

How Children Experience the Blended Family

BY JONATHAN W. GOULD, NICKI BETH FISHER, & DROR BIKEL

A significant number of divorced couples remarry, and an increasing number of blended families live together. Approximately 20 percent of children younger than 18 years old will reside in stepparent households. Despite the appealing notion of an ideal way in which to create a successful blended family, research shows that the blending of families occurs in a variety of different ways.

The five pathways

Social scientists have investigated how blended families come together to function as one family. Studies show that American families blend using at least five different paths.

1. **The accelerated path** is characterized by stepparents clearly assuming parental roles and by children's evolving view that they are related to each other as siblings.
2. **The prolonged path** is characterized by a functional family that has low levels of familial solidarity.
3. **The declining path** is characterized by an initial belief that the blended family is "perfect," followed by the realization that family members feel disillusioned and distraught.
4. **The stagnating path** is characterized by fluctuating expectations within the family and a lack of clarity about role boundaries.
5. **The high-amplitude turbulent path** is characterized by significant difficulty among family members in accepting new family roles and expectations.

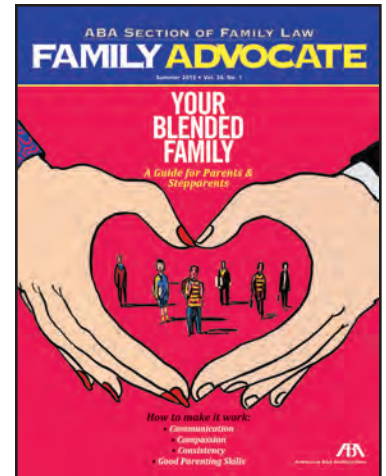
Each of these different pathways toward family blending reflects differences in how families communicate, develop, and maintain boundaries; learn to manage and resolve conflict; and engage effectively in role negotiations both between the remarried parents, between each parent and each child, and among the children.

Studies of blended families show that regardless of the chosen pathway, family members feel most satisfied when there is open communication. Open communication is described as family members' ability to talk about family roles and boundaries. The ability and willingness of family members to talk about their shared identity and to provide opportunities to explore and develop ways to acclimate to the evolving family are other important factors for successful communication within blended families.

Finally, families are more likely to blend successfully when they are able to talk about the diversity of expectations within the family, develop effective methods of conflict resolution, and acknowledge and talk about each others' feelings.

Keep communication open

Studies also show that open communication is thwarted in families characterized by the declining pathway. A lack of open communication and an ongoing avoidance of communication results in family members' physical and emotional disengagement



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Parents Must Lead

- Learn to communicate effectively.
- Develop and maintain appropriate boundaries:
 - Between parent/stepparent and children
 - Between parent and stepparent
 - Between and among stepsiblings
 - Between stepfamily and extended family.
- Learn to manage and resolve conflict.
- Learn to effectively negotiate roles and responsibilities.

—J.G., N.F., & D.B.

from the blended family.

Blended families experience family solidarity and satisfaction when they communicate openly about role identification, boundary management, conflicts, and expectations. Parents must facilitate communication to resolve disagreements and conflicts honestly among family members and encourage cooperation and understanding.

Often overlooked in parents' efforts to create a healthy and functioning blended family is how best to encourage children to talk about their feelings. Children's emotional reactions may vary from happy to sad to anxious to angry to confused. To make matters even more challenging for parents and stepparents, depending upon the age of the child, a child's emotional experiences may last a moment, a day, a week, a month, or longer. When families are in flux, children's reactions can be even more unpredictable and require careful attention and sensitive responsiveness.

Learn to listen

Surprisingly few parents talk with their children about what to expect when two families come together into a stepfamily. Children will be curious about the changes in their daily lives. They may be concerned about their physical and emotional safety. They may be uncertain about their financial, residential, or emotional security.

A growing awareness has emerged about the need to talk with children about their wishes and feelings or, at the very least, to ascertain through other means children's wishes and feelings about the changes in their lives resulting from their parents' divorce. Parents face many challenges as they talk with their children in a meaningful way and integrate their experiences in each parent's home.

