

A red stamp with the words "SURVIVAL GUIDE" in a bold, sans-serif font, tilted slightly upwards to the right. The stamp has a distressed, ink-like texture and is set against a white background.

**SURVIVAL GUIDE**

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# **The Blended Family Survival Guide**

Practical Ways to Unleash Love, Break  
Stereotypes, and Build Strong  
Connections.

*By Grant H. Wood*

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## Introduction-When It All Fell Apart...

You remember the moment when you knew it was over. It's burned into your brain and your spirit. The moment when everything you knew was shattered beyond all hope. The moment when you knew that your dream of the family story you wanted was dashed.

Whether it was a traumatic moment, the death of a partner, an affair or the final throws of a relationship slowly starved of love, you felt it break for good. You felt annihilated. Perhaps you experienced a cold sense of relief. Maybe you felt like you wanted to just stop breathing...but you pressed on somehow.

Then came new hope and new love, perhaps love like you had never imagined or experienced before. Your heart woke up, and you began to weave your world together with a new partner, only to find that there are new and complex questions. Some of them feel like they might be deal-breakers. There is grief to be processed, resentment, guilt and shame to overcome, co-parenting obstacles to navigate and new family members living together...but not because it was their choice.

You enter into the reality that family bonds are not only defined by blood but also in the heart. It's so much harder than you thought. Is it possible that the cracks and fissures from our loss can be repaired? Not only repaired, but actually enriched and able to thrive and shine like precious metal?

I often hear discouragement from followers of the Christian faith who feel like their family journey would be a disappointment to God. Perhaps they have been told that God hates divorce or even worse, that God can't bless a "broken family". Let's not forget that Jesus himself grew up in a blended family. He had a step-dad. He had step-siblings. He came from a long history of blended families. The widow Ruth in the Old Testament moved out to a new city with her mother-in-law and eventually re-married into the line that would eventually produce Jesus.

It's time for the faith community to embody the reality that God is loving all of us, all the time, always... no matter what situation we are in. Blended families don't live under a dark sun. I believe strongly that God loves people more than he loves their marriages. He embraces our fractures and our fissures. He can bind them back together with precious gold. Romans 8:39 lays it out pretty well. I like this translation from "The Message".

***“I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”***

While the perception of the non-traditional family has come a long way since the days of referring to them as “broken families”, it doesn’t make it any easier to go through the gauntlet of family blending. This book aims to be a source of information, equipping and encouragement for wherever you might be in the process of blending. I think it’s important to emphasize that any growth process or repair we go through as humans is for a lifetime. There’s no reality where we figure it out once and for all. The process for becoming a healthy blended family system does not often feel like we are creating something beautiful...it feels more like trying to survive. For this reason, we need to find resources for each day, and learn how to be aware, and how to repair the cracks as they inevitably emerge.

The purpose of this book is to help you with practical, evidence-based concepts and tools to aid you in your family's development. This book isn't about sugar-coating the challenges. It's about equipping you with the tools to not just survive, but thrive in this unique family dynamic. We'll delve into the common hurdles blended families face, from jealousy and resentment to establishing new routines and boundaries. But fear not! We'll also celebrate the joys of your newfound family, exploring the potential for deeper connections, increased support systems, and the richness of diverse perspectives.

Think of this book as your personal survival guide, filled with practical strategies, real-life anecdotes, and expert advice. We'll unpack communication techniques to navigate difficult conversations, discover creative ways to build trust and unity, and offer tips for fostering healthy relationships between step-siblings and step-parents. Remember, blended families come in all shapes and sizes, and so do the solutions. We'll explore different family structures, offering tailored guidance for each unique situation.

Here's to not only surviving, but thriving in your new blended family story!

# Chapter 1

## Life is a Highway...and It's Terrifying.

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### What are you driving?

I've spent some time entertaining the idea of what a blended family might look like if it were a car. Here's what I've come up with so far:

**Exterior:** Definitely a large-bodied, but slightly aerodynamic minivan. This is because no matter how cool the coolest person in the family is, there will be someone uncool at any given moment who will average it out to be a minivan. The vehicle would be a patchwork of paint colors ranging from chrome to that stupid sea-foam green color on most electric cars. The vehicle is lifted and rides on massive off-road tires, but it does NOT have 4 wheel drive. It is tragically fuel-inefficient. There's a sunroof only on one side so that the occupants can constantly fight over who sits there. The vehicle is equipped with high-speed sliding doors because at any moment, someone will want to leap out and take their chances. The doors also allow random friends and extend family ("randos") to invade the cabin of the vehicle at any and all times.

