

## FACT SHEET 7

### New partners and step-families

#### TIPS FOR SEPARATED PARENTS

##### 1. Before you start a new relationship ...

1. You and your child will get over your separation more easily if you put off starting a new adult relationship as long as you can.
2. Talk with your child about why it might be good for you to have a new partner in the future, so they can get used to the idea first.
3. Talk with your child about what could help them cope with a new partner.

##### 2. Introductions

1. Make the first meeting as short and casual as you can.
  - Choose a neutral place, like a park or a playground.
  - Behave in a relaxed way and don't pressure your child for approval.
2. Put yourself in your child's shoes – there are lots of reasons your child might not seem very keen at first –
  - Often children keep on hoping their parents will get back together, and your new partner is a sign that's not going to happen.
  - It's natural that mostly your child will be interested in you and their other parent.
  - Don't expect them to feel the same way about your new partner as you do. Your new partner is **your** choice, not theirs.
  - Your child will probably be worried about sharing your time and attention with your new partner.
  - Your child will be affected by their own deep feelings towards their other parent, including loyalty and worry about whether they are ok.
  - Be sensitive about how much physical affection you show to your new partner around your children. It's normal for them to dislike it at first.

##### 3. Have an open mind

1. When you start up with your new relationship, don't expect a traditional family where everyone's together all the time and automatically loves each other.
2. Avoid thinking of your new partner's relationship with your child as a 'parent-child' relationship. Instead, aim for them to get on in a co-operative and positive way.
3. Try to find the best ways to do things by taking things slowly, trying different options and approaches. Talk about problems. Negotiate and compromise.
  - Lots of people have to be considered: your children, you, your new partner, both your families/whānau, your child's other parent, their family/whānau.

- Spend time with your child alone so they don't always have to share your attention with your new partner.
  - Your children will need to keep up their relationship with their other parent (and their family/whānau).
4. Listen to what your child tells you about what they need and how things are going for them.
    - Reassure them that they are important and that you still love them.
    - Listen to their concerns and support them through problems.

#### **4. Making it work**

1. Don't hand over your parenting responsibilities to your new partner. Your child needs you to take the main responsibility for them, even if you aren't used to the role.
2. Remember that children, especially teenagers, will resent being disciplined by your new partner.
3. It's important to focus on your child even though you are involved in establishing your new relationship –
  - Give your child plenty of love, time and positive attention.
  - Talk with them as much as you can.
4. Encourage a good relationship between your child and their other parent. Reassure them that you don't want your new partner to replace their other parent.
5. Be as **fair** as you can when your new partner has their own child – fair with rules and discipline, and fair with presents and treats.
6. Help build up your child's self-esteem – if they feel good about themselves, that will be good for the whole family. Go on parenting courses to find out how.
7. Explain to your children early on that they need to treat your new partner reasonably and with respect, and make sure they understand what you expect.
8. Make sure your new partner doesn't feel left out either. Give time and attention to your relationship with them.

#### **TIPS FOR STEP-PARENTS**

##### **1. What to expect**

1. Your relationship with your partner's child will not be the same as a natural parent's. Over time, though, it may become warm, long-lasting and important.
2. Your relationship with your partner's child will not replace their relationship with a natural parent, even if they have little contact. Instead it will be an extra relationship.
3. You will need to be patient about building up trust and there will be many challenges. Be prepared for it to take a long time with a child older than 10.

4. Your role will probably sometimes be frustrating. You'll give time, energy and attention to your partner's child, but probably get no recognition when things go well.
5. You may get the blame when problems arise. Don't take it personally – remember, this is more to do with the situation than it is about you.
6. Don't expect your partner's child to call you "mum" or "dad" (unless they say they want to in a special case, for example if there's no contact at all with a natural parent).
7. To grow into a healthy adult, your partner's child will need an ongoing relationship with **both** natural parents, regardless of their faults.

## **2. What you can do**

1. Be very, very patient ... your partner's child has inevitably been through a difficult time with their parents' separation, even if they haven't shown it.
2. Be supportive and do what you can to help your partner's child to maintain all their important relationships.
3. Make sure your home is a safe and nurturing place for the children.
4. Let your partner be responsible for parenting their child in their own way. That can be frustrating when you're thinking "If that was my child I would ...."
5. Build up a positive relationship with the kids by finding out what fun things you can enjoy together. Share your interests. Be relaxed and light-hearted.
6. Do some everyday activities with your partner's child, but don't try to take on too much responsibility.
7. You will need to think carefully and plan your reactions calmly. You'll probably have to stay positive even when you don't feel like it.
8. Don't discipline your partner's child. They will resent you if you do, especially if they are older than 10 or 11.

## **TIPS FOR WHEN YOUR EX HAS A NEW PARTNER**

### **1. What to expect**

1. Your child will always be more interested in you. You don't need to compete.
2. Your child may end up with a warm and close relationship with their step-parent that lasts a long time, but that won't affect your relationship with them.
3. Children can love a new adult without loving their parent any less.

### **2. What you can do**

1. Things will be happier and more relaxed for your child if they are polite at their other home, so encourage them to use good manners even when they don't feel like it.
2. Your child may need your encouragement to talk to your ex-partner about any problems they are having – for example, sharing attention with their step-parent.
3. Talk to your ex-partner if you are concerned how things are going for your child, through a neutral third person or with a counsellor if necessary.

## TIPS FOR KIDS WITH STEP-PARENTS

1. Thousands of children in New Zealand have separated parents who live with new partners, often with the new partner's own kids. You're not alone!
2. When everyone's got used to it, lots of kids do end up enjoying having the extra people around.
2. Sharing your home can be tough at first, especially if you lose your place in the family (like oldest or youngest).
3. It's usually tricky for everyone else as well as you. If your parent's new partner has kids, probably they're feeling the same way you are. Give them a chance.
4. It's always best for you if you are getting on OK with everyone at home. Things you can do that help include –
  - Acting politely towards your parent's partner and their kids (even when you don't feel like it). Don't say mean things.
  - Being kind and patient with yourself and everyone else, thinking about how they feel.
5. Remember no-one's perfect, not your mum, not your dad, and not you either!
6. Don't blame your parent's new partner or anyone else – too many negative thoughts stop you getting the most out of life.
7. Stay close with the rest of your family/whānau. That usually helps, especially if the adult relationships at home keep on changing.
8. Talk about your problems, especially with your parents.
  - Tell your parents how you feel and let them know what they can do to help, like spending some of their time with you on your own.
  - Try talking to another member of your family/whānau, like a grandparent or aunt or uncle.
  - If you've got friends who are in the same situation, try talking to them. They'll understand lots about how you feel.
  - Try telephone help lines for kids.
  - It can help to talk to a school counsellor or a teacher you get on well with.



This handout was written by Julia Maskill and Dr Kerry Gould for the Ministry of Justice (2007) and provides additional information to that provided in the free 'Parenting Through Separation' programme delivered for the Ministry of Justice. For details of programmes in your area phone 0800 211 211. There is more information available for parents who have separated from [www.justice.govt.nz/family](http://www.justice.govt.nz/family)