

Remarriage: 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 worked with many couples who have learned to beat the odds and create a wonderful, love-filled marriage. The secret is in following a policy of joint agreement that both parties are enthusiastic about.

Let's consider a case in point; a second marriage for both parents. Each parent has two children, all of whom are older teens except one. It seems the parents constantly disagree on simple child rearing issues, i.e. cleaning their room, household chores, curfew, etc. Often one of the parents largest complaint is that since the partners have blended their families, it seems one of the partner's children have had to make the most adjustments while the other partner's children just seem to run wild when they are in their joint home (they live with their mother most of the time). One partner is reported as always critical of their partner's children and their "conformance" to house rules. At the same time that partner seems to make their own rules for their children. No two children are reared the same, and yet it seems that one marital partner continues to punish the other partner's children for seemingly minor infractions. This, of course, causes a great deal of distrust among parents and children alike.

Many remarried couples have a first-hand experience with these kinds of conflicts. It is common for each partner to put his or her own children's interests first. It is often in an effort to compensate for the trauma children experience when there is a divorce. But when the children's interests are first, the interests of the newly remarried couple and even the children are found somewhere down

the list, and that's a formula for marital disaster.

However, in cases that I have worked with, these marriages can be saved if both partners are willing to learn how to **never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement** between both partners.

The idea is to put your partner's interests first, and that is where they should be.

This starts with an awareness that you do not want to undermine the authority of either parent with any of the children (His or Hers).

When one parent interacts with a child in reprimand or discipline the other parent will show support by staying out of the interaction.

Eventually this will mean you will learn how to follow a policy that neither you nor your partner will reprimand or discipline any child without talking it over with the other parent.

This means you will agree that all reprimands and discipline will be talked over with the other parent the next opportunity the two partners can take time together to talk about the events of the reprimand or discipline. All parenting reprimand or discipline will only be finalized when the partners have reached an enthusiastic agreement about it.

At first, you may not agree about much of anything, in which case whichever parent is interacting with the child or children will make their best judgment and the other parent will support it by staying out of the interaction. Then later, when the child is not around, the parents will negotiate a joint agreement that both are enthusiastic about. Then the child will be informed of the decision of the joint parenting. Both parents will monitor the results.

An alternative is that there is no reprimand or discipline of the children until a joint agreement is reached (in which case they may do whatever they please). But as you practice applying the policy, you and your partner will begin to establish guidelines in child-rearing issues, and agreements will start to form.

Eventually, you will agree on how to discipline your children 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 to a joint agreement that both of you are enthusiastic about the outcome.

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 partner makes threatening remarks or if the negotiations fail.
2. If you reach an impasse, stop for a while and come back to the issue later (I suggest within 24 hours).
3. Identify the problem from the perspectives of both you and your partner. Be able to state the other partner'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 agree with. 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.

The reason you argue is that you are incompatible -- you have not learned how to act in the interest of both of you at the same time. But if you follow a policy of coming to a 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 may have already begun. Stop it before it goes any further.

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