

Blended families 101

Written by Timothy Houston
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What is a blended family? In its most basic sense, a blended family is one where the parents have children from previous relationships but all the members come together as one unit. It is said that the blended family is now the predominant form of family and it is estimated that there are approximately 23 million blended families in the United States. However, as blended families become increasingly common, the definition of a blended family is changing. Understanding the basics of a blended family can be essential for ensuring that your family can embrace its strengths to work through its differences.

A blended family is different from a step family. While the concept of the step family has been around for centuries, many blended families were not recognized until the two parents married and agreed to care for the children together, even if one parent was not biologically related. Today, it is much more acceptable for the adults in the relationship to live together and raise the children jointly without the legal commitment of a marriage or adoption. This more lenient approach can cause difficulties, particularly in terms of child support, medical decisions, and other complex issues. To overcome these challenges, the following suggestions should be considered:

1. Be yourself

Always be yourself. Kids can easily see through masks and figure out who we really are. You will invariably tire yourself if you're trying to play out the perfect blended-parent twenty-four hours a day. Just be you.

2. Communicate

Designated family time should be devoted to communication. This includes listening as well as speaking, and it is likely to open doors to conflict resolution that are bound to come up in daily life. Blended-families usually have some difficulty with communication in the beginning of the relationships, usually because each member comes from a different original family and they each bring different styles of communication. So, time, patience, and practice are essential in the beginning to blend communication styles successfully. Open communication helps keep expectations realistic.

3. Be flexible

Each family should be willing to make personal adjustments when need. Flexibility and compromising are key ingredients necessary to lead to happier and less stressed blended-families. Don't be so ridged, and keep in mind that routine is important, especially for younger children but the ability to adapt is a good idea for everyone.

4. Be patient

Blended-parents must move slowly. Nothing of value grows up overnight. The seeds of love need time to grow through respect, caring and affection. Patience is indeed a virtue and one that every blended-parent must develop.

5. Keep laughter in the mist

Don't be too serious. A sense of humor is an essential ingredient to stir into the blended family pot. Humor softens the rough spots and brings families together when used correctly. Just remember not to use it at another person's expense and do not allow any of the children to do it

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either.

6. Be respectful

Members of a blended family don't need to agree with each other on everything, but they must learn to respect the opinions, privacy and personal possessions of all members of the family. Biological parents should make it clear to their children that disrespect will not be tolerated and must also be careful to show their own respect.

Blending families is difficult but not impossible. Communication will be the key to success, so get as much information about the topic as possible. It is also a good idea to seek out external counsel and work groups. The more work you put in up front, the greater the opportunity for success.

Timothy Houston is an author, minister, and motivational speaker who is committed to guiding positive life changes in families and communities. To get copies of his books, for questions, comments or more information, go to www.tlhouston.com.