



Step-Parents by Jodi Wyman

Parenting after a divorce can be very difficult. Statistics show that more than half of divorced people will remarry. This creates the even more difficult challenge of step-parenting.

Any lawyer practicing family law can verify that new partners can often present a further challenge to a family already struggling with co-parenting after separation. The new relationship has a wide variety of potential problems. If the former spouse does not like the new spouse, they will not be happy seeing their children spend time with them. Children may not like the new partner at first and feel threatened by their presence. They also may worry that liking the new partner is an act of disloyalty to their parent. When children are caught in the middle, they often choose sides.

If a child does not like their new step-parent, with good reason or not, the married parent's relationship with their child can be hampered. They feel they have to choose between their partner and their child.

On the other hand, if the children do like the step-parent, it can create feelings of jealousy for the biological parent.

The step-parent has the challenge of deciding whether they can discipline their step-child and how involved they should get in parenting issues and decisions. Should they attend parent/teacher interviews, doctor appointments and school events?

In many divorce cases, the step-parent helps by acting as an intermediary. When the biological parents cannot talk civilly, the step-parent sometimes assists with communication and in arranging visits.

The situation can become far more complicated when both partners have children, and just trying to make schedules for the children can seem impossible.

One issue that step-parents may not be aware of is what happens if their marriage ends. Does their relationship with the step-child end? The answer is not always.

The law used to be that a step-parent had a choice as to whether they wanted to continue the relationship after a marriage breakdown. Judges however decided that this approach was not fair to children. The Court has the jurisdiction to require a step-parent to pay child support on an indefinite basis. Child support can be ordered even if the biological parent is also paying support. There are no rules as to how long the step-parent has to be in the family before a support obligation is triggered.

A step-parent can also have visitation rights with the child after a separation if the Court feels it is in his or her best interests. This is more common when there is no biological parent available to the child and/or when the second marriage was a long one. As well, the age of the child is a factor. A very young child will be more inclined to form a closer relationship with a step-parent than a teenager would.

In cases where the step-parent has become a true parent to the child, and either in the absence of the biological parent or with their consent, a step-parent can adopt a child. They are then the parent in all respects, and a new birth certificate will issue. The biological parent they replaced has no further rights or obligations.

Being a step-parent is a challenge. Fortunately, there is a great deal of help available for step-parents. There are books, support groups, parenting courses and even information on the internet. It is worth investing some time to truly understand the situation into which a step-parent is entering.