

Family Fundamentals

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Blended families need time, patience

My husband and I married this summer. It's a second marriage for both of us, and we each brought children into the family. Everything seemed fine until we combined households and school started — now, the kids are not getting along at all. What's the best way to handle this?

Blending families can be challenging, and reasons are many and varied. The National Stepfamily Resource Center points out that all stepfamilies begin with a history of loss: Stepfamilies form because previous relationships have ended. Such a significant loss can bring on feelings of sadness, anger and fear, and many times members of a blended family may enter into the new situation on edge, guarding themselves against the possibility of experiencing that kind of loss all over again.

In addition, the very formation of stepfamilies creates “insiders” and “outsiders,” according to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. In traditional families, relationships are more fluid: Family members feel closer to one or another depending on experiences. Roles shift. Sometimes children feel closer to one parent, other times, to the other parent. In stepfamilies, the association says, those insider and outsider roles are stuck: Biological family members feel more loyalty to each other. Parents often feel torn between balancing their children's and their spouse's needs. It can take years for everyone to learn how to function as a new family unit.

Place on top of those issues the competition for resources — privacy, space, attention — that children naturally feel with each other, especially when thrust into a new situation, and there are bound to be bumps in the road.



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Experts in family relations say it's important not to have unrealistic expectations when blending families. Don't try to rush things. It's important to carefully communicate with each other. Remain positive about your spouse, especially in front of the children. Also, as a family, explore adopting fresh traditions that blend old and new activities and rituals.

Through its Extension service, specialists at the University of Florida offer a four-page publication, “Couples Considering a Blended Family,” as well as an extensive home study course, “Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies,” both available online at edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_step_families. These materials provide insights you may find helpful, including:

- Emotions in stepfamilies tend to be more intense than in traditional families. It may be difficult for children to express feelings appropriately. If they are acting out, help them verbalize what's going on inside.
- Teenagers in blended families may struggle with a lack of decision-making power or a perceived loss of relationship with their biological parent. Find ways to allow them to provide input.
- Model the behavior you want to see in your children.
- Focus on the positive aspects of each child. Don't expect too much too soon.

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Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by Michelle Treber, family and consumer sciences educator with Ohio State University Extension.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.

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