

Is the Brady Bunch for Real? *Making Blended Families Work*

Stepfamilies, reconstituted families, blended families – there are several names to describe a very complex family structure with a myriad of possible combinations. But whatever you choose to call this type of family, and whatever combination it is comprised of, Statistics Canada indicates that ten percent of families with children are stepfamilies.

In blended families all the stresses and issues of an intact biological family are magnified. Sibling rivalry is intensified with the increased resentment of stepsiblings. Jealousy is heightened with attention paid to new spouses and stepchildren. In addition, children encounter feelings of displacement from their position in the family, fear about the future, abandonment and loss over the original family break-up, as well as loss in the hope of biological parents reuniting. Children are often reluctant participants in the new marriage, and are angry and feel frustrated at the lack of control they have over their own circumstances.

While there can be some positives coming out of a second marriage, like the only child who gains the siblings he's always wanted, there are incredible and overwhelming struggles. The divorce rate for second families is higher simply because of the challenges. Even though these daunting issues set second families up for failure, MOSAIC Counsellor Robert Long believes there are approaches that can help blended families succeed.

Children face conflicting loyalties between their biological parents. Parents face divided loyalties between their new spouse, children and potential stepchildren. With this new relationship, the couple is flung into the thick of things – no honeymoon period, no dedicated couple bonding time. Core values, rules and methods of childrearing vary from household to household and parents and children face conflicts around family traditions, discipline, fairness, wants and needs. The adults may want to marry and move to a new home; the children, however, want their biological parents to get back together and to stay in their own home, in their own neighbourhood and school.

KIDS FIRST

"Children first is a good starting point," says Robert. "I think the parent's right to remarry comes after the responsibilities of being a parent." It's important to have the kids on board because if not handled carefully, they can end up rejecting and distancing themselves from the biological parent in ways that are not recoverable. Children must know that you are committed to them no matter what happens in the marital relationship.



COMMUNICATION

In a blended family you need to dedicate more time to communication. Allow the kids to talk and listen. Weekly family meetings are essential where you have open and honest discussion that is age appropriate. Talk about everyone's roles, about the 'house' rules, not Mom and Dad's rules, about family expectations. Developing a family mission statement becomes an even more valuable tool for a blended family. It helps to develop a united front and a shared sense of purpose and brings everyone to the table with an equal voice.

PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

Different life stages bring with it different approaches to parenting. With younger children, a stepparent will take on more of a parenting role. With teenagers, it's a bit more of a cooperative venture.

Ten and up is where the problems are, says Robert. You need to parent in a different way. You are their parent's partner and you will support your partner in parenting their children. "Minimize the parenting role – you're responsible for their safety and protection - but disciplining and demanding respect is a pitfall. When you hear, *I don't have to listen to you, you're not my mother*, don't be drawn into the power struggle. *You're right, I'm not your mother, but your Dad and all of you agreed that...* Everything has to come back to the biological parent. The biological parent has to be the primary disciplinarian to reduce possible conflict.

The biological parent also has to support their new spouse around issues of fairness so stepparents don't feel out of control in their own home. When couples have a good relationship and can communicate and negotiate, they are able to work together and support one another. This reduces the partner's feelings of isolation and the parent's feelings of being caught in the middle between the children and the new partner.

COOPERATION AMONG PARENTS

Cooperation between the biological parents is critical to ensuring that the children can be comfortable in both homes. Ideally, it's best to have similar structure and rules in both settings; however, this is not always the case. When household methods vary, don't make the other biological parent wrong. "Instead," says Robert, "you can say *I know things work that way when you're at your Dad's, but here we do things this way* - that way neither one is wrong, just different."

Again, it comes back to *kids first*. While there may be feelings of anger and resentment, the adults need to put those feelings aside, make direct contact and work out residential schedules that support the children's access to both parents. This prevents



the children from being stuck in the middle and feeling emotionally torn between their parents.

Parents should not share inappropriate information with their children or use their children as "tools" to pump for information about the "other" parent. If comments come back through the children to the new spouse from the ex-spouse, it's best to stay calm and not be drawn into the drama. It is possible that the child is making it up, misunderstanding or taking it out of context, or is just looking to push your buttons. "Don't get defensive," says Robert, "act in a way that shows security in yourself, and simply say, *oh, I'm sorry she feels that way.*"

WHAT'S YOURS, MINE, OURS?

Much of children's anger comes from changes and losses they have experienced that are beyond their control. They now are sharing their parent and possibly their room and toys with stepsiblings. They may be attending a new school, missing friends and their former home and neighbourhood, not to mention the other parent and the way things used to be. They may be eating unfamiliar food, facing new rules and a completely different way of doing things. Having a place of their own in the household is essential to feeling as though they belong amid all these changes.

Their own space is important. Even weekend kids need to have space of their own so they feel wanted and valued and the same as everyone else in the household. It may not be their own room, but their own bed, dresser and stuff - and, it needs to be identified as such. *This is Andrew and Jack's room, not Andrew's room that Jack sleeps in when he's here.*

Appearing as one camp is essential. That's why, if at all possible, it's best to start fresh in a new place, rather than move into one partner's territory. This makes it easier to start a new entity, rather than build on an existing one. While you can share past family histories and negotiate differences, you also have the opportunity to develop new traditions, familiar rituals and celebrations unique to the new stepfamily.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Parents shouldn't expect to feel the same about their stepchildren as they do about their own. "How can you?" says Robert. "You're not biologically invested in the same way. But if the relationship with your new partner is important, then by virtue of that, the relationship with their kids is important." You may love them, but you don't have to love them the same. What is important is that you treat them fairly. Likewise, don't expect your stepchildren to feel the same about you as they do about their biological parents.

"The role of the outside party," says Robert, "is really to form a relationship with the kids. You have to show genuine interest in their life - if it's contrived, the kids will know. It will take time and energy and they will test you to the limit, but in the end they will develop a trust in you and will feel secure in the relationship." Spend one-on-one time together. Find out what they're interested in and become involved. Go to their soccer game, play cards, read a story together, drive on their school field trip.

"You can't expect to be their instant confidante. It's a building block principle."

Don't be surprised if children don't jump whole-heartedly into their new blended family. This choice was made for them and it's normal for them to resent the 'outside intruder' in their life and to be uncooperative and difficult as a result. There is no magical point in time when this will change. Typical family challenges will continue, even after a certain amount of time has elapsed. Even when the children grow, leave home for University or the work force, you still have the challenges of graduations, marriages, and family events. Hopefully, by then things will have cooled down. But, the real key is to put your own feelings aside and put the children's needs first.