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Blended Families: 4 Tips for Creating Harmony

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When you get married, you don't just marry your partner, you marry his or her family... including their children. And taking on the role of stepparent can be incredibly complicated. What is your role in supervising the children? Do you have the right to discipline? And what about when you and your partner's philosophies about parenting differ? There are no "right" answers to these questions – each couple has to determine what works for them. But there are a few universal guidelines that can help you create harmony in your blended family.

Begin with a solid foundation in your marital relationship: Couples do best when their relationship is built on a solid foundation of respect, love, and mutual support. When partners work as teammates who are truly interested in what's best for each of them individually and for the relationship as a whole, they are better able to navigate complicated and emotionally intense situations. Of course, such a foundation must be accompanied by healthy communication about those difficult circumstances.

Discuss the role of stepparent: Talk about your fears, hopes, and dreams for your relationships with the children. It is also vital to discuss your beliefs about the stepparent's role in guiding and disciplining.

The older the children, the less likely the stepparent will be directly disciplining them. But families are strongest when the stepparent can honestly and fully support the parent's efforts. In addition, it's essential that the stepparent feels that their thoughts and feelings are respected by their spouse. So

although the actual parent has the final say, it is important to discuss differences of opinion in a respectful manner.

As part of these discussions, it's a good idea to discuss your views of parenting in general. What do you believe are important values to instill in children? What are your thoughts about the best ways to discipline? What are the ways that you would like to spend time together as a family? Again, when your perspectives don't align, it's important to try to develop a shared image of the family that acknowledges and respects both of your perspectives.

Maintain an ongoing discussion about blending families: Be a listening ear and a voice of encouragement for each other. Ongoing discussions will help you to work through the many difficulties that are likely to arise along the way. You will want to include conversations about how to maintain good relationships with former partners who are the parents of the children. Also, make a conscious effort to support an awareness and openness in the children to the many "players" in the family (e.g. other parent, partner of other parent, other stepchildren).

Give time and attention to actively nurturing a bond between family members: Eventually, experiences with each other and time to adjust often combine to become the glue that holds the family together. While it is nice to sometimes have extended time together, it's the moments of connection that are essential. They can be as simple as a couple of minutes together before bedtime, family game or movie night, or occasional outings for ice cream. Keep in mind that the activity is less important than the chance to connect with each other around that activity.

Effectively blending families takes conscious effort and caring. Nurturing a bond includes being sensitive to issues that often arise in these situations. As with all relationships, blended families also tend to flourish when attended to with supportive and loving communication.