Parents In Play Therapy

Divorced and Blended families
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Blended Families-

- Understand the basics of a blended family.
- Define the risks and benefits inherent in blended families.
- Define how blended families develop.
- Understand treatment and treatment goals of blended families.
- Learn techniques to use with children in divorced families.
Parents In Play Therapy

Divorced families
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Divorced Families-

- Understand the trends in divorce in court.
- Recognize high conflict divorce families.
- Recognize the impact of divorce on children.
- Understand treatment and treatment goals of divorced families.
- Learn techniques to use with children in divorced families.
Divorce Statistics-

General Statistics

► 50% of all North-American children will witness the divorce of their parents. Almost half of them will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage. (Furstenberg and others -Life Course-)

► One out of 10 children of divorce experiences three or more parental marriage breakups. (Gallagher -The Abolition of Marriage)

► 40% of children growing up in America today are being raised without their fathers. (Wade, Horn and Busy, -Fathers, Marriage and Welfare Reform, Hudson Institute Executive Briefing, 1997)

► 50% of all the children born to married parents today, will experience the divorce of their parents before they are 18 years old. (Fagan, Fitzgerald, Rector, -The Effects of Divorce On America-)
Emotional Damage

- Studies in 1980 - 1981 uncovered that children in repeat divorces got lower results at school. The other children of their age rated them as less pleasant to be around. (Andrew J. Cherlin, -Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage- Harvard University Press 1981)

- Teenage children of divorce are three times more likely (35% instead of 13%) to need psychological help within a given year. (Peter Hill - Recent Advances in Selected Aspects of Adolescent Development- Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 1993)

- Children from divorced homes have more psychological problems, than children from which one of the parents has died. (Robert E. Emery, - Marriage, Divorce and Children's Adjustment- Sage Publications, 1988).
Between children of divorced parents there are relatively more cases of injury, asthma, headaches and speech defects than among children whose parents have remained married. (Dawson -Family Structure and Children's Health and Well Being- National Health Interview Survey on Child Health, Journal of Marriage and Family)

Children of divorced parents are fifty percent more likely to develop health problems than children in two parent families. (Angel, Worobey, -Single Motherhood and Children's Health -)

Children that are living with both biological parents are 20 to 35 percent physically healthier than children from broken homes. (Dawson,-Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-being -Journal of Marriage and the Family-)

Most molested childs come from single-parent households or are the children of drug users. (Los Angles Times 16 September 1985 The Garbage Generation)

A child in a female-headed home is 10 times more likely to be physically hurt or murdered. (The Legal Beagle, July 1984, -The Garbage Generation)
In 1991 a study was done of children from which the parents were divorced six years earlier. The study found that even after all that time, these children tended to be lonely, unhappy, anxious and insecure. (Wallerstein - The Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children - Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 1991)

Seventy percent of long-term prison inmates grew up in broken homes. (Horn, Bush, Fathers, Marriage and Welfare Reform-)
Problem Relating to Peers

- Children divorce statistics indicate that children of divorced parents are four times more likely to report relational problems with peers and friends than children whose parents have kept their marriages intact. (Tysse, Burnett, -Moral Dilemmas of Early Adolescents of Divorced and Intact Families-. Journal of Early Adolescence 1993)

- Children of divorce tend to be more aggressive toward others. This is especially the case for boys. (Emery, Marriage, Divorce and Children's Adjustment, 1988)
(Adult) children of divorce are almost twice as likely to attempt suicide than children from normal homes. (Velez-Cohen, - Suicidal Behavior and Ideation in a Community Sample of Children - Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 1988)
The high school dropout rate of children of divorced parents is roughly two times higher than that of children of which the parents did not divorce. (McLanahan, Sandefur, -Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps- Harvard University Press 1994)
Value and Goals

- Changing, not terminating relationship
- Mediation during divorce
- Mediation during changes in life and change to plan
- Discourage private agreements to break contracts - ie. Spouse not pay child support
- Public policy that expects continuing relationship between parents in their obligation to children
- Could change the negotiations around divorce
- Could change behavior of parents after the marriage

Divorce Trends

Gender Neutral- “Best interest of the child”

- Born out of desire to eliminate sexism in domestic policy
- Parents preference for custody based on relationship to child not gender
- Recognition to diverse roles and responsibilities of modern families
- Problem- still a sexist culture where men and women in families make different decisions based on sexism
- Problem- compensation- gender-related inequities that come from marital decisions based on marital rules of sexism. Roles will have to change not stay the same after divorce.

Divorce Trends

Intersecting Private and Public Ordering

- Past children were awarded to mothers or fathers based on judicial judgments of fault for marital failure. Included in this was alimony awards, property distributions, child support provisions, and so on.

- Now “no fault” divorce. These considerations do not bear the same weight. And not it is in the child’s “best interests”. For custody and financial arrangements.

- What does “best interest” mean? Still very sexism based.

- Now the move is from courts (public ordering) to mediating (private ordering)

- Private ordering concern- child not present

- Training and value of mediator significantly impacts divorce negotiations.

