For more information on adding children to a stepfamily, see:

*Yours, Mine and Ours: How Families Change When Remarried Parents Have a Child together,* by Anne C. Bernstein, Ph.D. (W.W. Norton, 1990)

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**WELCOMING**

**A NEW BABY**

**IN A STEPFAMILY**

**by**

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 **BEFORE THE BABY ARRIVES**

**Deciding Whether to Have Another Child**

1. **DISCUSS whether you will be having more children before committing to marry.** Better to learn early if you are incompatible on questions that do not permit compromise. Although hearts and minds do change, you cannot count on your partner coming around to what you dearly want.

**2) EXPORE both the plusses and the minuses of having another child.**

It helps when each person talks about both dreams and doubts. Rather than making deciding to go ahead less likely, learning that each partner has some hesitation allows the more reluctant partner to consider what would be attractive about enlarging the family.

**3) DON'T have a baby, if**

* Your partner is not in agreement
* Deceit or subterfuge is involved
* Your relationship is on shaky ground

**4) SERIOUSLY RECONSIDER, if**

* Having a baby is a way of competing with your partner's ex, "balancing" or outnumbering the children from the prior union
* The baby's reason-for-being is to "cement" new step-relatives as a family

A baby deserves to be cherished for him or herself, not as a means to an end.

**5) DO have a baby with your new partner, if**

* You very much want to be a parent to a child you will know from infancy
* You want more children
* You want to create a new life with a beloved partner
* You expect that your relationship will endure

**If You Haven't Yet Decided When to Have a Child Together**

**6) WAIT, if you can, until you have had a chance to get to know each other as partners before adding infant care to your family life.** Because even a very much-wanted change can be stressful, it helps to give family members time to adjust to one set of changes before beginning another. The longer you have been together as a stepfamily, the smoother the addition of a new family member.

**7) EXPECT to have to work harder to keep everyone feeling securely inside the family if your baby arrives early in the life of the stepfamily.** If your biological clock, an unplanned pregnancy, or a strong preference about the age gap between children doesn't allow for taking time to settle in to stepfamily life before having a baby, you will need to devote special attention to how each relationship in the family is going.

## Breaking the News

**8) MAKE SURE that your children LEARN from YOU that you are expecting a baby.** Older children often worry that a new baby may replace them in their parent's affections. If they think that you have told others and not told them, their fear of being excluded will grow.

**9) POSTPONE telling young children,** or anyone who might let the news slip, until at or near the end of the first trimester, when the risk of miscarriage is much reduced. Children who have lost a parent, or whose parents have divorced, are especially sensitive to loss. The young child's sense of time is also very different from an adult's: nine months can feel like an eternity.

**10) TELL your ex about the pregnancy AFTER you have told the children but BEFORE they see him/her again.** Your ex may well have mixed feelings about your having a child with your new partner. Much as you might wish otherwise, it is better that you—not your child—be the bearer of news that will elicit strong feelings.

**11) BE TRUTHFUL in speaking to your children and in response to their questions.** You don't have to fill in all the details, and you can say that you want to have the conversation another time, but their trust in you depends on not being told something that is not true.

**12) INCLUDE the older children in getting ready for the new arrival.** This helps them to feel that the baby will be THEIR sister or brother, another member of a family in which they will continue to be important.

*Sometimes their other parent will say things like "The baby isn't your brother, he's only your half-brother." This can be an opportunity to talk with your child about what makes two children siblings—growing up together, sharing experiences, a parent, etc.*

Remind your child that from the point of view of the baby, s/he will be a part of the family for as long as the baby has lived, a real big brother or sister.

**13) ALLOW them to have mixed feelings about the new addition**. Even children in first families may feel sad, angry, or worried at times about how the new arrival will result in less time and attention for them. In stepfamilies, children may also worry that, like a new spouse, a baby is a replacement not an addition, and that they will be left behind.

**14) ACKNOWLEDGE that having a baby will require adjustments from everyone in the family.** When you’re excited about the new arrival, it may be hard to hear complaints about the inconveniences that will arise for others in the family, but concerns that are silenced go underground, re-emerging to create distress later on.

**15) ASK the older children about what they need for the transition to go smoothly.**  Find out first about their worries or concerns and reassure them that their needs are important to you and that you are committed to taking good care of them, baby or no.

**16) PREPARE them to ask for attention when they need it.** Babies can’t help but cry out when they need something, but older children can get into the undesirable habit of putting their own needs on hold when there’s a baby around, especially in large families. Teach them how to ask for attention when they need it:

*In the words of a young woman who was twelve when her half-sister was born:*

*“Parents should tell their kid to stop and think, ‘Is this a time when I’ve got to say “Mom and Dad, listen, I’ve really got to talk to you. I don’t care about how busy you are.” Or is this a time when I can just let it go by.’”*

**Schedule Changes**

It is not unusual for changes in the parenting schedule to occur at about the time a remarried couple is having a baby:

* Non-resident parents may move away, thinking that their children are now established in a stable stepfamily,
* Or they may request more time, wanting to re-establish their place in their children's lives.
* Children may ask for more time to be with the growing family, which may become more child-centered,
* Or they may be want to spend more time in a household not organized around the needs of small children, especially if there are heavy demands for childcare placed on them.

