

## WORKING TOWARD SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILIES

Researchers estimate that nearly 50 percent of all first marriages end in divorce. This high rate has led to a boom in the number of stepfamilies. But, their success rates don't appear to be much better—roughly 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce.

Remarriage can replace a spouse, but it does not replace a natural parent for the children. Regardless of how pleased and secure the children may be with the in-house stepparent, children still know (unless there has been a death, of course) that there is a 'natural' parent living elsewhere. Whether they are missing that parent or not, there is a loss involved and the child may be grieving that loss.

Since blending a family is a difficult task and can take months or even years to finally come together, following are some guidelines to consider. For the adults involved, (and this means any new partners as well), the key elements are: to put the children's wellbeing first, to communicate clearly with one another and to have a great deal of patience, especially if the children are going back and forth between two households. This is a tall order, given that often there are hurt feelings and anger after a breakup. However, the children who adjust best in these situations are the children whose parents can be civil when dealing with one another. And children should NEVER be put in the position of messenger between his or her biological parents. The adults need to communicate with one another. Here are some other specifics to think about.

It is difficult to have a new person move into your "space", and also difficult for the new person to join a pre-existing family group. If at all possible, start this new family in a new space to minimize the feelings of "territory". Preserving original relationships is also important and can help children experience less loss at sharing a parent. At times, it is helpful for a parent and the biological children to have some time together beyond the stepfamily activities.

The parent-child relationship was in place long before the new couple relationship. Many parents feel that they are betraying their children by entering into a new relationship with a new partner. However, a primary couple relationship is usually crucial for the continuing existence of the stepfamily, so it is important to the adults and to the children. A strong adult relationship can provide the children with a positive model

for their own eventual adult relationships. The adults need to arrange some time for the nurturing of the couple.

And, including the child in the normal routines of the home allow him/her to feel welcome and a part of the family.

Caring relationships take time to evolve. The expectation of "instant love" between stepparents and stepchildren can lead to many disappointments and difficulties. Stepparents who have biological children may feel that they can step in to a new family and have the same interactions, feelings and bonds that they share with their own children. They have a long shared history with their own children that they don't have with their new stepchildren. Give the new family time to develop its own unique dynamic, with no pressure of how you think it "should" be. This family will always be different from first families.

For the most part, stepparents should not get involved in disciplining the stepchildren until a strong bond has developed over time. (This can easily take up to two years—sometimes more). It is important for the bio parent and the stepparent to discuss and decide as a couple how the children should be raised, i.e., chores, homework, allowances, bedtime, TV, dating privileges, acceptable and unacceptable behavior and consequences for bad behavior, so that they are 'on the same page' with their expectations but it is best left to the biological parent to discipline. The children should be made aware of the rules and regulations and the consequences so that there are no questions about what's expected. These rules can be discussed at family meetings with children old enough to understand the process. This goes for children visiting on the week-ends as well, although they might have fewer or lighter chores as part time household members. Otherwise, they can be expected to behave well and follow the house rules.

It is important that both parents support each other's actions. If there is any disagreement, talk about it when the children aren't around. Fighting or disagreeing in front of the children may alienate the stepparent and undermine his/her role in the stepfamily and compromise the child's respect for the stepparent. That said, there may be times when the stepparent is alone at home with the children and in that case, he or she will be in charge of any discipline issue that may arise.

If you have stepchildren who are visiting on the weekends, remember that visiting children usually feel strange and are outsiders in the neighborhood. It can be helpful if they can have some place in the household that is their own, i.e., a drawer, shelf or bookcase for toys and clothes. If there are some neighborhood activities for the family, this can help introduce the child to new friends. Or, perhaps the child can bring a friend to visit, especially if there are no other children in the home.

Integrating a stepfamily that contains teenagers can be particularly difficult. At this age adolescents are moving away from their families in all types of families. They also have more of a previous "family history" and so they may appreciate having considerable opportunities to be part of the stepfamily negotiations. However, with hormones raging, they may also experience moodiness and, in some ways, isolate themselves from the whole stepfamily experience, especially if they are suddenly feeling like a little child again.

It's important that the bio parent try to keep communication flowing with a teenager.

All families experience stressful times. Because stepfamilies are families born of loss, the mixture of feelings can be even more intense than in first families. Jealousy, rejection, guilt and anger can be more pronounced and expectations that the stepfamily will live "happily ever after" is even more unrealistic than in first families. Understanding and accepting the negative as well as the positive feelings can result in less disappointment and more stepfamily enjoyment. Flexibility is the name of the game.

#### **GROUND RULES FOR PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE:**

The more you are able to cooperate with the other parent, the better off your children will be. Certain ground rules need to be followed and certain issues need to be resolved by and between the divorcing adults:

1. When the children are living with you, you have authority and responsibility for them. When they are with the other parent, he or she has authority and responsibility.
2. Each parent has the same rights and prerogatives. No fair making plans on the other parent's time. This is the principle of non-interference.
3. One outcome of autonomy is that each parent is free to develop a personal style of parenting. You no longer have the right to judge the other parent's adequacy as a parent or to insist on certain behaviors that meet your own standards.

NOTE: Child abuse can and does happen during times of emotional turmoil. It is every parent's responsibility to exert self-discipline and to protect the child if the other parent is obviously abusive. The above guidelines are not intended to apply if there is abuse or jeopardy to the children.

If children report significantly fearful feelings about being at one parent's home, it is important to uncover what has made the children fearful. There may be many reasons for this. It is important to seek professional assistance.

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