- Affected by limited resource.

- Can be affected by bargaining power of one spouse over the other

Divorce Trends

Child custody concerns

- Some estimate 85%–90% children reside with mothers and only 10% reside with fathers.
- Hidden reasons for this: fathers agree because they believe they can get no better visitation if they dispute the claim. Some evidence this is true.
- Maccoby and Mnookin as reported in this report found 82% of mothers wanted sole physical custody. The large majority of them requested and got this in court.
- The fathers initially tried to get paternal, maternal and joint custody in equal proportions. More than one third did not even request physical custody.
- A Stanford study reported that when there was conflicting physical custody requests, mothers requests were granted twice as often as the fathers, even if both parents agreed the father should have sole custody the judge sided with the mother one quarter of the time.

Divorce Trends

“Best Interests” Standard

- If judges believe children belong in maternal care, especially early on, “best interest” standard allows judge to justify this.
- “tender years doctrine: belief mothers better suited than fathers for care of children.
“Primary Caretaker” Presumption

- The fit parent is the one who has had the dominant role in parenting the child to this point.
- Defined as the parent who takes care of daily needs on a regular basis.
- Does not account for needs of children as they grow to have different needs from their parents such as play, moral instruction, gender socialization, school encouragement, and so on.
- Above the age of four it is argued it can be difficult to define who is the primary and secondary caregiver based on multidimensionality of parenting roles and responsibilities.
- If parents agreed to split work and child care, how can we define primary care take and not let one parent have child based on sexist beliefs of father providing for family.

Divorce Trends

Fathers as Caretakers

- Research shows fathers are very competent to raise all ages of children even when they defer to their wives.
- As children grow fathers get more involved and take on more roles that are not gender-specific.
- Differences due to assumptions not capabilities.
- Sexist language that still hurts fathers.
  - Fathers to be are “Coaches” in Lamaze classes.
  - “Donors” in surrogate parenting classes.
  - Fathers still seem to be primarily economic support.

Divorce Trends

Joint Custody

- Movement towards joint custody has become popular
- Presents fathers with the opportunity to assume a significant parenting role in child's life and still not deny the mother right to do so
- Benefits child by allowing access to each parent
- Disadvantage if still serious conflict
- Stops the controversy of visitation for parent, child and mom who all complain about it - maintain relationship and Disney dad
- Fathers more likely to pay child support if they are involved in their child's life

Divorce Trends

The Impact on our Children

Inter-spousal violence perpetrated by men is only a small aspect of family violence. False abuse allegations are only a small tile in the mosaic of vilifying the men in our society. They serve well in successful attempts to remove fathers from the lives of our children. Here are some statistics resulting from that which show more of the whole picture.

• 79.6% of custodial mothers receive a support award
• 29.9% of custodial fathers receive a support award.
• 46.9% of non-custodial mothers totally default on support.
• 26.9% of non-custodial fathers totally default on support.
• 20.0% of non-custodial mothers pay support at some level
• 61.0% of non-custodial fathers pay support at some level [Technical Analysis Paper No. 42 - U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services - Office of Income Security Policy]
• 40% of mothers reported that they had interfered with the fathers visitation to punish their ex-spouse. ["Frequency of Visitation" by Sanford Braver, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry]
• 50% of mothers see no value in the fathers continued contact with his children. ["Surviving the Breakup" by Joan Berlin Kelly]
• 90.2% of fathers with joint custody pay the support due.
• 79.1% of fathers with visitation privileges pay the support due.
• 44.5% of fathers with no visitation pay the support due.
• 37.9% of fathers are denied any visitation.

63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes. [U. S. D.H.H.S. Bureau of the Census]

90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.

85% of all children that exhibit behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes. [Center for Disease Control]

80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes. [Criminal Justice and Behavior, Vol. 14 p. 403-26]
71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes. [National Principals Association Report on the State of High Schools]  
70% of juveniles in state operated institutions come from fatherless homes. [U.S. Dept. of Justice, Special Report, Sept., 1988]  
85% of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in a fatherless home. [Fulton County Georgia Jail Populations and Texas Dept. of Corrections, 1992]  
Nearly 2 of every 5 children in America do not live with their fathers. [US News and World Report, February 27, 1995, p.39]
There are:

- 11,268,000 total custodial mothers
- 2,907,000 total custodial fathers

Factors Associated with High-Conflict Divorce
- Young and or many children
- Concerns about ex-partners parenting practices
- Emotional dysfunction and characterological disturbance

Conflict Resolution Procedures and Programs
- Mediation
- Evaluation and Recommendation
- GAL
- Visitation Enforcement Programs
- Therapeutic Remedies
- Co-parenting Arbitration
- Supervise Visitation
Factors Associated with High-Conflict Divorce Co-parenting Patterns
Maccoby and Mnookin study

- Frequent arguments
- Undermining
- Sabotage of each others role as parents

Three to four years after separation- three major patterns

1. High communication and low discord- cooperative co-parenting 29%
2. Low communication and low discord- disengaged co-parenting 41%
3. Low communication and high discord- conflicted co-parenting 24%

