

Using MRE Skills to Promote Successful Blended Families

Marriages that create a step or blended family are different in crucial ways from first marriages. Understanding the differences can help marriage and relationship education (MRE) practitioners provide assistance to all new families, including ones in which a never-married parent is part of the equation. Because couples in marriages with stepchildren are at higher risk for divorce, it is of vital importance that they learn how to strengthen the very foundation of their marriage—the couple relationship—from the beginning. This Tip Sheet will discuss the challenges stepparents face in their marriages, and strategies that can help MRE practitioners prepare couples to blend their families together.

There are at least three key things that present particular challenges for blended families.

- 1. The parent-child relationships predate the new marriage.** Those bonds can compete with the new couple relationship if the relationship is not thoughtfully nurtured. MRE practitioners can help couples form a strong connection that can become the foundation of the new family unit. The success of a blended family relies on how well the stepparent and the biological parent are able to form a unified couple relationship as well as a cohesive parenting team.
- 2. Disagreements and problems with and about children are the primary reason these couples separate, so parenting must be negotiated differently in a blended family.** The couple often find they bring different styles of parenting to the relationship. When these styles



are not well combined and children are not given time to adjust, conflict can easily arise. Parents may also selfishly hold on to their old patterns of relating with their children in an attempt to soften the emotional suffering their children have gone through due to divorce or death. Parents may also carry guilt for the pain they have brought into their children's lives due to their own relationship struggles. But when biological parents do not incorporate the stepparent successfully into the parent-child relationship, marital bonds can shatter.

- 3. Creating a new, happily blended family cannot erase the feelings of loss and grief that everyone may experience.** With every change, there is a 'letting go' of something known, and this can not only be scary, it can easily trigger emotions. Sometimes there has been a loss of a person, perhaps through death or estrangement. While these individuals are not present physically, children still include them in their definition of the family and will often react in situations where they are reminded of their loved one. Older children

in particular may experience this aspect of the grieving process, and may behave negatively toward the stepparent as a way of declaring their loyalty to their loved one. Holiday and other traditions that change can also be experienced as a loss initially until they are experienced as a positive shift in the life of the new family.

Many of the same basic skills required for a first marriage to be successful are the same in blended families, once the underlying dynamics of blended families are understood. Because of the preexisting relationships, the grieving process, and the competitions for affection, blended families must use different strategies to build and maintain relationships. The couple must take time for them, try to understand the feelings of the children, and be patient and creative as they adjust to a new family arrangement.

Tips for MRE Facilitators

Nurture the couple relationship

- Be sure both spouses understand the need to make their marriage the priority and position the stepparent as the teammate of the biological parent. Help the couple create a shared parenting strategy by looking at what is best for their shared children.
- Stress that communication between the spouses must be open and occur daily. Couples can devise ways to connect with each other every day, even if only for a few minutes.
- Help couples develop and maintain protected time together away from the children, as a way to keep the marriage a priority.
- Coach couples to look for ways to support each other through any changes they make in their relationship in order to make it healthier.

Support the new family in dealing with grief

- Help both parents understand that grief involves feelings of love, denial, anger, and sadness, that both parents (residential and nonresidential) and children may experience.
- Help parents understand that these emotions are normal and need not be taken personally.
- Create conversations and exercises in class that can help family members understand and normalize these issues.

Coach the couple as parents

- Encourage biological parents to include the stepparent in all parenting decisions. It may also help initially to let the parent of each child communicate the rules and handle the discipline, with the other parent standing by in support.
- Encourage parents to avoid some common mistakes: becoming overly permissive to compensate for the child's feelings; making loyalty to the child a priority; and becoming resentful of either a spouse or an emotional child. Adjustment takes time for everyone.
- Look for communication danger signs and teach successful problem-solving skills to help couples address the underlying conflicts.
- Encourage parents to figure out what they can do together as a family to create positive feelings and a sense of new beginnings. This could include family activities such as a movie night or sports.

Help parents take care of the extended blended family

- Help stepparents understand the need for mini-family times (a time for family members with

blood-ties to be alone together).

- Encourage parents to talk creatively with children about new traditions or blended traditions for holidays, birthdays, or even dinner together. This respects the old traditions, while still opening up new possibilities by creating collaborative solutions.
- Especially when stress in the family is high, encourage couples to commit to finding ways to successfully deal with every challenging situation that may arise.

Blended families can be fragile. The couple and children all experience changes and may cope/ react in different ways. MRE practitioners need to help couples form a strong bond and work together, as a couple, to keep their relationship healthy. Helping couples develop co-parenting strategies, manage expectations and prioritize their couple relationship can improve the success of these families.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Ronald B. Cox Jr., PhD, and Certified Family Life Educator, for his contributions to this Tip Sheet. Dr. Cox is an Assistant Professor and Family Science Specialist for the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University. The NHMRC would also like to thank Joyce Webb, PhD, of the Resource Center for her contribution to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager, Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.