



Step-by-step parenthood

The highs and low of step-parenting can be tricky terrain to negotiate, writes **Karalee Katsambanis**.

Put five medical professionals in a room and they will undoubtedly come up with at least eight different opinions on how best to treat a patient.

Put five stepparents in a room and they will also undoubtedly come up with at least eight different opinions for treating a problem.

A medical professional can be guided objectively by their training and experience. But when it comes to step-parenting and blended families, parenting training does not exist and emotions are far more powerful than logic.

Good medicine is not just about treating the condition, it is as much about treating the cause.

Few realise the immense stress step parents are subjected to and their mental health is subsequently often underestimated.

No one grows up dreaming of being a stepparent. Indeed, it is role that chooses you, rather than you choosing it. Fantastic that “love” has been found a second time around, but there is a hidden cost to mental health.

The majority of stepparents choose to make a positive difference in the life of their stepchild. They do not sign up for the emotional or bad-mouthing games and in the worst cases the legal minefield they are often subjected to.

They sign up not realising that establishing relationships with their stepchildren can sometimes take years rather than weeks or months.

Do you have patients suffering from anxiety and/or depression? Have you asked them if they are a

stepparent? It is a question worth considering.

Every stepfamily's situation is different, but there are two golden rules to remember:

- There is no one right way to stepparent, but there is always one right way to behave in a stepfamily and that is with respect.
- Your ex is your ex but will never be your children's ex, so stop bad mouthing.

Remember these two golden rules and you will be head and shoulders above the rest.

Most people *mean* well. However, THE most annoying thing you can say to any stepparent, especially those enduring drama, is to say, ‘well, you knew what you signed up for’. The stepparent will shut down and never mention it again.

Successful parenting does not just simply happen. Most of the well-meaning advice you get about stepparenting and blended families comes from people who are not stepparents and who do not live in a blended family.

It is a tough job at the best of times but helping to parent someone's else child is a whole different ball game complete with challenges many biological parents simply do not realise.

More often than not, stepparenting is about coping criticism rather than claiming credit.

The fundamental value of having good communication between the stepparents and biological parents – with everyone on the same page working together for the benefit of the children – cannot be

underestimated and has never been more important.

Parenting is not a competition. There is room for both stepparents and parents to play the most important role they will do in their lives.

Stepfamily and blended family life, even at its happiest, is still far more complex than most people can imagine.

Stepchildren and biological children in the same home cannot be parented in exactly the same way. There will be different ages, personalities, needs and histories.

It is not the stepparent's job to ‘fix’ their stepchildren, but it is their job to do the best they can under the circumstances which ironically may be contributing to the erosion of their own personal mental health.

So the next time someone comes to see you about their mental health, it may well actually be their own stepfamily that is the real cause. Please, ask your patients. **mf**

*ED: Karalee Katsambanis is a TV commentator, journalist, columnist and media trainer. She is a mother of three children and stepmother of two young adults. She has published a book, *Step Parenting with Purpose – everything you wanted to know but were too afraid to ask*. www.karaleekatsambanis.com*

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