

Bringing a New Baby into a Stepfamily



By Susan Davis Swanson, MSW, LCSW

You've married your perfect partner and finally become pregnant with your child together. It is your first child and your partner's third. He is excited, but you don't feel that he is as excited about the pregnancy as you are. Your partner's other children are definitely not as excited about it as you, and you can already sense jealousy of the new baby. The joy you were experiencing at the thought of your first born has become lessened by the anxiety of bringing your baby into a stepfamily.

Bringing a new baby into your family is going to bring up feelings for every member of a stepfamily, just as a new pregnancy would in any family. When you are going to have your own child, especially if it is your first, you are going to have a level of excitement that you never experienced before (usually peppered with some fears and anxieties). Most people becoming parents for the first time fall in love with their baby in a way they had never experienced previously, so of course you will too!

In a stepfamily, however, your partner has already had his "first born" and "second born," and fell in love with them just this way. But as a first-time mom, you will be experiencing this level of pride, joy, excitement and love for the very first time, and you shouldn't let anything diminish that! Remember that your partner is just as excited about the new baby, even if he is coming from a different perspective, because it is the child of your union together.

Your partner's children will naturally have their own feelings about the new baby. Of course, you hope that your stepchildren will be as happy and excited as you are to welcome this new person into your family. But try and remember that there is usually jealousy inherent in bringing any new child into a family, and bringing one into a stepfamily won't be any different. Children can be excited, yet worried about how much time a new baby will require and how much attention will be taken away from them.

It is usually hard for older children to watch a parent fall in love with a newborn and find them so cute and adorable. All of a sudden, the youngest in the family looks so much "older" and seems more difficult, and the new baby gets all the love and attention! I remember my then 9-year-old stepson telling his father and I before our child was born, "There won't be any room for a new baby!" But he was more than excited once his new sister actually appeared.

Here are some things you can expect as a first-time mom when bringing a new baby into your stepfamily, as well as ideas for how to manage the reactions of your partner and stepchildren.



The First-Time Mom

As a first-time mom, you will feel a lot of different emotions: the powerful love for your new baby, worry that you are not giving as much attention to your stepchildren as you have been, and the sense that your partner may not have the same feelings about the baby because he already has children. You may also be getting a message from your spouse that you are ignoring his children in favor of the new baby.

One of the most powerful emotions you will experience as a new mother is the biological bond you will have with your baby. The biological bond between you and your baby is one of the most powerful in the world, and it is nothing to feel bad about. It's nature's brilliant way of bonding you together. I remember that feeling of having my own child — what powerful emotions! The bonding time you will have with your newborn is very important and necessary because it establishes an attachment for the infant to feel safe and secure. Even if you have enjoyed your stepchildren, you will realize many different feelings that emerge with the birth of your first child. Many stepmoms end up feeling shame about this. But don't feel guilty, because it's a natural feeling. Enjoy your baby and your bond with this new, little person!

Your stepchildren may act like any children would with a new baby: if they had your attention when they were at your house, they may feel you don't care about them anymore because you are focusing on the baby. You, of course, are going to be exhausted and overwhelmed adjusting to caring for an infant, so you may find you have little to no patience for the emotions of your stepchildren. But try to remember that they are having a completely natural reaction to change. Some reassurance that they are still important to you will probably quiet some of this down. It may also be wise to let your stepchildren participate in helping with the new baby so they feel like they are included.

A first-time mom often struggles with her baby not being the *first* for both her and her partner. Try to remember that while your partner has had the experience of becoming a dad before and of experiencing certain developmental milestones, each child is unique. The new baby is a result of the union of the two of you, and that alone makes it a very special "first." Maybe this is the relationship your partner is truly happy in, or the relationship he really feels more a part of. That alone will make your child together a special and unique experience! Remember, firsts in stepfamilies are different, but they are still important firsts!

The Partner (the parent of your stepchildren)

Bringing a new baby into the house may cause your partner to struggle with many conflicted feelings. He may feel guilty, especially if his first children are not enthused or are exhibiting jealousy about the new baby. It is normal for children to be jealous, and your partner should reassure his children that they are still very special to him, that he will always love them, and that a new baby won't change that. Likewise, your partner may sometimes feel caught in the middle trying to spend time with his first children, you and the new baby. You may also feel like you are being ignored and that your partner is giving all of his time and attention to his first children. While bringing in a new baby can be such a happy time, these loyalty struggles often show up!

It is very possible that your partner is often going to feel caught in the middle trying to "make everyone happy,"

and struggling with how to do it. Tell your partner not to be surprised if your attention goes to the new baby for some period of time; it is nature's way of creating the mother/child bond, so it may mean that, for awhile, the new baby holds much of your attention. The wise partner allows his new wife to feel these powerful feelings and doesn't make her feel guilty for bonding with the new baby. He even picks up the slack with the older children to help her out.

The Stepchildren

Your stepchildren will experience their own emotions when the new baby is born. They will often deal with loyalty binds between their parents, the fear of again losing a parent and loss of position in the household. Though most children experience at least one of these when a new baby is born, there are things you can do to help reassure your stepchildren.

When a parent remarries, children often struggle with loyalty binds between their biological parent and their stepparent. They may hear their mom's sadness that she couldn't have another baby with their dad, or maybe their mom is jealous of your marriage to their father. Your stepchildren now may feel that dad will have a new baby to keep him company when they are not there, but their mom will be alone when they come to visit you. They may even want to like or love the baby, but feel guilty because they can't talk about the baby at their other house because they don't want hurt their mom's feelings! Both you and your partner should be sensitive and empathic to these very possible dynamics the kids are going through. Encourage your stepchildren to talk about this with you and your partner.

When a new baby is born, children may fear that they will once again lose their parent. Remember, children already suffered a tremendous loss when their mom and dad moved to separate places. Then they struggled with another loss when he got together with you. So it stands to reason that these fears may rise up again in the form of dad loving the new baby and not loving them as much. These fears may result in them being more territorial for awhile, attaching closer to their dad when they are in your home. This is a normal reaction because they cannot understand the deeper fears they are experiencing. Children think in very black and white terms, so both you and your partner need to help them understand that there is room in your house to love everyone and they won't lose anything just because the baby is there.

Loss of position is a big concern for kids when a new baby comes along. A child may have been the youngest or the only child in their first family. We all get used to our positions in our family of origin (think of your position in your family). Some children may retain their position in one household and have another in another household: the same child who is the youngest at mom's is no longer the youngest to dad. This displacement of position in one house from another usually takes some time to adjust to, and we don't all respond to change easily. Give the children time to adjust. Many will with love, warmth and understanding from the adults in their lives.

You might also notice that your younger stepchild regresses to an earlier stage with the emergence of the infant. This is usually a surprise to parents, but it happens often. Your partner can help the children adjust by telling them stories about when they were first born, and how he and their mother felt the very same way about them.

It is important to help the stepchildren feel understood while they are going through these changes in their family system. Let your stepchildren know that they are still special to you to help ease any fears that they have been displaced in their dad's house.

Becoming a first-time mom is a joyous experience, though it comes with different challenges when it happens as part of a stepfamily. Trying to understand how bringing a baby into a stepfamily affects everyone may help to alleviate any stress you are feeling and let you fully enjoy your new role as mom.



Susan Davis Swanson, MSW, LCSW, is the executive director and founder of The StepFamily Center in Beverly Hills, Calif. She is a noted authority on issues involving divorce and remarried families with children. Susan is the host of the weekly radio show "Susan Swanson on Step". The shows can be found at www.stepfamilycenter.com.