

# TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILIES

By Holly Rampy Baird | Contributor

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As a family law attorney, I have worked with hundreds of blended families of all types, shapes, and sizes. However, the blended family with which I am most familiar is the one I grew up in. I could break down the specifics of each member's technical designation – "stepmom," "stepdad," "biological parent," "half-sister." But those are unnecessary labels. They are all just family to me.

How do you get to that level of love and acceptance, you ask? I will be honest; the transition from divorced family to happy, healthy blended family is not an easy one. And it is certainly not a short road. Just like any family relationship, it takes ongoing work. Blended families involve a variety of different relationships, all of which must be continually nurtured.

But it is possible! My family was not unique. I have had many clients over the years who have been able to move past the difficulties of the "divorce phase" to become successfully blended families.

Based on observations in my practice and conversations I have had with clients through the years, as well as my own experience, here are a few tips for those hoping to have a happy, high-functioning blended family.

Avoid negative and disparaging talk. When it comes to blending a family, success starts with the parents. Often there are deep-seated emotions and pain, which led to the end of the relationship between two parents. Anger and bitterness are common. Sometimes for a good reason. However, if a toxic or volatile co-parenting relationship between two former spouses exists, the likelihood of creating a peaceful blended family relationship is almost non-existent.

It is critical that parents refrain from saying negative things about each other to the children. Extra care should be taken to shelter children from the details of the divorce or any ongoing litigation. In fact, it is common in family law cases for a court to put in place a legal injunction, enjoining each parent from disparaging the other parent or discussing the litigation with or within the hearing of the child.

Parents should remember that children are perceptive – even more perceptive than they might realize. Overtly negative talk about the other parent is not always needed to communicate to the child that a problem exists. Children pick up on attitudes, snide comments, and body language.

Children should feel they are free to love the other side of the family, and freely share details about the time spent with them. Avoiding all negative and disparaging talk about the other parent or other side of the family is the key.

Parents (not children) should make parenting decisions. Parenting decisions are just that – decisions to be made by parents, not by the child. It is harmful in co-parenting relationships for the child to be moved into a role of making adult decisions. Unfortunately, this happens far too often.

By way of example, let's say a father is requesting a change in the weekend schedule so that his daughter can attend an event with the father's family. The instinct of the mother may be to say, "I will

ask her." In our society today, it is common to feel that children should have autonomy and be given a voice in everything. What the mom may not realize is that, to the daughter, this feels like she's being asked to make a choice between her mom and dad. These decisions cause anxiety for the child, which may manifest itself in many ways throughout the family. A unified front by both parents is always best!

Do not hesitate to seek professional help. In my experience, this is the most helpful thing a family can do to work through

the emotions that come with broken and blended families. There are several resources available today for blended families.

Parents should strongly consider individual therapy for themselves and for each child, no matter the child's age. In some cases, family therapy may be recommended by individual therapists. In family law litigation, a parenting facilitator or coordinator may be appointed to assist parents in resolving day-to-day parenting issues in a healthy way and without the involvement of the court system. For families where

a child may have been alienated from one parent by the other, there is specialized counseling, known as reunification therapy, to help mend the damaged relationship.

Of course, every family is different, so what works for one may not work for others. Additionally, where abuse has been involved, or where untreated substance abuse issues exist, some of the above may not be appropriate or possible. No matter the case, parents should take the initiative to seek out the education, resources, and help that can provide the family with tools needed for success.

*Editor's Note: Holly Rampy Baird is a Family Law attorney with the boutique firm Orsinger, Nelson, Downing & Anderson, LLP. An attorney with a passion for finding peaceful resolutions for her clients, Holly handles all types of Family Law matters, including child custody cases. She can be reached at [www.ondafamilylaw.com](http://www.ondafamilylaw.com).*

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