

Catholic Parenting 101

Tips for Blended Families

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Parents facing the challenging adventure of a blended family are not alone. In the United States, blended families, in which parents and children have been part of a previous marriage, is common in many homes. The challenges of “blending” families are substantial, such as balancing life between two families, figuring out rules and roles between both homes, avoiding unhealed emotional landmines with ex-spouses, and creating holiday schedules that work. Yet, wise and prayerful parents can make this a meaningful and redemptive experience.

Step 1: Prepare Thoroughly Together

- ▶ **Prepare for your new marriage.** Unfortunately people who remarry are less likely to seek premarital counseling. Find and participate in the nearest marriage prep program, like Cana II or something similar.
- ▶ **Create a new home-space.** If it is not possible to move to a new house, invite the stepchildren to help give the existing home a good makeover. Provide an opportunity to make the new space one that can be created together. Otherwise, children often feel like they are moving into their stepparent’s home, rather than creating a new home together with the stepparent.
- ▶ **Anticipate how each child is likely to respond.** While children nine years old and younger can often adjust more quickly, ten- to fourteen-year-olds often struggle with the transition into a blended family.
- ▶ **Talk about rules, roles, and responsibilities ahead of time.** Children will relax and adjust more quickly when they have clear expectations and know that all parents are unified.

Step 2: Handle the Common Challenges

- ▶ **Be patient.** Often a blended family comes together and finds its rhythm after several years.
- ▶ **Affirm the important role of your ex-spouse.** Remember that there may be ex-spouses, but there are no ex-parents! When appropriate, say positive things about the ex-spouse and help the child to maintain a good connection with him or her. This will help the child to learn that it is OK to love both biological parents and stepparents. This may be the most valuable gift you can give your children.
- ▶ **Discipline wisely.** Biological parents should provide a lion’s share of the discipline and take ownership of the rules. For the first few years, stepparents should only enforce those rules that have been clarified by the biological parent, much like an aunt or uncle would.
- ▶ **Addressing parents.** Parents should work with children to find the best way to address the stepparent, rather than assume they will call them “mom” or “dad.”

Step 3: Create New Traditions

- ▶ **Hold regular, positive, and productive family meetings.** Emphasize what is working in the home as well as each child's achievements. Also, use this time to listen to frustrations and solve problems effectively.
- ▶ **Create positive ways to maximize participation in your parish.** As with all families, blended families need creative ways to invite healing and redemption. Follow Sunday Eucharist with a special meal, either at a restaurant or at home. Encourage frequent celebration of Reconciliation. Even when there is disagreement or conflict in how to continue the children's religious upbringing, be sure to model faithful and healthy spiritual practices for the whole family.

- ▶ **Create scheduled, fun, one-on-one special times between stepparents and stepchildren.** Allow the child to choose the fun activity (within reason, of course). Protect these times against the natural temptation to be productive or solve problems. Rather, simply enjoy the time together.

There is no way around it: Parenting is an adventure. However, with good planning, patient and skillful problem solving, and a proactive commitment to create something deeply good and positive, the adventure can be rife with redemption, both for parents and for the new, blended family.