

# Nurturing the Blended Family

Handout

Presented by:

Risa Garon, LCSW-C, BCD, CFLE

Carolyn Wohnsigl, M, Ed.



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Transportation Services

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## Goals



- Discuss the joys and challenges of blended families
- Identify the roles of each family member
- Present communication strategies for parents and children
- Identify communication strategies for couples
- Create a picture of your blended family and an action plan to get there

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## The Joys of Blended Families

- "Love is Wonderful the Second Time Around"
  - Maturity, knowing the kind of relationship that meets your needs
  - Being more aware of your role in relationships
  - New family members, perhaps more accepting extended family
  - Feeling more secure about yourself, separate from being in relationship



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## The Challenges of Blended Families

- Relationship born of loss
- Children came first
- Acceptance by each other's children
- Acceptance by extended family
- Complicated finances
- Former partners and parenting
- Unrealistic expectations or assumptions

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## Keys to a Healthy Relationship

- Working through your own losses
- Being ready for a relationship; standing on your own without one
- Communicating about everything!
- The continuum of decision making, individual and couple friendships, control, views about religion, money, intimacy, extended family and..*Children*



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## Communication for Couples

- Acknowledge each other—always
- Let each other know you appreciate each other and each other's actions
- Make time each day for each other without children!
- Go on dates
- Argue in a healthy way
  - Timing
  - I messages
  - Defuse and deal
  - Be open to each other's ways of resolution
  - Prioritize importance
  - Don't hold grudges

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## What Children Need from Their Parents

- To know that they came first
- One on one time or family time with their parent and siblings
- To form and have their own relationship with their stepparent
- Discipline and structure
- Time to adjust
- Consideration of their concerns about the other parent
- Their parent as the disciplinarian
- The knowledge that you love them always, even if there are more children you now love

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## What Children Need from Their Stepparents

- An understanding of the losses they have experienced
- Time to adjust to the blended family
- Special time with just their parent
- Time to get to know their stepparents without force and pressure
- An understanding that the stepparent is not going to replace either parent
- A mutual expectation and demonstration of respect

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## Clarify Expectations about Raising Children

- Your views about the role of parents and stepparents
- Your philosophy of discipline
- Your views of religion
- Your views of parent/child time and relationships
- Your views of stepparent/child time and relationships
- Children's age, temperament, personality, birth order and order in blended family
- "Permission" to have a positive relationship with stepparent

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## Becoming a Blended Family

- Plan ahead and have discussions with each other, the other parent, and the children
  - Consider each child's needs as an individual and how they feel about the blended family
  - Turn each child's needs in to an action plan of how you will parent
  - Plan for how each parent and stepparent will be involved in children's routines
  - If possible, inform the child's other parent the changes that will impact the child (address, new family members)

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## Becoming a Blended Family

- Plan for what will happen when you are at an impasse
- Start new rituals and include children in creating them
- Keep most important rituals that provide links to past for you and your children



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## Gaining The Support of a Former Partner in Forming and Maintaining a Blended Family

- Inform your co parent about your significant other before you tell the children
- If conflict is not high, invite your co parent to meet step parent at a joint parenting meeting
- Stepparent needs to reassure that they are not trying to replace the parent
- Make clear boundaries so that there aren't problems
- Focus on the impact acceptance has for children
- Include co parent in discussions that mark a child's special occasion such as graduations

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## What All Families Need - Regardless of Composition

- Laughter, fun, breaks from pressures and stress
- Clear delineation of the roles of parent and child
- Acceptance of differences
- Clear boundaries, rules and consequences
- Knowing each other
- Empathy



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## Thank You

- Please take a moment to complete the evaluation form provided, your input is appreciated.

Seminar content developed by Risa Garon, LCSW-C, BCD, CFLE,  
National Family Resiliency Center, Inc.

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# The Blended Family Quiz

True/False/Undecided

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) Even though you may not be able to be fully available to your children, you should establish regular private time away from the children.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2) It is advisable not to talk too much with children about the new blended family structure since this arouses sad feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3) It is advisable for all adults in the household to quickly begin to participate in the discipline of the children.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4) Children often misbehave when they return from being with their other biological parent.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5) It is important for blended family members to do most things together so as to develop a strong family bond.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6) Loyalty is a key factor in blended family relationships.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7) After an initial adjustment period, family members will begin to love one another.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8) The average time it takes for a blended family to develop a sense of being a family is about one year.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9) A good rule of thumb is to keep standards high but expectations down.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10) Most people feel that the blended family is not as good as the traditional nuclear family.

