

## Getting Married (Again): Tips for Blending Families

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It is exciting to get married. Marriage offers the opportunity to create a new family and new traditions. However, getting married when there are children involved can bring with it a new set of challenges and anxieties about making your relationship work successfully for a lifetime. Stepfamilies are very common, but creating one can be challenging. In the United States, more than 1,300 stepfamilies are formed every day. It is a great responsibility to model healthy relationships for your children, and now is the perfect time to show them your best stuff! This tip sheet is designed to help engaged parents develop strategies to avoid potential areas of conflict and sustain a healthy marriage while co-parenting and combining families.

### Develop a Shared Parenting Philosophy

It is important to communicate about your parenting styles, beliefs and practices with your fiancé early in the relationship. This will allow you to identify a shared philosophy regarding how you will parent.

Marriage is a team sport. When a couple follows the same parenting “rules,” it sends a positive message

to the child/children about your commitment to each other, and to them. Different rules for “yours” and “mine” create division and confusion for children. Discuss with your fiancé *in private* the rules that will apply *to all* children such as: bedtime, chores, allowance, homework, computer time, telephone, television and anything else related to the children’s daily routine. Consider giving teenagers a voice when setting the rules and when identifying the consequences for breaking the rules. Participating in a parenting or marriage enrichment course

can help you discover parenting differences and similarities, and also help you agree on how to approach parenting conflicts ahead of time.

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### Establish Rituals

The American Psychological Association’s (APA) *Journal of Family Psychology* finds that family traditions and rituals are associated with marital satisfaction, adolescents’ sense of personal identity, children’s health, academic achievement and stronger family relationships. A blended family has a

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wonderful opportunity to create new family traditions. You, your fiancé, and all of the children in your "new" family will need to take the time to develop these new traditions. This will allow them to be more open to different ways of doing things, as well as help the bonding process.

In addition to creating new rituals, it is important to recognize the ones that are already in place in your family or your fiancé's family. Embrace established traditions without feeling threatened by how they were created or who may have started them. Family traditions can be found in celebrations such as birthdays, religious ceremonies, holidays, scheduled family time (e.g. movie night or game night), Sunday dinners and family reunions. Be prepared to gracefully accept the rituals that come with your partner's family and look forward to creating new ones together.

### **Address Grief and Loss**

Ending a relationship (be it a marriage or otherwise), especially one that produced children, is difficult. Our relationships are part of who we are, and breaking up or divorcing is a loss. Even when the break up is "the right thing to do," your expectations and life course have changed.

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Any time there is loss, there is grief. Be sure to address your child's grief as well as your own prior to remarriage. Talk with your children about what they are experiencing and their expectations for your marriage and family. Even the creation of an exciting new family can trigger a grief reaction or anxiety for some children as they are reminded of what they have lost. The consequences of *not* doing this with your children can be severe, as grief and loss tend to become apparent through behavioral and emotional problems. Similarly, talk with your fiancé about this difficult topic. Not being able to do so may indicate a lack of trust and openness in the relationship that can be detrimental in the long run.

### **Define Expectations**

Everyone enters marriage with their own expectations about who does what, and how things get done. Sometimes we aren't even aware of our expectations. Thinking about your expectations (even concerning the little things) and talking with your partner about them are essential.

Not all households are run the same. If your children are splitting their time between multiple homes, they are adapting to different rules in each setting. We all do better with some structure in our lives. Children especially need organization, structure and consistency. It is important for you and your fiancé to talk about what is

expected in your home, and to understand the environment in other home(s) where your children may spend time. This will allow you to create the most stable situation possible for everyone.

## Attend a Marriage Education Course

The best thing a couple can do for the family as a whole is to build and strengthen the couple relationship. Research suggests that the ability to communicate well and solve problems effectively are keys to lifelong marriage. Participate in a marriage education workshop to enhance your communication skills and learn strategies to deal with conflicts and challenges that may arise, including with those that could arise with your ex husband or wife. Some marriage educators have even adapted their programs specifically for blended families. One of the most important lessons to teach your children is the understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like. When children see the commitment and dedication the two of you have toward one another, it can provide a sense of security, reduce fear and anxiety, and reinforce the family bond.

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## Be Patient

Good relationships require work. Being a good parent or stepparent requires work as well. Do not expect the children to immediately bond with your new spouse. Remember, your marriage is a new relationship for them too. When children are involved, allow friendship and respect to evolve on their own. Make sure you and your fiancé are discussing your

individual relationships with the children to prevent any build-up of resentment or the perception of parents taking sides. Keep the lines of communication open and be flexible. Even after developing a plan and parenting strategy, you may need to alter and adjust it over time.

## Conclusion

A marriage is a joyous occasion and an exciting event in your life. Preparing for a marriage that includes blending two families requires special preparation and consideration. The more open you and your fiancé are with one another about your parenting styles, former relationships and expectations, the better prepared you will be for a healthy marriage. This will set a positive tone for communication and problem solving throughout your relationship.

*The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center would like to thank Joyce Webb, Ph.D., for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Dr. Webb is a psychologist with 18 years experience working with couples. Contributing authors also include Rhonda Colbert, Rachel Derrington, MSW, and Courtney Harrison, MPA, of the NHMRC.*

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