

# Blended Families and Stepfamilies Common in U.S.

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The blended family is becoming increasingly common. The U.S. Bureau of Census provides the following statistics from the 2000 Census:

- 1,300 new stepfamilies are forming every day;
- Over 50% of U.S. families are remarried or recoupled;
- The average marriage in the U.S. lasts seven years;
- One out of two marriages ends in divorce;
- 75% remarry;
- 66% of those living together or remarried break up when children are involved.

These statistics are not surprising to those of us working in the field of family law. There is a plethora of advice for blended families, and advice differs even among specialists. There is consensus, however, in certain areas with the caveat that each family is unique. This article is written in an effort to present issues and offer ideas from persons more experienced than I to help build successful blended families/stepfamilies. Remember: take what you want and leave the rest.

While intact families face similar challenges in today's society, i.e. communication, discipline, differing parenting styles, money issues, holidays with extended family, a divided family often presents a set of challenges that children in married-parent, intact families do not face. Created through conflict and loss, newfound commitment, and struggles with transition, successful stepfamilies emerge through careful planning, open sharing and discussions of feelings, a sense of humor, mutual respect and lots of patience. It is said that in stepfamilies the 'honeymoon' for the couple who marries does not occur until about the seventh year. Couples who are aware of this seven year adjustment period will better understand what is happening and hang in there. While both stepparents have parental roles, those roles may differ depending on the situation. Absent special circumstances, the stepparent is without legal rights concerning the stepchild. The biological parent may have the job of disciplining his/her own children with **clear rules for the non-biological parent in the event that the biological parent is unavailable**. Proceed with caution, especially in the initial years. The stepparent must first develop a trusting relationship with the children. Overstepping boundaries is not advised.

Don't argue about the ground rules in front of the children. Once stepparents have agreed on


plans or ground rules, stick to them. Plans or rules may need to be re-evaluated. Sometimes the children may participate in this decision. Other times, the decision may be made by the biological parent and his or her children. Yet other decisions may be made as a whole family. Parents need to communicate regularly to make these decisions out of earshot of the children. Create and develop new celebrations and rituals that are unique to the new family. It will be a challenge to juggle the traditions and rituals from the broken and extended family with new celebrations and rituals that are unique to the new family. A child may have a different seat at the table, a different bedtime or different chores. A child may be the oldest child in one home and the middle child in the other. Family discussions and open sharing of feelings is vital to the creation of new celebrations and rituals. By developing their own traditions and caring relationships, stepfamilies can create emotionally rich and lasting bonds for each member. (See *Blending Families*, by Elaine Fantle Shimberg, Berkley Books, New York (1999); see also *Becoming a Stepfamily: Patterns of development in remarried families* by P. Papernow, Jossey-Bass Publishers (1993).)

Parents in blended families should strive for as much consistency, fairness and attention as possible for each of the children. Children are very sensitive to even slight differences in how they are treated. They will react badly to perceived injustice, such as not getting as much time, attention, and rewards as compared to a stepsibling. Keep the lines of communication open to maintain consistency and avoid misperceptions.

It is important to keep in mind that all families are unique. What works for one family, blended or traditional, may or may not work for another family. In addition, the ages, gender and specific developmental issues of the children will also impact on what happens within



individual families.

Finally, both the biological and stepparent need to develop effective open and clear communication regarding themselves and the children and maintain consistent structure around scheduling events, visitation, and time at extracurricular activities to assist them in this new adventure. It is important that the remarried partners take care of each other and their relationship. **Setting time aside regularly to engage in activities that both parties enjoy will continue to strengthen the relationship that led to the initial creation of this new family** and raise the potential for extraordinary opportunities for developing rich, loving relationships over the course of a lifetime, for both the children and the adults. 

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