

# from stepmom to mother

Creating a successful blended family starts during pregnancy.

Here's expert advice on making it work. > BY BRETTE SEMBER

**W**HEN ADRYENN Ashley got married, she became an instant stepmother to Greg and Brad, then 15 and 13 years old, respectively. A year and a half later, she gave birth to her and husband Jim's baby, Jack. Even though Jack is 4 years old now, Ashley still struggles to bring her blended family together. "I walk on eggshells with the

stepkids, trying to get them to bond with Jack," says the Petaluma, Calif., mom, who adds that the bigger the age gap between the children, the more creative you have to be.

According to the New York-based Stepfamily Foundation (stepfamily.org), more than half of all families today in the United States are stepfamilies—those in which one or both partners already have a child or children—and the numbers

are only expected to grow. Many people who remarry or "recouple" go on to have a baby with their new partner, which can pose additional challenges to a couple.

Not only do such parents need to work through the usual sibling adjustments, they may also have to cope with feelings of resentment because the new baby gets to live with the stepchildren's biological parent instead of just visiting, as many stepkids do. In addition, stepchildren may have a more difficult time forming as close a relationship with the new sibling because they may not see the stepbrother or sister as often as a biological one does. They also often feel there is no longer any room or attention for them because the parents are so focused on their new "joint" baby.

Making the situation easier on everyone requires time, patience and flexibility. "It's certainly not automatically going to be the Brady Bunch," says Robin Goodman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and art therapist in New York.

## Blending begins before birth

Building a new family doesn't happen overnight, and pregnancy is the right time to start dealing with the issue. Ericka Lutz, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Stepparenting* (Alpha), advises making the family a joint venture from the get-go. For example, she says, "Ask the older child for baby-naming suggestions (though you don't have to take them), and by all means, do not displace the older child. This means that if your stepchild is going to have to share a room with the new baby, let the child take the lead on which side of the room will be his or hers *before* the baby is born."



Encourage—but don't force—your stepchild to interact with the new baby.

DAVID WARTHNEZ



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## your family

To make the adjustment easier, Ashley suggests saying "We are having a baby," and make that "we" inclusive of the older child. "Depending on their ages and inclinations, talk with the stepkids about getting involved with caring for the baby, either rocking, holding, feeding or—heaven help you—changing him," she adds. "This way, you'll stand a much better chance of them bonding." Just don't force them into any baby-care roles, or you'll breed resentment.

You also should create an "alone-time" schedule with the stepchild before your baby is born. Continuing this routine once the baby arrives helps the stepchild know she is loved and has a special place in the family. "Make sure the stepchildren don't feel like an afterthought," stresses divorce and stepfamily mediator Jano Blackstone-Ford, M.A., co-author of *Ex-Etiquette for Parents* (Chicago Review Press). She also suggests anticipating what will upset the stepchild most and getting her input on these issues before the new baby arrives. Along these lines, Blackstone-Ford says, try not to make changes that the older child will equate with the new baby's arrival, such as saying, "Now that the baby's here, it's time for the big girl to start preschool."

### Avoid trying too hard

Making time for your husband's other child doesn't mean you should expect to feel the same way about her as you do about your baby. The truth is, you will have an incredible physical and emotional connection to the baby, one that is naturally different than the way you feel about your stepchild. Don't beat yourself up about this: The step-

child already has two biological parents, and there can be room for different kinds of relationships if they are all loving and caring. When 38-year-old Amy Grisak from Great Falls, Mont., was pregnant with son Sam, now 8 months old, she was already stepmom to Blaine, 13. Her advice: "To take the pressure off, tell yourself, 'I am not taking on the role of parent to my stepchild. I'm more of a supportive figure.'"

Once you give birth, recognize that all children have adjustment issues when a sibling is added to the family, so don't overreact and assume that any "acting out" has to do with the stepfamily dynamics. "Trust the biological parent's gut," Lutz advises. He will know what is normal behavior for his child and what feels wrong. "Reactions such as jealousy, anger and competition are normal; physical aggression is not."

Above all, try to have realistic expectations. "The addition of a new child produces changes in family dynamics for stepfamilies and biological families alike," says Susan D. Stewart, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology at Iowa State University in Ames and author of *Brave New Stepfamilies* (Sage Publications). "In general, when there is a new baby, parents (and stepparents, as the case may be) are less involved with the older children." Stewart warns that trying to re-create a traditional nuclear family causes too much pressure. The solution, she says, lies in allowing your new family time to bond and develop natural relationships.

**Brette Sember** is the author of *How to Parent With Your Ex* (Sourcebooks) and *Your Practical Pregnancy Planner* (McGraw-Hill).

## Do's and don'ts for expectant stepmoms

- Do include stepkids in age-appropriate ways. They can draw pictures for the baby's room and help shop for baby items.
- Don't expect your spouse to love the new baby more. They are all his kids.
- Do accept that babies need intensive time and attention. You can't treat a baby and a 6-year-old the same, no matter how much you might want to.
- Don't expect the stepchild to instantly love the baby. Love is not a requirement; respect for the baby's place in the family is.
- Do make sure your stepchild knows you love her because of who she is and not because of your relationship with her father. She already knows marriages don't always last and may think your love is conditional on the marriage.
- Don't focus on the details of the biological relationships in the family. To a child, a sibling is a sibling.