

Suddenly a **stepmum**

Gisele, Khloe, Megan – they make step-parenting look so glam. But could you swap hot dates for play dates if your Mr Right had kids?

When Amanda Seyfried hooked up with Ryan Phillippe at Kate Hudson's Halloween party last year, she didn't just score herself a hot new boyfriend. Like it or not, she also walked into a relationship with Ryan's two young children. At 25, Amanda could be about to become a parent – before she's even considered having kids of her own. It's a huge step and, given the couple's already on-off status, it could be their downfall.

Ryan and Amanda's situation certainly isn't unique. Reality-TV star Khloe Kardashian, supermodel Gisele Bündchen, and actress Megan Fox are a few of the famous faces in Hollywood's stepmothers' group, and in Australia, one in five families are stepfamilies. Chances are, next time you agree to a date with that cute bloke from RSVP, he could be offering a package deal. So would a side serving of ankle-biters make you run for the door? Before you decide, there are a few things you should know...

It's not about you

Let's get one thing straight – there's nothing simple about dating a man who's already a daddy. "It's not a surprise that second marriages fail at a far higher rate," admits psychologist and Relationships Australia CEO Anne Hollonds. "This is really tough, especially if you don't have experience with kids."

The first thing you need to understand in this situation is that you won't be your partner's number-one priority – a little challenging, especially in those early days of dating when you're looking for signs he thinks you're special. "You've got to understand this is not about you, and how valuable you are or how much he loves you," Hollonds says. "It's just that you will never be as important as his children."

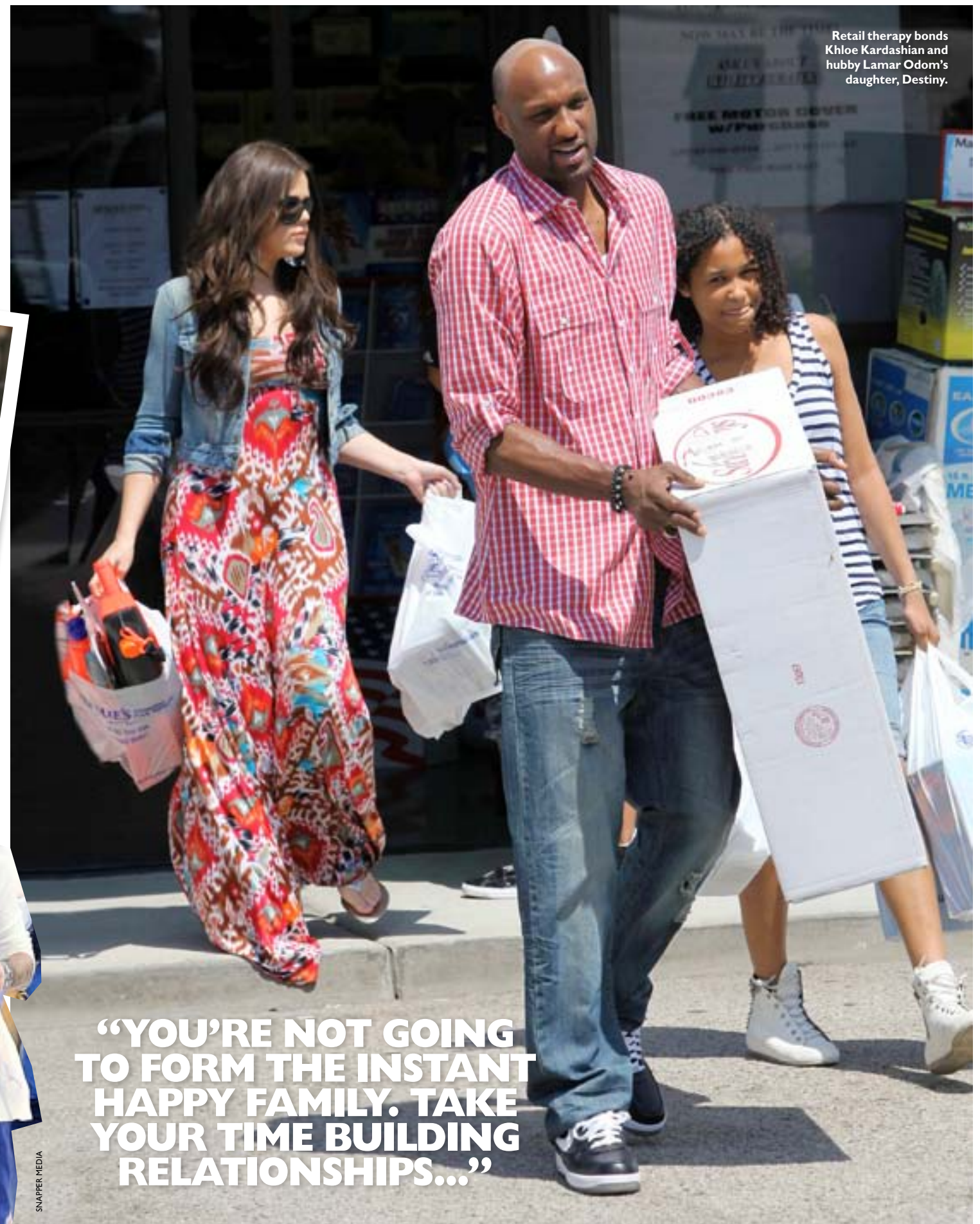
Her advice is to seek some professional help, both as an individual and as a couple. While it might sound intimidating to go into couple's therapy from day dot, it's vital you both have support in facing the challenges ahead. ▷



Gisele Bündchen plays with her stepson, John.



