



UPPER ISLAND ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE SERVICE

BLENDING FAMILIES: A GUIDE FOR STEPPARENTS

Tips for Avoiding Problems and Advice for Healthy Bond

Stepfamilies, also known as blended families, are more of a norm now than ever. Children in blended families may at first resist the many changes they face. Fortunately, most blended families are able to work out their growing pains and live together successfully. Open communication, positive attitudes, mutual respect and plenty of love and patience all have an important place in creating a healthy blended family.

What is a blended family?

In a blended family, or stepfamily, one or both partners have been married before. One or both has lost a spouse through divorce or death, and may have children from the previous marriages. They fall in love and decide to remarry, and in turn, form a new, blended family that includes children from one or both of their first households. While parents are likely to approach remarriage and a new blended family with great joy and expectation, your kids or your new spouse's kids may feel left out of your choice and uncertain about the change. What will the new person in their life mean to them? What will their new step-siblings be like? How will their relationship with their biological parents change?

Characteristics of a blended family include:

- Related by marriage or living together
- One biological parent plus one stepparent
- Parent and stepparent work to meet the often conflicting needs of his/her/their children
- Little / no time for the development of forms and norms; children are already part of the picture
- Different backgrounds and ways of seeing the world often conflict. Not enough time for these to evolve and be reconciled
- Couple never came first before the children
- Couple must come together almost immediately to establish new rules, routines, structures for all involved
- Positions in family are widely misunderstood and hold tremendous potential for conflict
- CONFLICT: What is my position? Place? Power? Influence?
- The child has no legal relationship with the stepparent
- At least two, perhaps more homes for the family
- Sex and Blood Bonds are in conflict; the pull between the bonds of parent-child-couple conflict
- Children are torn; don't know how to act or who to please

- Children are often subjected to fights between parents who live in separate homes, and the parent and stepparent; ample opportunity to pit parents against each other
- Myths abound especially re: "The Wicked Stepmother"
- Stepfamily is formed from losses ie. death, divorce or separation
- Startling, unexpected behaviors often stem from misunderstood, underlying dynamics and unresolved issues and feelings
- Unrealistic expectations of healing that needs to take place and of how the new family will make up for the hurts of the past
- Children mourn the loss of the original family and may be more vulnerable; they may be fearful of yet another separation or break up of their new family, which the statistics tell us is more likely than not.

Getting to know you 101



Although you love your new partner, you may not automatically love his children, and they may not automatically love you. It takes time for people to establish positive, trusting relationships and to develop a family history. You will increase the chances of creating strong relationships 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.

Children want to feel:

- **Safe and secure** – Children want to be able to count on their parents. Children of divorce have already felt the upset of having people let them down, and may not be eager to give second chances to their parents or stepparents.
- **Loved** – Kids like to see and feel your affection, although it should be a gradual process.
- **Seen and Valued** – Kids often feel unimportant or invisible when it comes to decision making in the new blended family. Recognize their integral role in the family when you are making decisions.
- **Heard and emotionally connected to** – Kids are eager for real connection and understanding. Creating an honest and open environment free of judgment will help them feel heard. Show them that you can view the situation from their perspective.
- **Appreciated and encouraged** – Children of all ages respond to praise and encouragement and like to feel appreciated for their contribution.
- **Limits and boundaries** – Children may not think they need limits, but a lack of boundaries sends a signal that the child is unworthy of the parents' time, care and attention. As a new stepparent, you shouldn't step in as the enforcer at first, but work with your spouse to set limits.

Let the child be your guide

Every child is different and will show you how slow or fast to go as you get to know them. Some kids may be more open and willing to engage. Shy, introverted children may require you to slow down and give them more time to warm up to you. Given enough time, patience and interest, most children will eventually give you a chance.

How does the age and gender of the children affect blending families?

Kids of different ages and genders will adjust differently. The physical and emotional needs of a 2 year old girl are different than that of a 13 year old boy, but don't mistake differences in development and age for differences in fundamental needs. Just because a teenager may take a long time accepting your love and affection doesn't mean that he doesn't want it. You will need to adjust your approach with different age levels and genders, but your goal of establishing a trusting relationship is the same.

Young children under 10

- May adjust more easily because they thrive on cohesive family relationships.
- Are more accepting of a new adult
- Feel competitive for their parent's attention
- Have more daily needs to be met

Adolescents aged 10-14

- May have the most difficult time adjusting to a stepfamily.
- Need more time to bond before accepting a new person as a disciplinarian.
- May not demonstrate their feelings openly, but may be as sensitive, or more sensitive, than young children when it comes to needing love, support, discipline and attention.

Teenagers 15 or older

- May have less involvement in stepfamily life.
- Prefer to separate from the family as they form their own identities.
- Also may not be open in their expression of affection or sensitivity, but still want to feel important, loved and secure.

Gender Differences – general tendencies:

- Both boys and girls in stepfamilies tend to prefer verbal affection, such as praises or compliments, rather than physical closeness, like hugs and kisses.
- Girls tend to be uncomfortable with physical displays of affection from their stepfather.
- Boys seem to accept a stepfather more quickly than girls.



Creating security and trust within a new stepfamily

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 kids. These feelings are normal.

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

Dealing with differences

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 kids that you and your spouse intend to deal with issues in a similar way. This should diminish some feelings of unfairness. If it simply isn't possible to agree, you may want to think about working with a support group or counselor to address some of the issues.

Keeping ALL parents involved

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

- Let the kids know that you and your ex-spouse will continue to love them and be there for them throughout their lives.
- Tell the kids that your new spouse will not be a 'replacement' mom or dad, but another person to love and support them.

Communicating often and openly

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, stepparent and stepchild or stepsiblings. Uncertainty and worry about family issues often comes from poor communication. Kids like to know what to expect. When they feel empathy and understanding from their parents and stepparents, they are more likely to be resilient to the normal ups and downs of adjusting to new family members and a new living situation.

It might be helpful to set up some 'house rules' for communication within a blended family. Some general guidelines:

- Listening respectfully to one another
- Positively addressing conflict
- Establishing an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere
- Doing things together – games, sports, activities
- Showing affection to one another comfortably

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 kids 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.