

The Mental Health News



Newly blended families are often chaotic

Blended families are extremely complex. Launching one is like managing a Stephen Spielberg production. The purpose of this newsletter is to describe the typical issues that blended families face and to provide a few suggestions.

Blended families typically experience stressors that traditional families do not. Some examples are as follows:

- The presence of one or more ongoing divorce wars. These wars wreak havoc on all who are near.

- The presence of practiced, divergent parenting styles.

While the presence of divergent parenting styles is not unique in traditional families, in blended families the parenting styles may have been successful in the previous family system. It may be especially difficult for the parents to compromise and to adapt to a new system.

The Challenge of Blending Families

by

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- The risk for “dividing and conquering” is high. The stepparent’s authority may be subverted by the birth parent following a plea by the child for the birth parent to intervene. Unfortunately, when the stepparent’s authority is subverted so to is the cohesion of the entire family.

- The risk for dysfunctional alliances is higher in blended families. In the face of stress family members may retreat into camps defined along previous family lines.

- Stepparents may try to establish a “close” relationship with stepchildren too quickly. Trying to force intimacy, as it were. Ironically, such an effort may slow down the process of drawing close to each other.

- Stepchildren may resent the fact of the stepparent. The child may go out of their way to reject the stepparent. Not because the stepparent has necessarily done something to cause this resentment, but because the child views the fact of the new marriage as the

Children may resent the new parent

destruction of a dream: the dream that the former family will be rejoined.

- One or both of the adults may go into the marriage with higher than usual levels of fear regarding the possibility of a divorce. Adults who have been through a divorce may fear their capacity to make a marriage work, the capacity of the other gender to be in a healthy relationship, the feasibility of marriage in contemporary society and so on. These fears can facilitate a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- There are usually unique life management issues to be settled: whose home will be the residence, whose kids will have to change schools, who has what responsibility for which previous debts, which ongoing expenditures will be maintained and which will be changed (John’s Karate lessons, Susan’s tap dance lessons, Mom’s college courses, Dad’s annual trip to Vegas and so on), which

kids will have which responsibilities, which adults will have which responsibilities...the list is lengthy.

The prescription for reducing the impact of these kinds of stressors, and for facilitating family harmony, will be unique for each family.

♥ Resist enabling and nurturing the existence of two families within the one family.

♥ Make every reasonable effort to negotiate a peace to any ongoing divorce wars: counseling, mediation, renegotiating the terms of the divorce, performing “penance,” sticking to



The prescription for success includes patience, discipline and persistence

However, some general guidelines may be helpful:

♥ Be as patient as possible. Then, when being as patient as possible, try to be even more patient. It’s going to take awhile and that’s to be expected.

♥ Ensure that you and your spouse spend time alone together nourishing your relationship. It is so easy to not do this, given all of the other demands on your time. However, any rose that goes unwatered will die, regardless of the importance of the gardener’s distractions.

♥ Try to make time for the entire family to do fun and interesting activities together. This tends to facilitate cohesion.

♥ When the child is ready for it, create time for the stepparent to spend time alone with the stepchild doing fun and interesting activities.

the terms of the divorce, not badmouthing the ex-spouse in front of the kids, not allowing the kids to badmouth or tattle on the ex-spouse...whatever reasonable effort it takes. It’s worth it as the ongoing damage is bound to be immense.

♥ Sit down with your spouse and agree on the nuts ‘n bolts of the parenting: who will have what responsibilities, what consequences will be used for misbehavior, how parenting disagreements will be handled, who will have what privileges, what is everyone’s bedtime and curfew, how often will the television be on and so on. Listen, empathize and compromise.

♥ Try to establish new, enjoyable family traditions.

♥ Allow old traditions, from previous families, to be integrated into your new family.

♥ Don’t let the kids divide and conquer:

–If you disagree with your spouse’s parenting decision, try to do so in private.

–If your spouse’s parenting decision is to be amended, try to let your spouse do it.

–If a child asks you for something, inquire whether he or she has already asked the other parent. If they have, direct the child to see the other parent regarding any amendments.

–Try to not side with the child against your spouse in front of the child.

If a family member develops symptoms, or if significant problems seem to be intractable, then professional help may be warranted.