Megan Fox, husband Brian Austin Green, and stepson Kassius run errands in L.A.



Retail therapy bonds Khloe Kardashian and hubby Lamar Odom's daughter, Destiny.

“YOU’RE NOT GOING TO FORM THE INSTANT HAPPY FAMILY. TAKE YOUR TIME BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS...”

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"It's important to take responsibility for your own insecure feelings, but you can also work on it together," Hollonds says. "The earlier you start working on it, the better."

You also need to keep in mind that while the financial obligations of parenthood aren't a problem for Hollywood dads like Ryan, for the average guy, it can be a huge drain. "Romantic dinners and lavish holidays might not be as frequent," says psychologist Jacqueline Saad. "If this is going to be a problem, you need to exit first up."

For Sophie, 24, whose boyfriend has a three-year-old daughter, it's all about balance. "We don't go out a lot, but because his daughter isn't with us all the time, we do get to spend time by ourselves," she explains. "At first it was an adjustment, but I liked the things we'd do when she was around, like going to the park or for walks."

And after 12 months together, they've learnt that communication is paramount. "He's very conscious of not putting his child onto me," Sophie says. "But recently we've become more of a team when it comes to his daughter. I told him, 'I'm here, I'm your team member.'"

Getting along with the kids

If the idea of children is still a far-off prospect, going into a relationship with a ready-made family is pretty daunting – and you need to work out if you're really prepared for it. That was the case for Katy, 31, who was undecided about the idea of parenthood when she met her now-husband. "When he asked me to meet his children [a five-year-old girl and a four-year-old boy] for the first time, I was nervous!" she recalls. "I hadn't spent a lot of time around young children, and found myself thinking, 'Oh God, what do you talk about with a five-year-old?! Will they hate me? Will they know me as his girlfriend?!' I felt like I was about to go to a job interview."

While every situation is different, taking things slowly will give you time to work out what you can handle without impacting the kids involved. "You've got to understand it's going to take time and you're not going to form the instant happy family," says author Dolla S. Merrillees, who chronicled

her experience in *The Woodcutter's Wife: A Stepmother's Tale*. "Be flexible and take your time building those relationships. But regardless of the situation, if you aim for respect and trust it's a strong way to start."

A good first step is to find a common interest with the child, whether it's cooking, sport or a TV show. "Get your partner to give you an insight into what the kids may like or dislike," suggests Saad. "Make an effort to get to know them on their terms."

"My husband's daughter was shy in that first meeting, but we got chatting about the Chipmunks movie she loved at the time," Katy says. "That helped her open up."

If his children don't warm to you instantly, don't take it personally – they're most likely still grieving the loss of their family. The key is sticking with it, says Hollonds, even when it feels like it's not making any impact. "Don't assume it doesn't matter," she says. "It will help."

The good news...

While it sounds like hard work, there are rewards, too. One of the bonuses for Sophie was finding an emotionally mature guy. "I thought he was more attractive because of all the things that come along with being a dad," she says. "He had care in his voice when he talked about his daughter." Plus, you might just end up with a new family. "When the kids tell me they love me, that makes everything better," says Katy.

"Step-parenting requires courage and commitment," Merrillees adds. "But you're on this journey because of love and you can't lose sight of it." **Penny Carroll** □

Dating a dad? Visit Relationships Australia (relationships.com.au) or Stepfamilies Australia (stepfamily.org.au) for advice and support.

QUEENS OF THE KIDS

THE YUMMY STEPMUMMIES

Supermodel **Gisele Bündchen** told *Vanity Fair* that husband Tom Brady's son is "100 per cent" hers.

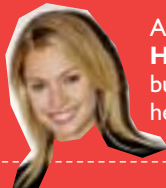


THE AWKWARD STEPMUMS

Wonder if Christie Hefner, 58, will call her dad Hugh's fiancée, **Crystal Harris**, 25, "mum" after the wedding?



Megan Fox has tattoos, a hot body and a stepson, Kassius, from her marriage to Brian Austin Green.



Age is no barrier for **Kristy Hinze**, 31, and Jim Clark, 67, but we bet it was tough for her two adult stepchildren!

THE STEPMUMS-IN-WAITING

LeAnn Rimes is attending counselling sessions with boyfriend Eddie Cibrian's ex, for the sake of his two sons.



THE EX-STEMUMS

Actress **Sienna Miller** has waved goodbye to boyfriend Jude Law's three kids. Twice.



Cameron Diaz's next role could be motherhood if she goes the distance with baseball star and dad-of-two Alex Rodriguez.



Sandra Bullock has stayed in close contact with ex-husband Jesse James' daughter, Sunny.

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