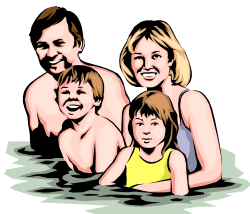


# ***FEAP NEWSLETTER***

*A Series of Educational Articles from your Faculty & Employee Assistance Program*

## **How to Put the “BLEND” Into Blended Families**

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The “traditional” two-parent nuclear family has become something of a rarity in today’s culture. As more and more single parent families and blended families become commonplace, new sets of challenges and opportunities arise. While all families today face difficult tasks, those presented by the blended family can seem, at times, to be especially formidable.

Just to provide some clarification in the myriad of family constellations of today, if there is an adult couple living in your house with at least one of them having children from a previous relationship, then you are in a blended family!

All families have unique characteristics, but blended families have some special characteristics that biological families do not have. Often when a couple enters into this kind of marriage, they are not prepared for some of the potential pitfalls, and this lack of awareness can make matters worse when the reality of the new situation sets in.

There tend to be four major differences between blended and biological families. These differences can shape the nature of the problems that may arise within this type of family.

These differences are:

1. ***Every member of the blended family has suffered a loss.*** Whether through divorce or death, at least one of the spouses and his/her children may have unresolved issues regarding the past family break-up. The new step-parent may experience the loss of privacy and organization that comes with “instant family”.
2. ***The parent-child relationship predates the couple’s relationship.*** The family is

“ready-made”. The couple has no time to establish a strong marital relationship prior to the introduction of children. Issues regarding discipline, jealousy, and resentment may all enter in to play. There is also a lack of shared memories and traditions. Disagreement may arise over seemingly “small” matters – i.e.: do we get a real or artificial Christmas tree? Or, more significant yet – do we celebrate Christmas or Hanukah (or both)?

3. ***Children may move between two separate households.*** Scheduling, visitation, and custody may be a problem. Children have to learn two sets of rules and expectations. The transitions can be difficult for everyone involved.
4. ***The other biological parent and relatives may have influence over the blended family.*** Unresolved control issues may surface between ex-spouses, and competition and conflict may result.

***Problems often arise*** when the blended couple carries false expectations about what this new venture really entails. Some of the common myths regarding blended families are:

- WE WILL all instantly love each other. It is unreasonable, and in fact, a set up for problems, if the members of a blended family have this belief. The love is between the marrying partners, not with the “accouterments” that each bring. It takes a lot of time, energy, and patience to develop a true love for a child that enters our life in this way. In fact, it may not ever be the same type of love that we think we “should” have.
- NOW that we are together, life in former families won’t matter. WRONG! Exes, in-laws, prior lives all do matter, and will influence the way in which the new family develops and meets the challenges.
- WE WILL do it better this time around. IN fact, statistics show that the odds tend to be against remarriages with children involved.

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Part of this trend may be due to the unrealistic expectations a couple has when they marry, and the resulting frustration and anger that results when reality sets in.

- EVERYTHING will fall quickly into place and we will be one happy family. Let's face it – "Leave It To Beaver" is only a TV show! It takes a lot of time – some experts say at least 2 years, for a new blended family to adjust and settle in to the new arrangement.
- WE WILL and must function smoothly as a family. **BIG WRONG!!** Trying to meet all the demands, needs (physical and emotional) of all of the members of a blended family, especially given the external factors of the ex spouse, in laws, etc., almost guarantee that things will often NOT run smoothly. Flexibility, patience and a sense of humor are necessities in blended families!
- OUR children will be as happy as we are. This is another myth. Children may not be as excited about the changes a remarriage brings as we are. They may feel angry at the fact that their lives are being forced to change when they had very little input into the decision. They may still have unresolved feelings regarding the break-up of the biological family. They may not like having to suddenly share the bathroom time with a stranger who is now called "step-sister".

One of the main keys in making for a healthy and happy blended family is the stability of the relationship of the spouses. – If the parents are happy, the kids will feel more secure.

Sometimes it is difficult for the couple in a blended family to find the time to devote to the marital relationship – demands of time and money pressures often get in the way. Sometimes, if there is leftover guilt from the previous marriage, this can get in the way of a healthy relationship. If the kids in the family are having a hard time, and acting out with poor behavior, this will distract from the time the couple has to spend on each other.

How To Nourish the Couple Relationship:

- ❖ Make it a priority – make time for the relationship - it is the foundation of the family.
- ❖ Identify and explore the feelings and fears you bring to the new marriage – insecurity, guilt, fear of failure, etc - Past issues need to be separated from current ones.
- ❖ Communicate and express your feelings and fears with your partner.

Often, we tend to only see the difficulties of being part of a blended family – here is a list of the strengths that can also exist in this type of family

1. The blended family has a lot of experience to draw upon.
2. Partners in a blended family have often learned tolerance self-acceptance, and have developed more reasonable expectations regarding relationships.
3. Since the stakes are high, there is often a high degree of commitment.
4. There is a larger extended family – therefore more possible sources of support, more role models.
5. A blended family offers a great opportunity to practice flexibility.
6. Being part of a blended family helps children learn how to adapt, solve problems, cooperate, and live together as part of a family.

If you find yourself struggling with this issue, or any type of personal problem, give the FEAP a call. We can be reached at 434-243-2643 or 1-800-847-9355.

