



THE FAMILY TREE

“Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore”

Welcome to the Brady Bunch age. Experts predict that, like the Bradys, half of all Americans have been or will be part of a stepfamily –or blended family – constellation at some point in their lives. But, unlike the Bradys, these families are usually far from perfect in the beginning. And most don’t come with “Alice.” After all, in today’s rather complicated world, half of all first marriages end in divorce. So, it stands to reason that when you add “his and her” kids, ex-spouses, and lots of extended family members to the second or third marriage, the odds for success decrease exponentially. As one now successful stepdad once put it, “blending families ranks right up there with herding cats and achieving world peace.”

Sound challenging? Well, it is – but not impossible, especially when you start out on the right foot, with patience, understanding, compassion, and most of all, realistic expectations. The Family Tree’s mission is to strengthen families and prevent incidents of child abuse from ever taking place. The stepfamily configuration can either be one of escalating stress and frustration for the parents and children, or it can be an opportunity to develop a stronger, vital, enriching family experience. Here are a few tried and true tips for growing healthy – and happy - stepfamilies, from our own experts at The Family Tree.

Begin your journey as a strong couple. All healthy family systems begin with loving and committed parents. This is particularly essential when creating a newly blended family, where you each have a lot more at stake. We recommend taking plenty of time to forge a strong and trusting relationship before you marry, and then keeping it front and center after the nuptials. Treat yourselves to at least one special date night each week, free from family problems and “kid talk.” If you must discuss some pressing issue on the home front, do as one couple suggests: “keep the discussion to only five minutes, *after* the date is over!”

Make a parenting plan. Children in any family situation tend to feel more secure when their parents present a united front. However, it may be harder to create that consistency under the blended family scenario. There are usually other biological parents to consider, as well as established parenting practices and family rules on each side. Some family therapists suggest negotiating a “parenting plan” up front. Begin with a joint parenting philosophy and include a set of rules and responsibilities for the new household. Make sure the consequences are clear, and even more importantly, the

rewards for good deeds and behaviors. Understand that you may have to compromise on some things, like curfews for teenagers or reward systems for younger children. And, you must still respect and factor in the feelings and practices of other biological parents. But, take heart. It's a great exercise in patience and cooperation – one that will serve as a good barometer for your future success as parenting partners.

Create a family vision. Many couples enter into the stepfamily arrangement with rose-colored glasses, often looking for a perfect family to make up for the not so perfect ones they have lost to divorce. But over time, these unrealistic expectations can create a pressure cooker which frequently blows, leaving everyone covered in resentment and distrust. To avoid this unpleasant outcome, take time - before the wedding - to develop a “family vision statement.” Set aside an afternoon when everyone involved can participate. Begin by explaining that you will all soon join forces to create a new family, and then ask each family member to describe his/her expectations for this union. Incorporate these comments into a *family vision statement*, which can then be approved by all, framed and displayed in the new family home.

Keep reminding yourself that Rome wasn't built in a day. Family therapists say it takes on average two to three years for blended families to fully bond and stabilize as a unit. For one thing, good relationships of any kind take time to build. For another, building the *right kind* of stepparent relationship can be tricky. Blended families come with their own unique set of issues, any and all of which can rock the proverbial boat from time to time – conflicted loyalties, excessive protectiveness, jealousy, and unresolved feelings about the “old” family. To keep from capsizing, learn to exercise extreme patience and infinite understanding. Remember that respect and trust – the cornerstones of all healthy relationships – are a two-way street, and the “golden rule” is a great one to live by. And above all, **never** put your spouse in the position of settling conflicts that arise between you and your stepchildren.

Establish new family traditions and rituals. Every family establishes its own traditions and rituals. This practice promotes intimacy and a sense of belonging. A ritual can be something as simple as homemade macaroni and cheese every Wednesday night. Just make it predictable, fun, and meaningful – the cloth from which inside family jokes and stories are made.

Honor thy stepchild's other biological parent. For every stepparent, there is a biological counterpart. And in most cases, these biological parents continue to play significant roles in their children's lives, through a variety of custody and visitation arrangements. Therefore, it's essential that you honor and support these relationships in every way you can, which includes the ongoing relationship your new spouse must have with his/her “ex” for the sake of their children.

Celebrate your child. By the time most children become members of a blended family, they have already transitioned through two other family units – the first being the union between their biological parents, and the second being the post-divorce family. Although kids are fairly resilient in the long run, you can expect resistance and resentment in the beginning at having to share your attention with a house full of “interlopers.” Give them

ample time to safely air their feelings with you privately, as well as guidance in coping with them. (One mom we know gave her daughter a diary for recording her thoughts and feelings. Three years and four diaries later, she finally completed her very personal journey as a full-fledged – and happy – member of the new blended family.)