



Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**
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Blended Families - How to get a smooth outcome! (Part 2)

Last month, we broached the topic of Blended Families, or families where one or both parents have children from previous relationships.

This month, I want to continue the discussion based on the latest compilation of the 40 years of research we have at our disposal.

This Blended Family stuff is not for the faint hearted. It is work. Hard work. Much harder than most people anticipate. Last month, I began explaining why this is so. Mainly, it has to do with the fact that children are usually lagging behind parents in processing a parent's new relationship. If you've done it right, you and your new love interest dated for a while before you introduced the children to him/her. So, you're further along in the relationship than your child. Couple that with the basic time it takes for children to assimilate information in general, along with their dislike of change, and you have a recipe for disaster (or, at the very least, some really awkward meals).

One of the biggest issues with blended families is discipline. What style is best? Who should do it? There is a common pattern of stepparents wanting more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren, while parents want more love and understanding for their children. This causes automatic conflict, and can feel like a "tug of war" situation.

Consider these concepts regarding Discipline in Blended Families:

Authoritarian vs. Authoritative Parenting. Authoritarian Parenting is hard and demanding, without the balance of warmth and empathy that children need. And it is often used by stepparents who feel the parent is too easy on the kids. It often uses labels like "you're so lazy" or "what's wrong with you that you can't see the garbage needs to be taken out" instead of calm requests ("Would you please take out the garbage?"). Part of the problem is that stepparents don't have history with children, and having history makes parents and children more tolerant of each other. Often, the stepparent was raised in an authoritarian way, and feels it is his/her duty to "get this kid on track" or "whip things into shape." Big mistake. You'll see why below.

Authoritative Parenting is both loving and firm, and is absolutely the best way for all children to be parented in every single aspect. Children need warmth and empathy to balance out the setting of firm limits. Authoritative parents have rules and expectations that match their child's developmental maturity level. They are also engaged with their children, monitor the child's behavior and activities, and follow through with consequences. The child's positive behavior gets just as much attention as the negative behavior.

Basically, the authoritative parent is tuned in, connected to the child, and understands that every choice made in life has a consequence connected to it so strives to teach the child that same lesson. While authoritarian parents get angry and frustrated with their children, they have the ability to step back and make sure the punishment is about teaching the child a lesson, not releasing the parent's anger.

So, who can discipline? The short answer is: the parent issues the discipline, not the stepparent. It is the stepparent's job to form a relationship with the child. And children don't generally like people who are disciplining them without that relationship in place. The only reason the parent can dole out the discipline and expect to maintain a relationship with the child is because that parent has always been in that child's life. A child will very quickly come to resent the stepparent who tries to issue discipline without first taking the time to connect with the child.

Next month, I'll delve deeper into that last subject - how do stepparents form relationships with stepchildren? Especially when the stepchildren show no interest in forming that relationship? Very carefully, my friends, very carefully. See you next month!