**Interior:** The vehicle is apportioned with wood paneling throughout because the step-mom thinks that “*Hard-woods just make everything come together*”. There are two active steering wheels so that parents will get to negotiate control at every moment. The steering wheels are also reachable from the rear of the vehicle so that the kids can take control at any given moment. Control of the vehicle will constantly adapt even when the step-dad thinks he should have control. Good news! There are 125 USB ports throughout the cabin! Bad news...the children have stolen or broken all of your charging cables. The vehicle does not have interior seating. This is so that everyone will have to provide stability for themselves and touch each other as much as possible. There is a small compartment off the left rear of the vehicle where the silent 13 year old boy will lock himself in and never be seen in the light of day.

**Engine:** The engine is a combination bio-emotion fuel system. It runs on love, faith, resentment, rage, attempts at forgiveness, humility, shockingly awkward moments of all kinds and chicken nuggets every night.

What does your vehicle look like? What vehicle do you *want* your family to look like? That might actually be a really fun and revealing conversation to have with your family. It's easy to see why each blended family will always be uniquely different from every other family. We want to resist stereotypes, but find some principles that can benefit the family no matter what their situation might be. It's a really difficult task, because in this day and age, there are so many complicating factors that face families of all types. Let's lay out some of the biggest challenges we are facing and consider the impact on the family.

### **The Situation...**

Modern families face a massive range of problems that can vary based on individual circumstances and shifting cultural contexts. The following are some common challenges that modern families often encounter. You can circle the ones that apply to you...yeah just circle all of them. It will feel like coloring or like you have some control over something.

**Work-life balance:** This term is used all the time, and it's a pipe dream if you're thinking that balance means a 50/50 healthy situation. Work-life balance is day to day and moment to moment. It's always in flux. Many families struggle to balance the demands of work and family life. Long working hours, inflexible schedules, and the pressure to succeed professionally makes it difficult for parents to be present with their children and engage in meaningful family activities.

**Financial pressures:** Economic instability, rising costs of living, and high levels of debt can create financial stress within families. Struggling to make ends meet, save for the future, or provide for children's education and well-being is a significant and on-going burden.

**The Time Commitment of Sports and Interests:** I can't believe I said it, but I did. I'm going there. The truth is that kids will never go back to the days when they played on a no-pressure little league team sponsored by "Uncle Benny's Burrito Palace and Hardware." By the age of 3, your child should be injured, deemed un-athletic or riding on a luxury coach somewhere to Texas to play in the toddler elite league world series. Dance and gymnastics are just as bad. Don't even ask my opinion about cheer. Band kids who should be just nerding out somewhere with each other are up at 2 am trying to produce a top 40 hit. It's mass hysteria and pressure. The serious problem is that massive amounts of time, expense and energy are spent putting pressure on kids who just need to be kids. Don't get me wrong...sport and the arts are essential and healthy, but I think we've allowed money hungry industries to cause us to view our kids as commodities and put adult-size pressure on them to measure up to often impossible standards. It also creates parents who feel guilty when they can't give their child the most optimal, amazing and victorious experiences of life.

**Parenting and discipline:** Raising children in the modern world can be challenging, as parents navigate issues such as setting boundaries, instilling values, and managing technology use. Balancing disciplinary measures with promoting independence and personal growth can be a source of tension within families. As if this weren't hard enough, blended families particularly struggle with undercurrents related to parental role confusion, fairness, loyalty and grief.

**Technology and screen time:** Holy crap. This one is hard. The prevalence of technology and digital devices presents unprecedented challenges for all modern families. We didn't know that our old Atari 2600 would open a hellish gateway to excessive screen time, internet safety, cyberbullying, and the impact of social media on children's self-esteem and mental health. These are all concerns that parents must learn to address.

**Communication breakdowns:** Effective communication within families is always difficult, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and emotional distance. Busy schedules, lack of quality time together, generational gaps, and differences in communication styles all contribute to breakdowns in family communication.

