

# **Building a Healthy Blended Family**

*By Jackie Block, MFT*

When divorce happens it is like a death. With divorce comes the loss of dreams, daily parent/child relationships, possible loss of support from family and friends, and possible loss of community, school, jobs. Often, it means changing roles within a family.

## **Adjustments**

It takes at minimum of 18 months to two years for a comfortable working situation to evolve in a newly formed blended family. It may mean adjusting to more people in a family and it could mean adjusting to patterns of behavior that are different from yours. During this period of adjustment, it is important to remember that each individual in a family may approach different tasks or situations with their own individual style. Having a different way of doing things does not necessarily make it wrong.

## **Expectations**

It is important that you and your partner talk about expectations regarding your couple relationship, parenting, finances and visitation. As the heads of the household, it is important that you and your spouse stick together, come to an agreement and stay with it. Keep in mind there are no instant relationships. Don't expect your children to love their new step-parent as you do. Allow for honesty and do not hide behind being in love, fears and insecurities because if expectations are not talked about in the present you are more likely to fail in the future. Address personal expectations and make sure that there is room for self care.

## **Children**

Developmentally, preschoolers pick up on the feelings of adults around them. If you feel confident, safe and secure, they will feel safe and secure. Five and six year olds often feel confused if they are not made aware of what is happening and what adjustments they will need to make. Give them a little time and preparation in terms of what is expected. Six to twelve year olds may not ask questions but often carry guilt about the divorce and think that it may be their fault. Reassure them. They may equate your low, angry or irritable mood to something they have done instead of your own grieving process. Reassure, reassure, reassure! Teens are in the process of leaving home and may not be willing to connect with a new family. Allow for independence and choices. Teens often harbor resentment towards the divorce. Respect feelings and keep the door open.

## **Building Relationships**

Allow for others to be involved with you and your children. Be thankful if your ex's new spouse cares for your children and treats them as you would. Allow children to invite their friends and encourage involvement in your neighborhood. If you are the step-parent, take a step back and watch patterns of interaction before you impose your rules and your way on the household. Sometimes a better way of developing a relationship with a step-child is by being available but not pursuing that child. Remember, change takes time and the more gradually change happens the more likely change will become permanent. Think about how you would like to be treated and do the same. Be aware of your

jealousy, insecurity, anger or other feelings that may get in the way of becoming an effective parent. Your focus should be on your household, not on your ex-spouse's household. Do not allow yourself to be pulled into "but mom does" or "but dad does..."

### **Planning**

Decide together and use family meetings to work on solutions to household or behavior problems. Plan how to handle disagreements between you and your partner concerning your interactions or their interactions with the children. Plan to limit the time you spend focusing on your ex-spouse, what he or she does wrong and his or her time with the children. Use your time to improve your household, not tear down your ex's.

### **Visitation**

Plan special outings when visits happen and when they don't happen. Don't treat the visiting children like guests. Have a place for them to stay, keep their personal things. Keep toiletries on hand for the visiting children. Use family meetings when it comes to territorial issues that evolve from "yours, mine and ours." Respect their belongings and do not allow use of those things when they are not there without permission. Introduce children to the neighborhood. As children get older, allow for transportation, time with friends, or special plans that are not part of your household.

### **Transition From One House to the Other**

Be aware of your anxiety and how that may impact your child's reluctance to go the other parent's household. If there are difficulties with transition, try doing it differently. Maybe the drop-off or pick-up needs to be reversed or a step-parent, family member or friend should do the exchange.

### **Sexuality**

Be aware of how your affection for each other impacts the comfort level the children have with this relationship. Teenagers in particular are struggling with their own sexuality and may be even more bothered than younger children. Be aware of how teens may create distance between themselves and a step-parent. If a child is attracted to this new parent, they may act out more to create distance. Be aware of subtle seductive behaviors on a parent or child's part. Have rules about the kinds of clothing that is worn and do not allow adults or children to walk around in their underwear. Don't turn to your child if you are emotionally upset with your spouse. If crushes in the sibling system develop, talk about it and make a distinction between feelings and behavior. Having a good adult-adult relationship prevents boundary violations in adult-child relationships.

### **Money**

Money is a sensitive issue. Especially if it was a problem in your previous marriage, make known your goals for managing money in your current marriage. Discuss resentments regarding money, child support and use of joint income. It is recommended that you don't divide expenses with your new family. Don't buy for children out of guilt. Don't deny yourself and give more to the children. Don't keep everything separate. Separate child care accounts but be mindful of equality. Avoid discussing late child

support payments with the children. Most importantly, openly discuss money issues in your marriage.

In summary, it is critical that you and your spouse give your energy and time to your household. Openly discuss areas of concern with your new spouse. Try hard not to let resentments, jealousy and anger be the motivation for your decisions and you will, with time, have created a successful blended family.

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