

Blended Families

All relationships have their complications, but stepfamilies create a web of relationships and inter-relationships that make the average spider's overnight spinning look simple in comparison.

Consider these possible variations: the woman may be wife, ex-wife, mother and stepmother. Her relationships might include her husband, her ex-husband, her children and her stepchildren, and her stepchildren's mother who is her new husband's ex-wife. If her ex-husband has remarried, then her relationship circle also includes his wife who is now her children's stepmother. And, his new wife might have children of her own.

Change the genders and the man/husband/father's roles are just as complex.

Now consider the children. Parents, stepparents, stepsiblings. And we haven't even talked about extended family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins.

Considering that each individual relationship comes with its own set of potholes, it isn't any wonder that the blended family might be in for a bumpy ride. For example:

- Feelings of loss and grief, guilt, anger, jealousy, loyalty conflicts, resentments, hurt and betrayal, rejection—these are just a few of the feelings family members may experience. Parents who are undergoing the stress and tension of divorce and remarriage may have less time and stamina to deal with their own feelings, let alone the children's emotional turmoil.
- New and different ways of doing things. When a family is forming, the members have no shared family histories or shared ways of doing things. From the way the table is set and how the holidays are celebrated to discipline and chores—everything must be sorted out, discussed, and agreed upon.

- Roles and responsibilities change and expectations run high. The mother of one may suddenly become the stepmother of three. The youngest child may no longer be the baby and the oldest may lose her position, too. Time and space need to be reckoned with. Parents may expect their new spouse to love their children immediately and for all the children to become instant best friends.

The difficulties facing a blended family may be many, but where there are challenges there are also opportunities. Here are some suggestions and solutions:

- **Acknowledge the river of feelings** and encourage their expression.
- **Allow time for dealing with the issues** these feelings raise and time for mourning losses.
- **Be open to new ways of doing things.** Be flexible. Whenever possible include everyone in the decision-making process.
- **Communicate.** Talk and listen.
- **Maintain and nurture original parent-child relationships.**
- **Support and include one another.** Plan time for family activities.
- **Encourage friendships;** let relationships develop in their own time.
- **Maintain a sense of humor and play.**
- **Ask for help** from other family members, support groups, community-based programs, clergy, and your therapist.

Those who plan ahead and communicate about potential problems, who face the issues as they arise, who support one another and seek help when it is needed, can build strong bonds among themselves and nurture a healthy and loving family. *

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