

Blended Families



Developing Intimacy While Integrating Lives

by Jennifer Brady

In the 70's, one of America's most well known television families gave us a picture of life as a blended family. Carol and her 3 daughters met Mike and his 3 sons...and they lived happily ever after as the Brady Bunch. They sure made it all look so easy. However, today's reality is a bit different.

Anytime two single parent families are joined together, a blended family is formed. The composition of a blended family may differ quite significantly, but the challenges they face are rather similar. When adults and children are required to adapt their current family system to a new system, they will undoubtedly experience a wide range of trials, joys, fears, and rewards. Tom Frydenger, author of *The Blended Family*, testifies that "becoming a blended family means mixing, mingling, scrambling, and sometimes muddling your way through delicate family issues, complicated relationships, and individual differences, hurts, and fears."

There are three significant areas which are affected in the blended family - the new couple, the children, and the new family.

The Couple: Anytime you enter a new marriage, there must be a considerable focus on growing toward understanding and intimacy. For a second marriage, this can be a wonderfully exciting venture. However, there may also be certain obstacles the new couple will need to address. Issues from previous marriages may need to be brought to light and discussed in order for the new marriage to proceed in a healthy manner. Very often, negative emotions and thoughts resurface after a commitment is made to a new partner and family.

Guilt is one emotion which may be present. Adults may feel that they have caused their children harm or that they are being disloyal to their first spouse.

The fear of failure is also a possible concern. Looking to the past, adults may question their ability to have a successful marriage.

Finally, feelings of grief may reappear as the adult is aware of a variety of losses he/she has encountered (i.e. first marriage, an intact family, children who live with former spouse, etc.)

These issues can be worked through if the couple is willing to spend time talking honestly about their feelings and fears.

It is crucial for the newly married couple to make time for each other in order to develop their relationship.

Although this may be difficult due to the demands of raising children, it is a necessity for marital intimacy as well as for the stability of the new family unit.

The Children: Integration into a new family will be different for children depending on their age, maturity level, past life experience, and emotional strength. However, there are some common needs that most children will face at some point in the process. For a smoother transition, it is essential for parents to be aware of these and other needs of their children as well as to offer them support, understanding, and encouragement. Some typical needs are:

- ❑ The need for privacy and personal space.

- ❑ The need for reassurance about their role in the family and their relationships with you, their step-parent, their non-custodial parent, and their siblings.

- ❑ The need for respect and fairness (i.e. rules, chores, consequences, etc).

- ❑ The need to be included in family decisions.

- ❑ The need for clear understanding of household rules as well as consequences for breaking them.

- ❑ The need for acknowledgement and validation of feelings regarding the new family system.

- ❑ The need for **time** to adjust to a new family arrangement including step-parent and step-siblings.

The Family: Now that we have discussed needs and tasks of the couple and the children, let me share some practical tips for helping the new family learn to function as a whole unit in love, trust, and respect.

Courtesy and grace are two characteristics which help a blended family in their

transition. If each member can choose to honor the differences of the others as well as offer an accommodating attitude, things will run a lot smoother.

A Family Meeting is a wonderful tool for all families to utilize, not just blended families. A weekly, scheduled time for your family to meet together to discuss a variety of issues can be vital to the success of your family. Family meetings should be held regularly for them to have the full impact. If they are called only when a problem arises, then the focus of the meeting may become negative in nature. This family time can be used to discuss a number of concerns but the ultimate goal is to foster unity, growth, and love among the members. Topics to be discussed at family meetings can include family chores, rules and consequences for behavior, weekend or vacation plans, financial concerns, personal issues, and relational concerns. One specific benefit of the family meeting for blended families is that it gives the children input in family decisions which increases their sense of belonging and cohesion.

Another valuable aspect of the family meeting is the spiritual focus. Many families begin and end the meeting in prayer as well as have a time of devotion and sharing. This emphasis sets the stage for family interactions with one another during the meeting and outside the meeting. The family which is filled with the Spirit will undoubtedly reflect the fruits of the Spirit in their relationships with one another.

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