**17) BE PROACTIVE, not reactive, in thinking through who should be where when.** Don't say "yes" to requests for change because they hurt your feelings or "no" as an automatic response to a difficult ex-spouse.

**18) EVALUATE requests for changes in the custody or parenting plan based on the needs of the older children.** Sometimes there will be no choices to make. When there are, take time to evaluate the basis for the request and to consider how it will affect all concerned before negotiating the best choice among the alternatives.

**19) TIME changes so that the arrival of a new baby does not coincide with the older children's spending less time in the household.** There are sometimes good reasons to alter the schedule, but great care must be taken to make sure that the older children cannot confuse the baby's birth with the reason for their being there less often.

 **AFTER THE BIRTH OR ADOPTION**

**If You're a New Parent**

**20) ENJOY your new baby.** This is a special time. Cherish it.

**21) REMEMBER that your stepchildren are watching how you parent**. They will be especially attentive to whether they still matter to you now that you have a baby of your own. As you become more of a family insider, make sure they know that they are in no way outsiders.

**22) DON’T BE SELF-CRITICAL** that you feel a stronger connection to your baby than you do to your stepchildren. Differences in attachment are to be expected. Generally speaking, the younger the child when you become part of the family, the more the relationship will resemble the bond between a parent and child.

**23) BE WATCHFUL** that differences in how you feel do not translate to differences in what you do. Every child in the family deserves caring treatment, responsive to their needs. You can be even-handed even when you are not even-hearted.

**24) TAKE stepchildren's criticism with a grain of salt.** It's hard not to take it personally, but try not to be defensive. The best response to resident critics is to strengthen their sense of belonging—that they are an indispensable part of the family, valued and cared for.

**25) MAKE time for the older children.** Time is precious and in short supply when there is a baby in the house, but every minute invested in nourishing the connection with your stepchildren will more than pay off. How they feel about the baby depends, in part, on how they feel about you.

26) AVOID always dividing childcare responsibilities along biological lines, **with the new parent/stepparent caring for the new baby while the parent of all the children spends time with her big sisters or brothers. The older children need to know their stepparent has not lost interest in them, and the baby will have better relationships with all family members if he is not seen as their stepparent’s “private property.”**

**27) GIVE your partner the benefit of the doubt.** New mothers, especially, tend to compare a husband as daddy to the baby with how he fathers his older children and conclude he favors her stepchildren. What they fail to remember is that fathers often become more involved with their children when they are no longer infants and can “do more.”

**If You’ve Had Children Before**

**28) SHARE THE WONDER of becoming a parent with your new spouse, especially if he or she is a first-time parent.** Your experience will be a blessing when the baby runs a temp in the middle of the night, but a "been-there-done-that" attitude to the baby's arrival will pour cold water on the excitement of a brand-new parent.

**29) TEACH, don't take over.** While it's "natural" for mothers to do more of the infant care, when mom is also the veteran parent, new dads can be intimidated by what they don't know and leave mom to do it all. Baby care is a teachable skill; make sure that both parents are competent caregivers, so that moms are not overworked or unavailable to their older children.

**30) MAKE time for the older children**. Now is the time to demonstrate with deeds, not words, that the baby will not replace them in your heart and mind. Their relationship to their stepparent and to the baby will be more accepting and affectionate if they don't feel that they've lost you.

**31) BE the best parent you can be to all your children.** It’s not uncommon that having a child in the home full-time awakens regrets in parents who have children who live elsewhere. Don’t letguilt about not being able to be a full-time parent to your older children keep you from getting close to the new baby.

**With Each Other**

**32) CARVE OUT couple time.** Although it will be harder than ever now, you still need time to be with each other as partners, not just as parents. Mobilize your support system--family, friends, or paid childcare providers—to make the time to keep your relationship an energizing, mutually supportive one.

**33) NEGOTIATE newly emerging differences in parenting.** Stepparents who have taken a back seat in making rules and defining expectations for the older children will now demand a greater voice. Now that you have a child for whom both of you feel entitled to make policy, previously ignored differences will demand attention.

**34) TALK THROUGH what is important to you, and why, and listen to your partner's thoughts and feelings.** First try to understand the other's point of view and then explore what might be a workable solution that both can endorse. Set priorities—what is most important, even essential, to you, where do you need to compromise, and when can you defer to your partner’s stronger need.