HIGH CONFLICT DIVORCE

Factors That Determine Adjustment:

- Developmental Level
- Special Needs
- Past Trauma
- Quality of Parent/Child Relationship
- Number of Transitions; moves, schedule changes, re-marriage, multiple legal battles
- Parent Mental and Emotional Health
- Parenting Quality
- Involvement of Father
- Contact with Both Parents
- Parental Conflict
- Social Support
- Age
- Temperament
Protective factors


- Low level of conflict between parents
- Parents adjusting well to the divorce
- Children being given sufficient information about the divorce
- Age and developmental level of children
- Level of social support
- Child’s gender
- Child’s ability to cope with stress
Signs of Stress


INFANTS AND TODDLERS:

A. Regression in terms of sleeping, toilet training or eating; slowing down in the mastery of new skills
B. Sleep disturbances (difficulty going to sleep; frequent waking)
C. Difficulty leaving parent; clinginess
D. General crankiness, temper tantrums, crying.
THREE TO FIVE YEARS:

A. Regression: returning to security blankets and discarded toys, lapses in toilet training, thumb sucking
B. Immature grasp of what has happened; bewildered; making up fantasy stories
C. Blaming themselves and feeling guilty
D. Bedtime anxiety; fitful/fretful sleep; frequent waking
E. Fear of being abandoned by both parents; clinging
F. Greater irritability, aggression, temper tantrums.
Signs of Stress

SIX TO EIGHT YEARS:

A. Pervasive sadness; feeling abandoned and rejected
B. Crying and sobbing
C. Afraid of their worst fears coming true
D. Reconciliation fantasies
E. Loyalty conflicts; feeling physically torn apart
F. Problems with impulse control; disorganized behavior.

NINE TO TWELVE YEARS:

A. Able to see family disruption clearly; try to bring order to situation
B. Fear of loneliness
C. Intense anger at the parent they blame for causing the divorce
D. Physical complaints; headaches and stomach aches
E. May become overactive to avoid thinking about the divorce
F. Feel ashamed of what's happening in their family; feel they are different from other children.
Educating parents

- Observe interactions while talking
- Assess interactions through play activities
- Meetings with BOTH parents and no child to discuss pertinent issues without child
- Meetings with each parent individually
- Get each parent to commit to short and long term goals
- Gain each parents agreement to be included throughout the whole process
- Get each parent to sign consents for the other parent
- Offer resources
TREATMENT GOALS FAMILY

- Transition plan between homes with decreased stress
- Communication skills
- Deal with issues of loyalty
- Understand and reduce parent abandonment
- Deal with parent conflict and ways to protect and remove child from the middle of conflict
- Increase positive relationships with both parents
Positive Relationship with Both Parents- Most healthy. Positive relationship with both parents, value them both and want to spend time with them both

Affinity with one parent- closest to one parent but want to stay in contact with both parents. Temperament, age, interest, sibling preferences of parent, parenting skill, and so on may lead them to be closer to one parent over another.

Allied Children- alliance with one parent. Consistently prefer one parent before the divorce and want limited contact with non-preferred parent after separation. They do not reject the parent completely. They are more ambivalent.
PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIPS


- **Estranged** - Due to parent’s history of family violence, abuse, or neglect. Only feel safe rejection the parent after the separation.

- **Alienated child** - Reject their parent vehemently without guilt or ambivalence. Strongly resist or completely refuse any contact with that parent. Usually parent have no history of hurting the child.
DENIAL

This especially occurs in young children and surfaces as story telling (Mommy and Daddy and me going to Disneyland; we're moving into a duplex and Daddy will live next door; they will also have reconciliation fantasies).
ABANDONMENT

When parents separate, children worry who will take care of them. They are afraid they too are divorceable and will be abandoned by one or both of their parents. This problem is worsened by one or both parents taking the children into their confidence, talking about the other parent in front of the children, using language like "Daddy is divorcing us," being late for pick-up, or abducting the children. Children who are feeling insecure will say things to a parent which is intended to evoke a mama bear/papa bear response (a demonstration of protectiveness). If children do not have "permission" to have a good relationship with the other parent, or if they think they need to "take care of" one of their parents in the divorce, they are likely to end up having feelings of divided loyalties between their parents or, in the extreme, they may become triangulated with one parent against the other parent.
PREOCCUPATION WITH INFORMATION

Children will want details of what is happening and how it affects them. Communication from the parents needs to be unified and age appropriate.

ANGER AND HOSTILITY

Children may express anger and hostility with peers, siblings, or parents. School performance may be impaired. Hostility of children toward parents is often directed at the parent perceived to be at fault. Hostility turned inward looks like depression in children.

DEPRESSION

Lethargy, sleep and eating disturbances, acting out, social withdrawal, physical injury (more common in adolescents).

