

# BLENDED FAMILIES: NEGOTIATING THE PITFALLS OF STEP-PARENTING

The new divorce laws announced in April 2022 can try to make separation a kinder process but only if couples will allow a blame-free re-structuring of their relationship. Many couples looking at divorce may already have attached to a new partner, location or lifestyle.

The new 'no blame' divorce law sounds as if it is designed to effect a smoother path, but sadly 'no blame' does not usually sit comfortably beside 'no emotion' and the breakup of a couple or family is almost always a time of heightened feelings.

The celebrations such as birthdays and holidays that could bring 'exes' together, can be a time of great joy, but sadly they can also be fraught with complications when families have to blend - sometimes in edgy new groups. Negative fall-out from enforced mingling can have long term consequences unless carefully managed.

There will be many bruised and bewildered households viewing a new ongoing connection post divorce with trepidation. These are tricky times and will effect a need to manage all the relevant relationships in a more positive way.

## What is a Blended Family?

A blended family is created when a couple makes a new life together that will include children from one, or both, of their previous relationships.

Just looking at that sentence, it doesn't take much reflection to see that this is a big task that needs careful management. For a new couple in this situation there is likely to have been a difficult ending from a previous coupling that was, at best, immensely sad and, at worst, still tinged with anger or bitterness. The first step is to navigate the end of a relationship that previously became a family and which is now changing. Social roles that felt established can be hard to shift. Accepting that one partner is moving on can be extremely painful if the other is still grieving.

## The three most important words to remember at this time are:

- a) Respect
- b) Boundaries and
- c) Kindness

All of these can be sorely tried at times of heightened emotion. Don't be fooled by celebrities taking to the press and social media celebrating their seamless divorces 'We are still great friends', 'no-one else is involved' and their superb co-parenting mantra 'we will always put our children first'. This is not my experience as a therapist who has listened to the descriptions of innumerable divorces and seen countless couples navigating their new lives. A good blend can happen, but only if that three word rule is scrupulously followed from the start

As with the adults negotiating this new situation, their children will be going through a range of complicated emotions. This was not their choice and it may not even have been the choice of one of their parents. It's important to remember that often it's not the actual separation that is the most wounding, but any ensuing conflict among parents and even rival families.

## a) Respect

The one most important rule at this stage is for the parents to stay respectful of each other. This is extremely tough if either is angry or hurt, but in front of the children all negative comments or sly remarks are totally off-limits. This includes anything they may overhear or pick up from friends or relatives.

Civility is key or children can grow up with a bias or even feel that they have to take sides to defend one parent. There should be no right or wrong here as far as they are concerned. However, there is likely to be disorientation and possible uncertainty where once they thought life was secure and predictable. Co-parenting is for life and needs a polite and adult approach. Whatever dramas may lurk beneath the surface, the children's well-being, both emotional and physical is absolutely paramount.

Particularly at the start of the new arrangements, there will be systems that need careful handling. Things like: access, holidays, money and ties with other relatives need to be agreed in this different context. Familiar networks of friends and family can shift and break. A good co-parenting couple will do their utmost to preserve these bonds. Sometimes at the cost of bravely managing their own difficult feelings. Schools need to be informed and there will be family situations that will have to be organised so that children can rely on the parental couple to hold themselves with maturity, both publicly and privately

### **b) Boundaries**

This includes all the new systems and unwritten rules.

Keep pick-ups and drop-offs brief and polite. That's the easy part. The tricky bit is to realise that a second home will have its own rules and habits. Much as it may be painful to realise that things are done differently in another household, keep any objections to a minimum, pick your battles and only pitch in if it's really vital, maybe on matters of safety or health for instance. It's tough to know that another, maybe unknown, adult has influence on the children in this second home. Confidantes like trusted friends, therapists or supportive family members are an enormous help at turbulent times.

The children come first This is an absolute - new partners can easily find there is an undercurrent of rivalry with the young part-time visitor. Children are likely to feel this too. The birth parent will need to gently assert that in any fresh relationship their kids come first.

If a new partner has children, then it has to be understood that the couple relationship will never be an exclusive twosome, there will be priorities that cannot be overlooked.

It can take a long while for children to make the transition into their new family and it can be equally hard for any adult to sometimes feel excluded from a parent/child couple. Don't expect immediate acceptance. This is a long term investment and can take time, and feel tricky if rejection is shown by a confused offspring. Conversely it's easy to fall into Disney mode and make life relentlessly shiny to try and get joy and fun firmly in the mix. Children in these circumstances will need a level of ordinariness and predictability as their foundation.

There are also some practicalities that will need facing. For example, what will the new step-parent be called? Hopefully it goes without saying that there is no substitute for the biological parent, but an open discussion can give a child a feeling of participation.

Money can be a tricky subject. Setting up a second home will be costly. New partners can feel resentful if finances feel too depleted by the needs of previous families. This is a delicate subject and needs careful handling. Parents can overcompensate by providing practical extras to try and soften hurts caused by divorce and separation.

Ensure you find quiet couple time for any new relationship to outline fears, try to adjust and really listen to each other without defensive combat.

### **c) Kindness**

This brings us to kindness which at times of stress and pressure can be hard to find. Don't expect this to be resolved easily. In our 21st century results-based society, families may need to be realistic that they are in this for the long haul. Children can test a new partner with difficult behaviours and overt comparison with the other parent or household. Their pain can come across in a challenging and disrespectful manner. Avoid

confrontations where possible. Don't engage in negative outbursts and always reward the positive. Remaining kind in a rivalrous dynamic will be bruising. Anger often disguises pain.

Nearly half of the couples in these blended families will go on to have children of their own and this will need sensitive management that adds another layer of step and half siblings to the mix.

Squabbles and rivalries are likely in any growing tribe where individuals are redefining their identities. Well managed, this can form a healthy way to express emotion, particularly if there is a loving and safe foundation at the heart of a family.

### **Moving Forward**

Couples Counselling can be hugely helpful in giving divorcing couples a safe space to discuss their fears and sadness and help them to create a more constructive way forward. There is likely to be deep disappointment and loss. Discussing a parenting plan will help an estranged couple relate to each other in this new, separated way in which they go forward as co-parents, but no longer identifying as the past couple that they once were. It can also give newer couples a platform to express anxieties and to explore the acceptance of others in their relationship. Grievances can be outlined in a safe environment rather than letting them grow and become destructive.

Carefully managed, and over time many families will benefit from the extension and pleasure that comes from an enlarging group of relatives. There is no 'normal' now where families are concerned. Can 'the more' become 'the merrier'? Yes and it takes time, tact and love. However, with Respect, Boundaries and Kindness there can be hope and a better future.

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If you would like to contact me to discuss problems in your relationship or marriage, you can send me an email to: [info@christinafrasercounselling.co.uk](mailto:info@christinafrasercounselling.co.uk) or you can call me on **07910-235848**.