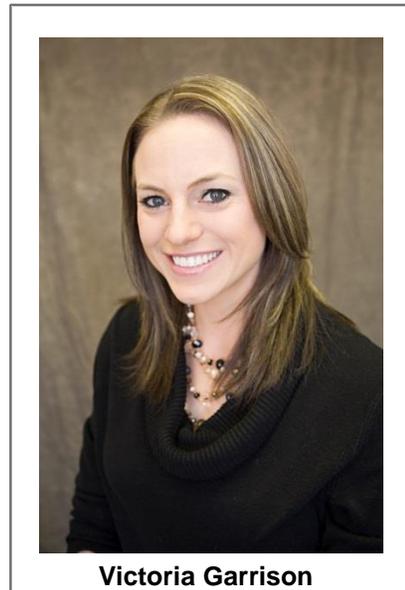


## Navigating the Blended Family

*By Victoria Garrison, MA, LCPC*

Webster's dictionary defines a blended family as "a social unit consisting of two previously married parents and the children of their former marriages." This definition is true; however, blended families can form in many different ways. They come about through remarriage after divorce or the death of a spouse or between adults in committed (but perhaps unmarried) relationships. They can even include aunts, uncles, or grandparents who take on parenting roles. Regardless of the combination, having a blended family poses challenges and rewards.

Parents often ask, "How can I help my child bond with my new husband?" or "How long will it take for my daughter to understand that her new stepsister is a part of our family now?" Children ask, "What if I don't want a stepparent?" or "Why do I have to have more brothers and sisters? I already have the ones I need." Sometimes they say, "I don't want to share my mom with anyone else" or "I'm never going to love anyone other than my 'real' mom and dad." Dealing with these types of emotionally charged questions and statements can be challenging.



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Many feelings and perspectives should be considered when exploring the dynamics of a blended family. New situations arise depending on what stage a family is in the process. The number of children involved, their ages, and the way in which the blended family was formed greatly impact the direction of the family. All blended families face similar issues related to the themes of roles, respect, and patience.

**Roles.** In a blended family, familial roles (or who does what in a household) can be complicated. Parents and stepparents should decide who will take on which roles and how they will convey those roles consistently. Be patient and communicate frequently during this process. It can be helpful for parents to schedule time alone with their own child occasionally so they can talk privately about the challenges associated with the new living situation or family roles.

Some stepparents favor their stepchild in an effort to overcompensate or build this new

relationship. Although done with best intentions, this behavior can create negative family dynamics. Stepparents should create an agreement with their partner that the child's parent will be the primary disciplinarian until a healthy bond has been formed between the stepchild and stepparent. New stepparents should avoid acting as the enforcer, but instead, work with their partner to set limits. In general, parents and stepparents should avoid showing favoritism to a specific child or children living in the home. As a family, create a list of house rules and discuss any differences in these rules with the rules of other homes in which the child lives. If possible, keep rules consistent among all of the child's homes. As you discuss and establish roles, remind the child that a stepparent is not trying to replace a parent. Assure the child that the stepparent wants to contribute to the child's positive support system. In addition, parents should remind their own child that they will continue to communicate with the child's other parent. In general, avoid giving ultimatums, especially those that could force having to choose between your children, your stepchildren, or your partner.

**Respect.** Ideally, all members of a family like each other. Realistically, this is not always the case. Although you can't insist that people like each other, you can insist that all family members treat one another with respect. Parents should be role models for how to show respect toward all family members living in or outside the home. This can be difficult, because, depending on the relationship you have with your child's other parent, you may have strong negative feelings toward some people in your child or stepchild's life. However, to have a healthy living space, a child must see respect being shown among the family members.

One way to show respect is to avoid making negative comments about the child's other parent or other side of the family. Being cordial and kind during "exchanges" when your child transitions from your home to the other parent's home is another way to demonstrate respect. Respect also can be shown by focusing on the positives and rewards of being a blended family as opposed to focusing on the differences or struggles that may have caused the family to split. If your stepchild lives with you only some of the time, respect that child's personal space. For example, provide the child with a drawer or cupboard to store belongings and toiletries. Find ways to make the child feel like an essential part of the family rather than a visitor. For example, assign a particular role or job for the child to do when he or she lives with you.

**Patience.** When navigating the complexities of a blended family, removing time constraints can help alleviate pressure. You may offer your time, energy, love, and affection to your stepchild, but these may not be reciprocated immediately. Limit your expectations by thinking of the long-term value in sharing your energy and love rather than focusing on immediate returns from your stepchild. Remind yourself that adults may have had more time than the children have had to sort through their thoughts and feelings about the blended family's dynamics. Therefore, allow your

children time to adjust. Also, let the child set the pace of relationships rather than trying to force bonds between stepparents and stepchildren. Often, children of divorced parents feel that people they trust have let them down, and they may not be eager to trust someone new. Patience and understanding are critical. Openly communicate with the child and have patience as he or she identifies and shares feelings. Take time to get to know your stepchild and allow plenty of time to develop love and affection. Also, be patient as relationships develop among stepsiblings. Recognize that siblings typically argue and struggle with getting along with each other, so give these issues time to play out among stepsiblings as well.

Being part of a blended family can yield positive long-term relationships. Creating a platform of clear roles, respect, and patience can foster a wonderful family dynamic. Enjoy the time you invest in building a blended family. Above all, communicate.

**If communication is difficult or if you need support, please contact me at Youth & Family Counseling at 847-367-5991 ext. 23**