

A ChildLine Information Sheet

Stepfamilies

Children are affected by changes in the family. Many children will live in a variety of family environments during their childhood and adolescence.

Some facts and figures about the family today

- Recent research indicates that around a half of all divorces will occur within the first ten years of marriage.
- It is now probable that one in four children will experience their parents divorce before they reach sixteen.
- Currently in Britain there are over 2.5 million children in stepfamily life. One million live in their stepfamily; another million visit their stepfamily.

What is self-harm?

Stepfamilies come together when people marry again or live with a new partner.

This may be after the death of one parent, separation or divorce. It can also mean that children from different families end up living together for all or part of the time.

In 2000/2001 over 15,000 children called ChildLine to talk about their family relationships, many of which concerned stepfamilies. A further 1,525 called about parents divorcing or separating.

Some children are very happy, but for others, coping with stepparents, stepbrothers and stepsisters can be a difficult and lonely experience. Settling into a new family situation can always be difficult for the children involved, but this usually resolves itself with time. However, for other children problems can arise in relation to how well they do at school and their general health and wellbeing. This can result in depression or children feeling stressed and unhappy. What appears to be most important is that children continue to retain a healthy relationship with both their natural parents.

Children have told ChildLine counsellors:

- *"It's hard getting to know lots of new people all at once."*
Michael, 12
- *"He seems to think he can tell me what to do, but he hasn't got the right. He isn't my real dad."*
Alison, 15
- *"I feel like Mum's a different person."*
Janine, 13
- *"I think that Samuel and his children are more special to her now."*
Remi, 13
- *"It feels wrong when I'm having fun with Dad and his new wife, when I think of Mum by herself."*
Alice, 15
- *"I'm not sure who to go to now, when I want to talk about things."*
Stef, 13
- *"I most want my mum back and for everything to be OK again."*
Paula, 10
- *"Every time I go out with Dad, he quizzes me about Mum and my new step-dad. I feel like a spy."*
Alex, 16

Other worries stepchildren may have

Sometimes stepchildren continue to see both their birth parents, but others may lose touch with one of them. There can be pressure to be a "perfect family", but it takes time to get to know one another.

Just getting used to different ways that each person has can cause problems. Different rules and expectations, kinds of food eaten,

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when homework is done or what household tasks you would be expected to do are all things that cause stress. Family holidays, Christmas and other religious festivals are all times when each family has its own ways of doing things and it can be hard to adjust to new ways.

Children might have to move house, neighbourhood and school. It can mean

losing friends and moving away from loved relatives. Families combining can mean less privacy; for example, sharing a bedroom, or never having somewhere quiet to do homework or just be alone. It can be a difficult time for parents too – they are having to be a parent for a child they hardly know.

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How ChildLine can help

It can be hard to find someone with the time to listen when so many changes are happening, and children sometimes feel that they are expected to just get on with it. Although a new family situation won't be the same as before, being part of a stepfamily can be very positive and good for the children involved. It's worth remembering that while things can go wrong, there may also be a means by which to put them right.

Young people may need to go through a grieving process, letting old habits, family ceremonies and ways of doing things go by. They can feel a lot of stress, anger and sadness. Talking can help with all these feelings.

ChildLine takes children's and young people's problems seriously, giving them a chance to talk in confidence about their concerns, however large or small. ChildLine counsellors can also tell them where to go for more information, including local sources of help and advice. This service is free and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Further information and advice

ChildLine

Freephone: **0800 1111**

or

ChildLine,
Freepost NATN1111
London E1 6BR

or

ChildLine Minicom: **0800 400 222**

Monday to Friday 9.30am - 9.30pm

Saturday to Sunday 9.30am - 8.00pm

Other sources of help

ParentLine Plus

Unit 520, Highgate Studios,
53-79 Highgate Road, Kentish Town,
London NW5 1TL

Telephone: **020 7284 5500**

Helpline for parents: **0808 800 2222**

Website: **www.parentlineplus.org.uk**

ParentLine Plus is targeted at parents who are experiencing problems with, or are concerned about their children. It offers advice, guidance and support through its national helpline, and publishes a number of leaflets and reports.

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ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

Registered charity numbers
216401 and SC037717.

Please note – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect young people's identities.

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CONTACTING CHIDLIN E

Children can call ChildLine on **0800 1111** (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit www.childline.org.uk

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our textphone service on **0800 400 222**.
Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders' institutions called The Line on **0800 88 4444**.

Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 2.00pm to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call **020 7650 3230**.