Carol Smart, a sociologist and academic at the University of Manchester, developed a research program to investigate how children think and talk about their experiences in separating and divorcing families. Smart found that greatest among the challenges for parents are how to hear what is being said and then what to do both with the content and the emotions expressed by their children.

Reporting results from several studies, Smart writes:

One of the most significant outcomes for us was the way in which talking to children, and analyzing their stories, had the effect of jolting us into a child's world-view... [W]e were acutely aware of how different the experiences of the "same" divorce was for parent and child....Even the most caring parent could find it very difficult to see divorce from the standpoint of his or her child.

Carol Smart, "From Children's Shoes to Children's Voices," *Family Court Review*, 40, 307–19 (2002).

Smart concludes that children's voices often are not heard. Children's accounts of family life frequently are overshadowed by their parents' interpretations of events. Smart found that children and their parents often offered vastly different accounts of many aspects of family experiences. "It is not that children's accounts obliterate or correct the parents' accounts; nor is it the other way around. Rather, it is to acknowledge that people stand in different relationships to one another, have access to different resources, and regard different things as important."

Taking children's stories seriously means giving legitimacy to children's experiences and placing them on the same level as parents' own experiences. One is not necessarily more important than the other. Parents need to listen to and thoroughly understand each family member's experience.

When adults attempt to place themselves in the shoes of children, they often project memories from their own childhoods on to the children's memories. They hear children's stories as reconstructions of their own childhoods, recalled through many

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layers of personal history. Parents need to be more reflective about and sensitive to children's stories. Smart reminds us that it is not simply a matter of providing opportunities for a child to speak; it also is a matter of being attentive to what we hear the child say.

Among the most challenging issues is the question of when a parent should introduce a new partner to the children. Children often are still in the process of adjusting to the new single-parent family when their parent decides to remarry. Children need time to adjust and accept the fact that their parents' marriage is over, with no chance of reconciliation.

Children often ask, "Where do I belong?" When informed about an upcoming engagement or marriage, children may well need to ask questions about that decision. They may need to talk about what it means to remarry. What does it mean to become part of a stepfamily? What happens to the child's relationship with the other biological parent? And what about biological grandparents, cousins, and other family members?

Children may be concerned about how they will fit into the stepfamily. They may feel confused about how to accept a new stepparent and/or a new sibling. They may feel torn about how to accept the new family without feeling disloyal to the other parent.

Children may feel a sense of helplessness about the course of their lives. They may embrace the stepfamily one day and feel ambivalent or angry about it the next day. Parents need to find ways to talk with their children about all of their emotional reactions. Often parents will try to tell their children how to handle their feelings.

Instead, allow your children to express freely whatever feelings they can identify. Ask open-ended questions that facilitate children's emotional exploration. Examples of open-ended questions are: How does that make you feel? Tell me more. And then what happened? Tell me what concerns you the most. Parents need to be prepared to support and nurture their children through this critical juncture in their lives.

Some children may feel required instantly to love and care for all new family members. This myth can lead children to feel guilty, angry, or depressed. Reassure your children that relationships take time to develop and that healthy relationships can be built over time through sharing positive experiences.

Discussions between children and stepparents should acknowledge that each person develops a relationship with the other person in his or her own way. Some stepparent-child relationships will develop quickly and positively, while others will develop quickly and negatively. Some relationships may take years to develop and follow a steady course, while others may follow an unsteady course. Parents need to accept that each child must be allowed to develop a relationship with each stepparent in his or her own way.

Discipline

Children often struggle with which parent or stepparent has the right to discipline them. Talking with children about who is in charge of discipline may provide role clarity and thereby reduce role confusion. Clarify who develops family rules and chores and provide guidance as to how children participate in this decision making.

Children may experience many losses throughout the process of family blending. The loss of daily contact with the other parent can be overwhelming and fraught with guilt. No longer having frequent contact with the other parent's extended family also may be upsetting. The loss of living in a familiar family structure may be very confusing.

