

Ask an Expert – Tips for Creating a Successful Blended Family

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The term blended family highlights the unique challenge of finding acceptable ways to blend the lives, experiences, expectations and dreams of parents who remarry and the children involved. The ratio of people in the United States who live in blended families is one in three.

Blending a family can feel like mixing oil and water, and many families are taken by surprise by the challenges it presents. However, it is possible to be successful with commitment, compromise and patience.

Consider these tips for dealing with common struggles.

- **Challenges children experience** – Divorce and blending new families can be difficult for children to navigate. The greatest struggle they face is dealing with the loss of the family they once had or hoped to have and finding ways of maintaining loyalties in the new family setup. A child may love both parents, but feel uncomfortable vocalizing that with either parent. It is worse if the parents and stepparents don't get along, and the kids become pawns in their disagreements. As a parent and stepparent, the best thing you can do for your children is to focus on getting along with all the adults involved. You don't have to love each other, but you can be civil, and it's essential to keep the children out of your disagreements.

- **Challenges parents and stepparents experience** – Parenting in stepfamilies typically involves a couple joining in the middle of established parenting methods. Parenting

styles include a mix of firmness/permisiveness and kindness/hostility. If one parent is more permissive and kind, while the other is firm and more harsh, problems will result. Parents who use the same styles will likely have fewer challenges. Try your best to align your methods and reach compromises. Also, children generally respond better when they are disciplined by their own parent, who should be the one to deal with difficult discipline issues. Both the parent and stepparent can manage day-to-day issues so that children know adults are to be respected. Make sure to be 100 percent consistent with each other on everyday matters.

- **Couple relationship challenges** – When couples commit and create a new blended family, they are often a bit older than a typical newlywed couple. Because of this, they come into the new relationship with more experience, opinions, traditions, expectations and established ways of living their lives. It can be difficult to align these realities. One thing that can help is for couples to sit down together and discuss the parenting approaches used on them as a child and how they now feel about those approaches. Then couples should discuss the methods they have used as adults and why they chose to use them. As both partners better understand the context and reasons behind these approaches, it is easier to understand what the other is trying to do in their parenting. It also provides a forum for couples to discuss the middle ground they can find in future approaches. Compromise is critical, as is being selfless. If one person always gets his or her way, that means the other person doesn't, which can cause hurt and more challenges.

Blending families can be complicated. However, when these families are created, they can be just what everyone involved wants and needs. If you work to understand your partner's perspectives, compromise to ensure your partner's opinions and approaches are considered, and selflessly love the family, being in a blended family can be a wonderful experience for all involved.

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