

## Blended (Step-parenting) Families <sup>1</sup>

In our world today there are more and more blended families trying to make it. Because nearly 40 percent of marriages end in divorce and people remarry, children of divorced parents are faced with the challenge of a *new blended family*.

The blended family is a very complicated situation to navigate for a parent who wants to create a happy home-- both for their child/children and themselves.

Making the transition into a blended family can sometimes breed conflict and resentments -- children may be uncomfortable with their new step-parent's disciplining techniques or they might fight incessantly with their new step-siblings. Other children may withdraw and turn inwards rejecting any help.

### What makes a successful blended family?

Trying to make a blended family a *replica* of your first family, or the *ideal* nuclear family, can often set family members up for confusion, frustration, and disappointment. Instead, embrace the unique differences and consider the basic elements that make a successful blended family:

- **Solid marriage.** Without the marriage, there is no family. It's harder to take care of the marriage in a blended family because you don't have couple time like most first marriages do. You'll have to grow and mature into the marriage while parenting.
- **Being civil.** If family members can (at least) be civil with one another on a regular basis (rather than ignoring, or purposely trying to hurt, or completely withdrawing from each other), you're on a good and healthy track.
- **All relationships are respectful.** This is not just referring to the children's behavior toward the adults. Respect should be given not just based on age, but based on the fact that you are all family members now. Never put each other (or the ex-spouses) down. Respect is owed to all members of the family and new extended family unit.
- **Compassion for everyone's development.** Members of your blended family may be at various life stages and have different needs (teens versus toddlers, for example). They may also be at different stages in accepting this new family. Family members need to understand and honor those unique differences.
- **Room for growth.** After a few years of being *blended*, hopefully the family will grow and members will choose to spend more time together and feel closer to one another.
- **Make time for Prayer.** Making time for Mass and prayer are so important in the early stages of formation with your new blended family. Let this be a time for making new family traditions when it comes to prayer.

### Bonding with your new blended family

Early in the formation of a blended family, you as a step-parent may want to focus on developing positive relationships with your step-children. You will increase the chances of success by thinking about what the children need. Age, gender, and personality are not irrelevant, but all children have some basic needs and wants that should be met as a precursor to a great relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Material taken from <http://www.helpguide.org/>

## Dealing with differences in blended families

As you merge two families, differences in parenting, discipline, lifestyle, etc. may become more pronounced and can become a source of frustration for the children. Make it a priority to have some unity when it comes to household living, including things like rules, chores, discipline, and allowance. Agreeing on some consistent guidelines and strategies will show the children that you and your spouse intend to deal with issues in a similar way. This should diminish some feelings of unfairness.

Recognizing the ways that step-families are different can help you understand and accept some of the problems you're likely to face in your new family structure, and can be an important first step in achieving a healthy blended family.

### Some common differences in blended families

- **Age differences.** In blended families, there may be children with birthdays closer to one another than possible with natural siblings, or the new step-parent may be only a few years older than the eldest child.
- **Parental inexperience.** One step-parent may have never been a parent before, and therefore may have no experience of the different stages children go through.
- **Changes in family relationships.** If both parents remarry partners with existing families, it can mean children suddenly find themselves with different roles in two blended families. For example, one child may be the eldest in one stepfamily but the youngest in the other. Blending families may also mean one child loses his or her uniqueness as the only boy or girl in the family.
- **Difficulty in accepting a new parent.** If children have spent a long time in a one-parent family, or if children still nurture hopes of reconciling their parents, it may be difficult for them to accept a new person.
- **Coping with demands of others.** In blended families planning family events can get complicated, especially when there are custody considerations to take into account. Children may grow frustrated that vacations, parties, or weekend trips now require complicated arrangements to include their new step-siblings.
- **Changes in family traditions.** Most families have very different ideas about how annual events such as holidays, birthdays, and family vacations should be spent. Children may feel resentful if they're forced to go along with someone else's routine. Try to find some common ground or create new traditions for your blended family.
- **Parental insecurities.** A step-parent may be anxious about how he or she compares to a child's natural parent, or may grow resentful if the step-children compare them unfavorably to the natural parent.

### Strengthening a blended family

One challenge to creating a cohesive blended family is establishing trust. The children may feel uncertain about their new family and resist your efforts to get to know them. Learn not to take their lack of enthusiasm (and other negative attitudes) personally. It isn't that they don't want you to be happy; they just don't know what it will be like to share their parent with a new spouse, let alone his or her children. These feelings are normal.