Losses associated with leaving a familiar home, neighborhood, school, and life-long friends may well be upsetting to children, especially if their parents fail to

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prepare and guide them through these potential (though predictable) challenges.

Children also may suffer a loss of identity in terms of membership in the family they have known. They may have difficulty accepting the new family simply because it is not what they have known. Older children tend to react more strongly to this loss.

Stepfamilies may present new situations for children. Children may view stepsiblings as rivals for the attention and affection of parents and stepparents. They may feel a need to compete for attention and be very sensitive to issues of fairness.

Young children may be very sensitive to safety and security issues in ways that seem foreign to adults. They may need reassurance that as part of the new stepfamily they will have a home, a bedroom, food, safety, and security. They may need to be reassured that both parents will always love them and want to spend time with them. They also may need assurance that a stepparent will not take the place of a parent and that the nonresidential parent will continue to play an active and important role in the children's lives.

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Older children will view the blended family through a different lens. They tend to be acutely concerned about issues of fairness as applied to residential living arrangements, distribution of resources, and other related concerns. Some children become very concerned that their nonresidential parent is lonely and sad. They may spend hours worrying about how to ease their parent's presumed emotional hardship.

Among the interesting research findings of Carol Smart's work was the revelation that children of all ages tend to view their relationship with parents through a fairness lens. Children believe that they should spend about equal time with each parent. Children may view unequal timesharing schedules as unfair to the parent with less access. Allowing children to express their feelings and ideas about parenting access plans before the plan is put into effect may be helpful in reducing children's emotional turmoil.

Parents who want to create successful blended families must remain ever vigilant to potential challenges raised by their children in response to their decision to remarry and blend families. When parents anticipate issues and allow open communication between themselves and their children and stepchildren, their new family stands the best chance of functioning effectively together. **FA**

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Sidebar:

Questions and Concerns to Explore with Children

1. Where do I belong?
2. What does it mean to be part of a stepfamily?
3. Am I still part of the biological family?
4. What happens to my relationship with my other parent?
5. What happens to my relationship with my maternal and paternal grandparents, cousins, and extended family?
6. How will I fit into the new stepfamily?
7. How do I handle wanting to belong to the stepfamily and feeling disloyal to my old family?

8. How do I handled my changing and confusing feelings about being part of my new stepfamily?
9. Will anyone understand how helpless and confused I feel?
10. Will anyone understand how unsafe and uncertain my new life feels?
11. Does my mother/father expect me to love my new stepfamily right away?
12. Does anyone understand how sad I feel about all the losses I have endured in such a short time?
13. How do I re-write the narrative in my head about how my life was going to unfold?
14. Who can help me revise this narrative?
15. Who can I trust with all these feelings, thoughts, and confusion?
16. What happens when my noncustodial biological parent is no longer present in my life?
17. Will my stepparent replace my noncustodial biological parent in my life?
18. What if my stepparent wants to adopt me, and I don't want him/her to?
19. Do I have to listen to my stepparent as if he or she were my parent?
20. What if I do not have the same feelings about him/her?
21. What if my noncustodial biological parent and stepparent do not like each other?
22. To whom do I listen?
23. To whom do I turn to maneuver through their conflict?
24. What if I like my stepparent better than my noncustodial biological parent?
25. Am I being disloyal?
26. Am I abandoning my biological parent?
27. How do I deal with these feelings of betrayal?
28. What if I do not like my stepfamily?
29. How do I communicate with both of my biological parents about these feelings?
30. What if I live with my stepsiblings, but not biological siblings, and do not get along with my stepsiblings? How do I communicate these feelings?
31. What if I get along with my stepsiblings better than my biological siblings?
32. What if I feel that my biological custodial parent has changed, and he or she does not give me the attention he/she used to? What if he/she now pays more attention to my stepsiblings, and I feel left out?
33. What if my new blended family is wealthier than my noncustodial parent? How do I deal with feelings of guilt and betrayal?

—J.G., N.F., & D.B.