

Blended Families.

In the last lesson, you explored challenges that money and work can present to your relationship and how you can use them to enhance your relationship instead. In this lesson, you'll delve into the other hot topic in relationships: children.

This lesson is about managing the challenges of bringing children into your relationship, making yours a blended family.

The Other Parent

You only need to go as far as fairy tales to hear horror stories about step-parents and step-children. Although you know that fairy tales sensationalize these situations, children may not know this. They may be frightened, resentful, or looking forward to the new situation.

There are millions of successful and healthy blended families. Yours can be one of those. It takes all involved parents to make life easier for everyone by engaging in healthy, open, and regular communication.

Let's look at some situations of blended families:

1. **Children with only one parent are the easiest situation, since you're adding fewer people into the new family.** The "non-present" parent is a part of the family even if not with you.
 - **The emotions of the children determine how easy the blending of your family will be.** If the parent has walked out of their lives, the children will feel confused, angry, and hurt.
 - If the parent passed away, the children may still be coping with grief. They may also be resentful of someone coming, as they see it, to take the place of the parent who died.
 - If there never was another parent, the children may be resentful of having to share their parent with someone else.

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2. **The most challenging situation involving children is when one or both parents use the children against the other parent.**
 - **This is an emotional minefield.** The parent using children as a weapon to cause pain is difficult for all. If both parents are doing so, and you're not that parent, there is little you can do about the situation.
 - The children are caught in the middle and their emotions will be volatile. If they are angry with you, don't take it personally. It's not about you.
3. **Healthy parents working together for their children make it easier for blended families.**
 - The children will still have challenges in adjusting to the new situation. When all involved communicate and support each other, as well as set clear boundaries with the children, a potentially difficult situation can be fun and enriching.

The "New" Parent

As the "new" parent, you have the biggest adjustment in parenthood. Yes, your partner will need to address the emotions of their children, but they know their children. You don't.

Be aware of several dynamics which could affect your relationship with your partner:

1. **You are not the parent**, and older children will certainly be sure you know that, but **you still have rights and responsibilities.**
 - **You have a right to be treated respectfully** by both the children and your partner.
 - You have the responsibility to initiate communication with your partner when needed.
 - You'll have the responsibility to engage in parental tasks such as transporting the children, keeping them clean, and feeding them.

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When and how much needs to be agreed upon by both you and your partner.

2. **You'll need to set limits and discipline your partner's children.** Use the communication tools you know to clarify what you can and can't do.
 - Because you don't have a history with the children, you might be more objective with them. If you haven't been a parent before, you may not be aware of how quickly children can trigger emotions.
 - As much as possible, **remember that much of what the children say and do is about them and not about you.** How you respond to them is about you.
3. **You can and, hopefully, will fall in love with the children.** Being a step-parent can be enriching and fulfilling. The more adults who support and love the children, the better it is for them.
4. **Have fun!** Being a new parent isn't all responsibilities. Schedule fun times for all. This will ease the transition and enhance your relationship with your partner as well.

The "Old" Parent

The parent who brings children into the relationship often doesn't realize how difficult this may be for their children and their partner. Consider what you're going through in adjusting to a new and loving situation.

Your children didn't choose this. Your partner chose you, and the children came with the package. Not only are you primarily responsible for your children, you have a responsibility to your partner.

Being proactive in several areas will ease the adjustment for all:

1. **Use your communication tools with your children,** especially children of school age.
 - Ensure that they know what is expected of them regarding respect, boundaries, and chores.

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- Demonstrate your love for them through words and actions. Just as you have learned the “love language” of your partner, learn that for your children.
2. **Be in continual communication with your partner about your children.** Daily communication is preferable for the first few months.
 - Agree upon responsibilities.
 - Keep everyone aware of your schedule and the children’s schedules. This includes which parent is doing what.
 3. **Have fun together!** Include your children and your partner in fun family activities.

Summary

Nurturing another life is one of the most fulfilling and difficult activities anyone can do. When children come with a new relationship, there are challenges to be addressed. As with all things, clear communication keeps your relationship strong.

In the next lesson, we’ll discuss how to address the needs each of you have in a relationship.

Before you move on, take a few minutes to integrate what you have learned by answering the reflection questions below.

Reflection

1. What are your greatest fears about bringing children into your relationship?

