

Divorce rates for a first marriage hover around 50% and almost 65% for second marriages. Research shows that in 2011 blended families or step-families will outnumber any other type of family. Marriage and child-rearing is hard enough, adding step-parents and multiple households can sometimes make the challenge feel insurmountable. Some families are blended due to a death or other unfortunate circumstance and face the same type of challenges.

Blending families is no easy pursuit. Often times the adults get frustrated that everyone is not feeling as loving and excited as they are about their decision to create a new family. This can lead to feeling discouraged, resentful, and overwhelmed. However, with guidance and good communication blended families can be very successful.

Some of these challenges blended families experience include different parenting styles, varying ages and developmental stages of the children, and the details and characteristics of how the new family was formed. Many families of divorce have gone through an intense and stressful process that causes significant hardships for everyone, including the children. Other divorces that are more amicable and are handled privately amongst the parents are less damaging for the children. That being said, I believe it is the parent's responsibility to create the most peaceful and stable environment possible. Children of tragedy or divorce did not ask to be in this situation and often feel powerless, confused, and sad.

How can you make a blended family work? The key to success is giving everyone a voice. Initially, the parents need to sit down and discuss how they envision their family to look and

function before blending. Parents need to agree upon parenting responsibilities including discipline, how to handle concerns regarding the other set of parents, and how to resolve issues. Once the parents are in agreement the children should be informed. I usually suggest a family meeting once a week to discuss issues, concerns, and any new rules that may have to be established. During these meetings, everyone should be able to share openly and honestly, without criticism or judgment, about how they feel and what they need to feel better.

Children of tragedy or divorce are grieving a loss. They have lost the family they knew and often their home. They are being asked to lovingly accept this new person as a parent. This sometimes makes children feel as if they are betraying their other parent and causes significant emotional turmoil. You may have had a chance to fall in love with this new person but your children will need some time. As the parents involved, you most likely had more time to address your feelings and emotions or may have even sought out help. Children are often asked to adapt to this new family structure with little preparation or skill set. Allowing children to share their feelings helps them feel like they are being heard which in turn makes them feel happier, calmer, and more empowered. Children often have an easier time talking to someone outside the family, such as a therapist, so they don't have to feel as if they are hurting someone's feelings.

Things to consider:

-Be patient, change is difficult. Adjustment can take several years

-Don't try to establish a new family unit too soon. Most families need at least 2 years to grieve and heal

-Be open to new ideas and strategies for parenting

-Be considerate and accepting of other parents' differences

-Never speak negatively in front of the children about the other set of parents

-As parents of this new family structure be loving and provide a united front to avoid manipulation

-Don't make too many changes at once

-Be respectful and respect will be returned. Children may have been exposed to inappropriate information during a difficult separation but will need to establish their own relationship with this new step-parent

-Every relationship requires work and no two relationships are alike

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