Tips for blended families

Blended families are becoming an increasingly common part of life. If you are currently part of a step-family sometimes feel that the challenges are overwhelming.



With time, patience and some careful planning however, you're likely to find that although relationships within a step-family are often complex and challenging, they can also be enormously rewarding.

Common challenges

If you are about to enter a blended family relationship or are in the early stages of one, accept that some chaos and confusion is normal in the beginning.

There are a few things to know and watch for in a soon-to-be blended or newly blended family:

- Many children fantasize that their parents will get back together again. A new union with someone else is evidence that this won't happen and forces the children to confront reality. Typically, blame is thrown onto the step-parent, for being the "cause" of dashed hopes, and onto the biological parent for choosing a new partner.
- Children may make attempts to sabotage the new union by acting up or even by telling untrue stories about how their step-parent is treating them.
- When children begin to like their stepfather, for example, they are often afraid they are being disloyal to their biological father. This may cause children to suddenly back away from the new relationship or to attempt to create conflict with the step-parent.
- Children may resent any involvement in their lives by the step-parent, viewing it as an attempt to take over their biological parent's role.
- Step-siblings often become intensely competitive and may act out in attempts to secure their biological parent's sole attention.
- Children may find it hard to adjust to new living accommodations and may feel they have no "space."
- Couples frequently find their parenting styles and expectations are different. Disagreement over disciplining the children is one of the most frequent causes of friction.
- Step-parents sometimes find it difficult to accept that their partner's ex-spouse remains a central figure in his or her life through the children.

Facing the challenges as a couple

It is important to recognize that a step-family will never be quite the same as a biological family and that the relationships within it will likewise be different.

Accept that successful blending will take considerable time and patience. Agree that this is a long-term project and be realistic about timelines for relationship goals.

- Discuss the realities and challenges together. Accept that problems are likely to arise and talk about how you will face them.
- Understand that a successful blending will require continued open and honest communication between you and your partner. Don't let problems fester. Discuss and resolve issues together.
- Consider whether it might be helpful to register for family counselling before you blend your families.

- Discuss who will have authority over the children as well as values and differences in parenting styles and approaches to discipline. Discuss and agree where compromises can be made and where they can't. Determine the key common values upon which you will raise your new blended family.

- Agree that the biological parent will initially retain the prime parenting and disciplinarian roles. Many experts suggest that the biological parent should continue to carry these roles for the first 18 months.

- Don't try to force relationships. Accept that it will be some time before there is real love between step-parent and children. Aim for mutual respect and friendship first.

- Try to continue key traditions from each side of the new blended family. Begin to develop new family traditions of your own.

- Agree as a couple that you will never speak negatively about their other parent when the children are present and on the need for patience and flexibility with each other and with the children.

- Try to keep a sense of humour!

Biological parents

As the biological parent you have certain specific roles and responsibilities.

- Accept that both your children and your new partner may have anxieties and concerns about the new arrangement and will be facing some emotional challenges. Be open and listen to any concerns your children or your partner brings to you.

- Understand that you will be the key link in the new blended family. You will set the tone and determine how both the step-parent and the children should be treated. Insist on a minimum standard of mutual respect and consideration.

- Take on the role of primary parent and disciplinarian for the first 18 months. Give your partner and the children time to get to know and respect each other before handing over the challenge of exerting discipline.

- Don't expect your partner and your children to love each other immediately. Love takes time to develop. Encourage them to get to know each other's interests, likes and dislikes first.

- Be patient with your partner. He or she may have little experience with children or may have a different parenting style.

- Make time to be alone with your children. Give them focused attention and the opportunity to open up about any problems. Let them know how much you love them. Praise their efforts to make the blended family work.

- Make time to be alone with your partner. A blended family can be stressful for both and it's important to spend time together as a couple.

Step-parents

The step-parent also has certain roles and responsibilities.

- Don't expect miracles to happen overnight. A successful blended family takes time and patience to develop.

- Communicate with your partner. Discuss expectations and agree on your role in the family. Don't let problems fester. Be open about concerns and irritations and work with your partner to solve them.

- Don't feel guilty for not loving the children. Don't blame the children for not loving you. Love takes time to develop. Concentrate on trying to get to know the children and their interests, likes and dislikes.

- Don't try to discipline the children at first. Leave the task to the primary parent for the first 18 months. However, you have a right to expect mutual respect and consideration and should talk with your partner if you are receiving less than this.

- Don't try to take on the role of biological parent. That role is already taken.

- Accept the involvement of your partner's ex-spouse in your family's life as the children's other parent. Encourage their relationship and try not to see it as a threat.

- Find opportunities to be alone with your partner, away from the children.

- Try to be patient with your partner and with the children.

Though blending a family is a potentially complex proposition, with love, dedication, patience, time and a commitment to clear and open communication, it can be an intensely rewarding and meaningful experience.