# Guidelines for a successful blended family

- **Permit considerable "psychological space."** Attachments between family members need to develop over time. Newly formed relationships will not be as intense as those between biological family members.
- **Move slowly in forging a relationship with your child.** In particular, school-age children cope best when the parent is warm and friendly but doesn't take an active parenting role until the child is ready for it.
- **Reframe your expectations concerning feelings between family members.** Love does not automatically develop among relationships. Strive instead for respect and fondness.
- **Allow for activities in which "subgroups" spend time together (biologically related children; biological parent/child).** This may help buffer feelings of loss inevitably experienced by children. The family need not do everything together. Preserving original relationships is important.
- **Accept the fact that you may not be able to integrate all children fully into your new family.** Each person should be respected as an individual and invited, but not forced, to do things with the family.
- **Clarify the adult roles within the family, especially concerning your involvement with children and discipline.** While the adults should jointly establish guidelines and family rules, it is advisable for the natural parent to enforce them whenever possible, especially during the first few years. However, it should be made clear to the children that when the natural parent is unavailable, or if a different adult family member is the one being put on the spot, then that adult is the person with authority.
- **Expect from 3-5 years for a sense of family cohesiveness to develop.** Building a family is a process that occurs over time.
- **Create new rituals as a blended-family.** Rituals help people develop a sense of family connection. An annual excursion to a favorite location, creating new ways to celebrate holidays and birthdays, holding family meetings, establishing mealtime or bedtime routines, all reflect your family's unique way of being together.
- **Hold family meetings as a way to manage issues and concerns.** Regularly scheduled meetings offer all family members an opportunity to share concerns and work towards solutions for many problems. Family meetings also allow members to comment on progress and celebrate achievements.
- **Build in private time for various family members to share.** Allowing family members to have their own private time or quality time spent with one other special person in the blended family allows special bonds to be nourished through various relationships within the blended family.
- **Be flexible, open to change, and willing to compromise.** Remember that each decision is ongoing and subject to revision.
- **Keep your child's school informed about changes that occur within the family.** Make sure that the school has special instructions and the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all the adults in the household - and the biological parent who may live in another household.
- **Seek out professional help if you feel that time and effort have not worked in resolving differences.** There are many skilled counselors and therapists who can offer support and practical suggestions to enhance the well being of your family.

## Gains and Losses

List the gains and losses that children and adults experience in blended families. As an adult in a blended family, you will want to acknowledge the losses and emphasize the gains.

	LOSSES	GAINS
CHILDREN		
ADULTS		

## Making stepfamilies work

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The so-called "blended family" is no longer an aberration in American society: It's a norm.

### Planning for remarriage

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A marriage that brings with it children from a previous marriage presents many challenges. Such families should consider three key issues as they plan for remarriage:

- **Financial and living arrangements**  
Adults should agree on where they will live and how they will share their money. Most often partners embarking on a second marriage report that moving into a new home, rather than one of the partner's prior residences, is advantageous because the new environment becomes "their home." Couples also should decide whether they want to keep their money separate or share it. Couples who have used the "one-pot" method generally reported higher family satisfaction than those who kept their money separate.
- **Resolving feelings and concerns about the previous marriage**  
Remarriage may resurrect old, unresolved anger and hurts from the previous marriage, for adults and children. For example, hearing that her parent is getting remarried, a child is forced to give up hope that the custodial parents will reconcile. Or a woman may exacerbate a stormy relationship with her ex-husband, after learning of his plans to remarry, because she feels hurt or angry.
- **Anticipating parenting changes and decisions**  
Couples should discuss the role the stepparent will play in raising their new spouse's children, as well as changes in household rules that may have to be made. Even if the couple lived together before marriage, the children are likely to respond to the stepparent differently after remarriage because the stepparent has now assumed an official parental role.