**Changing family structures:** Modern families come in myriad forms, including single-parent households, blended families, same-sex parents, and multigenerational households. Adjusting to these non-traditional family structures can bring unique challenges and require lots of flexibility and understanding.

**Mental health issues:** Mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, affect individuals within families and can impact the overall well-being of the entire family unit. Addressing and supporting mental health concerns can be a significant challenge for modern families. The media powers that be (good luck figuring out who that is) have learned to capitalize and make money off our greatest fears no matter what our political persuasion is. This has caused anxiety to spread like wildfire. It's sickening.

**Balancing individual needs:** Each family member has their own needs, desires, and personal goals. Balancing individual aspirations with the needs of the family as a whole can be complex and may require compromise, open communication, and mutual support. Self-care has never been so important, and yet feels like it has never been so hard to do in today's times.

**Cultural and societal pressures:** Teenagers used to have to go through the gauntlet of figuring out if they were jocks, nerds, preps, skaters or in the band. These days...teens can't seem to get through high school without seriously questioning every word they speak, every action they take and whether they are male, female or maybe a furry forest creature. Families face external pressures from society, cultural expectations, and social norms. Balancing traditional values with changing societal attitudes can be challenging and may create conflict within families.

It's important to note that these challenges are not universal, and every family is very unique. The specific problems faced by a modern family are shaped by cultural background, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and personal circumstances. With this much going on, how do we get traction?

### **Resetting the Compass...**

The world we live in is largely oriented around what we do and what we have. This is the basis for social media and why it always makes us feel like poo when we scroll through all the amazing things that the other people and families are doing and having. Just for fun, I just now scrolled through my own Facebook feed. Within 30 seconds I saw this post from someone I kind of know:

*“Day 3 - Travel to Santorini -Kids first airport lounge and business class experience. Made it to Santorini in time for the sunset and dinner with a view.”*

Now...if that doesn't just warm the heart...and make me feel like my pontoon day with my kids on a small, hot Missouri lake with sandwiches I made is worthless. So...I have a suggestion for all of us including myself. What if we could begin to train ourselves to shift our primary focus to WHO WE ARE AS PEOPLE versus what we are doing or what we possess?

No matter what kind of family situation you are in, the path to health and balance is about cultivating who you are, who your kids are, who your spouse is, and yes, even who your co-parent is. It's about remembering that each person in the equation is carrying their own longings, regrets, fears and wounds. It's about paying attention to what your people are feeling and needing deeply underneath all the happenings that we are bombarded with. Part of this deeper awareness begins with how we understand the nature of grief and loss.

## Chapter 2

# Everybody Hurts...Understanding Grief

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The writer of Ecclesiastes in chapter 3 gives us a poetic expression of our human experience of grief...

*“There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under the heavens:  
a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance.”*

Here, and in so many other portions of scripture we come to know that the experience of grief is woven into every human experience.

### **Defining Grief:**

Understanding the nature of grief is a critical component in our understanding of blended families. When family bonds and boundaries are rearranged, and new ones formed, loss and chaos are deeply present in each family member.

*Ecclesiastes 4:11-12-Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

When familial attachment bonds are broken through either divorce or death, they break powerfully, and in different ways for each person in the family.

What are some ways we can describe grief?

Grief is what living beings experience when what or whom they love dies or disappears. We grieve when there is a death of any kind, and we grieve when family bonds break and we lose the benefit of those nurturing bonds such as the family home, family rituals and routines and relationships with extended family members (in-laws, cousins, etc... )

Grief is not what people feel when they don't get what they want, or lose what they want to have happen, or when they don't get what they think they deserve. This is only disappointment. Not the same at all (very important not to confuse with grief). Grief is more of a tearing apart in the very fabric of a person's life.

**Grief is natural:** to grieve the loss of what we love is as natural as eating, singing, dreaming, running, or breathing. In John chapter 11, we see that Jesus wept for Lazarus even though he knew he would raise him from the dead. Jesus' grief and anguish was part of his human experience...and it's part of ours.