### Create clear, safe boundaries in blended families

An important part of building trust in a family has to do with discipline. Couples should discuss the role each step-parent will play in raising their respective children, as well as changes in household rules.

The following tips can help make this difficult transition a bit smoother:

- Establish the step-parent as more of a friend or counselor rather than a disciplinarian.
- Let the biological parent remain primarily responsible for discipline until the step-parent has developed solid bonds with the children.
- Create a list of family rules. Discuss the rules with the children and post them in a prominent place. Try to understand what the rules and boundaries are for the children in their other residence, and, if possible, be consistent.

### **Keep ALL parents involved**

Children will adjust better to the blended family if they have access to both biological parents. It is important if all parents are involved and work toward a parenting partnership.

- Let the children know that you and your ex-spouse will continue to love them and be there for them throughout their lives.
- Never put each other down in front of the children or any other time.
- Tell the children that your new spouse will not be a 'replacement' mom or dad, but another person to love and support them.

### **Communicate often and openly in blended families**

The way a blended family communicates says a lot about the level of trust between family members. When communication is clear, open, and frequent, there are fewer opportunities for misunderstanding and more possibilities for connection, whether it is between parent and child, step-parent and step-child, or between step-siblings.

Uncertainty and worry about family issues often comes from poor communication. It might be helpful to set up some 'house rules' for communication within a blended family, such as:

- Listen respectfully to one another.
- Address conflict positively.
- Establish an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere.
- Do things together – games, sports, activities.
- Show affection to one another comfortably.

### **Use routines and rituals to bond blended families**

Creating family routines and rituals helps unite family members. Decide on meaningful family rituals and plan to incorporate at least one into your blended family. They might include Sunday visits to the beach, a weekly game night, or special ways to celebrate a family birthday. Establishing regular family meals, for example, offers a great chance for you to talk and bond with your children and step-children as well as encourage healthy eating habits.

### **Tips for a healthy blended family:**

- All brothers and sisters "fall out", so don't assume all family arguments are the result of living in a blended family.
- Beware of favoritism. Be fair. Don't overcompensate by favoring your step-children. This is a common mistake, made with best intentions, in an attempt to avoid indulging your biological children.
- Communicate, communicate, and communicate. Be sure to discuss everything. Never keep emotions bottled up or hold grudges.

- Make special arrangements. If some of the children “just visit” - make sure they have a cupboard for their personal things. Bringing toothbrushes and other “standard fare items” each time they come to your home makes them feel like a visitor, not a member of the blended family.
- Find support. Locate a step-parenting support organization in your community. You can learn how other blended families address some of the challenges of blended families.
- Spend time every day with your child. Try to spend at least one “quiet time” period with your child (or children) daily. Even in the best of blended families, children still need to enjoy some “alone time” with each parent.

### **Maintaining marriage quality in blended families**

Newly remarried couples without children usually use their first months together to build on their relationship. Couples with children, on the other hand, are often more consumed with their own children, than with each other.

You will no doubt focus a lot of energy on your children and their adjustment, but you also need to focus on building a **strong marital bond**. This will ultimately benefit everyone, including the children. If the children see love, respect, and open communication between you and your spouse, they will feel more secure and may even learn to model those qualities.

- Set aside time as a couple by making regular dates or meeting for lunch or coffee during school time.
- Present a unified parenting approach to the children – arguing or disagreeing in front of them may encourage them to try to come between you.

### **When to seek help for your blended family**

If, despite all of your best efforts, your new spouse and/or children are not getting along, find a way to protect and nurture the children despite the difficult environment. Hopefully, when the children see and feel your emotional support, they will do their best with the situation.

It might be time to seek outside help if:

- A child directs anger upon a particular family member or openly resents a step-parent or parent.
- A step-parent or parent openly favors one child over another.
- Members of the family derive no pleasure from usually enjoyable activities such as school, working, playing, or being with friends and family.

### **Finding a good resource in your area**

It may take some time, but choose a resource that everyone in your blended family is comfortable with. A good connection with someone should result in some positive changes right away.

You can obtain referrals from:

- **Your local parish or priest.**
- **Your family doctor.**
- **Family or friends.**
- **Domestic Church (Marriage and Family Life) Office of the Diocese.**