### Marriage quality

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While newlywed couples without children usually use the first months of marriage to build on their relationship, couples with children are often more consumed with the demands of their kids.

Young children, for example, may feel a sense of abandonment or competition as their parent devotes more time and energy to the new spouse. Adolescents are at a developmental stage where they are more sensitive to expressions of affection and sexuality, and may be disturbed by an active romance in their family.

Couples should make priority time for each other, by either making regular dates or taking trips without the children.

### Parenting in stepfamilies

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The most difficult aspect of stepfamily life is parenting. Forming a stepfamily with young children may be easier than forming one with adolescent children due to the differing developmental stages.

Adolescents, however, would rather separate from the family as they form their own identities.

Recent research suggests that younger adolescents (age 10-14) may have the most difficult time adjusting to a stepfamily. Older adolescents (age 15 and older) need less parenting and may have less investment in stepfamily life, while younger children (under age 10) are usually more accepting of a new adult in the family, particularly when the adult is a positive influence. Young adolescents, who are forming their own identities tend to be a bit more difficult to deal with.

Step-parents should at first establish a relationship with the children that is more akin to a friend or "camp counselor," rather than a disciplinarian. Couples can also agree that the custodial parent remain primarily responsible for control and discipline of the children until the stepparent and children develop a solid bond.

Until stepparents can take on more parenting responsibilities, they can simply monitor the children's behavior and activities and keep their spouses informed.

Families might want to develop a list of household rules. These may include, for example, "We agree to respect each family member" or "Every family member agrees to clean up after him or herself."

## Stepparent-child relations

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While new stepparents may want to jump right in and to establish a close relationship with stepchildren, they should consider the child's emotional status and gender first.

Both boys and girls in stepfamilies have reported that they prefer verbal affection, such as praises or compliments, rather than physical closeness, such as hugs and kisses. Girls especially say they're uncomfortable with physical shows of affection from their stepfather. Overall, boys appear to accept a stepfather more quickly than girls.

## Nonresidential parent issues

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After a divorce, children usually adjust better to their new lives when the parent who has moved out visits consistently and has maintained a good relationship with them.

But once parents remarry, they often decrease or maintain low levels of contact with their children. Fathers appear to be the worst perpetrators: On average, dads drop their visits to their children by half within the first year of remarriage.

The less a parent visits, the more a child is likely to feel abandoned. Parents should reconnect by developing special activities that involve only the children and parent.

Parents shouldn't speak against their ex-spouses in front of the child because it undermines the child's self-esteem and may even put the child in a position of defending a parent.

Under the best conditions, it may take two to four years for a new stepfamily to adjust to living together. And seeing a psychologist can help the process can go more smoothly.

*Thanks to James Bray, PhD, a researcher and clinician at the department of family medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.*

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**Find this article at:**

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stepfamily.aspx>

# Guidelines for a successful blended family

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- **Seek out professional help if you feel that time and effort have not worked in resolving differences.** There are many skilled counselors and therapists who can offer support and practical suggestions to enhance the well being of your family.

# Ten Commandments of Step Parenting

by Turnbull and Turnbull

1. Provide neutral territory so that each family member can feel he/she has a special place that belongs to him/her.
2. Avoid trying to fit a preconceived role, but try to be kind, intelligent and a good sport.
3. Set limits and enforce them, work out the rules ahead of time, and support each other when the rules have to be enforced.
4. Allow an outlet for the children's feelings for the natural parent. Children need to express these feelings.
5. Expect ambivalence, it's normal.
6. Avoid mealtime misery.
7. Avoid expecting instant love; it takes time to establish bonds.
8. Avoid taking all the responsibility; the child has some too.
9. Be patient; it takes time to work through the problems.
10. Maintain the primacy of the marital relationship. Some stepparents spend too much time and energy trying to work out their stepparent roles and neglect their own relationships.

