

Bonus Parenting (Step-parent)

This is not an easy job. Just being a parent in this day and age is hard enough. But to step in and help rear someone else's children is also difficult. There are no ex-parents. Your bonus children will always have those two biological parents, whether one of those parents is deceased or divorced from your husband or wife. Regardless of how often or how seldom your bonus children have contact with their other biological parent, they were first part of that biological family. They will continue to live with that influence.

"Primary" bonus parents usually live in the same household with the children. Their relationship with the children is like that of a biological parent, with the same responsibilities and benefits. Children may call them "mom" and "dad", and accept them as full parents. Such a relationship most often exists when the other biological parent has little or no contact with the children. This role is usually acquired over a period of time, and is more common when the children are very young.

The "Other" parent bonus parent. Most bonus parents probably fit in this category, and they usually have the hardest job because the children continue to have a regular relationship with their other biological parent. The "other" bonus parent may be expected to perform many parental duties, but often do not have the acceptance or authority that usually comes with being a biological parent. Being the "other" parent requires long and sensitive conversation with your spouse, getting to know the children, and a lot of patience.

"Friend" bonus parents who relate in a "Friend" role may not live in the same household with the children. Older children often prefer this "Friend" relationship, and usually feel more comfortable calling such bonus parents by their first name. Bonus parents who are "Friends" may exert considerable influence on their bonus children, but usually do so more through the special relationship they develop with the children than by filling the parental role.

Guidelines for Bonus Parenting:

1. Don't expect too much too soon. There is no such thing as "instant love", especially between bonus parents and the children. Love and relationships ordinarily develop over a period of time.
2. Keep your marriage healthy. In bonus families, as in other families, one of the most important factors in a satisfactory family life is a strong bond between husband and wife. Bonus parents have a special responsibility to avoid making your spouse choose between you and the children. He or she probably feels especially responsible for the children, maybe even feeling some guilt for the breakup of the former family relationship. Respect those feelings. Allow your relationship with the children to develop in a way with which your spouse and the children's other biological parent is comfortable.
3. Avoid competing with your spouses "ex" or trying to take over the other parent's role. Your personality, skills, and values are no doubt different from those of your spouse's previous partner. That doesn't mean either of you is better, just different. Be yourself and don't try to out-do their biological parent. Avoid taking

the any established roles from the children's other biological parent. Instead, offer support, in ways that the children's parents find helpful.

4. Respect differences in histories and households. A bonus parent joins a family with an established history. Keep in mind that you are the newcomer and that you will probably have to do most of the adjusting at first. Help them understand your beliefs, but don't try to turn them against those of the other parent. Support the position that, though different, both systems of beliefs are entitled to respect.
5. Discipline carefully. Discipline causes the greatest number of problems for bonus parents. Responsibility for discipline should probably rest primarily with the biological parent in the early stages of the relationship in order for your relationship with the children to develop with time and with a minimum of conflict. As time goes on, a bonus parent should take a direct share of the parental responsibility for discipline. You and your spouse should discuss limitations and tactics carefully, however, and support each other in actions taken. Your spouse will need to let the children know that you are in charge when he or she is not available.
6. Be aware of potential money problems. Money pressures are usually greater for bonus families. Your best remedy for avoiding money-related problems is clear and honest communication, first between you and your spouse, and also at times with the children. Remember that your decision to marry a person with children carries certain costs, including financial ones.
7. Be sensitive to sexual matters. The absence of a blood relationship between you and your bonus children may bring tension to everyday activities. It may be necessary, to provide greater privacy for everyone than you might prefer, especially in the early months of your marriage.
8. Don't be surprised by anger in bonus children. Children are frequently very hurt and frustrated by their parents' separation. These feelings often come out as anger, which is sometimes expressed toward the bonus parent. The children may think the bonus parent was responsible for their parents divorce, and may see you as the one who prevents their reconciliation (this sometimes causes the children to try to break up the new marriage) or they may be angry because they think the bonus parent doesn't like their other biological parent. They may also be angry with the other biological parent and take that anger out on the bonus parent. Try to understand what causes that anger, and realize that some expression of these feelings is better than keeping them bottled up inside. Acceptance of the bonus parent may cause the child to feel disloyal to the biological parent not living with them.