IMMATURITY/HYPERMATURITY

Children may regress to an earlier developmental stage when they felt assured of both parents' love. They may do some "baby-talk" or wet their beds. Children may become "parentified" by what they perceive to be the emotional and physical needs of their parents ("Someone needs to be in charge here.")

PREOCCUPATION WITH RECONCILIATION

The more conflict there is between the parents, the longer children hold onto the notion of their parents' reconciliation. It is clear that the parents are not "getting on" with their lives. Children will often act out in ways which force their parents to interact (negatively or positively). Children whose parents were very conflictual during the marriage often mistake the strong emotions of conflict with intimacy. They see the parents as engaged in an intimate relationship.
Because so much marital conflict may be related to the stress of parenting, children often feel responsible for their parents' divorce—they feel that somehow their behavior contributed to it. This is especially true when parents fight during exchanges of the children or in negotiating schedules: children see that parents are fighting over them. They may try to bargain their parents back together by promises of good behavior; they may have difficulty with transitions or refuse to go with the other parent.
Children will often act out their own and their parents' anger. In an attempt to survive in a hostile environment, children will often take the side of the parent they are presently with. This may manifest in refusals to talk to the other parent on the phone or reluctance to share time with the other parent. Adolescents will typically act out in ways similar to how the parents are acting out.

In summary, expect that children will test a parent's loyalty, experience loyalty binds, not want to hurt either parent, force parents to interact because they don’t want the divorce, try to exert some power in the situation, express anger over the divorce, occasionally refuse to go with the other parent (normal divorce stress, loyalty conflict/triangulation, or they may simply not want to stop doing what they're doing at the moment--similar to the reaction we've all gotten when we pick our children up from child care, or we want to go home from the park).
Grief and Loss Themes


The most common problem which arise tend to stem from triangulation, divided loyalties, and projection. Some indicators of each are:

**Triangulation:** Child refuses to have time with the other parent or talk to the other parent on the phone, child badmouths the other parent.

**Divided loyalties:** When a child tells each parent different and opposing things about what they want it is a good indication that the child is trying to please both parents and is experiencing divided loyalties.

**Projection:** Children are barometers of a parent's emotional well-being. Usually a parent reporting the stress of a child can not see that the child is acting on the parent's anxiety. Parents should ask themselves how they are feeling about the divorce, the other parent, and the time sharing arrangements before assuming the child is having difficulty adjusting or assuming the problem is with the other household.
Children of divorce feel vulnerable and overwhelmed by conflicting emotions

Key issues to address:

- Developing effective coping skills
- Facilitating the appropriate expression of feelings
- Clarifying divorce-related misconceptions
- Expressing anger through appropriate outlets
- Disengaging from parental conflict
- Eliminating self-blame for the divorce
- Enhancing positive perception of self

Creative Interventions For Children of Divorce
By Liana Lowenstein, MSW, CPT-S

The Basketball Game

Instructions:

“Take turns shooting a basket. If you successfully throw the ball through the basketball hoop, you get three beads or Lego’s. If you miss the basket, answer a question (the questions are related to divorce). Players earn three beads or Lego for each question correctly answered. At the end of the game, players create something from the beads/Lego’s accumulated.”

Examples of Game Cards include:

1. What are some feelings children of separated/divorced families often experience? Sad, scared, abandoned, worried, angry, guilty, embarrassed, relieved.
1. **What are some reasons parents divorce?** They were fighting a lot and couldn’t make up; they couldn’t fix their problems; they weren’t happy being together anymore; they fell in love with someone else; they stopped being in love.

2. **What are some reasons why children may blame themselves for their parent’s divorce?** They may think they made their parents argue and that’s why they got divorced. Or they may think they should have done something to make their parents stay together. But divorce is never a child’s fault.
1. True or false: Once parents divorce they hardly ever get back together.

2. True or false: Children must pick sides and love one parent more than the other. False. Children don’t have to pick sides; they can love both their parents.
Click! Emotions (adapted from Cotnoir, 2008)

“Helps children identify and express feelings. The practitioner and child brainstorm a list of feelings associated with divorce. The child is then asked to facially express each feeling, and to hold the facial expression while the practitioner takes a picture of each facial expression. The child then identifies times he/she felt the depicted feeling.
My Parents Argue and I feel Stuck In the Middle Marshmallow People (Lowenstein, 2006)

Works well with high-conflict families

Instructions-

The activity begins by having the child complete the following sentences:

1. My parents argue about…
2. When my parents argue, I feel...
3. My mom says mean things to my dad, like...
4. My dad says mean things to my mom, lie...
“The practitioner instructs the child as follows:

“Make three marshmallow people to represent you your mother, and your father (use marshmallows for the head and body, pretzel sticks for the arms and legs, and icing for the face and hair). Use the marshmallow people to act out an argument you saw between your parents. Use the marshmallow person that represents you to practice going into another room when your parents are arguing. When your parents are arguing, it can help to tell yourself: “When my parents argue, they still love me, no matter what” Use your marshmallow person to practice saying this to yourself.” After the activity the child can eat the marshmallow people!”
Getting Rid of Guilt (Lowenstein, 2006)

For children who blame themselves for the divorce. It challenges and corrects distorted thoughts of self-blame.

