



Work Life Services Newsletter July 2023

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Blended Families: Take it Step by Step

Old TV shows like the "Brady Bunch" made blending two families into one look easy. The reality is that blended families -- in which parents and children from two families join as one after remarriage -- need to do some hard work to make the adjustments needed for stable family life.

Despite sometimes long odds, however, parents and kids can establish and maintain a successful, loving family by trying to be honest, learning to trust each other and keeping the lines of communication open.

"The first thing I tell family members when I counsel them is that they have to begin by telling each other what they want out of the family -- and what they're afraid of," says psychiatrist Kim J. Masters, M.D. "You can't make it work if you don't trust each other."

Parents in a blended family must remain vigilant if they are to prevent destructive attitudes from creeping into family life.

Here are a few ideas to get started:

- Life in a blended family doesn't have to be ideal at every moment to provide the warmth and nurturing needed. Says Dr. Masters: "It doesn't have to be perfect -- it just has to work!"
- The stepparent in a new blended family should tell the children frankly what is expected of them, and what he or she hopes to be able to give. "Instead of worrying about, 'How do I show the kid I love him?' the stepparent should deal with the child like a supportive coach or camp counselor," says Dr. Masters. "Later, the feelings will catch up."
- Blended families should hold regular meetings in which household rules are explained clearly and all members are encouraged to describe their feelings.
- Be honest about the struggle. Parents need to come together humbly. They need to recognize that they will probably face some difficult moments."

Daily life in a blended family can be difficult for everybody, but it can pose an especially difficult challenge for a stepparent who no longer lives with his or her own birth children.

This situation is full of emotional dangers. Among them:

- "Playing Santa Claus" with stepchildren to make up for guilt or grief over moving away from biological children.
- Feeling resentment toward biological children for siding with the other parent during a nasty divorce, and then taking out that resentment on stepchildren.
- Keeping stepchildren at an icy emotional distance to protect against being hurt again by separation.

According to Dr. Masters, the best defense against slipping into such destructive behaviors is for the stepparent to be open with the new family.

Ask your new children: "What can I help you with? If you tell me how I can help you accomplish the things you want, I'll do my best to make it happen."

Most of these adjustment problems tend to resolve after a while, provided only that the parents show the kids that their love for each other is the most powerful force at work within the family.