

THERAPY MATTERS: The Reality of Blended Families

By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

The Brady Bunch was seen on TV from 1969-1974 at a time when the country was just beginning to see a surge in divorce and remarriage. Mike Brady was a widowed architect with three boys he was raising on his own. He married beautiful, young Carol who was similarly raising three girls without a partner. These two groups united and with the help of a live in housekeeper, Alice, presented as a harmonious family. Carol and her daughters all took Mike Brady's surname and the joining of the families appeared seamless. The show was "cutting edge" at the time with its blended family theme, but it also sought to depict that theirs was just like a "regular" family, with typical rivalries, squabbles, and resolutions. The mention of Brady Bunch to this day conjures up images of happiness, cooperation and cohesiveness.

Divorce, these days, continues to be common. In fact, an estimated 50% of first marriages end in divorce. When divorcing under the age of 45, 80% of divorced men and 75% of divorced women remarry within three to four years. And divorced adults with children tend to remarry quicker than divorced adults without children. Statistically, half of all children born since The Brady Bunch years will live in a blended family arrangement. And yet, the typical blended family does not come together nearly as easily as the Brady's did. Research shows that it usually takes seven years for a blended family to feel truly settled. There is generally a lot to negotiate and often parents are surprised to find that there is conflict so quickly and in ways they could not have imagined.

We are much more knowledgeable these days about the complex dynamics of blended families. Here are some of the most important concepts to consider if you are part of or venturing into a blended family arrangement:

The parent-child relationship predates the new marriage. This is not the case in a nuclear family, where a couple comes together first; prior to the introduction of children. In blended families, the parent-child bond has been in place longer and is often stronger than the new marital bond. We have seen in our practice many instances where this has created upheaval in the relationships. New spouses can quickly become jealous of the special bond that a partner shares with their children. Children may feel threatened by a new stepparent who appears to be pulling time and attention away from them. The biological parent often feels trapped in the middle, unable to please both their new spouse and their child.

Loyalty conflicts are inevitable. A person with children who marries and enters into a new relationship can not expect their children to immediately adore their new partner as they do. The Brady Bunch right away referred to their stepparents as "mom" and "dad", but this is very unrealistic. Children generally are not eager to "replace" a parent,

whether that parent is lost to death or divorce. Parents are often threatened by an ex-spouse's new partner, and children intuitively pick up on this. Many children have confided in us feelings of guilt for even liking or enjoying time with a new stepparent, as if by doing so they are somehow being disloyal to their other parent or not loving them. This dynamic appears almost universal, and can occur in even the healthiest of families.

Family customs will change. All families have customs and norms that define them. A family's history includes everything from how a particular holiday is celebrated to what the after-school routine is. When two families are "blended" together, they each bring their own set of traditions and their own ways of doing things. Thursday may have been "pizza night out" with Daddy, but Daddy's new wife might not approve of fast-food and is used to providing a daily home-cooked meal. Loss becomes inevitable, as the new blended family cannot accommodate both standards. The challenge for the blended family is to develop new traditions and norms while still holding onto pieces of the past. We encourage the families that we work with to involve the children in this endeavor whenever possible. For example, a mother can talk with her children about how they have celebrated Christmas in the past vs. how their new stepfather (and his children) have celebrated it. The children can be encouraged to think of ways to combine these traditions, as well as new ideas for celebrating that might be novel and fun for everyone.

Roles must be defined. Roles must be defined within a marriage, but nowhere are roles murkier than when it comes to stepparents and stepkids. Discipline is a hot button issue, and the general rule of thumb is that each parent should take the lead in the discipline of their own biological children, at least initially. Problems can quickly arise when both partners in a new marriage have different discipline standards. The goal would be to have the couple discuss their shared rules and be in basic agreement about what is acceptable. Roles can also be messy when it comes to stepparents and "exes". Having the new stepmom rush in to volunteer as the soccer team's "Team Mom" can be insensitive to the biological parent, even when that parent lives a considerable distance away. Similarly, if there is a major problem with regards to a child, this problem should be addressed first between the biological parents. The stepparent, while a part of the "parenting team", assumes the role of a junior partner. And finally, roles among the children may also require some attention. A child accustomed to being the "only child" in the family may suddenly find himself part of a household unit where he has older or younger stepsiblings.

As mentioned above, it takes considerable time – an average of 7 years – for a blended family to fully merge together. Helpful along the way is remembering to take care to nurture all of the relationships in this new, complicated family – instead of viewing the group as one big "bunch". Couples need time together to cement their relationship, away from the prying eyes and ears of children. Bio parents and their bio kids need one-on-one time, separate from stepparents, to preserve their special bond and shared history. Stepparents also need alone time with their new stepchildren to allow relationships to

flourish and grow. And finally, all blended families have “exes” in the mix. It is always in the best interest of the children to honor that relationship regardless of the circumstances of its demise.

Happy blending to you and yours!

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