

How to help your kids (& you!) in your Blended Family

There's no doubt about it, being a part of a "modern family" can be tricky.

If we don't already feel some discomfort when explaining our blended family situation, we then have to brace ourselves for the inevitable (and sometimes nosy!) questions that follow: "Do you and your ex still get along okay?" or "So they don't all have the same Dad?"

It's interesting too, that a quick Google search brings up SO much negative information – from statistics on the rates of blended family separation and divorces to blog rants about step-children and how spoilt and awful they are.

Seeing this can turn that fairly naive question about 'how to help your step-daughter with her family tree homework' (the answer is to redesign the template!), into something that leaves you feeling overwhelmed or unsettled.

It's true, stepchildren will test us, our partners won't always understand the struggles we have with their kids, and yes, their ex is involved in our world (probably forever!), which can be challenging, for sure.

It's also true that in blended families, new situations that take extra courage and negotiation occur all the time. Think about your step-child's first days at school, birthday parties, the gymnastics/swimming/debating events, the parent/teacher conference, Christmas Day, the graduation, even their weddings. In a 'traditional' family, these situations are easy, even exciting and looked forward to. For we 'blendies' they can be more complex – practically and emotionally.

But hang in there steppies!! Our aim here is to try kicking all that 'blended family' negativity up, up and away – we quite like to visualise this! We've done some research and have some experience and want to provide, not all the answers, but some tips that can really help.

Step by step (tehe!) guide to being a Blendie

Step 1 – Sort the routine (with everyone!)

Set the boundaries around the children's routines and structure. I know this seems like a strange place to start, but this can really impact how 'safe' a child feels across their blended families – they need to know the routine, who's picking them up, who's dropping them off. Try to ensure there are "no surprises" for them in terms of their care – it keeps everyone feeling comfortable and on track – check out our [routine charts](#) to help.

Another important part of routine and structure is ensuring all parents (biological and steppies) know what they're responsible for in terms of childcare arrangements, and have been consulted in the process. When things remain 'free-flowing,' it's easier for resentments to build.

The relationships between all parents is super important and if you're managing this – fantastic! But, keep the structure as its been arranged with all parents involved, keep connecting over whether the structure is working for each person, and if a parent can't manage the arrangements for a long or short period – help them out in the short term or change the arrangements so they suit you all (again)!

Step 2 - Keep focused on the kids

This may seem like a no-brainer, but regularly think about things from your child's perspective. Why? Because kids are exceptionally good at thinking that everything is 'their fault' (e.g., Mum and Dad split up because of me).

When families blend it's the adult's choice and yet the kids are immensely affected (not always negatively!). They are also sometimes the cause of conflict in blended households. Behaviour can be deceptive -

quiet kids aren't always content, and loud kids aren't always sharing their true feelings.

But more importantly, thinking about the world from a child's view helps us build strong relationships with our kids, step-kids and partners. This all helps keep families connected and that's the gold, right there!

Step 3 – Keep looking for good info and connect, connect, connect

There's a reasonable amount of good information around about blending your family in the early stages including: blending slowly and keeping communication open between you and your kids and step-kids (not to mention your partner and the ex!).

Sometimes we 'fall into' a blended family thinking it will all turn out like The Sound of Music... and then it doesn't! If your blended family isn't new but you'd like to give it a tune up, it's never too late to recreate or redesign it.

We recommend:

- Take a step back, and look for ways to 'blend slowly'. Try new ways to connect and open communication with your child or stepchild, like you're getting to know them all over again. A way to do this is to ask yourself: Who are you for this child? Or: Who do you want to be in their life? Our step-kids usually have a Mum and Dad, so there's no need to fill this role, and that's quite cool. Knowing you get to be someone different – an aunt or uncle type figure – can be helpful.
- Some experts suggest that a stepparent's main aim is to build a friendship with step-children... avoiding some of those parenting habits such as 'telling off' or 'punishing'. Instead saying "I don't like it when you..." in much the same way as you would with a friend.

How to help your kids (& you!) in your Blended Family

- Build their self-esteem by valuing them just as they are! The most important people in our lives 'see' and acknowledge us as we are now, without judgment or criticism. This can be as easy as smiling and giving the thumbs-up when watching them play – no need for words all the time!
- Be interested in what they're interested in – keep curious and keep conversations flowing. One way to do this is to comment about your own experiences or share your feelings. Try hard NOT to just use 'questions and instructions'.

Step 4 – Emotions are important!

When emotions are running high:

- Give yourself a chance to keep you cool or calm down, but let kids know you're doing this. E.g. "Do you know what? I'm feeling a bit frustrated right now, give me two minutes and I'll be back to talk with you."
This is a great way to diffuse the situation, get the time you need, but also fantastic modelling – kids learn that emotions are okay and we can deal with them!
- Talk about emotions; connect emotionally, it makes a huge difference in validating and diffusing the BIG emotions! When you see your child or step-child feeling sad, name this: "You look like you might be feeling sad right now, am I right?"
Naming how someone might be feeling is empathetic and values what they're going through. It also opens communication up so you can support them in that feeling and together figure out some solutions. Often kids will know the best thing to do, so don't race to 'fix' it for them.
- Talk empathy – arguments and fights will break out between step-siblings

and others in your family. Try really hard not to become the Umpire! Asking a child "how do you think that might feel?" (without expecting a detailed or accurate response) encourages empathy and that's important if you want kids to be kind, thoughtful and look for solutions that can help.

- Keep language personal – "I like it when..." or "I don't like it when _____ I'd like it if you could _____ instead." Own what you say.
- We don't know all the answers. Yes, we're the adults and it feels like we should, but we actually don't know what our kids and step-kids are going through or how they are experiencing things. Being mindful of this, noticing emotions and being empathetic are fundamental.

We love [The Gottman Institute](#). Gottman has years and years of experience working with couples and families – apparently he can predict couples staying together!

Gottman's tips for blended families include:

- Setting realistic expectations.
- Focusing on communication.
- Parenting together with your partner (others suggest playing more of a friend than traditional 'parent' role)
- Creating your own unique family vibe and traditions, with new rituals that your children will remember and perhaps even carry on.
- Staying connected to your partner.

We love referring to blended families as Splendid Blendeds, because they're pretty cool – they're the product of second chances and everyone deserves a second (or even third) chance!

Splendid Blendeds are relationship dependent – with your kids and step-kids, your partner, your ex, your partner's ex, the

Grandparents across all of these people, school teachers... etc! Keep growing these. Practice patience, understanding and empathy - and stay the course. You have every right to be proud of your family!

Other useful information we recommend:

Check out our [parenting hub](#)

And see our [parenting courses](#) page... not because you're getting anything wrong, but for the connections with others who have Splendid Blendeds. Parenting groups are often not about all learning new things, they're about connecting with others, not feeling judged and having your worries and concerns normalised. Win, win, win!

Check out [No-drama discipline](#) by Dr Dan Siegal. Don't be fooled by the title, it's a truly great book and we have first hand knowledge of the difference it has made for parents and kids. While it's not specific for blendies, just look past this, connecting emotionally (we think) is almost more important for blendies because they have to find their 'language' fast – it hasn't developed over time or it's a new language you need to learn!

Counselling: Sometimes the best thing to do is talk it out with a good listener and mediator. You can do this privately and pay for the service, or you can often request counselling for low or no cost through your GP.

A big shout out to Dr Dean Sutherland, (University of Canterbury), Jenni Marceau (CDHB) and Carolyn Heyward-Judd (counsellor) for their incredible knowledge, expertise and blimmin good advice.