“The child is provided with several cartoons depicting scenarios. In each scenario, there is a child who makes a guilt ridden statement, and another child who responds with an appropriate challenge to the guilty statement. For example, the “guilty” child says, “I made my parents divorce because I was bad.” The “helper” child responds, “Your parents divorced because their marriage was bad, not because you were bad.” In another cartoon scenario the “guilty” child says, “I should have been able to save my parent’s marriage.” The “helper” child responds, “It’s not up to kids to fix their parents marriage.” There are a number of cartoon scenarios. The activity includes discussion questions guided by the practitioner to effectively process the child’s thoughts and feelings.”
Parents In Play Therapy

Blended families
A Boston University psychologist researcher reported that of the career women who earned over $100,000 and had married men with children over 75% said that, "if they had do it again they would NOT marry a man with children."

50% of all women, not just mothers, are likely sometime in their life, to live in a stepfamily relationship, when we include living-together families in our definition of the stepfamily, according to research compiled by Professor of Sociology Larry L. Bumpass of the University of
THE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE:

Experts differ on the effects of divorce. Here are three of the most respected.

Judith Wallerstein is a psychologist and author of SECOND CHANCES and THE UNEXPECTED LEGACY OF DIVORCE: A 25-Year Landmark Study, which followed 93 now-adult children for about 25 years on the affects from their parent's divorce.

Wallerstein reports that:
Only 45 percent of children "do well" after divorce.

- 41% are doing poorly, worried, underachieving, deprecating, and often angry.
- Fifty percent of the women and 30 percent of the men were still intensely angry with their former spouses.
"Most felt the lack of a template, a working model, for a loving relationship between a man and a woman."

Divorced parents provide less time, less discipline, and are less sensitive to the children as they are caught up in their own divorce and its aftermath.

Many parents are unable to separate their needs from the children's needs and often share too much of their personal life with their children, placing the children in a precarious emotional state, vulnerable to grandiosity or to depression within what is left of their families.

The majority of parents of divorce are chronically disorganized and unable to parent effectively.

As diminished parenting continues, it permanently disrupts the child's once normal emotional growth and functioning.

Step Family Foundation
http://www.stepfamily.org/stepfamily-statistics.html
The good news, according to the study:

"The children of divorce tended to do well if mothers and father, regardless of remarriage, resumed parenting roles, putting differences aside, and allowing the children continuing relationships with both parents.

Only a few children had these advantages.

On the other hand:

E. Mavis Hetherington, a developmental psychologist, has researched 1,400 families, some for three decades, involving about 2,500 children. While some of her findings in For Better or for Worse, Divorce Reconsidered are disturbing, she believes the negative effects of divorce are exaggerated while the positive effects are ignored. She finds:
1. Most children are doing reasonably well within two years of the divorce.

2. About 25% of youths from divorced families have serious social or emotional problems; 10% from intact families do.

3. Most young adults from divorce are establishing careers, creating intimate relationships and building meaningful lives.

4. Young women do better than young men, often becoming more competent than if they had stayed in unhappy family situations; some thrive.

5. Seventy percent of adult children of divorce say divorce is an acceptable solution to an unhappy marriage, even with children; 40% from non-divorced families agree.
Myths and Realities of Step Families


- **Myth #1:** Stepfamily blending happens quickly.
- **Myth #2:** A stepfamily is the same as a first-marriage family.
- **Myth #3:** Love occurs instantly

- **Reality #1:** A stepfamily begins after many losses and changes.
- **Reality #2:** Individuals are at different places in their family.
- **Reality #3:** Children and adults all come with expectations from previous families.
Myths and Realities of Step Families


- **Myth #4**: Stepmothers are wicked.
- **Myth #5**: Children whose parents divorce and remarry are damaged permanently.
- **Reality #4**: Parent-child relationships predate the new couple relationship.
- **Reality #5**: There is a biological parent elsewhere in actuality or in memory.
Myths and Realities of Step Families


- Myth #6: It helps children to withdraw from their nonresidential parent
- Myth #7: Remarriages following a death go more smoothly than those occurring after a divorce.
- Reality #6: Children are often members of two households.
- Reality #7: There is little or no legal relationship between stepparent and stepchildren.
Foundations of a Blended Family


- **Too many changes at once can unsettle children.** Blended families have the highest success rate if the couple waits two years or more after a divorce to remarry, instead of piling one drastic family change onto another.

- **Don't expect to fall in love with your partner’s children overnight.** Get to know them. Love and affection take time to develop.

- **Find ways to experience “real life” together.** Taking both sets of kids to a theme park every time you get together is a lot of fun, but it isn’t reflective of everyday life. Try to get the kids used to your partner and his or her children in daily life situations.
Foundations of a Blended Family


- **Make parenting changes before you marry.** Agree with your new partner how you intend to parent together, and then make any necessary adjustments to your parenting styles before you remarry. It’ll make for a smoother transition and your kids won’t become angry at your new spouse for initiating changes.

