

# Keeping Peace in Blended Families

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Raising your own children is hard enough. Raising someone else's brings even more challenges.

Divorce, death, adoption, and other circumstances result in children being raised by people other than their biological

parents. This is so widespread, that the term "blended family" has been coined to describe families where children share one home or two, with birth and stepparents, often with a lively combination of half, step, biological, or foster siblings.

A blended family is one where children share one home or two, with birth & stepparents, often with a lively combination of half, step, biological, or foster siblings.

Here are several thoughts on how to deal with issues common to such families:

- With divorce or death, please pay attention to your children's need to grieve the loss of their parent or their parents' marriage. If you start another relationship before the children have adjusted to your restructured family, psychologist Michael G Connor writes that parents may see "fear, anger, depression and other insecurities." Connor reports that "arguments, blaming, defiance and acting like a victim<sup>1</sup>" are common ways that children try to take control of their lives. **Pay attention to your children's need to grieve the loss of their parents' marriage.**
- Involve your new sweetheart with the children only after you know she or he is the one. Please don't create a climate where the children get attached to partners, who then move on and out of their lives, never to be seen again.

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- Check out your new partner's parenting style before you get married. There are a thousand great ways to raise children, and it is hard enough for two people to agree, much less three or four. If you have substantially different ways of parenting, perhaps agree that they must defer to the birth parent's way of doing things or have a much lesser role in raising the children.
- Understand that the fondest wish of children of divorce is that their parents will get back together, and they may actively try to break up any new partnership. Don't buy it. I wish now that I had the wisdom to recognize this thirty years ago, rather than reacting to such behavior. I should have **Understand that children's fondest wish is for their parents to get back together.**

## What will the stepparent's role be in your family?

asked directly, "Are you wanting A and I to get back together?" and let the children know that A was going to move out, no matter what. We would stay friends and co-parents, and no amount of bad behavior would change that fact. A good follow up question would have been, "Are you feeling sad or angry that we're breaking up?"

**"You are right, I'm not your dad, & Mom and I have agreed that you will do your homework before playing video games."**

- You and your spouse should decide, with input from the children, what a stepparent's role will be in the family. Decide on family ground rules and present a united front. When you hear the inevitable, "you're not my dad, I don't have to do what you say!" You can reply, "You

**Combine traditions to make holiday celebrations uniquely yours.**

are right, I'm not your dad, and Mom and I have agreed that you will do your homework before

playing video games." Follow up, "it's OK to be angry that your parents are not together. You still need to be respectful."

- Combine traditions and make birthday and holiday celebrations uniquely yours. You may have a number of traditions living under one roof. Enlist the children's help to plan new family celebrations, merging ideas from all sides of the family.

**Allow all children some space that is only theirs.**

- Work out how to share space in the home with everyone involved. Many families cannot afford to rent or own a home with an extra bedroom for a child who is not with them full time. Whether that means doubling up, or sleeping on the couch, let children who need to share their space, offer suggestions toward a room sharing solution.

**Maintain a good relationship with your ex. Don't ask your children to split themselves between the two people they love the most.**

- Allow all children some space that is only theirs, even if it is just a

bookshelf or a corner of a room. This tells them that this is their home too, even if they are not with you every night of the week.

- Do everything you can to maintain a good relationship with your ex. If you can't, then pretend, at least in front of your children. If Junior wants to invite both parents plus the step mom you can't stand, to the school play or soccer game, you owe it to your child to be polite, pleasant and agreeable for a couple of hours. If you can't do at least that, realize that you are asking your children to split themselves in half, and choose between the two people they love the most.

**Don't burden your children with your emotional needs.**

- Stepfamily coach, Angie Blackwell, suggests that you also let the children know that it is normal to want their parents back together, and that it doesn't hurt your feelings<sup>2</sup>. If it in fact does hurt, find a gentle friend or a counselor to listen. Your children don't need to be burdened by adult emotional needs.

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- Blackwell also suggests that you tell the children that they already have a mother and a father, and

are not trying to replace them, and that you want to be a part of their lives in a way that is helpful.

- Now for the hard one. Befriend all the co-parents. Being on good terms with everyone will allow more flexibility, and in families, cooperation beats competition any day of the week.

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When a new relationship comes with children, be aware that there are multiple needs within the family. While you may be head-over-heels in love, children will have their own opinions, desires and needs. Taking as much care with the children as with your new partnership, will result in greater chance of long-term happiness. In spite of initial hardships, parents report life long, and rich relationships with children they had a hand in raising.

<sup>1</sup>Parenting in Blended Families by Michael G Conner, Psy.D <http://tinyurl.com/y8zorkr>

<sup>2</sup>Why Your Stepkids Hate You and What you Can Do About It by Angie Blackwell, CFLE CPC. <http://tinyurl.com/y8w8nlx>

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