

“STEPDADS
Leaders, or just wandering in the wilderness?”
By Gordon Taylor

The role of step dad is daunting, assuming you can even define it. When I remarried I gained a 14-year-old stepdaughter after having three brothers and three sons. Common sense would dictate that this would be a different experience. How little did I know!

First of all, I “conveniently” forgot all the parenting mistakes I had made in my first marriage and launched into step-parenting with an enthusiastic naiveté that died less than a month after the Wedding.

Parenting is very different in the stepfamily. I learned quickly that my role was to back up my wife in parenting her daughter, not to lead this family out of the wilderness. I soon realized that if you’re leading and no one is following, you’re just out for a WALK!

I experienced the fragility of the step-relationship and how its formation is the barometer for determining how fast the new family is forming. I also experienced how devious (smart) teenagers can be when I was driving all over our hometown looking for a runaway. Many years later it was revealed to me that I was the one under surveillance as I drove around our home looking for her. Yes, she had me spotted the entire time.

It took approximately five years before we experienced and understood (trusted) each other enough for our relationship to solidify and really bloom. My stepdaughter was my “living laboratory” in which our experiments taught me about personality styles (ours were opposite), gender differences (again opposites), and most of all communication and conflict resolution skills – which now has become my lifestyle and my profession as an M.F.T.

I would like to return to the defining of a stepparent’s role. If the child is young, approximately six and under, there may be a chance to become the psychological parent. I obviously will never be the biological father, whether he is alive or dead. The psychological parent relationship can develop if I am willing to put in the time, energy, money, etc. to encourage it. Also it assumes that the child has the ability and willingness to attach to another adult parent-figure.

The older the child when the stepparent enters the scene, the longer relational development will take, and it probably will take on the role of a friend, confidant, or even just an acquaintance. The ultimate challenge for the stepparent is letting the child set the pace of the growing relationship. To be productive, the stepparent must accept that principle. If you’ve ever tried to push a piece of string to get it to go where you want it to go, you will understand my point.

A comment about teens! If you are forming a stepfamily with teens, don’t even try to be a parent/stepdad at first. Come in as a friend and support for a lost, hurting child. As stated earlier, the most productive role for a step dad is that of a “servant leader.” As Stephen Covey said, “Seek first to understand and then be understood.” Good luck, don’t forget to educate yourself and be willing to seek counsel.