

Parenting – Blended Families

Blending families in second (or third) marriages is one of the greatest causes of divorce. Very few of these marriages survive five years. However, I have witnessed many couples who have learned to beat the odds and create a wonderful, love-filled marriage. The secret is in following the Policy of Joint Agreement.

Think of a second marriage for one partner and a first marriage for the other. One partner has a child from the previous relationship. This new couple seems to constantly disagree on simple child rearing issues, i.e. cleaning the room, household chores, curfew, etc. One member of the couple's largest complaint is that since they have blended their family, it seems the parent of the child from a previous relationship protects her child. The new partner feels he has had to make adjustments while the other partner's child just seem to run wild. At the same time the partner with a child from a previous relationship feels the other is always critical how they supervise the youngster. Comparison's are made to the child's other parents behaviors. And though the partner that has no children may feel they have tried to stress that no child will be reared the same in their other parent's home as they will be reared in this home, there continues to be times when the child "gets away with infractions." This is causing a great deal of distrust among the parents. Often such couples will ask me if there anything they can do to rebuild trust between them in their new marriage?

Marriages with blended families tend to be unsuccessful, in fact they are one of the greatest predictors of divorce. And you may already have first-hand experience to see why this is the case: you and your partner have a different way of handling the child. You can't convince her that your way is the only way but neither can she convince you that her way is the only way. It is common for the spouse with a child from a previous relationship to put his or her own child's interests first. It is often in an effort to compensate for the trauma the child experienced when there is a divorce. But when the child's interests are first, the interests of the other spouse are found somewhere down the list, and that's a formula for marital disaster.

In cases that I have worked through, these marriages can be saved if both spouses are willing to never do anything without working out an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse. In effect, whenever you follow this policy, you put your spouse's interests first, where they should be.

I find the most helpful starting point is the following:

1. Agree that which-ever parent is interacting with the child knows they have the support of their marital partner in their discipline.
2. When one parent informs the child (his or her) that a disciplinary consequence has been set, the other parent will support that discipline.
3. At a later time (preferable when the child are not around) both parents will talk about what happened. The parent who initiated the consequence of the child's behavior will explain to the other parent what happened and their rationale for doing discipline as they did it.
4. The parent who initiated the discipline will know that the other parent supports them. However, he or she also knows that the other parent is going to listen to their point of view and attempt to understand it. They may also present their point of view, which may be different from the initiating parent's.
5. They will then apply the policy of joint agreement to not only hear each other's point of view, but to also negotiate a joint agreement.
6. Until they come to a joint agreement, the original consequence stays in place and is supported by both parents.
7. When a joint agreement is arrived at by the marital partners, they will jointly support and present to the child their negotiated agreement.
8. The joint agreement of the partners will be presented to the child as a joint agreement. It may support the original action or represent a negotiated agreement subsequently arrived at by them both.
9. It is always presented as a joint agreement and not one parent vetoing the other.

Following this policy means that neither you nor your spouse is controlled from reprimand or discipline of the child. You will act using your best

judgment knowing that your marital partner will support you. You and your partner know that support of each other is of first importance. It is equally necessary for you to tell each other what happened and what has been done. You will trust that this consequence or discipline will be supported by both partners until you have reached an enthusiastic agreement about it. If you do not have this agreement in place you may not agree about much of anything, in which case you are not able to discipline your child and the child may do whatever he or she pleases.

But as you practice applying the policy, you and your spouse will begin to establish guidelines in child-rearing issues, and agreements will start to form. Eventually, you will agree on how to discipline your child(ren) in a way that takes each other's feelings into account, and your marriage will be saved.

Child rearing is a huge problem in blended families, but it's not the only issue in your marriage, I'm sure. Regardless of your conflicts, however, you'll find that you can resolve them all when you have learned to negotiate with the Policy of Joint Agreement.

Incidentally, here are a few guidelines that will help you negotiate an enthusiastic agreement:

1. Set ground rules to make negotiations pleasant and safe:

- a) Try to be pleasant and cheerful through your discussion of the issue,
- b) Put safety first--do not threaten to cause pain or suffering when you negotiate, even if your spouse makes threatening remarks or if the negotiations fail.

- c) If you reach an impasse, stop for a while and come back to the issue later.

Identify the problem from the perspectives of both you and your spouse. Be able to state the other spouse's position before you go on to find a solution.

Brainstorm solutions with abandon. Spend some time thinking of all sorts of ways to handle the

problem, and don't correct each other when you hear of a plan that you don't like. You'll have a chance to do that later.

Choose the solution that is appealing to both of you. And if your brainstorming has not given you an answer that you can enthusiastically agree upon, go back to brainstorming until you come to a joint agreement. In the mean time -- that is until you come to a joint agreement --- support whichever partner initiated the discipline for the child. The child needs to know that you support your marital partner and that you and your partner talk about them and their behaviors. That you will support each other is of first importance to establish a blended family. The reality that you may, through negotiation, even change what discipline has been selected because you have jointly come to a joint agreement on how to best handle them.

The reason you and your partner argue is that you are attempting to control the decision of your partner (and you know you only have power over what you do, not what your partner does; nor for that matter, not what your partner's child does unless it is a joint parenting agreement). You need to learn how to act in the interest of both of you at the same time. But if you follow the Policy of Joint Agreement and use the guidelines for negotiation that I have just described, you will find yourselves in greater and greater agreement. Eventually, your marriage will turn out better than you could have ever hoped.

If you don't follow this policy, however, you will eventually make each other so miserable that you will lose your love for each other and divorce, like most marriages with blended families. This process has already begun. Stop it before it goes any further.

Lewis R. Bigler

M. Div., MA, AAPC Diplomate
Family/Couple/Individual

Counselor/Mediator, Mental Health
Counselor

4476 Main Street, Suite 204 Snyder Square,
Amherst, NY 14226

716-634-0658 www.Biglercounseling.com

Lewis@Biglercounseling.com