

TODAY'S FUTURE

Childcare Website

Exciting activities to assist you in promoting the learning and development of young children have been created. Visit <http://knox.unl.edu/child>

Once Burnt, Twice Shy

It's a challenge to build a close relationship with children who have been emotionally injured because their parents split up—yes, even if it was a long time ago. People are reactive; they learn from experience. As a stepparent, you've walked into a relationship with kids who are leery about trusting, both trusting you individually and trusting a new adult relationship.

It's common for kids to withhold their affection from a stepparent, no matter how nice you are, no matter how carefully and kindly you treat them, and no matter how strong your relationship with your Honey is. Be prepared for a cool reception. And be prepared for that cool reception to last a long time. You are going to have to take the risks.

I Kid You Not!

One of the measures of intelligence in the scientific sense (I don't mean "brainy", I mean as in "able to think") is the quality of being able to learn from experience. This is one of the criteria imposed by computer scientists as they seek artificial intelligence in computers. Can a computer learn from what happened in the past and adjust? By being suspicious of a new adult relationship after his own parents' relationship ended in divorce or death, your stepchild is only being intelligent. Suspicion is the appropriate response. Don't judge him for it!



You're In Charge

Ignoring the evil eye and calming the baleful stares will take time, unconditional respect, care, and courtesy. You are the adult here; act like one. Your job is to not withhold approval and affection, and to look behind the negative behavior to see what is driving it. It could be many things: fear of being hurt, loyalty issues to the bioparent, the need for independence, and so on. Being the adult means trying to understand what is going on with the child and to deal with her as you would like to be treated, even if she's treating you like scum. I'm not talking dishrag, floor rug weak-kneed wimpiness. I'm talking about modeling appropriate behavior. Part of your appropriate behavior may be getting angry about being treated like scum and requesting better treatment.

How do you do this? It isn't always easy. One way is to try to look for the positive intent behind the nasty actions.

Positive Intent, Negative Behavior

Jeanne Elium and Don Elium, authors of "Raising a Family", say, "There is always an underlying meaning — a positive intent — to our words and actions." Looking for positive intent enables you to stop taking a child's behavior personally, to help you see it as a problem the child is having, and to ease your own frustration level.



Step-Speak

Positive intent is the underlying positive meaning behind any action.

Stepping Stones

You may notice that your stepkids flip out when there's conflict in the house. Kids who have witnessed a divorce firsthand tend not to be able to tolerate fighting because they witnessed so much of it in the past.

"You're not my mother, and you can't tell me what to do!" Henry snarls as he tosses his filthy clothes on the floor and storms out of the room. What's Henry's positive intent? It could be one of several things: Henry is feeling concerned that you are trying to step in and take over his mother's role. He's feeling loyal to his mother. Henry could also be feeling the need to take on more responsibility, and he doesn't want to be told what to do by anybody.



Seeking to understand Henry's positive intent doesn't mean that you have to put up with his dirty towels or his snarling. But beginning to understand why he is so surly is the first step to solving the problem.

Demonstrate Your Relationship's Strength

All kids test; it is part of their job description. Testing limits and boundaries is healthy (even when it is uncomfortable for the parents.) Kids test more than their physical environment and their parent's patience; they also test the strength of their stepfamily. It can be unbearable, but hang in there. Kids are not looking for weakness; they are looking for strength.

Help Kids Feel Good About Themselves

Few things will be more important in deciding your children's future than their sense of self-worth. Kids who feel good about themselves are:

- Less likely to be pressured into doing things they don't want to do.
- Much better at solving problems and generally do better in school.
- Happier, enjoy learning new things, and get along with others.
- Affected positively in all aspects of their lives.



Ways To Help Children Feel Good About Themselves:

•**Spend time with your child.** Talk, listen, and show interest in his activities.

•**Don't put your child down.** Talk to her the way you like others to talk to you. Be patient and understanding.

•**Provide opportunities for success.** Success is the best esteem builder there is.

•**Give praise when you observe the effort.** Be specific. Make sure your child knows what it was that was well done. "You are staying right beside me in the store. What a big girl you are becoming!"

•**Support your child when he is struggling or frustrated.** "I know you want your brother to play with you now. He is doing his homework. Could you build a tower while you wait?"

•**Teach your child to praise others and see**

the best in each situation. Be a good role model by having the best self-esteem you can.

•**Teach the difference between praise and bragging.** "You must be proud of yourself. You did great!"

•**Express your affection often** through physical contact such as hugs, kisses, pats or an arm over the shoulder.

•**Respect feelings and abilities.** Remind yourself not to carry her when she can get there on her own or not to speak for her when she can do this for herself.

•**Relax and accept your child as he is.** Don't try to make him somebody else. Recognize and nurture his special qualities.