

# Blended Families



Blended families can take on many forms but will typically include a couple and their children from previous relationships, as well as children they may have had together. Although not all family members may be related biologically, they can still form close, loving bonds and live cooperative and fulfilling lives together.

Creating a stable and functional blended family can sometimes be difficult with children often experiencing complex emotions relating to their place in the family, concerns over having new siblings and emotions about changes to their relationships with both birth and step-parents.

Some of the key challenges for parents creating a blended family, as well as tips on how to ease the transition to a new family structure and ensure the creation of healthy, mutually beneficial relationships.

## Children might not get along with your new partner

It can take some time for children to warm up to a new parental figure with many complex emotions to navigate such as fear, uncertainty, conflicted loyalty and anxiety.

What you can do:

- Take things slowly when making changes in your children's lives, such as when introducing them to a new partner. It is best to gradually integrate changes into their routines and wait until they are comfortable and secure with each step before moving on to the next. Stability and routine are very important to a child's wellbeing.
- Have patience, close bonds are built over time.
- Encourage respectful communication between all members of the family, even if they do not yet get along. It is important to remember acting out can be a sign that your child is experiencing difficult emotions. You may need to enlist additional support from a councillor or other trusted person to help your child make sense of their feelings or hostility and learn to process them in healthy ways.

## Spending quality time with your own child

It is important that while creating a strong family dynamic for your blended family, you still allow time to spend with your child one on one.

- Pick an activity that your child enjoys doing in your time together.
- Incorporate the one-on-one time into the family's routine, as children respond well to consistency. Go for a walk, take an outing to the park or play a game together once a week on an allocated day.
- Make your time together as natural and comfortable as possible and encourage them to talk about any concerns or feelings they may have.

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## Children feeling anxious or resistant to new siblings

### a) A new baby

- Make the existing children aware they are to have a new sibling early on and include them in your plans.
- Encourage them to take part in preparing for the new baby, maybe by helping to decorate the nursery.
- Listen to their feelings and concerns and create an environment for open communication.

## b) Step sibling

- Encourage respectful communication at all times, regardless of like or dislike.
- Do not force the children to like each other, understand that it can take time to form bonds.
- Let your children's teachers know about the changes that are happening in their home life, teachers can help look out for changes in your children's behaviour that may indicate they're not coping, as well as provide an additional point of support should your child need someone to talk to.

## Relationship with the parent who hasn't re-partnered

It is important to help your children maintain a positive relationship with their other parent, when blended families come into play, children may feel like their loyalties are being tested, or fear that their parent is being replaced.

- Plan and communicate with your child's other parent before taking any concrete steps and outline what each of you are comfortable with in regards to your children's interactions with your new partner. Do not introduce your child to a partner before consulting with their other parent first.
- Don't make your child keep secrets from their other parent and don't talk badly about the other parent to your child.

- Share positive memories you have with your child and their other parent, encourage them to talk openly about their own positive memories and experiences.
- For older children, encourage them to seek support for coping with any difficult emotions they may be feeling.

## Maintaining a strong relationship with your new partner

- It is crucial for the health of the family that your relationship is built on strong foundations, spend some time together without your children to bond one on one, such as while they're at school or spending time with their other parents.
- Communicate openly with your partner about how you might be feeling, and the strains you may be experiencing around the integration of the family unit. Have realistic expectations – it takes time to develop new relationships and for all family members to adjust to the changes in family structure.
- Remain a team when it comes to raising your children together, lay out boundaries and discuss expectations regarding your parenting styles and family dynamic before you begin taking any action.

## About Relationships Australia

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For over 70 years, we have been supporting children, adults, families and communities.

As a federation of Relationships Australia organisations in each state and territory, we have over 118 service locations across the country, with our National Office based in Canberra.

We provide a broad range of services including counselling, family dispute resolution and mediation, family violence prevention, support and recovery services, and mental health services.

Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia receives funding from the Australian Government, as well as state and territory governments, and other sources.

## Next steps

For more information on our services and how they can support you, or to find your nearest centre:

Call 1300 364 277

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