

A RECIPE FOR BLENDING FAMILIES

Developing your blended family is like fine cooking. It takes good ingredients, time and attention and needs to be adjusted for individual tastes.

The ingredients are you and your marriage relationship, your children and the Master Chef— God!

Know that successful blending of families takes time – 2-4 years in fact! Just remember that biological families take years to develop as well and members tend to be added over time. You have the added excitement of everyone arriving at once! Be patient and map out a course of growth.

The predictable stages of growth for blended families are:

I. Beginning/Fantasy .The strong hope and belief in this beginning stage is that a harmonious family will quickly form. Characteristics of family members at this stage are:

For the Parent...

- Loves own more children more than spouse or stepchildren
- Feels like an insider
- Needs to become open to change

For the Stepparent...

- Loves stepchildren less than their parent (spouse)
- Feels like an outsider
- Needs to define what he/she wants

For the Children...

- Love parent more than stepparent (loyalty)
- Not sure how to react to stepsiblings.
- Want the comfort of regular routine
- Need nurturing and discipline to make transition to blended family

Be patient. You cannot form this new family by sheer act of will.

II. Confusion & Chaos .Friction about living together emerges You may have differing expectations about how to discipline and parent. There will be tension with ex-spouses. Children can be caught in the tug of war between ex's. The deeper established bonds between natural parent and children can form powerful competing coalitions that can divide the new family. *Everything* feels awkward and confusing. The main way to bring order out of chaos and clear up confusion is to develop a “ business” plan for the family that:

- Specifies short-term and long term goals
- Defines roles and responsibilities
- Develop a few basic family rules with agreed upon consequences if broken. This takes stepparent out of the middle.
- Maps out the family calendar/schedule in advance
- Schedules regular meetings to celebrate progress, solve problems. Pray and have fun together.

Take a piece of paper and sketch out a business plan outline. Consult your children if they are old enough and get their input as they will then be more willing to cooperate.

III. Conflict & Crisis . Sometimes you may become stuck between the old ways of being a family (often a single parent family) and the new ways of a blended *family*. It is a time of pain, disappointment and ongoing conflict. Ways to soften and shorten the conflict, crisis stage

- ◆ Hold weekly family meetings to defuse conflict, negotiate resolution, improve communication
- ◆ Natural parent responsible for discipline of own children with stepparent in supportive roll
- ◆ Find time for individual interests separate from the family
- ◆ Make one-on-one time to spend with each family member. This is especially help for building the relationship between stepchildren and stepparents.
- ◆ Intentional small acts of kindness and love to build up the relational bank accounts
- ◆ Commit yourselves to forgive when needed.

IV. Building & Development The family has had time to get to know one another and to discover difference and patterns of conflict. Once the family decides to work at making necessary changes they move into this stage and progress is more possible.

- ◆ The couple bond begins to strengthen. They define and refine their expectations. When tested by the children, they hold firm.
- ◆ Children feel more connected and secure. They develop relationships with stepparent and stepsiblings.
- ◆ All are more conscious of their reactions and how it is affecting others.
- ◆ Conflicts still happen but ways are found to resolve them.
- ◆ Roles and routines become more comfortable.
- ◆ All members become more accepting of each other allowing space for one another.
- ◆ There is a sense of relief that progress is being made.

V. Stable & Committed . This is the stage of good news! Time has passed, conflicts have been survived and adjustments made. The family may not look like the dream envisioned at the first stage but there is stability, acceptance of differences, and an expectation that ongoing change is OK.

- ◆ Daily living settles down
- ◆ Family expectations are clear
- ◆ Conflict resolution is faster and easier
- ◆ Regressions to earlier stages happen, particularly at a life cycle event (birth, graduation, marriage move) or when stress is high but these are temporary.

There is a sense of real connectedness and caring and yes, sometimes even heartfelt love. There is a grateful sense that the effort has been worth it.

Finally, remember the powerful role of prayer. Dedicate yourselves to prayer individually and as a couple. Seek God and the Holy Spirit's guidance. Pray with your couple minister and talk about God's faithfulness and love and how this has helped them. Stay in touch and call on them for support in the future. Be ready ask for professional help of counselors, parenting programs or clergy if needed. God bless you in your marriage and your new family!