- **Don’t allow ultimatums.** Your kids or new partner may put you in a situation where you feel you have to choose between them. Remind them that you want both sets of people in your life.

- **Insist on respect.** You can’t insist people like each other but you can insist that they treat one another with respect.

- **Limit your expectations.** You may give a lot of time, energy, love, and affection to your new partner’s kids that will not be returned immediately. Think of it as making small investments that may one day yield a lot of interest.
Solid marriage. Without the marriage, there is no family. It's harder to take care of the marriage in a blended family because you don't have couple time like most first marriages do. You'll have to grow and mature into the marriage while parenting.

Being civil. If family members can be civil with one another on a regular basis rather than ignoring, purposely trying to hurt, or completely withdrawing from each other, you're on track.

All relationships are respectful. This is not just referring to the kids' behavior toward the adults. Respect should be given not just based on age, but also based on the fact that you are all family members now.
Compassion for everyone’s development. Members of your blended family may be at various life stages and have different needs (teens versus toddlers, for example). They may also be at different stages in accepting this new family. Family members need to understand and honor those differences.

Room for growth. After a few years of being blended, hopefully the family will grow and members will choose to spend more time together and feel closer to one another.

Adapted from: RemarriageSuccess.com
Successful Blended Family


- Losses have been mourned.
- Expectations are realistic
- There is a strong, unified couple
- Constructive rituals and traditions are established
- Satisfactory step-relationships have formed.
- The separate households cooperate
Children want to feel:

- **Safe and secure.** Children want to be able to count on parents and step-parents. Children of divorce have already felt the upset of having people they trust let them down, and may not be eager to give second chances to a new step-parent.

- **Loved.** Kids like to see and feel your affection, although it should be a gradual process.

- **Seen and valued.** Kids often feel unimportant or invisible when it comes to decision making in the new blended family. Recognize their role in the family when you make decisions.
Bonding with your New Blended Family


► **Heard and emotionally connected.** Creating an honest and open environment free of judgment will help kids feel heard and emotionally connected to a new step-parent. Show them that you can view the situation from their perspective.

► **Appreciated and encouraged.** Children of all ages respond to praise and encouragement and like to feel appreciated for their contributions.

► **Limits and boundaries.** Children may not think they need limits, but a lack of boundaries sends a signal that the child is unworthy of the parents’ time, care, and attention. As a new step-parent, you shouldn’t step in as the enforcer at first, but work with your spouse to set limits.

► **Let Children set the pace**
Young children under 10

- May adjust more easily because they thrive on cohesive family relationships.
- Are more accepting of a new adult.
- Feel competitive for their parent’s attention.
- Have more daily needs to be met.
How Children Adjust to the Blended Family

Adolescents aged 10-14

- May have the most difficult time adjusting to a stepfamily.
- Need more time to bond before accepting a new person as a disciplinarian.
- May not demonstrate their feelings openly, but may be as sensitive, or more sensitive, than young children when it comes to needing love, support, discipline and attention.
Gender Differences - general tendencies:

- Both boys and girls in stepfamilies tend to prefer verbal affection, such as praises or compliments, rather than physical closeness, like hugs and kisses.
- Girls tend to be uncomfortable with physical displays of affection from their stepfather.
- Boys seem to accept a stepfather more quickly than girls.
Attachment relationships and blended families

Anyone with an insecure attachment history may have problems establishing close, loving bonds with new members of a blended family. Fortunately, an insecurely attached child (or adult) can learn to trust others, and bond with people who treat him with consistent affection, attention, and respect. See the Related Articles section to learn more.
Dealing with Differences in Blended Family


- **Age differences.** In blended families, there may be children with birthdays closer to one another than possible with natural siblings, or the new step-parent may be only a few years older than the eldest child.

- **Parental inexperience.** One step-parent may have never been a parent before, and therefore may have no experience of the different stages children go through.

- **Changes in family relationships.** If both parents remarry partners with existing families, it can mean children suddenly find themselves with different roles in two blended families. For example, one child may be the eldest in one stepfamily but the youngest in the other. Blending families may also mean one child loses his or her uniqueness as the only boy or girl in the family.
Dealing with Differences in Blended Family


- **Difficulty in accepting a new parent.** If children have spent a long time in a one-parent family, or if children still nurture hopes of reconciling their parents, it may be difficult for them to accept a new person.

- **Coping with demands of others.** In blended families, planning family events can get complicated, especially when there are custody considerations to take into account. Children may grow frustrated that vacations, parties, or weekend trips now require complicated arrangements to include their new stepsiblings.
Dealing with Differences in Blended Family


- Changes in family traditions. Most families have very different ideas about how annual events such as holidays, birthdays, and family vacations should be spent. Kids may feel resentful if they’re forced to go along with someone else’s routine. Try to find some common ground or create new traditions for your blended family.