**Grief is necessary:** when there is real loss, grief does not want to be avoided or postponed; grieving is absolutely necessary. Ancient people believed that without tears of grief the world would cease to renew itself and cease to exist. EX. the rich Jewish tradition of shiva (7 days), sheloshim (30 days), and aveilut (those who have lost a parent observe a mourning period of 11 months). Our modern culture often moves so fast that people aren't allowed time to adequately process their grief even in the immediate wake of a tragic event or loss.

**Grief is progressive:** In our modern times, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is known for defining distinct stages of grief: shock/denial, guilt/pain, bargaining/anger, depression, acceptance.<sup>1</sup> They do not happen sequentially. They tend to come in waves that layer and cascade over each other again and again. Over time they gradually decrease in their frequency and intensity, but they are always there. I heard one person describe grief in this way: Grief is like a heavy backpack that we will carry our whole lives, but the further we go, we get accustomed to carrying the weight. That made a lot of sense to me.

**Grief must be expressed:** Grief permeates life and grieving can take many forms, but grief can never be denied, outrun or simply thought away, or ignored into nonexistence. When grief is stuffed down or unattended, it can easily hide for years, even generations, in the skeletal structure of the family emotional process. Like light,

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<sup>1</sup> APA. Kubler-Ross, D., & Kessler, E. (2014). On grief and grieving. Simon & Schuster.

matter, sound, and energy, grief will ripple through those in the future who did not consciously experience the loss.

So a part of our role in surviving in a blended family is to have a keen, active awareness of how ourselves and the different family members are experiencing and processing their grief.

If we can facilitate space for family members to truly and freely acknowledge their grief and give expression to it, it can cleanse, heal and revive the family, and bring back health to the individual members.

### **How Does Grief Impact Blended Families?**

No one is “fine” after divorce or death.

**Children:** Children experience distress and loss when there is family strife. They actively enter into a more intense grief process when they become aware of the parent’s divorce or death. Children, depending on their age as well as other factors, experience the full grief cycle, but at different speeds and levels of expression. Do not assume the child isn’t grieving just because there isn’t an outward expression of grief. The birth order of the children will also create differences in the way they experience and express grief.

**Ex-spouses:** Divorce is NOT the death of a relationship. Divorce is the dismemberment of a relationship between partners who once loved and lived together. Amputees experience a phenomenon called phantom pain. Phantom pain is pain that feels like it's coming from a body part

that's no longer there. This is a unique and difficult form of grief for everyone who experiences it, regardless of how greatly they helped contribute to the breakdown of the marriage. The death of a spouse is no less intense even though death brings a different kind of finality of the loss of a spouse/parent.

Even when partners are coming into a new, loving relationship and celebrating new bonds, grief does not simply go away. Our minds and bodies powerfully remember every part of our journey through life and love. Triggers of both fond and painful memories will often enter into the mind and heart of every partner who has been through divorce or the death of a spouse. They are carrying the memory of money problems, sexual problems, abuse, parenting disasters and toxic communication just to name a few. Blending spouses have the task of dealing with their awareness of the past wounds and difficulties they encountered in their previous life, often at the same time they are trying to create new bonds and experiences. So knowing that reality, It's so important for those blending spouses to be able to express whatever they are struggling with, otherwise they can bottle it up, pretend that they aren't struggling internally, and quietly suffer.

**Extended Family:** Grief ripples through every generation of the family tree trunk as well as the branches of siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc...In the wake of grief, extended family members can provide comfort, presence and healing, or they may also create strife, bitterness, chaos and even emotional danger. Do not under-estimate the power of the extended family emotional process to either do help or harm.

## **Survival Tips:** What Do Blended Family Members Need When They Are Grieving?

### **Helping Children Navigate Grief:**

**1. Take your kid's pain seriously.** Their emotions are NEVER WRONG. Emotion always makes sense, but children often are not able to communicate what they are feeling in a sophisticated way. Listen to them even beyond their words. Facial expression, their gut, emotion, changes in mood, sleep appetite, habits, grades, etc... Help children find words for what they feel. Let them express honestly, even if it hurts you. If a child has experienced the death of a parent or sibling, help kids remember them. Soothe any guilt. Make it an ongoing conversation. Grief doesn't go away.

**2. Open Communication and Honesty:** Children deserve honest explanations about death, tailored to their age and understanding. Use clear, direct language and avoid euphemisms that can create confusion. Encourage questions and listen patiently to their fears and concerns. Let them know it's okay to feel sad, angry, or confused, and validate their emotions.

