

Blended Families and Stepfamily Dynamics

Highlights

Blended families are formed when adults in a new relationship move in together, and one or both partners may have children.

Children in blended families may face emotional challenges like divided loyalties and adjusting to a new home.

With time, energy, and care, blended families can work well.

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Understanding the Issues Ahead

The decision to form a new family usually affects many different people.

Children may be excited by their parent's new relationship but also feel upset about leaving their old home. They may be anxious about moving to a new school and sad about losing their friends.

Children may experience divided loyalties between the parent they live with and the parent they visit regularly.

Adults may have complex relationships with former partners. Working out shared parenting details isn't always easy.

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins may worry that they will be cut off from the children who are an important part of their lives.

Relationships within the blended family may also present challenges. For example, a child may not warm to their new step-parent straight away. There may be competition or conflict between step-siblings.

There may be differences in values, expectations, and child-rearing practices between the new partners.

What Do I Need to Consider About Parenting Arrangements?

There are many things to consider when working out new living and parenting arrangements:

How you will communicate with your family in different households

The most appropriate parenting approaches for you and your co-parents

Arrangements around holidays, birthdays, special occasions, and school events

Focus on Yourself

Blending families can be a stressful time. It can be difficult to find the time to look after yourself, but it's key to being healthy and facing the challenges that may come up.

Start with simple things like:

Having some downtime and rest
Reading a book
Going for a walk
Continuing with your hobbies

Focus on Your Relationships

Look after your new relationship as adults. Put time and effort into honest, quiet talks. If there is conflict, listen without blaming or rushing into decisions.

Spend time building relationships with all the children, but don't try to become everyone's best friend overnight. Don't expect to be a super-parent who always gets things right.

Respect the Children

Accept that each child is an individual with a history, feelings, and rights. Don't expect children to play together happily right from the start, but insist that everyone behaves politely and respectfully - and behave that way yourself.

Keep Changes to a Minimum

Children benefit from predictability and knowing how things are done at home, so keep rules and routines consistent. Create a sense of belonging by encouraging children to keep favorite toys, books, photos, and other personal items in the new home.

Ease into Discipline

It's often best that the step-parent supports the parent's style of discipline rather than imposes their own, especially at the beginning of the relationship.

Everybody - children, adults, and other relatives - will need time to get used to the new arrangements. There may be times of unhappiness or disagreement. Be patient, encourage kindness, and seek support if needed.

Tools and Assistance

Don't try to deal with everything on your own. Get help if you need it. You can:

Contact a family counseling service

Seek support through parenting and relationship resources

Ask a professional for advice