



Building Unity When Families Combine

A large proportion of parents and children will be a part of a blended family at some time in their lives. There can be many advantages to combining families, such as there may be less loneliness for the parents, less strain on resources, and a more stable environment.

But some of the hoped-for benefits do not readily materialize. The anticipated friendships between stepsiblings are as likely to generate rivalry and misunderstanding as closeness and friendship. An adolescent girl may find the transition to be especially hard because closeness with her mother may be displaced by her new marriage partner. All the family challenges make second marriages even more likely to fail than first marriages.

There are things people can do to prevent problems and build unity. The first is to have patience. While a stepdad may hope to bring order, peace, and healing to a new family, he also brings new ideas, new demands, new relationships. A step parent is wise to be very patient and listen a lot.

In fact, in any time of family stress, the counsel to "seek first to understand" is vitally important. Rather than impose our meanings and solutions on a new family, we can listen, seek to understand, and invite family members to suggest solutions.

A new stepparent is also wise to avoid competition. While a new stepmom may feel that she is a real improvement over her predecessor, she should recognize that her stepchildren have deep ties to their natural mother. Step parents should be supportive of continuing relationships between children and their natural parents.

The new couple can prevent problems by making time together. Some of that time should be dedicated to building their partner relationship. Some of it should be committed to untangling family challenges. A strong partner relationship can help the family survive and thrive.

Families are strengthened by having goals. A new stepparent might seek to discover the goals and dreams of each child. They can support and encourage each child's dreams. Over time the parents can invite all family members to think about common goals. Family projects can be a catalyst for unity. Family fun can build closeness.

One of the dangers for stepparents is taking sides. It is natural to develop stereotypes about our children and stepchildren. "He is the stubborn one." "She is the selfish one." Stereotypes prevent us from helping. Thinking win-win is more likely to lead to helpful relationships.

When children are in conflict, a parent or both parents can meet with each combatant individually. Each child will benefit from being understood. "You are really tired of all the noise and confusion. You wish we could have peace." After the child feels understood, it is time for synergy. "What can you do to make things more peaceful in your life?"

There are challenges in blending families. But there are also satisfactions when we patiently build relationships.