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Healthy stepparenting, healthy marriage

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Being a blended family will definitely affect your marriage. Few couples get away with one parent hanging out on the sideline, while the other (usually the biological parent) "makes the rules".

Even if the child and stepparent have known each other for years, adolescence can be tough even for two biological parents, so stepparents might have more challenges.

In my own experience, not knowing how else to act in my teen years, I took a lot out on my stepdad. Unfortunately, he was a handy scapegoat. But teens are doing a lot of things from 12-20, the first being establishing independence. I've heard that it's easy to compare a two year old's stages to a teenager's stages because they are experiencing similar things in their family dynamic: finding out who they are in relation



Photo by SheilaTostes

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to everyone else.

The teen is going through a process called "identity formation", according to *Understanding Psychology* by Charles Morris and Albert Maisto. The adolescent is finding out who they are by figuring out their beliefs, making personal choices, and creating goals. Many adults are still doing these things 20-40 years later. Teenagers are also associating more with peer groups, where they are learning how to survive on their own, without their parents.

So what's a stepparent to do when they become scapegoated, caught in the middle, and rebelled against?

This topic was a suggestion from a reader. Do you have a question, concern or topic you want to see? Email me!

Here are a few tips from experience, as well as some helpful sources:

- Both/All parents have to come together and agree on boundaries, limitations, and discipline.
- Both/All parents should agree on praise and reward, as well (otherwise parents can be pitted against each other).
- When parents can communicate with each other with ease, this provides a stable environment for the teen who may continue to lash out, rebel, or test boundaries, but at least the parents have methods to communicate effectively when conflict arises.
- Sit down all together, and talk about the current challenges. Teens like to be heard (even if they resist!) by both/all parents.
- If there are some exceptionally tough challenges, have the stepparent and teen sit down and talk by themselves.
- While it may make sense to befriend your teen, let them be friends with their peers and you stay in the parent role.
- See rebellion as a good thing. There are still going to be consequences, but this is how your teen is learning who he/she is in the world.
- Get support from [National Stepfamily Resource Center](#).
- Realize that children have natural alliances with one or both of their biological parents. While this may cause some hurt feelings, it's not personally against the stepparent.
- Karolyn Meader, of Portland, Ore., in an [article on stepparenting teens](#), suggests that stepparents define their roles in the family and not focus on getting trying to get the child(ren) to like them.
- Understand that stepfamilies cannot be like nuclear families. Examine your expectations and make sure they are realistic, especially with regard to your family's specific situation.
- Create rituals. While this may get some resistance, it also provides structure. You may not need to coerce or force your teen to participate, but they will know that you always have a movie night, or a hike on Sunday, or take a summer road trip and it provides them choice, stability, and inclusion.

One of the most important aspects in your marriage is that you communicate well, during good times and bad. If your communication has been half-hearted or mediocre at best, a troubled teen will bring it to the surface in no time. If your communication is great, but you haven't yet learned about creating limitations, boundaries and discipline, then sit down and talk (just the two of you) about how things have changed for the teen and explore what's relevant right now.

Take 10 minutes and quietly sit by yourself (both the biological parent and the stepparent should do this) and meditate on what your teen wants right now. Listen for the loving, scared, assertive, curious, and/or lonely voice that your teen may not be able to express to you face to face. You may get a feeling of "My teen wants more one on one time with me," or "My teen may want more autonomy" or even "My teens wants more rules." If you allow the spiritual voice of your teen to talk to your spiritual self, you might be able to circumvent the current conflict and get closer to resolution.

Finally, the most important thing you can do, regardless of consequences, actions, rebellion, and everything else, is to love your teen as hard as you can. Love each other as hard as you can too. Only you will know what



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that looks like. Create stronger bonds based on the storms you have already weathered so you're prepared for the future.

Remember, this eventually shifts as your teen gets older, has more experiences, and gets closer to leaving the house.

For more info: [Articles on stepfamilies](#), [National Stepfamily Resource Center](#), [Stepparents and Teenagers](#), [Blended Families](#)

Did you grow up in a blended family? What helped you get through the tough times? Are there things you would do differently? Can you offer additional resources, websites, books, or advice?

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Becca Campbell is an Examiner from Seattle. You can see Becca's articles on [Becca's Home Page](#).

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