



A WAY OF BEING WITH CHILDREN

Blending Families

Tips and Techniques for a Smoother Transition

What is a Blended Family?

A blended family is a family unit formed when two individuals with children from previous relationships come together to create a new family. Blending families can be an enriching but complex journey, especially for children. The process requires time, patience, and a willingness to build new relationships. A child's perspective is crucial to consider, as they are often navigating emotional complexities that may not always be voiced.

For children, blending families can feel like a loss of control. They may feel uprooted from familiar routines and relationships. Adults can help by providing reassurance, stability, and a listening ear. Asking for their input and genuinely valuing their feelings can make a significant difference in how they adapt.

Stuck in the Middle

Children in blended families often feel “stuck in the middle” due to their unique position between two family systems, where they may struggle to balance relationships, expectations, and emotions. Here are some ways to help children feel less “stuck”.

1. **Open communication** - encourage children to express their emotions without fear of judgment. Reassure them that they don't have to “choose sides.”
2. **Consistent boundaries** - align parenting approaches and routines across households as much as possible to reduce confusion and frustration.



3. **Avoid using children as messengers/mediators** - keep adult conversations between adults as children are not equipped to handle problems of that nature. Children may feel pressured to defend or “side with” one parent during conflicts. Being placed in this role creates emotional stress and reinforces the feeling of being caught between family members.

4. **Shared attention** - children may feel overlooked or displaced as new relationships form, such as a stepparent's bond with their biological child or the attention given to a new baby. This can create competition for love, attention, and validation. Try to share attention amongst children and spend intentional, one-on-one time where possible.

5. **Therapy and support** - family or individual therapy can help children process feelings, develop coping strategies and navigate the relationships of a blended family. Remember, children often want everyone to be happy, which means added pressure and difficulty managing their own emotions. Validating this and allowing them the time and space to work through the challenges is crucial to a successful blended family dynamic.

Practical Tips and Techniques

1. Understand the child's emotional landscape - children in blended families may experience feelings of loss, loyalty conflicts, or fear of change. They might worry about betraying a biological parent by bonding with a stepparent or feel uncertain about their place in the new family dynamic. Try to create an open environment where children feel safe expressing their emotions. Use age-appropriate language and encourage honest dialogue about their concerns.

2. Build relationships gradually - rushing relationships can lead to resistance, especially with children who may already be wary of changes. Stepparents should focus on building trust and rapport with children. Try to spend one-on-one time with each child, when they're open to it, doing activities they enjoy as this shows a genuine interest in their world and lays the foundation for trust.

3. Establish clear family roles - unclear boundaries and expectations can lead to confusion. Children thrive on structure, routine and predictability, so it's essential to define family roles, responsibilities, and rules early on. Try to involve the children in creating family roles to give them a sense of ownership.

4. Prioritize communication - blended families often face miscommunication due to differing parenting styles or unspoken expectations. Effective communication helps bridge these gaps and fosters understanding. Perhaps holding regular family meetings to discuss schedules, resolve conflicts, and celebrate successes together may help and reinforces the idea that everyone's voice matters.

5. Seek professional guidance - therapy can be invaluable in blending families. A family therapist can provide a neutral space to address underlying tensions, teach conflict resolution skills, and support children who might struggle with the transition.

6. Celebrate individuality and unity - while it's essential to foster unity, it's equally important to honor each family member's individuality. Children should feel that their unique traits, traditions, and relationships are respected. Try to blend traditions from both families to create new shared rituals.

7. Be patient and persistent - blending families is a marathon, not a sprint. Challenges will arise, but perseverance and empathy can help overcome them. Remember that setbacks are natural. Celebrate small victories and remind yourself that building a blended family is a process.

8. Don't expect everything to be perfect - trying to force the image of a "happy, united family" too quickly sets unrealistic expectations. This can lead to frustration when conflicts arise or adjustments take longer than anticipated. It also can create the feeling that everyone needs to put on a happy face, invalidating feelings and keeping things feeling superficial. Focus on progress, not perfection.



Get more resources at: www.centerforchildcounseling.org/awayofbeing