories and quotes from people who have StepDads. I'd never heard of the song or even Brad Paisley at that point. So when the children started reading the song lyrics, I was in tears. Especially this part of the chorus:

"And then all of a sudden, it seemed so strange to me how we'd gone from "something's missing" to a family. Looking back, all I can say about all the things he did for me is that I hope I'm at least half the dad that he didn't have to be."

The CD also includes an anecdote from Brad Paisley on how he came up with the lyrics with his songwriting partner who had recently become a new stepfather. The transformation in his friend was so powerful that it inspired the song.

When you first become a stepparent, there's a tendency to want to take your bows, like you did something so great as to marry a single mom and choose to

help raise her kids. Becoming one is the easy part. The true accomplishment is what you do after that.

While many parts of the song touch my heart, what resonates most is the line, "I hope I'm at least half the dad that he didn't have to be." The "didn't have to be" part is a given. Setting a standard, raising your children in a way they would strive to emulate is the challenge.

And that truly is the way you go from stepfather to StepDad.