**3. Express and Explore:** Create safe spaces for children to express their grief. This can involve talking, drawing, journaling, playing, or creative activities. Reading children's books about grief together can open up conversations and normalize their feelings. Engage in rituals and traditions that honor the memory of the loved one, like visiting their grave, sharing stories, or creating a memory box.

**4. Maintaining Routines and Consistency:** Grief can be disruptive, so maintaining familiar routines and

schedules can provide a sense of security and normalcy for children. Be flexible when needed, but aim for consistency in daily activities, meals, and bedtimes. This predictability can offer comfort and stability during a time of uncertainty.

**5. Seeking Support and Connection:** Grief is a shared experience, and seeking support can be invaluable.

Encourage children to connect with trusted adults like family members, teachers, counselors, or therapists.

Consider joining support groups for children dealing with loss, where they can connect with peers who understand their emotions.

**6. Patience and Understanding:** Remember, grief is a path, not a destination. Healing takes time and varies for each child. Be patient with their emotional ups and downs, and avoid pressuring them to "get over it." Offer reassurance and love, and let them know they are not alone in their grief.

**Bonus Tip:** Be mindful of your own grief. Children are sensitive to the emotions around them, so taking care of yourself is crucial. Seek support for your own grief so you can be a strong and stable presence for your child.

Remember, these are just starting points. Every child and family is unique, so tailoring your approach based on their individual needs is key. If you have concerns about your child's coping mechanisms, seek professional guidance from a child therapist or grief counselor. They can provide specialized support and resources to help your child navigate their journey through grief.

## Helping Your Spouse Navigate Grief:

**1. Be a Listening Ear:** Grief is a deeply personal journey, and offering a safe space for your spouse to express their emotions without judgment is crucial. Listen actively and attentively, validating their feelings and avoiding the urge to fix or offer unsolicited advice. Sometimes, simply being present and holding space for their grief is the most powerful support you can give.

**2. Practice Patience and Understanding:** Everyone grieves differently and at their own pace. There's no set timeline for healing, so avoid pressuring your spouse to "move on" or suppress their emotions. Be patient with their fluctuating moods and unpredictable behavior, remembering that this is a normal part of the grieving process.

**3. Offer Practical Support:** Grief can be exhausting, both emotionally and physically. Offer concrete ways to lighten their load, like handling household chores, taking care of errands, or preparing meals. Be mindful of their individual needs and preferences, offering help without being intrusive.

**4. Encourage Healthy Coping Mechanisms:** Gently suggest healthy ways for your spouse to manage their grief, like exercise, prayer, meditation, spending time in nature, or engaging in hobbies they enjoy. Supporting their self-care and emotional well-being is vital for navigating this difficult period. Help them avoid numbing habits like social media and unhealthy food or substances.

**5. Communicate Openly and Honestly:** Clear and honest communication is essential, even when it's challenging. Express your love and support openly, and invite them to share their needs and anxieties. Be willing to

have difficult conversations about how their grief is impacting both of you and work together to find solutions.

**Bonus Tip:** Seek Professional Help if Needed: Don't hesitate to seek professional support if your spouse struggles to cope or their grief seems overwhelming. Grief counselors or therapists can provide specialized guidance and tools to navigate the complexities of loss. Remember, seeking help is a sign of strength and commitment to supporting your spouse's well-being.

These are just starting points, and tailoring your approach to your spouse's unique needs and personality is essential. Remember, patience, understanding, and open communication are key to walking alongside your spouse through this challenging journey.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Prepare to Manage Your Expectations**

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I remember working with a blended family who had just moved in together to begin their new journey. Each parent was bringing younger children into the mix. On the first night with the whole family together, one of the daughters had gotten into a crate of blueberries and eaten the whole thing before bedtime. In the middle of the night, she woke up, ran, disoriented with nausea, into the other children's room and spewed blueberry vomit all over her new stepbrother. It was not a berry nice beginning. Ha! Sometimes I crack myself up.

Buckle up! because we're about to shed light on the expectations that can trip us up and explore practical strategies to turn "blended chaos" into a thriving, unique family unit. Ready to ditch the Hallmark movie script and embrace the unpredictable, heartwarming reality of your blended family adventure? Let's begin!

