

## His, Hers, & Ours - Can Blended Families Be Successful?

With over 50% of marriages now ending in divorce, the occurrence of re-marriages where children are present has become the norm rather than the exception. Often there is hope that the new marriage will bring the satisfaction and fulfillment that was missing in the previous marriage. Frequently parents feel guilt about the failure of the original marriage and the impact that the divorce has had on the children. As an effort to erase some of this guilt and to assure happiness for the children the single parent often seeks a partner who will not only be a good mate, but also a good parent. There are, however, a number of problems that can interfere with these hopes being realized.

1. Ex-spouses can be insecure and fearful about being replaced by the new step parent.
2. The new marriage does not have time to grow and develop before the arrival of children - the new husband and wife become instant parents.
3. Children feel conflicting loyalties and may fear that if they care for their new step parent, they may disappoint or hurt their natural parents.
4. The natural parent may over protect their child thereby preventing the step parent from assuming a full parental role.

The above problems can result in an alliance being formed between the parent and natural child which take precedence over the new marital relationship.

In spite of all these difficulties parents do remarry and merged families can be successful. There are a number of steps that can be taken to insure the success of a blended family. First, before entering a new marriage participants need to successfully resolve their previous relationships. This entails some acceptance of responsibility for the failure of the marriage and a "letting go" of the ex-husband or wife. It is helpful for each person to get a sense of self as a separate individual with both strengths and weaknesses and to see themselves as a people who could survive raising children on their own before another marriage is attempted.

Second, couples need to get to know each other as man and woman rather than as perspective mother and father. Before including children in the relationship there needs to be sufficient time for the new partners to get acquainted. Marriages sometimes get lost because of the pressures of taking care of children. Therefore, after the new marriage happens priority should be given to nurturing the marital relationship. Some regular times doing things as a couple apart from the children is a necessity.

Third, many children feel that they will hurt a parents feeling if they like the new step parent. Children need to be given the repeated messages that they can love both of their parents as well as their step parents. They do not need to make a choice. It is particularly important that this message come from the non-residential

parent. Children need this permission so that they don't get caught up in loyalty issues.

Finally, couples need to find methods of resolving their parenting differences that are based on mutual respect and care. This can be the most difficult issue in a merged family. Each person comes into the marriage with their own parenting style. They have not had the opportunity to work together over time to evolve a common approach to their children. Complaints of "you're too strict" or " you're too lenient or protective" are often heard. Any problems the children may have are often viewed by the step parent as parenting mistakes of past years. Consequently, each parent becomes very sensitive about their child's behavior and how their spouse may react to it. Without a sense of trust between the parents the family can become spilt into separate camps. Because children can sense this division they may take advantage of it to the detriment of the entire family. To overcome the problems caused by differing parenting styles the couple needs to set aside time to talk about their parenting issues in nonjudgmental ways. These discussions need to be open to understanding each other's position. There needs to be willingness to compromise and experiment with new ways of dealing with the children. If this spirit of trust and care exists sizable problems can be dealt with and partnerships can be created that result in happy children and a fulfilling family life.

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