## Phrases for Miscommunication

Ordering:	<i>"You must... You have to...You will.."</i>
Threatening:	<i>"If you don't, then...You better or else..."</i>
Preaching:	<i>"You should...You ought to...It's your duty..."</i>
Lecturing:	<i>"Here is what you are doing wrong...Don't you realize..."</i>
Giving Answers:	<i>"What I would do is...It would be best if you..."</i>
Judging:	<i>"You are argumentative...lazy...You will never change..."</i>
Excusing:	<i>"It 's not so bad...You'll feel better..."</i>
Diagnosing:	<i>"You're just trying to get attention...What you need is..."</i>
Prying:	<i>"When?...How?...Where?...Who?..."</i>
Labeling:	<i>"You're being unrealistic...emotional...angry..."</i>
Manipulating	<i>"Don't you think you should..."</i>

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## Phrases for Active Listening

Encouraging:	<i>"Can you tell me more?"</i>
Clarifying:	<i>"When did this happen?"</i>
Summarizing:	<i>"Let me see if I understood what you said..."</i>
Acknowledging	<i>"I can see that you are feeling very angry right now..."</i>
Open Questions:	<i>"Why? What would you like to see happen?"</i>
Responding:	<i>"I see it this way...How do you see it?"</i>
Soliciting:	<i>"I would like your advice about how we can resolve this."</i>
Role-reversing:	<i>"How would you feel if it were you?"</i>
Normalizing:	<i>"Many people feel the way you do..."</i>
Empathizing	<i>"I can appreciate why you feel that way."</i>
Validating:	<i>"I understand that you feel ___ when s/he ___"</i>
Appreciation:	<i>"I appreciate your willingness to ___"</i>
Reframing:	<i>"I hear you saying..."</i>

# Phrases for Reconciliation

## I feel...

*Did I do something wrong?  
That felt like an insult.  
I feel blamed. Could you rephrase that?  
I'm feeling unappreciated  
I feel defensive? Could you  
rephrase that?  
Please don't lecture me?  
I don't feel like you understand  
me right now.  
Sounds like it is all my fault.  
I feel criticized. Can you rephrase  
that?*

## Sorry

*My reactions were too extreme. Sorry.  
I really blew that one.  
Let me try again.  
I want to be more understanding of you  
right now but I don't know how.  
Help me understand what you are saying?  
What is it you think that I don't  
understand?  
Tell me what you hear me saying?  
I can see my part in all of this.  
I'm sorry. Please forgive me.*

## Getting to Yes

*You are starting to convince me.  
I agree with part of what you are  
saying.  
I don't understand your point, could  
say it in a different way?  
Let's compromise here.  
I never thought of things that way.  
Let's agree to include both our  
interests in the solution  
Let's find our common ground.  
Good point.*

## I Need to Calm Down

*I need things to be calmer right now.  
I need you to listen to me right now  
and try to understand.  
Can I take that back?  
Please be quiet and listen to me.  
This is important to me. Please listen.  
I need to finish what I was saying.  
Can we take a break?  
Can we talk about something else for a  
while?*

## Stop Action!

*I might be wrong here.  
Please let's stop for a while.  
Let's take a break.  
Please stop.  
Give me a moment. I'll be back.  
Let's agree to disagree here.  
Let's start all over again.  
I want to change the topic.  
We are getting off track.  
This isn't working for me, can we  
look at it a different way?*

## I Appreciate

*I know this isn't your fault.  
My part in this problem is...  
I see your point...  
Thank you for...  
That is a good point...  
We are both saying...  
I understand  
I see what you are talking about.  
This is not your problem, it is our  
problem.*

# **RESPONSIBLE CHILDREN THROUGH FAMILY MEETINGS**

Eva W. Maiden, MA

Marriage, Family and Child Counselor

## **Purpose of Family Meetings**

- For children to participate in the life of the family, expressing their ideas and listening to those of their parents;
- To learn decision making in areas that parents believe can be negotiated;
- To improve organization of the household;
- To provide a forum for communication about special situations;

## **Underlying Attitudes**

- Feelings are valid;
- Different people have different perceptions; this is to be respected whatever their age;
- Comments about “how things are going” are appropriate – blaming is not;
- Tone is business-like and serious (sometimes it can be fun, too);

## **Necessary Conditions**

- Regular meeting time;
- Agenda
- Chairperson
- One person speaks at a time;
- Talk “coolly” on hot topics if possible; table if there is too much heat or an impasse;
- Stick to a time limit;

