

Blending Families: TIPS FOR AVOIDING PROBLEMS AND ADVICE FOR HEALTHY BONDING

Stepfamilies, also known as blended families, are more of a norm now than ever.

At least one-third of all children in the U.S. will be part of a stepfamily before they reach age 18. 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.

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▣ 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?

As you get ready to expand your family, a few important things to remember are:

- Be realistic – things won't be perfect overnight.
- Be patient – good relationships take time and kids need time to trust and count on you.
- Limit your expectations – know that you will probably give a lot of time, energy, love and affection that will not be returned immediately. Think of it as making small investments that may one day yield a lot of interest, but don't expect anything in return for now.

Given the right support, kids should gradually adjust to their new family members. It is your job to communicate openly, meet their needs for security and give them plenty of time to make a successful transition.

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.

Dealing with the death of a parent

Some people wrongly assume that a blended family will come together more easily when a parent has died. Adults and children need time to grieve the loss of a loved one. A remarriage may trigger unfinished grieving. If children in your new household are recovering from the loss of a parent, give them space and time to grieve and learn more about how to support them.

See Helpguide's [Supporting a Grieving Person](#) and [Coping with Grief and Loss](#) for more

information.

See Helpguide's [Children and Divorce](#) for more information on the type of loving environment that will help your kids.

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.

How do attachment relationships affect the ability of stepfamilies to bond?

People who have an insecure attachment history may have problems establishing close, loving bonds with new people. Fortunately, it is never too late to change this tendency. An insecurely attached child (or adult) can learn to trust others, and bond with people who treat him with consistent affection, attention, and respect.

See [Parenting & Attachment](#) and [Relationship Help: Building Great Relationships with Emotional Intelligence](#) for suggestions on how to repair attachment problems.

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.

See Helpguide's Co-Parenting after a Divorce for more tips on working with your ex.

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.

Resolving feelings and concerns about the previous marriage

A second marriage may resurrect old, unresolved anger and hurt from the first one, both for adults and children. For example, a child can no longer hope that his biological parents will reconcile. Or an ex-wife may stir up trouble with her ex-husband when she hears he is about to remarry. The new couple must negotiate a final emotional divorce to clear the way for a fresh start.

See Helpguide's [Relationship Help](#) and National Stepfamily Resource Center "Love Notes" for tips on cultivating your marriage relationship.

What to do if your blended family can't get along

If, despite all of your best efforts, your new spouse and children are not getting along, find a way to protect and nurture the children despite the difficult environment. Hopefully, if the kids 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 stepparent or parent
- a stepparent or parent openly favors one of the children
- members of the family derive no pleasure from usually enjoyable activities such as learning, going to school, working, playing, or being with friends and family.

To Learn More: Related Helpguide Articles

[Co-parenting after a separation or divorce](#)

[Coping with Divorce: Helping your child cope](#)

[Guide to Grieving: Coping with a divorce or relationship breakup](#)

[Parenting and Attachment: Bonding for secure attachment](#)

[Relationship Help: Improving relationships with emotional intelligence](#)

References and resources for blended families & stepparenting / stepfamilies

[National Stepfamily Resource Center](#) - Clearinghouse of information, resources, and support for stepfamily members. Topics include counseling, finances, co-parenting, co-grandparenting, and more.

[NSRC LoveNotes](#) – One sheet PDF files with tips on cultivating your marriage relationship and developing strong bonds with your new spouse.

[Kids Health - Living with Stepparents](#) - Article on feelings children might have when a new family is blended together. (Nemours Foundation)

[Preparing to form healthy step families before the wedding](#) – Tips for making a second marriage a smooth and healthy transition. (IDoTakeTwo.com)

[Couples Considering a Blended Family](#) – Things to consider before remarriage and tips for creating a cohesive blended family. (University of Florida)

Gina Kemp, M.A., and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#), contributed to this article. Last modified in March 09 http://www.helpguide.org/mental/blended_families_stepfamilies.htm