



Check Ingredients Before Blending

Blended family is the term used when previously separated parents remarry and combine families. If you are looking at “blending” consider these points to facilitate the children’s adjustment:

1. Have a suitable courtship period.

The purpose of courtship is to ensure compatibility prior to marriage. When children are involved, the issue of compatibility extends to the potential stepparent/stepchild relationship and between potential stepsiblings. Families each have their own culture, and their own rituals. During the courtship process, the adults and children use the time to learn and experience their family differences with the view to determining compatibility, adaptation and change. This can only occur over time and a year or two would be a reasonable minimal period for such courtship. Guessing how the kids will respond, adapt or change to anniversaries, birthdays, religious holidays, etc., places them and the blended family at risk. Experiencing and planning for these events during courtship will give some clue as to what to expect after blending and give time to plan.

2. Consider how the kids should address new partners.

During courtship you didn’t expect the kids to call the potential stepparent as mom or dad, but with marriage, many parents do expect this change. For some children this represents an enormous emotional adjustment. Some kids just don’t view the stepparent in the same capacity as a parent and they may fear upsetting their other parent when calling the stepparent mom or dad. As such, what the children call stepparents must be a matter of discussion, not only between parent and stepparent, but also with natural parents and then with the kids. The degree to which this can be sorted out in advance of marriage, the greater the likelihood of a smooth transition. Names do matter and showing respect can go a long way to facilitating adjustment.

3. Find an “up-side” for the kids.

The choice to marry is based upon the adults’ desire for a significant intimate relationship. However from the child’s perspective, they can perceive themselves losing time with the newly married

parent. Further, they may now have to share other family resources and there may be a change in residence away from familiar community, friends and school. As such, kids may begrudge the new family and take out their upset on the new stepparent as the source or cause of change. The additional risk in these situations is when the child then complains to the other parent, seeking to avoid the newly blended family. The other parent will likely take the child’s side and try to minimize their upset. Frequently this takes the form of a challenge to the access regime with more restricted access to the newly blended family so as to keep the child away from the upsetting situation. However, this only creates new problems. Allowing time for new relationships to develop and facilitating a tangible benefit to the child in the midst of the changes can minimize the risk of this situation.

4. Determine issues of responsibility and authority.

Adults entering into blended families need to discuss expectations and the limits of authority for the care, management and discipline of each other’s children. Planning in advance and having the children experience these clearly set structures help the children learn and adjust to new rules.

A new partner can be a wonderful and refreshing experience for separated parents. However, before moving too quickly to marriage or co-habitation, it is best to take time to facilitate adjustment. The purpose of this is to increase the probability that the newly blended family will succeed for everyone and thus limit the chance of another failed marriage with all the disruption it brings to the children.

Do develop and enjoy new relationships. This is natural and healthy. Do so with sensitivity to your children’s adjustment. It really does take considerable time, energy and discussion.

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