## **Roads to Success**

- Leader hold attention -- even of the most distractible family member;
- Leader helps most emotional family member stay in “business mode:”
- Leader elicits ideas from quietest or least powerful family members;
- Keep asking for cooperation;
- Keep noting and highlighting areas of agreement and reaching for more agreement;
- Try for consensus; use voting only after attempts for consensus have failed;

## **Language for Meetings**

- Use “I” statements (I messages);
  - “I feel...”*
  - “I would like us...”*
- Avoid YOU statements (blaming/accusing);
- For criticism, use:

*“How are things going?”*  
*“How are we doing?”*  
*“Let’s review the agreements we made.”*  
*“We are not on target...”*

- For problem-solving, use brainstorming;
  - “Does anyone have any ideas for this?”*
- End on a positive note;

*“We got a lot done today.”*  
*“We looked at some tough questions today.”*



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- Summer camp
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- College planning

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<http://does.ors.od.nih.gov/childcare>



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**Executive Director**  
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**[www.nfrchelp.org](http://www.nfrchelp.org)**  
**[www.familyconnex.org](http://www.familyconnex.org)**

**Risa Garon** is Executive Director and co-founder of the National Family Resiliency Center, Inc.(NFRC) formerly *Children of Separation and Divorce Center, Inc.* in Columbia, Rockville and Solomons, Maryland. NFRC is a private, non-profit mental health center serving children and families throughout their life cycle of development who are experiencing transitions such a pre marriage, marriage, separation, divorce and step parenting.

Ms. Garon is a licensed clinical social worker, board certified diplomate and certified family life educator. As a psychotherapist, Ms. Garon specializes in working with adolescents, adults and couples. She works with many parents experiencing separation, divorce and remarriage. In addition, she is a certified mediator and is trained and certified in collaborative law, serving as a divorce coach and child specialist.

Recently, Ms. Garon led a team of professionals in writing and developing NFRC's online parenting plan program, FamilyConnex® which is utilized by parents across the country. Ms. Garon developed the *Child and Family Focused Decision Making Model* that helps parents and professionals better address the needs of children and helps parents remain decision makers about their own children.

The model is detailed in a book that she co-authored, *Guidelines for Child Focused Decision Making*. Ms. Garon, along with NFRC staff, developed a national certification training program for professionals who want to implement the NFRC's *Healing Hearts*® divorce education program for parents and KidShare® educational programs for children. Ms. Garon designed a state of the art advanced training seminar for Best Interest Attorneys and co-authored the book: *Attorneys Representing Children: Guidelines for Interviewing and Assessing Children and Parents Experiencing Separation and Divorce*. She has also contributed numerous articles to professional journals and major newspapers. Ms. Garon contributed two chapters in the American Bar Association's "Child and Youth Developmental Considerations," and "Parenting Considerations," *A Judge's Guide: Making Child-Centered Decisions in Custody Cases*. Ms. Garon is a faculty member of The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, which recently selected NFRC as an exemplary program to work with family courts and adjunct assistant professor with the University of Maryland School of Social Work.

Ms. Garon has written numerous articles and co authored several books for children, parents and professionals. The Child and Family Focused Decision Making Model that she and her staff developed have received national awards.

## **Carolyn Casey Wohnsigl, M.Ed.**

Director of Educational Programs  
National Family Resiliency Center, Inc.

**Carolyn** is a certified professional school counselor with a twelve-year history of working with children and families in the school and private, non-profit settings. For the past eleven years, Carolyn has directed Educational and Clinical Programs at the National Family Resiliency Center, Inc. (NFRC). Carolyn has co-authored NFRC's on-line parent plan program and two workbooks for children. She advocates for children and families in transition on a local, state and national level. Carolyn has worked with directors at the NFR Center in creating and implementing new educational programs and updating existing programs for children and families. She coordinates and teaches monthly co parent educational programs. Carolyn teaches professionals in other jurisdictions the curriculum and guidelines for presenting each of the educational programs around the state and country. As a counselor, Carolyn provides comprehensive, systems-based individual, group and family counseling services for children and youth ages 6-18, co parent consultation and reunification sessions. Carolyn also consults with guidance counselors, teachers, therapists, attorneys and other professionals to build a circle of support for families.