

YOU'RE NOT MY FATHER / MOTHER

WHEN YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO LIVE WITH STEPPARENTS

Zoe: When you first get a stepparent, it's pretty uncomfortable because you don't know how you're supposed to act around them or what you're supposed to call them. Should you call them Mom, Dad, a special name, or by their name? You don't know where you stand with them or where they stand with you. You didn't pick them, so you don't know if you really like them or they really like you. If they're horrible, you need to tell your parent. Your parent has the right to find love, but you have the right to be treated well.

Evan: Keep in mind that they're not your biological parent, but they care a lot for you, or at least they should. If they don't, your parent shouldn't be with them. You should try to form a relationship with them. The best thing is to forget they're your "stepparent" and just think of them as a loving adult, like an uncle, who lives with you.

Zoe: It's important for a stepparent to know how much authority they have, so they know when to step in and when not to. I think they should have 40 percent authority, and if they're the only one home they should enforce rules but not make them. Your parents should tell both you and them exactly what's what. In the beginning, they should have about the same authority as a babysitter.

Evan: Uh-uh, Zoe. I disagree. They should have more say than a babysitter, but they shouldn't have as much authority as your biological parent. And they definitely should have more authority than your older sister! If you don't like them, tough. Your parent loves them, but your parent loves you, too, so you should tell them how you feel, but try to not make your parent feel guilty. I happen to really like my father's new partner. Things are a gazillion times better since he moved in. He knows a million things, he's a great cook, and he takes really good care of me when I'm sick.

Zoe: Another good thing is that if you're not getting along with your parent, the stepparent can step in (get the pun?) and try to get your parent to listen. They're a bystander, so they can see both sides.

Evan: You just have to give this person a chance. If your parent married him or her, there must be something good about them. If not, your mom or dad will figure it out for themselves.

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	Dear Zoe,
	I know I'm supposed to like my stepmother, but I
	don't. She's mean and she's nothing like my mom.
	I don't want to tell my father 'cause he'll get mad
<input type="radio"/>	and just tell me to get along with her. What am I
	supposed to do?
	Laura, age 11

Dear Laura,

Don't expect to like your stepmother right away. There's no such thing as instant love, it always takes time to get to know someone. Don't expect her to be like your mom. No one can replace your mom, but this woman can be a cool figure in your life. At 11, this may not seem like much, but when you're a teenager, you'll like having another woman in the house. Of course, if she's really mean, tell your dad. He might side with her, but hopefully he'll listen to you. You won't be able to change her living with you, but you can at least give her the benefit of the doubt and hope she cares enough about you—or at least enough about your dad—to try harder to be nice.

Best of luck,

Zoe

EVAN'S QUICK TIPS

1. **Have a positive attitude.**
2. **Assume your stepparent is a nice person and wants to get to know you.**
3. **Spend time doing something special with them. (I went to a basketball game with my mom's boyfriend, which really helped us bond.)**
4. **Cut them some slack. This must be hard for them too.**
5. **Make sure you know how much authority they have.**

TEN YEARS LATER, (EVAN) *

The title of this chapter says it perfectly: You're Not My Father/Mother. That will never change. However, that doesn't mean that you can't accept, love, or at the very least coexist with this person. Both of my parents have dated and had relationships. Some of their partners I have liked, some I haven't. In the process I've learned it's about how I choose to relate to them and the experiences we create together. The advice I have now is to try your very best to realize that these people make your parents happy—that's why they chose them. They aren't out to get you; they are there to relate to you, love you, care about you, and add to your life.

What Their Mom Has to Say

Getting used to a stepparent is another one of the adjustments you have no say in, yet it affects your life in so many ways. To put it bluntly, you're stuck with this person. Just because your mom or dad has chosen a new partner doesn't mean you are happy to have him or her in your life. Some kids are really pleased about having a stepparent, but others resent him or her for lots of different reasons. You may not like the way your stepparent treats you or your parent. You may feel as if they are taking too much of your mom's or dad's time and attention, or you may think they have too much authority. After all, why should some "stranger" have the right to make rules or be in charge of you? All of these issues need to be worked out with your mom or dad, but your parents can only help if you let them know your feelings.

The best way to get results is to ask for what you want. For example, maybe you don't think it's fair for a stepparent to discipline you, or perhaps you'd like to spend at least one night a week with your parent without their new partner. Try not to worry about hurting your parents' feelings when you are being honest about how you feel.

It's also important for you to try to be open to your stepparent. It takes time to get to know anyone new, and more time to develop trust. Your stepparent probably wants you to like him or her and is anxious to find ways to have a good relationship with you. This is a two-way street and you have to be willing to do your part.