### **The Landscape of Expectations:**

A blended family is a unique ecosystem, where individuals come together with diverse experiences, values, and aspirations. Managing expectations in this intricate web of relationships requires a keen understanding of the diverse perspectives present. Each member may carry their own vision of how the family should function, roles that

should be assumed, and ways in which affection and respect should be demonstrated.

Parents entering a blended family often anticipate a smooth transition, envisioning instant bonding between their new partner and their children. Similarly, children may hold expectations that their new stepparent will seamlessly fill the void left by a biological parent. Unrealistic expectations like these will lead to disappointment, frustration, and tension, as the realities of blending lives often differ from fairy-tale ideals.

### **Survival Tips:**

#### **1. Communicate Openly and Honestly:**

Open and honest communication forms the cornerstone of successful expectation management in a blended family. Creating an environment where all members feel safe to express their thoughts, concerns, and desires fosters mutual understanding. Regular family meetings, which provide a space for open dialogue, can be immensely helpful in clarifying expectations and addressing potential conflicts before they escalate. If it's too hard to gather the whole family together, work to address each individual child on their own time. This takes time!! Depending on the ages of the children, this process can take months and even years to take root.

Parents should strive to lead by example, showing their children the importance of effective communication. By discussing their own expectations openly and explaining the reasoning behind certain decisions, parents can demonstrate the value of compromise and negotiation. Children, in turn, learn to express themselves

constructively, reducing the likelihood of pent-up frustrations.

## **2. Set Realistic Expectations:**

Recognizing and setting realistic expectations is crucial to prevent disappointment and resentment from taking root. Parents should encourage children to form realistic expectations about their stepparent's role in their lives, emphasizing that this relationship will evolve over time. Similarly, stepparents must manage their own expectations about how quickly they will bond with their stepchildren. I tell my clients that as a step-parent, you should just hope at first to be like a friendly aunt or uncle or family friend . If you can even get that...consider yourself lucky and build from there!

Family members should be encouraged to acknowledge that the blending process is a journey, not a destination. It takes time for relationships to develop, trust to form, and roles to solidify. By acknowledging this reality, everyone can better appreciate the incremental progress being made.

## **3. Be Flexible As You Define Roles:**

One of the challenges in a blended family lies in the delicate dance of defining roles. Clarifying the responsibilities of each family member can help reduce confusion and potential conflict. Parents should engage in open discussions with their new partner about parenting styles, disciplinary approaches, and division of household duties. With discipline in particular, I encourage parents to stick to disciplining their own children as much as possible! Try not to cross streams. There is no faster way to create chaos than an unrealistic expectation around discipline. Do not try to be the “new sheriff in town” with stepchildren.

You will regret it and get run out of town by the kids first and then by your spouse probably.

It is important to remain flexible in your roles. As the family dynamic shifts and evolves, so too should the roles within it. Children will initially resist the authority of a new stepparent, and stepparents will need lots of time to find their groove in their new parenting role. Flexibility allows for adjustments that accommodate the changing needs of each family member.

#### **4. Embrace Individuality:**

While blending a family requires the creation of a unified household, it is equally important to respect and embrace each individual's uniqueness. Children may be grappling with loyalty conflicts or feelings of displacement, which can be exacerbated if they perceive their individuality is being stifled. Children will often be radically different from each other on how they deal with change. Make sure you are noticing how each child is coping with new realities. Encouraging open discussions about personal interests, hobbies, emotions and goals can help each family member feel valued for who they are.

Parents and stepparents should make an effort to forge individual connections with their stepchildren, nurturing a bond that goes beyond the blended family context. By celebrating each person's individuality, a blended family can create a supportive environment that fosters personal growth and self-esteem.

#### **5. Seek Professional Support:**

In some instances, the complexities of managing expectations within a blended family may require outside intervention. Family therapists or counselors can provide a

neutral and safe space where family members can explore their feelings, voice their concerns, and work through conflicts. These professionals offer valuable tools for effective communication, conflict resolution, and coping strategies, equipping the family with the skills needed to navigate the challenges of blended family life. When do you get help? Get help as soon as you feel stuck and don't know what to do.