**With the Children**

**35) CREATE a ritual of welcome for the new baby that recognizes the relationship to the older children.** Whether formal (christening, naming ceremony) or informal (gathering of family and friends, or just your household), this should underline that the baby is a sister or brother as well as a daughter or son. It can be as simple as each family member, in turn, holding the baby (on a pillow, surrounded by parents if the child is very young) and introducing him or herself: “Hi, Sally. I’m your sister Emily.”

**36) GIVING each child a gift “from the new baby” is a nice touch.** And, as in any family having a new baby, family members and other visitors should be encouraged to bring something for the older children when bringing baby gifts.

**37) TELL your older children affectionate stories about their own infancy.** Hearing about themselves at the same age—amusing things they did and how happy you were to have them—will help them feel close to their baby sister or brother. Emphasizing how much they were once like the baby will help make them *a little* more patient with the time it will take for the baby to become more of a playmate.

**38) MAKE SURE you have one-to-one time with your older children.** Knowing that they can depend on having you to themselves, even for a limited time, reassures your older children that they have not lost you to the new baby. It is more important that the time be something that they can depend on than that it be a lot of time.

**39) LET each child be the center of attention, at least some of the time.** Time is a scarce commodity in the home of a new baby. Search for opportunities—nap time, maybe—when you can focus on the older children.

**40) INVITE them to participate in some baby care activities.** The youngest children can help by entertaining the baby during a diaper change; an older child may enjoy “driving” the stroller. There may be times, later on, when some babysitting will be a part of their family responsibilities, but in infancy, and until they’ve bonded, have baby care be a chance for inclusion, not a chore.

**41) AVOID the “Cinderella Syndrome” by minimizing childcare responsibilities.**  This protects the older children from feeling overburdened and the younger children from feeling that they have a houseful of parents rather than brothers and sisters. Some families, for example, distinguish between babysitting needed so parents can fulfill family obligations, which can be required, and babysitting so parents can go out for fun, which is voluntary and must be paid.

**42) REMEMBER that even “big kids” need parenting.** Teenagers, especially, may relish being out from under careful parental supervision, but they still need loving care and parents who are aware of what is happening in their lives.

**With Non-Resident Children**

**43) CREATE re-entry rituals that allow time for children to reconnect with their parent before they are expected to relate to the whole family.** Especially when they are not in your home most of the time, your older children's relationship to the baby depends on their feeling secure in your love. Once they have had a chance to feel close to you again, they will be more ready to reach out to other family members.

**44) BUILD opportunities to stay connected when you’re apart.** High-tech (faxes, videoconferencing on the Internet) or low-tech (U.S. Postal Services, telephone calls), possibilities for keeping in touch when the older children are in their other home are greater than ever. Use them to make sure they know that they are an important part of your family and that you are thinking about them when they’re not there.

**Promote Good Sibling Relationships**

**45) REMEMBER that children's relationships with each other depend on their parents and stepparents treatment of each.** If they see you that you don't have double standards, treating stepchildren one way and those you've parented from birth another, they will respect you and trust each other.

**46) DON'T OVERREACT to sibling squabbles**. Younger children often "invisibly" provoke the older, setting up big brother or sister for parents to punish. Overprotection of the little one fuels the aggression of the older.

**The Older Children's Other Parent**

**47) KEEP your children's other parent informed about the changes to your family.** The older children will have feelings about these family transitions and, as their parent, your ex will need to know at least the broad outlines of what's happening: plans for remarriage, having a baby, other people joining or leaving the household.

**48) DON'T use the children as messengers.** The phrase "don't kill the messenger" came about because the bearer of news often gets the brunt of the recipient's responses. Your ex may have strong feelings about changes to your household. If at all possible, make sure your children aren't there when the news arrives, but in no case should they be ones to deliver it.

**49) LET the older children take the lead in whether and when to introduce their other parent to the child you have together.** Unless they sense that parent is too hurt or angry to welcome the introduction, the older children will eventually want to have some contact between members of their two households—but maybe not right away. Their interest can be your guide.

**50) BUILD BRIDGES whenever possible**. Being able to introduce the important people in their lives to one another helps them move between households more comfortably. And when he or she is older, your mutual child will be curious about where the older children go when they’re not in the home.

**EXTENDED FAMILY**

**51) HELP your parents understand** that you are committed to all your children and that your remarriage and plans for another child will not interfere with your ability to be a good parent to your older children. Grandparents play a very influential role in whether or not grandchildren accept a stepparent and how they feel about any new half-siblings. The middle generation needs to reassure them that beloved grandchildren will not suffer the fate of fairy tale stepchildren.

**52) ENCOURAGE your parents and siblings to welcome your stepchildren into the family.** While first time grandparents, especially, may be completely captivated by a new grandchild, they may need to be reminded not to translate differences in attachment into obvious favoritism.

53) **ENJOY, ENJOY, ENJOY** your growing family as you attend to creating a workable stepfamily.