- Parental insecurities. A step-parent may be anxious about how he or she compares to a child’s natural parent, or may grow resentful if the stepchildren compare them unfavorably to the natural parent.
Strengthening your Blended Family


- Create clear, safe boundaries in blended families

- An important part of building trust in a family has to do with discipline. Couples should discuss the role each step-parent will play in raising their respective children, as well as changes in household rules.

- The following tips can help make this difficult transition a bit smoother:

  - Establish the step-parent as more of a friend or counselor rather than a disciplinarian.

  - Let the biological parent remain primarily responsible for discipline until the step-parent has developed solid bonds with the kids.
Strengthening your Blended Family


- Create a list of family rules. Discuss the rules with the children and post them in a prominent place. Try to understand what the rules and boundaries are for the kids in their other residence, and, if possible, be consistent.

- Keep ALL parents involved

- Children will adjust better to the blended family if they have access to both biological parents. It is important if all parents are involved and work toward a parenting partnership.

- Let the kids know that you and your ex-spouse will continue to love them and be there for them throughout their lives.

- Tell the kids that your new spouse will not be a ‘replacement’ mom or dad, but another person to love and support them.
Communicate often and openly in blended families

The way a blended family communicates says a lot about the level of trust between family members. When communication is clear, open, and frequent, there are fewer opportunities for misunderstanding and more possibilities for connection, whether it is between parent and child, step-parent and stepchild, or between step-siblings.

Uncertainty and worry about family issues often comes from poor communication. It might be helpful to set up some ‘house rules’ for communication within a blended family, such as:

- Listen respectfully to one another
- Address conflict positively
- Establish an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere
Strengthening your Blended Family


- Establish an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere
- Do things together—games, sports, activities
- Show affection to one another comfortably
- Use routines and rituals to bond blended families

Creating family routines and rituals help unite family members. Decide on meaningful family rituals and plan to incorporate at least one into your blended family. They might include Sunday visits to the beach, a weekly game night, or special ways to celebrate a family birthday. Establishing regular family meals, for example, offers a great chance for you to talk and bond with your children and stepchildren as well as encourage healthy eating habits.
Tips for your Blended Family


- **Tips for a healthy blended family**
- *All brothers and sisters “fall out,”* so don’t assume all family arguments are the result of living in a blended family.
- **Beware of favoritism.** Be fair. Don’t overcompensate by favoring your stepchildren. This is a common mistake, made with best intentions, in an attempt to avoid indulging your biological children.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Be sure to discuss everything. Never keep emotions bottled up or hold grudges.
Tips for your Blended Family


- Make special arrangements. If some of the kids “just visit,” make sure they have a locked cupboard for their personal things. Bringing toothbrushes and other “standard fare” each time they come to your home makes them feel like a visitor, not a member of the blended family.

- Find support. Locate a step-parenting support organization in your community. You can learn how other blended families address some of the challenges of blended families.

- Spend time every day with your child. Try to spend at least one “quiet time” period with your child (or children) daily. Even in the best of blended families, children still need to enjoy some “alone time” with each parent.

- Source: I do! Take Two
Educating parents

What Children Wished Parents Understood about Parenting a Blended Family

- Understand each others roles as a parent and stepparent
- Understand each others philosophy of discipline
- Understand each others view of religion
- Understand each others view of parent/child time and relationships
- Understand each others view of the children’s age, temperament, personality, birth order and so on
- Understand each others view on having a relationship with the stepparent
Educating parents

What Children Wish Parents Knew about Becoming a Blended Family

- Please plan ahead and discuss changes with all of us.
- Please make a plan for what will happen when we make no progress.
- Please consider all of our needs as individuals.
- Please consider how we each feel to be in a blended family.
- Please make an action plan to help meet our needs.
- Please turn our plan into a parenting plan for how you will parent each of us.
- Please start new family rituals.
- Please let us help come up with the family rituals.
- Please let us keep important rituals from our past.
Educating parents

What Children Wish Their Parents Knew

- I come first
- I need one on one time
- I need family time
- I need to get to know my stepparent and develop a relationship of my own
- I need structure and discipline
- I need to be given my own time to adjust
- I need you to be considerate of my concerns about my other parent
- I need you to know I will always love you
Educating parents

What Children Wish Their Stepparent Knew

- Please understand I have lost a lot
- Please give me time to adjust
- Please give me special time with my parent
- Please give me time to get to know you without force or pressure
- Please let me adjust in my own time
- Please understand you will never replace my parents
Treatment goals for families

- Explore the challenges of blended families
- Explore the joys of blended families
- Identify roles of each family member
- Work on communication strategies between parents and children
- Create a story of the blended family
- Put together an action and parenting plan
Narrative Family Therapy with Blended Families

**Reasons for Narrative Family**

- Social stigma is attached to being a blended family
- Nuclear family model is cultural norm in our society
- This makes them inferior and a part of contributing to societies problems
- Families are influenced by these myths and cultural stories - CINDERELLA, SNOW WHITE, HANSEL AND GRETEL
- During times of stress cultural myths and stories reinforce negative beliefs and interactions towards each other and views of each other.
- Individual counseling is not usually recommended for blended family issues unless unresolved issues from past.
Assumptions of narrative family therapy

