



# Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**  
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## **Blended Families - How to get a smooth outcome! (Part 1)**

In all my years of writing this column (15, give or take), I have never written about the topic of blended families. I'm not sure why - I do a lot of work with blended families; I wrote a course for divorcing parents where we discuss blending families; and I grew up in a blended family. I'm kind of an expert.

Blended families are families where one or both parents have children from previous relationships. Blended families come in all shapes and sizes - mom already had kids, dad already had kids, mom and dad already had kids, and often the parents have children together. (Kind of a "yours, mine and ours" scenario.)

Many, many, many people have no idea what they are getting into when they decide to blend a family. They think as long as the parents are in love, things will just work out. That is so not true. Just like marriage is hard work, blending a family is hard work. So much has already happened to all the people involved. And we all have our ideas of how parents are supposed to act, how children are supposed to act, and what the boundaries of the stepparent should be.

We now have about four decades of research on this topic, and for the next three months I'm going to be sharing with you what we have found out. Here we go!

**For children, often the process of becoming a blended family is more difficult than the divorce was.** Think about all the changes children have endured by the time a new stepparent enters the picture: loss from the divorce, not seeing at least one of their parents as much, having to get used to a new environment with whichever parent moved. If both parents moved, there

is nothing familiar - house, bedroom, neighborhood friends, school, etc. And then there is having to meet their parent's various new love interests before the parent settles on a lasting one. That's a lot of change for anyone, folks, much less a little person.

We know that the more change children endure, the more their wellbeing decreases. This is why it is so important that your children do not meet everyone you date. They shouldn't be meeting anyone until you are confident the relationship is going to be around for a long time. And you shouldn't be getting engaged until you've been dating for a long time. And you should have a long engagement before you get married. Even if you didn't have children, you should go slow (you can't possibly truly know someone in under 1-2 years). But, because you do have children, it is even more important that the children have the time they need to process all the changes. Basically, if you want your kids to be ok, you have to S-L-O-W D-O-W-N!

**There must be a secure parent-child connection.** When we adults fall in love with a new person, it is normal for that new relationship to be consuming. This usually means the parent pulls away from the child for a bit, which is the perfect scenario for the child to resent the new boyfriend/girlfriend. If your new relationship continues developing, your child may feel pushed away for an extended period of time. To combat this, you must have one-on-one time with each of your children. They need a dedicated time where they have your undivided attention. Schedule this time, and do not cancel it. You want your child to feel like a priority for you.

**They also need to feel heard and understood during this time of transition.**

This can be difficult, because you are excited about your new relationship and you want your child to be as well. You must get out your empathy skillset and think about how your child must feel. Just acknowledging that the situation is not easy can be helpful: "This new blended family thing is not easy, huh?" "Isn't it strange that even when you like someone, it's still hard to have them around all the time?"

**Age and gender are important**

Research indicates that boys and young children have an easier time with the blended family concept. Girls and older children need longer to adapt. The amount of conflict between parents is also key - the more low-conflict the divorce was and co-parenting is, the easier children will adjust. Regardless of age or gender, children must be given the space they need to process a parent getting married to someone new. Smart parents and stepparents give kids that space.

Next month, we'll discuss parenting styles common in blended families, and the impact they have on children. Frankly, there is a lot of good information for all families, not just the blended ones!