



The Challenges in Step and Blended Families

Family life is full of challenges. On top of all the normal challenges, there are extra challenges for step families. That is one of the reasons that the divorce rate for remarried couples is higher than for first-time marriages. Step families and blended families can be happy and effective, but the extra challenges require extra effort and extra wisdom to make the family strong.

Be realistic. Some stepparents may enter the new family expecting to quickly build close bonds with stepchildren. Some experts estimate that it takes as long as seven years for some children to adjust to step parents. Those children may feel deep loyalties to natural parents even if those parents had serious problems. Rather than try to replace that parent, it is generally better for a stepparent to build a relationship more like that of a kindly aunt or uncle. It is often wise to allow the natural parent to take the lead in dealing with his or her children.

Be patient. There may be many things that need to be changed. Resist the temptation to jump in to fix things all at once. Children need time to adjust to new rules. Many changes with stepchildren need to be initiated by the natural parent. Changes may have to come in small steps. Look toward long-term solutions rather than immediate change. As much as possible, provide children stability in rituals and relationships. So many things change for children as their parents divorce, date, and remarry. It is good for them to know that they can count on some loving people and certain rituals such as a family fun time or regular dinner together.

Work closely with your partner. All the added stresses in step families put strains on the marriage. Make time for relationship-building with your partner. Because of the more complex histories in a step or blended family, expect challenges around issues of money, tidiness, responsibilities, sex, in-laws, traditions and holidays. There are many adjustments to be made. Be sure to build on and emphasize the strengths you have with your partner.

Use steady doses of empathy and understanding. One of the most healing things that anyone can do in a family is to show empathy. Even when we disagree with people, it is very healing when they are heard and understood. (See the unit in this series: "Empathy and Understanding Strengthen Children.") Carefully avoid saying unkind things about ex-spouses. If an ex-spouse has said something about you that is unkind or unfair to one of the children, respond with calm understanding: "I am sorry that he feels that way. We are trying very hard to provide you a good place to live and learn."

The ability to negotiate calmly and sensibly makes a big difference. If you are considering entering a blended family situation, study carefully how you and your potential partner solve problems together. If you have already remarried or formed a blended family, cultivate your ability to think creatively, work patiently, and support lovingly.

Get appropriate help. There are times when each of us needs help finding better ways of solving family problems. You may find it useful to read one of the books recommended below. Some people find it useful talking to people who are wise and caring. You may find it helpful to read other units on this website. The objective is to get new ideas and fresh hope to strengthen your family life.

Applications

1. What strengths do you bring to the marriage and the family? What strengths does your partner bring to the marriage and the family? Make a list and keep them in mind. When things go badly, consider how the two of you can use your strengths to make things better.
2. What are some of the challenges in the blended family? Which of them can be temporarily set aside as you seek to build a firm foundation of trust and caring? Which of them can be handled in different ways so that there is less friction? Which of them require your joint effort? Make plans to work together to turn challenges into growth.
3. As you deal with stepchildren, the natural parent should help decide the kind and amount of your involvement with his/her children. What guidelines has your partner set for your involvement? Do you occasionally talk about how your relationships are going with children so that the relationships can continue to grow and improve?
4. There are a variety of perceived losses to deal with when a single parent remarries. For many children, the remarriage of a parent marks the end of the dream that their biological parents will work things out and reunite. This loss of the ideal happy family is combined with other losses for both the children and the new couple. There may be a loss of personal or couple time, a loss of contact with non custodial parents, a loss of confidence that relationships will endure, a loss of resources that may be needed to support children living with an ex-spouse, or a loss of clear role expectations. Which losses apply to your family? Which are most pressing? How can you use your family strengths and resources to deal with any sense of loss?

Recommended Reading

Barnes, R. G. (1984). *Single parenting*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Blau, M. (1993). *Families apart: Ten keys to successful co-parenting*. New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group.

Bray, J. H., & Kelly, J. (1998). *Stepfamilies: Love, marriage, and parenting in the first decade*. New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

Bustanoby, A. (1992). *Single parenting*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Card, E., & Watts Kelly, C. (1996). *The single parent's money guide*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Einstein, E., & Albert, L. (1986). *Strengthening your stepfamily*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

- Engber, A., & Klungness, L. (1995). *The complete single mother: Reassuring answers to your most challenging concerns*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation.
- Goldstein, S. (1982). *Divorced parenting: How to make it work*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.
- Hetherington, E. M. (1999). *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lofas, J., & Sova, D. B. (1995). *Stepparenting*. New York, NY: MJF Books.
- Nelsen, J., Erwin, C., & Glenn, H. S. (1997). *Positive discipline for blended families*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing.
- Papernow, P. L. (1998). *Becoming a stepfamily*. 1998: GICPress.
- Richmond, G. (1990). *Successful single parenting: Going it alone*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House.
- Stahl, P. M. (2000). *Parenting after divorce: A guide to resolving conflicts and meeting your children's needs*. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers.
- Talia, M. S. (1997). *How to avoid the divorce from hell and dance together at your daughter's wedding*. Danville, CA: Nexus Publishing Company.
- Thomas, S. (1997). *Parents are forever*. Longmont, CO: Springboard Publications. 0-
- Visher, E. B., & Visher, J. S. (1991). *How to win as a stepfamily*. New York, NY: Dembner Books.
- Whiteman, T. (1993). *The fresh start single parenting workbook*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.