- Narrative Family Therapy assumptions are that there is an understanding and experience of the world that is structured through language and stories that we tell in regards to personal experience.
- There are many possible stories and possible interpretations for one event.
- Assumption that we are greatly affected by the dominant story of society
- Assumption that society constructs our view of reality
- Assumptions determine how we think and remember the past
- Shape how we define who we are
- Define our future
- Therapy is about engaging the family in telling their story about the problem

Role of counselor in narrative family therapy

- Help family expand and look at alternate views and explanations for the story
- Move from unhelpful stories to new and helpful possibilities and stories.
- Work together with client from a place of respect for families experience and knowledge- they are the expert.
- Externalize the problem- remove blame from one family member
- Listen attentively
- Ask respectful, non-imposing questions “respectful curiosity”
- Questioning is the foundation of this approach
- Search for strengths and bring them out
- Invite family to discuss and reflect on them
- “Unique Outcome”- times the problem did not occur
Narrative Family Therapy with Blended Families

**Role of family in narrative family therapy**

- They uncover how the problem affects each other
- Realize the negative impact labels has had on them and their family
- Begin to separate from dominant cultural narratives
- Begin to consider new interpretations and new meanings
Blended Family Specific Questions-

- “How do you think your views of what it means to be a family have been shaped by what other people think it means to be a family?”
- “How might ideas about families on TV have influenced how you expected things would be as a family?”
- “If you were a nuclear family what might be different in how you relate to each other?”
- “What do you think expectations about a perfect family encourage you to believe about each other?”
- “How might expectations about what a family should be have influenced what you expect from each other?”
Externalizing Questions-

- “How is old life thinking getting in the way of your present relationships?”
- “How is old life thinking getting you to argue with each other?”
- “What do you think you may need to do as a family to guard against old life thinking snaking into your lives?”
Blended Family Specific Therapy Tasks:

- Help family see themselves in a different “normal” lense
- Help family establish new boundaries
- Help family determine healthy roles and response to conflict
- Help family determine more flexible boundaries, open and inclusive boundaries
- Help family future focus - determine where they are headed
- Help determine strengths

Narrative Family Therapy with Blended Families
How do I build stories?

- Talk
- Arts and crafts
- Puppet show
- Doll house
- Computer
- Homemade book
- Video
- And so on
Why siblings?

- Siblings support each other when parental supports are limited
- Positive sibling relationships in childhood associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems and overall better adjustment
- Older siblings protect preschool children from negative outcomes
- Positive sibling relationships mean better problem solving ability between siblings
- Sibling relationship more important than perspective taking in solving conflict
- In remarriage new siblings may be added
- Positive sibling relationships contribute to healthy development
Sibling group play therapy

- Purpose helps children feel more comfortable in playroom
- Helps them work through difficult feelings
- Provides a place for social reality testing
Positive relationships between stepsiblings lead to total family strength and integration

Helps new family discuss roles, boundaries, shared identity, diverse expectations, conflicts, and feelings.

Counselors can explore open communication role identification, boundary development with the subsystem, and ambiguity of developing a new family unit

Established rules and norms early on to help decrease potential for divorce

Increases stability and well being in all subsystems.
Progression of Sessions Presented in Article -

Child Centered Play Therapy

- Allowed them to understand the current ways things were in their family and move toward more hopeful ways of being.
- Counselors wanted to make sure they were forming a strong bond with the children before doing directive expressive art activities.
- Assessed the level of the children’s developmental and emotional needs in order to match directive techniques.
- Established a sense of stability in the therapist-child relationship.

SIBLING PLAY THERAPY

Progression of Sessions Presented in Article -

Puppetry

- Expresses needs and conflicts that are unconscious
- Express confusion and anger, loss and new roles
- Done over several sessions to allow for mastery and resolution
- Allowed for communication patterns and decision making strategies to progress.
- Communication in metaphor
Progression of Sessions Presented in Article

Puppetry-

They based it on Bratton and Ray’s (1999) four stage process:

- Pick- choose a puppet
- Plan- a story with a beginning, middle and end
- Play- perform the show
- Process- discuss it with them in the metaphor.
Progression of Sessions Presented in Article-

Clay Creatures and Habitats

- Promote understanding of role and responsibility in the family
- Practice new ways of responding in a safe environment
- Clay helps a child access emotions and experiences and increases self-concept through master and control.
- Craft materials, tools also used
Bratten et al (2012) -
Close eyes and think about a real or imaginary animal that represents them
Create it in clay
Use developmentally appropriate language
Next session - ideal habitat.
Child tells his/her creation and how the creature was feeling or experience the world
Description of habitat shows insight to the child's worldview of self and others
REFERENCES


http://www.fathersforlife.org/divorce/chldrndiv.htm

http://www.stepfamily.org/stepfamily-statistics.html


REFERENCES


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