

# Tips for Christmas – for step-parents

By Alison O'Mahony

The heart of Christmas time is... a time for togetherness, connection, warmth, for love, where we can feel 'at home' and be accepted for who we really are. Yet it's these emotional expectations that can make it so very difficult, especially in step-families.

Why especially for step-families? Because in step-families; children celebrate Christmas with Mum and Dad in separate households, families not only have two sets of in-laws, but ex-families to consider too; and where two sets of Christmas family traditions need to come together and a new family tradition form when children from previous families are already in the families.

Be StepWise is an organisation that supports step-parents as they transition as a family. "Sometimes it is incredibly difficult to enable a family to get over the hurts caused by family break-up, for whatever reason, through death or divorce", says Alison O'Mahony, the organisation's founder. "Being a step-parent is different from being a parent in some fundamental ways. We believe it is as easy to step-parent successfully as it is to step-parent unsuccessfully, the difference is knowing how. Yet the rewards can be great. Some step-families never work well, and that is a shame."

Here are Alison's tips to overcome some of the classic problems and help make this Christmas one you will want to remember.

## **First of all.....**

Get close to your partner - work as a team

*"The worst bit about last Christmas was the row I had with Ian. We are supposed to be together, but in the end the children got to us. I was blaming him and he blamed me, we couldn't get past it."*

\* Discuss Christmas soon and then keep talking to your partner about it every day. Plan the children and Christmas arrangements, how to manage the ex and other relatives, the traditions you want together

\* When you talk to others use 'we' and 'us', not 'I'. 'I' can aggravate step-children as it can inadvertently implies you might take over. 'We' and 'us' infer inclusiveness and togetherness as a family

\* Keep listening to your partner's views. You want to back each other up, seeing each other's point of view will help with this. Particularly important if this is your first Christmas together as different traditions can really get in the way

\* Aim to accommodate each other's traditions and work out new ones. We know a family who put up three trees together, his, hers and the new joint tree to respect previous traditions

\* Go to your partner for the appreciation you need. Christmas is exhausting, a lot is expected and you can feel unappreciated

\* Plan a special 'something' for you and your partner after the Christmas period as a little celebration

together. After Christmas, I need a holiday!

### **Hold a Family summit.**

*"The grandmother came and said to me, 'you know these children don't know anything. They don't know who's coming and who's going, or what is happening, wouldn't it be better if you told them?'"*

All families have times when they communicate together. Often, you don't notice them because they can take place in a moment, first thing in the morning, at the end of a meal or in the car. This is when house rules may be set or plans and arrangements explained. In a step-family it may need to be set up slightly more formally as this is a new or second family, wait for a time when all the family members are there. Do it well before Christmas, or Christmas Eve if this is your first opportunity, or as they arrive on Christmas day before you start celebrations - have a family summit. Make it fun, tell everyone who is doing what when and where, plans and timings for the day (present opening, screen time, traditions you would like to set up, food), any house rules that need to be remembered, and help required. Ask for their contributions and ideas, (the decision remains yours and your partner's). This can transform someone's mood in a family from reluctant to joyous. PS it can feel unnerving holding a 'summit', but the rewards will be good! Make it fun. Hand out balloons/ small gifts/ tree decorations to everyone afterwards. Enjoy! Laugh! Say you want to make good memories!

### **Speak to each child individually.**

*"Sometime I feel no one cares about me. I don't care anymore either..."*

\* Talking is good! Better than fisticuffs, moods or tantrums

The more difficult it is for you to talk to a child, the better it is you are doing it

\* Find some time alone when you will not be disturbed, it does not need to be long (ten minutes can be fine). Just check out how they are feeling, how they are feeling about Christmas, ask if they have any special hopes or wishes, (within the realms of practicality)

\* Use the time to build your relationship. You will learn lots and may find ways that will make Christmas better in simple ways.

### **Intervene in fights**

*"I used to hate it when a fight broke out and I was trying to do the best thing by everyone yet the bully got his way. The worst bit was when parents didn't take enough interest to sort it out. It made me feel that next time, I would hit him instead".*

With any fighting, become involved at as early a stage as possible

\* Ask, "What is the problem?" Let everyone have their say without interruption, ask them for a solution, keep asking for solutions until one suits all. If this is not possible find the best solution and some way of compensating the person who has to give up the most. At a later time, while alone with them ask each of the protagonists what really happened - then listen. Listen for what started the fight. There will be a trigger. You may not know which story is the right one, and that doesn't matter

\* Watch out for the trigger happening again (it will). Then you can intervene much earlier next time.

