



What do I call you?

Some separated parents face a difficult decision when one or other parent establishes a new and committed relationship: What to call the stepparent?

What a child calls a stepparent can set the stage for battles or deeply loving relationships. The direction this takes is greatly determined by the relationship between the natural parents and the respective security of each parent's relationship with their children. Age of child will also factor in with regard to the child's comfort in addressing the stepparent with special terms.

Preschool age children tend to take more naturally to calling a stepparent mom or dad. For them, a mom or dad is a loving person in authority who has serious responsibility for their care. Some school age children may be less inclined to call a stepparent mom or dad owing to concerns of loyalty to the natural parent, while others may feel embarrassed calling a step parent by their proper name when out in public. Hence school age children are at times seen to call a stepparent by their proper name in private and by mom or dad, in public. Teenagers are far more apt to just call a stepparent by their proper name and tend not to feel the discomfort sometimes experienced by the younger school age children.

Parents themselves may take issue with their child calling another adult mom or dad. There may be concern of their relationship being diminished if the child uses their name towards the stepparent. If there is conflict between the natural parents, the perceived threat to a parent's relationship with their child may intensify if a child then calls the stepparent mom or dad. In such cases, the child may then be subject to a tug of war where one parents expects the child to address the stepparent as mom or dad while the other parent admonishes the child, "you only have one mother or father". In these situations, the child is caught in the middle and either annoys one, other or both parents, or alternately, learns to lie about the situation to avoid harassment.

Parents have a number of strategies to find the right name for a stepparent. In some cases they simply let

the child-stepparent relationship speak for itself and thus take their lead from the child. In other cases, natural parents meet and discuss the matter and come to a mutual solution. Some parents find a compromise solution by finding similar, but different terms such as mom/mommy and dad/daddy. Where there are cultural differences, the term used by one culture may be different than that used by another culture and hence there may be no conflict by using the respective cultural term. Other persons use special names or pet names.

Parents must remember that whatever one chooses to do, sets the stage for what the other may do. Thus care is advised if one parent makes a decision that they wouldn't like the other parent to take.

The child's perspective is to have loving and caring relationship with all parents – natural and step. The child seeks to avoid conflict and get on with the job of being a kid. If the child is caught up in the struggle of what to call a stepparent, the child can be distracted from school and behavioural or emotional problems may arise.

What is really being discussed is the process of adjustment. Natural parents and stepparents must understand that the process does take time and with time, they all can learn that kids may have loving and caring relationship with multiple persons where loving one takes nothing away from loving another regardless of what they are called.

Best advise? Concentrate on loving your child and what the child calls you will be secondary to a great relationship because that's what it's really about.

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