

How stepdads can avoid missteps

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As any stepdad can tell you, it's one thing to win a mom's heart and another to win over her children.

Although one-third of American [children](#) live in a stepfamily during part of their childhood, little is known about the development of the relationship between stepfathers and [stepchildren](#).

New research from Brigham Young University fills that gap with a study that identified three factors that significantly contribute to closeness in stepfamilies:

- The couple keeps arguments to a minimum
- Mothers help children feel comfortable sharing their frustrations
- The stepfather and mother agree on how to parent

BYU professor Kevin Shafer's research on stepfamilies appears in the academic journal *Social Work*.

"Family roles can be negotiated and there is going to be some bumpiness," said Shafer, who teaches and researches in BYU's School of Social Work. "The notion that couples should put the couple first and everything else will fall into place is false."

Shafer and BYU grad student Todd Jensen analyzed data from a nationally [representative sample](#) of 1,088 children in stepfamilies. From the children's perspective, frustrations occur when the new dad assumes too much parental authority or when he disrupts the family's normal way of doing things.

"Moms need to let their children know that it's ok to talk if they have a problem with their stepfather because everybody is still trying to figure out this new family dynamic," Shafer said.

And the lack of history between stepdads and children amplifies the detrimental effects of [parental conflict](#).

"Full-blown arguments set up stepfamilies for failure," Shafer said.

Couples typically make one of two mistakes in the transition. The first type involves the couple acting as though nothing major has changed – that the new father is a replacement instead of an addition. The second type of mistake is for mom to take upon herself all of the parenting.

The common thread in both scenarios is that the children's voices are missing.

"If you have teenagers, they should be a pretty active participant in discussions of what the family is going to look like and how the family is going to function," Shafer said.

The study contains one pleasant surprise: Communicating openly and avoiding arguments contributes to closeness regardless of family income or education level.

"It really is the interpersonal dynamic that predicts [family](#) closeness," Shafer said. "You can build these bonds in spite of financial challenges."

Provided by Brigham Young University

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