## **Positive not negative**

Three positive comments for every negative is a good ratio. Using this ratio means you're far more likely to get a "Yep, no problem, I don't mind doing that."

\* It's difficult to train yourself to look for positives, and you also need to develop a way of giving positive comments - it can feel unnatural or patronising. But that isn't a good enough reason not to do it. Find a way that you feel comfortable with, and they feel comfortable enough about accepting. We all grow our self-esteem through praise, but some people are very resistant to hearing it. Keep going, and keep praising despite push-back - how about a wink? Or a quick thumbs-up to show you've noticed something good?

\* When you criticise, or say something negative, couch it in positive terms. Say what you don't want, but also say what 'we' do want instead

\* If you find you want to say something negative and you haven't found three positives yet? 1) don't say anything, or 2) find three things in quick succession to say that are positive and then mention the negative. Be strict with yourself on this!

## **For those 'irritations' that drive you mad!**

\* It is very tempting to try and change others' annoying habits. The trouble is habits are more difficult to undo than you think. It can take 30 days' effort to alter a neural pathway - too long for the Christmas period

\* Take action to stop the annoying habit happening, (move the chair they are rocking to-and-fro on, remove the candles out of reach, so they can't fiddle with the wax, put the onions/ tomatoes/ mushrooms or whatever else they won't eat through the magimix before adding them to the recipe)

\* Or ignore it and stop yourself getting annoyed about it, by giving yourself a little treat or distracting yourself.

\* Use the consequence for doing the habit, (falling hard on the floor when you rock the chair, burning yourself on the candles) as a lesson when it happens!

## **The ex**

Remember the serenity prayer "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change things I can and the wisdom to know the difference"

\* Take full control of yourself, what you do, say and think, you cannot take control of anything else

\* The first year Princess Diana had been left alone without her boys, she said she spent the whole time walking round in circles, she was so distressed. I am not trying to advocate for the real Mother, you have rights and needs too but think before you act

## **Respond, avoid reacting**

\* Prepare for things that usually go wrong in advance, (if they are always late be prepared with something to do)

\* Turn to your partner other adults you can trust, to release your feelings

\* Decide to take the initiative and think differently about the situation.

## **The in-laws, the out-laws, the ex-laws and other well-meaning friends and relatives**

*"I remember saying clearly I did not want chocolates eaten whilst sitting on our new sofa. Later I saw my step-children's uncle handing truffle chocolates to the children on the very sofa - what could I do?"*

Relatives, friends and even neighbours can feel they have more say than you, the step-parent in matters about the house and the children. Managing the boundaries with adults is difficult

- \* Be assertive, you want the respect you deserve
- \* Say, "oh, you couldn't have heard me", as you swoop down removing the box of chocolates from his hand, "I said no chocolates to be eaten on this sofa."
- \* Using humour is great too: "We don't want Banksy (the graffiti artist) here yet!"
- \* Appeal to your partner to say something

Ask others' opinions about how sensible it is to give children chocolates to eat on a new sofa

- \* Or just to repeat the phrase, 'no chocolates on the sofa'. Repeat the phrase calmly and convincingly, and people will hear it, eventually
- \* Understand there is only so much you can do. You are responsible for your thoughts, feelings and action and them theirs.

## **Look after yourself**

This is the last one but the one that you will use the most

- \* Do what it takes to 'look after yourself'. Work out how. What are the kinds of things that are treats for you? Keep adding to the list, but they could be: have a cup of tea, walk on the sunny side of the street, read an article in your favourite magazine, listen to music, etc, etc
- \* Buy yourself a gift for yourself, wrap it up and put it under the tree. This is a gift for you for all you've given to everyone else e enjoy!
- \* Don't forget to plan that 'break' with your partner, it can be a weekend away, or a night out, just something for you two.

## **About Be StepWise**

Be StepWise works with perspectives. Your perspective will be governing what you think and do. Members of step-families often have very polarised perspectives. We can't change others, but we can change ourselves. Changing our view opens up new possibilities in ways that finds solutions for everyone. Be StepWise offer coaching programmes, counselling, workshops, couples consultations, email response service, booklets, and an informative website. For information, call 020 8761 1633, email [Alison@beStepWise.co.uk](mailto:Alison@beStepWise.co.uk) or see [www.BeStepWise.co.uk](http://www.BeStepWise.co.uk).

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