

Blended Families and the Holidays

Today at least one-third of all children in the U.S. are expected to live in a step-family before they reach the age of 18. It is estimated that 1,300 new families are formed each day to include a step-parent and step-sibling. Even though the blended family is becoming the norm rather than the exception, this system is not without challenges. The primary factor in the evolution of these families is loss, whether it is divorce or death of a biological parent. Because family members experience a transition of lifestyle changes and adjustments, holidays can be difficult. The media generates a "traditional family" image with culturally driven images of multi-generational families gathering to celebrate their holiday rituals and traditions. Perhaps parents of blended families could "gift" their children with understanding the dynamics and feelings from their child's perspective.

Children will go through a period of adjustment after a parent's death or divorce and then, remarriage. The child's basic security is interrupted and shattered. Research has demonstrated that in time, however, most children can recover their emotional stability. The following are suggestions to help the child make transitions without long-term emotional consequences.

Time to Heal

"The first three years are the hardest for the child to blend into a new family system," according to Mary Jean Weston, Psychotherapist and Step-family Counselor. Most children have a loyalty to their biological parent and fear if they bond with a step-parent it will mean they care less for the birth parent. Therefore, it is important for parental figures to reassure the child that it is okay to have a relationship without choosing sides. Once the reassurance is given, allow time for the child to get to know the new family and to create healthy relationships in order to develop a family history.

Validation and Expression of Feelings

In blended families, children may feel awkward and alienated because they do not know their position in the new family. If their perception is that more time and attention is given to the new spouse or step-sibling, they may feel abandoned and rejected. It is important to listen to their verbal and non-verbal cues and give them permission to express their fears, resentments and insecurities.

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Boundaries and Expectations

Children need consistent and predictable structure and rules. Until the step-parent has developed a solid bond with the child, the biological parent should remain primarily responsible for control and discipline. The step-parent's role could be to monitor the child's behavior while avoiding triangulation and power struggles. One suggestion to avoid conflict is for the step-parents to discuss and agree on a list of family rules, share the rules with the children and then place the rules in a visible location.

Respect that the child may have to live in two different households with two different set of rules. The child can adjust to the different environments when there is cooperation between step-parents and biological parents. Therefore, DO NOT put the child in the middle of disagreements with each other or the biological parent. This is most damaging to the child's adjustment. If spouses have conflict, they need to seek professional help to mediate the disagreement. It is imperative that respect for each other be maintained in front of the child. As difficult as this might be, the parent is deciding she/he loves the child more than hating the ex-spouse! Secondly, the step-parent needs to show support for the child's relationship to the biological parent. By doing so, the child will be more willing to build a new relationship rather than feeling there is a competition for love and respect.

Nurturing and Accepting Environment

Because children are most loyal to their biological parents, do not demand the child love the step-parent. One common mistake is to expect the child to call the step-parent Mom or Dad. Instead create a nurturing and accepting environment by expecting and modeling mutual respect between the adult and child. By allowing the children to build a relationship at a pace where they feel comfortable, the better the chance that love and trust will evolve. Secondly, create a safe place for the child to learn how to communicate trust and bond with the new family. Give the child affection, encouragement and respect for their individuality and remain centered and welcoming. Most importantly, do not speak negatively or express bitterness about the ex-spouse in front of the children. This undermines a child's self-esteem and ultimate healthy adjustment. Instead foster the creation of interpersonal skills that will enable the child to make meaningful connections in the future. By learning and understanding from the child's point of view, the following are tips to make holidays with blended families enjoyable and memorable.

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Plan Ahead

Decide ahead of time where children are going to spend the holiday. "This is an adult problem to be resolved by adults," says Dr. Judith L. Bauersfeld, Psychotherapist and President of the Step-families Association of America. Some parents try to divide the day which can put a lot of pressure on the children. A better solution, suggests Dr. Bauersfeld, is to alternate holidays on a yearly basis. This plan will allow the child to know the arrangements in advance which will allow the child to focus on the holiday without feeling a split of loyalties between the family systems.

Avoid Competition

Competing for who buys the most expensive gift or who gets the most time with the child, creates a tense environment. Instead of allowing feelings of jealousy to cause competition for your child's attention, focus on creating a relaxed and enjoyable holiday.

Maintain a Sense of Humor

All step-families go through difficult adjustments. Avoid bringing past hurts into the present. Focus on having fun and express appreciation for one another. Remember the idea of perfect families celebrating perfect holidays is a myth!

It is possible to build healthy relationships when kindness, patience and respect is modeled by the adults. What was written over 2,000 years ago, still applies today. *"Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowances for each others faults because of your love."* Ephesians 4:2