**Conclusion:**

Managing expectations within a blended family is a continuous process that demands patience, empathy, and understanding. By fostering open communication, setting realistic expectations, defining roles while remaining flexible, embracing individuality, and seeking professional support when needed, a blended family can transform its unique challenges into opportunities for growth, unity, and lasting harmony. As each family member learns to navigate their own expectations and respect those of others, they contribute to the vibrant mosaic of a loving and thriving blended family.

## **Chapter 4**

# **“I Still Hate You...Let’s be Co-Parents.”**

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So...after divorcing each other because of long standing resentment, contempt, hurt and bitterness that you couldn’t solve, you have the opportunity to be healthy, respectful co-parents who find common ground around the best interests of your children...

Cue the “Mission Impossible” theme...

It will be a very difficult process to move from grief and anger into healthy cooperation, but it is still an essential endeavor. No matter how much hatred is in the mix, take heart and know that with some time and hard work, the burden of pain can release and become something different. In this chapter, we delve into the intricacies of co-parenting, exploring strategies for effective communication, conflict resolution, and creating a supportive environment for children amidst the challenges that may arise.

## **Survival Tips:**

### **1. Deal With Your Resentment.**

Okay, this is a really hard one. Resentment, like a stubborn weed, will take root after divorce, choking out joy and hindering your healing. But remember, you have the power to uproot it. The hardest step is to begin by owning (to yourself) whatever part of the divorce or relationship you helped create. Ownership is hard. It's especially hard to do when all the evidence points to your ex-spouse (such as if you were cheated on with an affair or abused in some way). If this is the case, maybe you can own how you stayed too long in a marriage that you knew was killing your soul. Maybe you abandoned your health when you got overwhelmed with pain. The point here is stop the persistent, unhealthy focus on blaming your ex even when you feel justified in doing so.

Acknowledge your feelings - suppressing them only strengthens their grip. Practice self-compassion, understanding that resentment is a natural response to hurt. Write down your frustrations, then shred them or turn them into creative fuel. Forgive, not for your ex, but for yourself, releasing the burden of negativity. Forgiveness will not erase your hurt, but it will help you focus on creating a positive future, setting goals and surrounding yourself with supportive people. Remember, healing takes time, so be patient with yourself. Embrace the present, and cultivate a sense of gratitude for the new opportunities this chapter holds. The stronger you become, the less room resentment will have to grow.

## 2. Communication Needs to Be Clear, Calm and Consistent:

Clear and consistent communication is the bedrock of healthy co-parenting. Establish a preferred method of communication - be it email, text, or phone calls - and ensure both parties respect agreed-upon boundaries. Focus on factual information about the children's well-being, avoiding hurtful language or personal attacks. Remember, you're a team working towards a common goal - your children's happiness.

Both parents must commit to sharing relevant information about the children's lives, such as school events, medical appointments, and extracurricular activities. Regular communication helps ensure that both parents are informed and involved in the children's daily experiences. This process will be easier if **each parent takes their own responsibility** for knowing what's on the school calendar (teacher conferences, concerts, practices and homework assignments). In my experience, it is a recipe for disaster if only one co-parent is counted on to deliver this core information for the other. There are exceptions to every rule, but a lot of conflict arises around schedules even when things are smooth.

Modern technology offers a plethora of tools to facilitate communication between co-parents. Messaging apps, shared calendars, and email are just a few examples of platforms that can streamline the exchange of information and reduce misunderstandings. However, it's important to strike a balance between digital communication and direct, in-person conversations, especially for more sensitive topics.

### **3. Navigate Conflict with Respect and Understanding:**

Conflict is inevitable in any relationship, and co-parenting is no exception. Differing parenting styles, financial disagreements, and unresolved emotional issues from the past can all contribute to tensions between co-parents. The key lies in how these conflicts are managed.

Both parents should strive to approach conflicts with respect and understanding. It's essential to remember that disagreements should be addressed privately, away from the children's ears. Engaging in heated arguments or airing grievances in front of the children can create emotional distress and erode their sense of security.

Mediation can be a powerful tool for co-parents to navigate conflicts that prove challenging to resolve independently. A trained mediator can help facilitate productive conversations, guide both parties towards compromise, and ensure that the children's best interests remain the central focus.

