

Blended families

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Building a new family can be an exciting fresh start for parents and children.

It is not always easy. It takes lots of time and energy and care for the new family to work well.

Each family has its own strengths to build on and challenges to deal with.



About blended families

Blended families are formed when adults in a new relationship decide to live together. Children of one or both partners may live with the couple full-time, or come to visit.

Blended families can work well and provide lots of love, security and support for children and parents.

Children can find it hard to adjust to the changes. They may be confused about where they belong and worry about things such as moving house or schools, or losing touch with friends.

It is important to spend time with them. Talk about your plans and answer their questions. Listen to their feelings.

Other people are affected too, including ex-partners, their new partners and other family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

While you may be really excited and happy about the blended family, others may have different feelings and ideas about it.

- Grandparents may worry they will lose contact with their grandchildren or their adult son or daughter.
- Teenagers may feel they are being pushed out or resent the new adult.

It is important to make sure everyone's feelings are shared and understood.



It is important not to speak badly of the other parent in front of children. They are hurt when they hear their parent being criticised.

Starting a new family

A blended family is a new family that will build its own history and traditions over time. It is exciting to work out how you will do things, but not always easy.

Each family brings its own expectations and traditions such as how they celebrate special occasions.

Be prepared to make changes and to compromise. Keep a diary or take photos of events. This can help you see the progress you have made and build the family history.

Blended families do not start with an empty slate.

- Children may feel loss and grief over their parents not being together, losing their own home or bedroom, or moving schools. They may even lose their position in the family as the oldest or youngest and be somewhere in the middle. Some may have had a more grown-up role in a single-parent household and find it hard to be regarded as a child again.
- You and your new partner may still have strong feelings from a previous relationship. If you still feel angry, sad or upset after some time, it may help to talk to your doctor or a counsellor. This gives more chance for the new family to work well.

Ex-partners

Even though you are not together, you and your ex-partner still share responsibility for your children into the future, including financial responsibility. You may have agreed how you will manage all this. Some parents draw up a formal Parenting Plan.

It is best for your children if contact with your ex-partner is without conflict or tension. Conflict stresses children and affects their wellbeing. They can feel torn between the new family and loyalty to their other parent.

When communicating with your ex-partner:

- try to be calm and polite
- always stick to the agreed arrangements. Be reliable and on time
- be flexible when plans change. Have back-up plans
- keep a diary or calendar at each house to help communicate about events and visits
- don't use children to carry messages, or to find out what's going on in your ex-partner's life.

Becoming a step-parent

Becoming a step-parent can be both scary and fun. It can be a bit tricky to work out your role. It is a big change for you and your partner's child.

- Having a step-parent may mean the child realises their parent won't get back together. Children can hope for this, even if their parents have been separated for years.
- Children may feel disloyal to their other parent if they become friends with you, especially if they really like you.

It can help to:

- tell children that you are not replacing their parent. Begin by simply being another caring adult in their life. Try not to become 'best friends' too soon
- spend time building relationships with all of the children. Take it at their pace and try to build trust. In some cases this can take years
- make sure each parent has time to spend alone with their own children
- agree that each parent will discipline their own children, especially at first. Children can resent discipline from the step-parent and there may be confusion if they don't do things exactly the same as the parent.

Let your step-child decide what they will call you. It might be your first name, or an agreed name. Calling you 'mum' or 'dad' may work in some situations but not in others. It may confuse children, and can cause conflict with the child's other parent.

You cannot expect step-children to love you but you can expect them to treat you with respect, as you do them.

When children come to visit

Many children spend time at two homes. This can be hard for everyone to get used to. Parents may:

- feel overwhelmed by the extra children in the house
- be upset about the amount of time their partner spends with their children.

Children who are visiting may:

- feel jealous of other children living in the home full-time
- feel like a burden, or that they are not wanted.

Children living in the home full-time may resent the visiting children. They may have to share their bedroom, or may think the other child gets special attention.

When children come to visit:

- give them time to adjust when they arrive. They may want to be alone for a while before joining in
- let them know they are loved and that they have a place in your life
- try to give them privacy, and a space of their own
- help them sort out the things they want to leave at your house, or bring each time. Don't be upset if they forget something.

Try to be consistent with family rules for all children.

Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of growing independence from parents. Young people are going through rapid physical and brain changes that can make them more emotional, irrational and likely to take risks. This is all normal although it is often a difficult time for families. Settling into a blended family can be an added pressure.

Some young people may be happy about the new arrangements, while others may not. It may depend on their previous history and relationships, their age and temperament, and what else is going on in their lives.

Young people may:

- want to spend more time with friends than family
- resent the new partner or their children, and not really want to be involved
- be dealing with other issues in their lives.

It can help to:

- understand what's going on for your teenager, and be patient with them. Don't take any outbursts or negative behaviour personally
- give them a say in things that affect them, such as who they live with
- don't make big issues of small things — save your energy for what's really important, e.g. safety
- talk when things are calm — shouting matches don't help anyone
- respect their privacy and ensure others do too — give them space and time to adjust
- expect them to be involved in family chores and activities. If they resist, it can help to say you understand how they feel. Let them know you value their involvement and it is important for them to be part of the family. Come to agreements together rather than getting into a battle.

You don't have to be best friends with your teenager. Let them know you expect to be treated with respect — as you treat them with respect. Violence is never acceptable.

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If people don't get along

It will take time for children and adults to work through their feelings and adjust to the new arrangements.

There may be times of unfriendliness or conflict.

- Tell everyone you expect them to be polite and respectful, whatever they feel about another person. Model this yourself.
- Encourage them to listen to each other, and talk about problems. If things are heated, wait until everyone is calmer.
- Get help from professionals if you need to.

Looking after your relationship

The relationship with your partner is what holds the new family together. It is important to keep it strong, so you can work as a team and deal with the ups and downs. Try to spend quality time together without children.

Getting help

Seek help if things are getting hard. Family counsellors can give you ideas and support. Your doctor is a good place to start.

Every family is different. What works for one family may not work for another.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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