



“Few step-families are quite as sugar and spice and everything nice as *The Brady Bunch*”

Step-parenting expert and author Karalee Katsambanis offers some words of wisdom on how to traverse this tricky terrain and not come out looking like the wicked stepmother

STORY KARALEE KATSAMBANIS

While stepfamilies are more common than ever before, few are quite as sugar and spice and everything nice as portrayed in old episodes of *The Brady Bunch*. Even at its happiest, blended-family life is still far more complex than people on the outside could ever imagine.

When I became a stepmom to two pre-teens, I had no children of my own. Unlike Mike and Carol Brady, I also didn't have a housekeeper like Alice Nelson. Forget Alice's washing, cooking and cleaning skills – what I needed was her sage advice on how to navigate the complicated world of step-parenting. Finding the right strategies to cope with juggling the diary arrangements for visits during schooltime and holidays, dealing

with the emotional roller-coaster of exclusions from special events like birthday dinners, school graduations and sports matches, and of course the always painful “you are not my mother!” outbursts.

Now, 15 years later, having come out the other end as a mother of three pre-teens and stepmother of two well-adjusted young adults, I wanted to share the tough lessons I learnt for others navigating this tricky territory.

There's not much I haven't seen or experienced as a step-parent – from arguments over last-minute change of plans that appear spiteful and calculated, to tackling a former partner who refuses to have any communication even when a child is sick and may need special

treatment. Sometimes there are children from both partners' previous unions involved and often a new baby, or a few, come along. For us, the arrival of a new baby brought the most unexpected challenges, the hardest of which was the refusal of my stepchildren's mother to allow them to meet their sibling until “our weekend”. It was emotionally draining for everyone, especially the kids.

It's understandable that you'll want to create that ideal of the happy family, but don't rush things. Be realistic about how long things will take to evolve. It can take substantially more time than people think for stepfamilies to bond and build trust. So just take it one day at a time.

Step-parenting is about commitment, compromise and compassion. The biggest thing to remember is that it is not a competition. Don't pit yourself against their biological parents or try to one-up them, and never badmouth them in front of your stepkids. Remember that while they may be your partner's ex, they will never be your stepchildren's ex. But at the same time, it's OK to set boundaries



Step-by-step

- 1 As much as you may want to, it is not your job to fix your stepchildren. Sometimes just being there is enough to make a huge difference in their lives. More than anything, it takes time for them to realise that you're not the enemy.
- 2 There is no one “right way” to blend a family. But there is always one way to behave – with respect. Remember the golden rule: you can only control what you say and do, not how others behave.
- 3 Avoid messy areas that can cause unnecessary discomfort. I've never tried to get my stepchildren to call me Mum. Instead, they call me by my maiden-name initials, KT.
- 4 In an ideal world, disciplining a stepchild should be left to the biological parents. But we don't live in an ideal world. It is a conversation that you and your partner need to have to set clear guidelines.

Step Parenting With Purpose: Everything You Wanted To Know But Were Too Afraid To Ask by Karalee Katsambanis, \$29.95, karaleekatsambanis.com

in your home and your relationship, and don't be afraid to say no.

It's not wise to overcompensate by buying loads of presents in the hope of winning a stepchild's love, approval and smile. As hard it may be, just show interest in them and be there for them, even if they remain distant or conflicted for some time. Keep in mind that while you may be ready to be a step-parent, your stepchildren may not be ready for you just yet.

My stepkids are no longer kids. We have a mature and healthy adult relationship despite living on different sides of the country. They know that I am still there for them if they need me, in good times and bad. At the end of the day, a parent or step-parent isn't there to be a best friend to the child – they're there to help raise a person who will be self-confident, know that they're loved and make a great contribution to society when they grow up. ♦