

STEP-PARENTING

About forty percent of Christian adults in this generation are divorced, and a large percentage of them remarry. If you or someone you love is in this category, then you soon discover developing the most healthy and loving new family is not easy. I want to offer you some simple guidelines for blending the new family to be the best it can possibly be. As a psychiatrist, I have helped many blended families do this, even though sometimes it is so stressful it feels like you (the new step-parent) are in a “blender” yourself—the type you keep in your kitchen! So here are some helpful suggestions:

1. Be sure to treat your own children and the new stepchildren equally. I often see parents favoring their own children and either ignoring or even being rude to the stepchildren when they are visiting their natural parent. No favoritism.
2. Don't say anything bad about your step-children's parents to them or in front of them—not anything bad about or to the parent you are now married to, or about the other parent, regardless of the actions of the other parent. Informing your stepchildren of the faults of either of their parents is not your duty. They will eventually figure it out.
3. Don't take over the disciplinary duties of your stepchildren. Let their natural parent have more say in it than you do.
4. Do not argue about discipline in front of your children or stepchildren. It is fine to have minor arguments about other things in front of them, so you and your new mate can model conflict resolution, but never about discipline in front of them. Do that privately.
5. Get together with your new mate and get a large piece of paper, like print paper or a legal pad sheet, and draw a line down the middle of the sheet. On the top left, put 'RULES AND CHORES' and on the top right put 'CONSEQUENCES.' Then make a list of all the rules and chores either of you can think of that are important to the blended family, including some rules and chores for yourselves. Then on the right, next to each rule or chore, decide together on a reasonable consequence for not doing that rule or chore. The consequences should be related to the offense as much as possible. For example, if one of the chores is taking out the trash every Tuesday morning, and you decide which child or step-child should do that chore, a consequence for that child forgetting to do that chore would be to do two chores the next day or two to make up for the one they forgot to do that week. The two chores should take about twice as much time together as the one that got missed. Do not condemn or criticize the child

for forgetting to do the chore, but be sure he does two chores to make up for it so he will try harder not to forget the following Tuesday.

If there is a general rule for everybody, like NO YELLING AT EACH OTHER, think of a consequence that anyone in the family could do, including either parent, if the parent yells at someone. Usually one parent will be a little too strict and the other will be a little too lenient, so compromising is the best way to go. Consistency is much more important than whether the consequence is a little too strict or a little too lenient. The blended family needs to see the new parents as unified with each other. When the parents are finished with all the rules and chores and consequences, do not show it to the children and stepchildren yet. In fact, call a family meeting at a time everybody is OK with, get a large sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle and set it up just like the one you did privately with your mate. But this time let the kids suggest what they think the rules and chores ought to be, and the consequences too, but as parents, you guide it as much as possible to end up like the one you did yourselves. You will be amazed at how good of a job your kids often do at coming up with reasonable chores and consequences. As much as possible, agree with the ones they come up with IF they are pretty close to what you, as parents, already agreed on. The rules, chores and consequences that the kids do not come up with, you as parents add as suggestions. Then get everyone in the family to sign and date it, so everyone knows what to expect and it eases a ton of tension. Be sure to enforce it though. It is wasted effort if the parents do not enforce it. The kids are much more likely to obey rules, chores and consequences they themselves have a hand in writing than if you just hand them the list you, as parents, came up with.

When they mess up, whether on purpose or by accident, do not shame them or condemn them. Simply enforce the consequence. That is what God does with us. In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul said that, even though he is a dedicated Christian, he often fails to do some good things he intended to do, and he often sins by doing things he intended not to do. But his conclusion is in Romans 8:1, that "there is therefore no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus," and that God does not condemn us for our sins of omission or commission, He just wants us to learn from them so we can grow more Christ-like. James says we all fail in many ways, so expect your kids and step-kids to fail in many ways too. But love them and help them learn and grow from their failures. We often learn more from our failures than we do from our successes.

6. Agree on a good church that is biblical, balanced, and has a great youth program. Take your family to church faithfully. If you have a child or stepchild who is old enough to drive and would prefer to go to a different

- church (a church that is also biblical and balanced), then allow that child to go to a different church. He or she will be more motivated to follow Jesus at a church he decides to go to rather than one that is decided on for him or her.
7. Have family devotions together, possibly at the supper table or in the evening before bed, but keep it very short and very interesting, so the children won't dread it.
 8. If your own child or your step-child's "other parent" is abusive, be sure to protect that child as much as you legally can from the abuse of the other parent without saying bad things about that parent. Use the courts if necessary.
 9. It is OK to tell your children or your stepchildren "You should" or "You shouldn't" do something when it comes up, but never say those terms to your new mate. If you use those terms with your mate, you are being your mate's parent, and your mate already has parents. If you don't like something your mate did, then tell your mate privately how you feel about what he or she did, not expecting them to change (unless it is abusive), and realizing you do not expect a perfect mate or even deserve one—and there aren't any anyway. But if you tell your mate how you feel about what he or she did or failed to do, your mate cannot argue back and say "No you don't." All you are asking your mate to do is to consider how you feel about that action or inaction, and when they ponder it, that technique is the most likely to bring about changes, because if we are told we should or should not do something, we are naturally going to resist it and argue about it. In I Peter 3, we are told not to preach to our mate, but to set a good example to our mate with a humble spirit and hope our mate catches on. They may or may not, but it has the best chances of working to improve the relationship. Nothing kills the romantic feelings quicker than to hear a bunch of shoulds or shouldn'ts from your new mate and find out you are now married to your mother or father.
 10. Don't be afraid to get professional Christian counseling at any bump in the road that you get stuck on. A child and family counselor for family issues, a marriage counselor for marital issues, a private counselor for personal struggles, or even a psychiatrist for meds if needed for genetic issues or for severe depression and anxiety from all the stressors you have just been through the past few years, can be very helpful.

BEST WISHES IN YOUR FUTURE TOGETHER AS A BLENDED FAMILY.

Paul Meier MD
www.meierclinics.org
1-888-7-CLINIC