### **4. DO NOT Trash Talk Your Co-Parent to the Kids. You Will Deeply Regret it Someday.**

Your kids are 50% you and 50% them...tearing down your co-parent is like tearing down your kids. Children can't divorce their parents and they don't want to, even when they don't get along with them or respect them. Your children have a different relationships with their other parent than you do, so don't project your painful divorce on them. As children become adults, they will look back and remember what you said, so guard your lips. This is

really hard to do when children are more young adult age and have their own strong opinions about their co-parent. Even if your teen or young adult has a negative relationship with the other parent, resist every urge to ride that band wagon. Trash talking a co-parent to younger children is downright irresponsible and destructive. It's called alienation, and parents who do it often discover that their children grow to resent it deeply and forever. Nuff said? Ok.

Therapeutic support, such as individual counseling or support groups, can provide a safe space for co-parents to process their feelings and develop coping strategies. By managing their emotional well-being, co-parents are better equipped to provide a nurturing and stable environment for their children.

## **5. Work for Consistency and Try to Share Expectations:**

Consistency is a cornerstone of effective co-parenting. Children thrive in environments where routines are predictable and expectations are clear. Co-parents should work together to establish shared guidelines for important aspects of parenting, such as bedtime routines, discipline strategies, and rules for screen time. When children receive consistent messages from both households, they experience a sense of stability that contributes to their emotional well-being.

Shared expectations extend beyond daily routines to larger life events. Major decisions regarding education, medical care, religious upbringing, and extracurricular activities should ideally involve both co-parents. Regular check-ins or meetings can help facilitate discussions on

these important matters and ensure that both parents have a voice in shaping their children's lives.

### **6. Be Flexible and Adaptable:**

Does point number 6 seem to contradict point number 5? Yes, it does. While consistency is important, co-parents must also embrace flexibility and adaptability. Life is dynamic, and unforeseen circumstances can arise that require adjustments to existing arrangements. A co-parenting plan that allows for modifications and includes contingency plans can help co-parents navigate unexpected changes with less stress.

Flexibility also plays a role in accommodating the children's evolving needs and preferences. As they grow and develop, children's interests and schedules may shift. Co-parents should remain attuned to these changes and be willing to adapt their approach to parenting accordingly.

### **7. Celebrate Co-Parenting Triumphs**

Hopefully, amidst the challenges, co-parents have the opportunity to celebrate their triumphs and milestones. Successfully navigating a tricky parenting decision, witnessing a child's achievements, or simply fostering a sense of unity during important events are all reasons to acknowledge the positive aspects of co-parenting.

Acknowledging these triumphs not only reinforces the value of collaboration but also sets an example for the children. When they witness their parents working together and supporting one another, children learn the importance of teamwork, respect, and compromise.

## **Conclusion: A Journey of Growth**

It's a significant challenge, but co-parenting is a dynamic journey that demands continuous growth, empathy, and dedication. Effective communication, conflict resolution, consistency, flexibility, and a shared commitment to putting children first are the cornerstones of a successful co-parenting relationship. While challenges may arise, the rewards of witnessing children flourish in an environment of love, stability, and support make the efforts of co-parenting undeniably worthwhile. As co-parents work together to provide their children with the best possible upbringing, they contribute to shaping resilient, confident, and emotionally healthy individuals who are prepared to face the world with strength and grace.

## Chapter 5

# Let's Dance! Keys to Healthy Conflict

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**Proverbs 15:1 “A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but harsh words stir up anger.”**

The proverbs have a way of just getting right to the point, and there is an abundance of truth packed into this familiar verse when it comes to understanding the nature of conflict. The singer-songwriter Dave Mason also captured how many of us feel regarding conflict in relationship when he wrote:

Don't seem the same, seems you've lost your feel for me.  
So let's leave it alone, 'cause we can't see eye to eye  
There ain't no good guy, there ain't no bad guy  
There's only you and me and we just disagree<sup>2</sup>

Conflict is an inevitable part of family life. Conflict is not an enemy though...healthy conflict provides an opportunity for family members to grow deeper in their understanding of each other. In this session, we will discuss the nature of unhealthy and healthy conflict and show you a process for conflict that you can use with your spouse, your children and even your co-parent.

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Mason - We Just Disagree. (1977)

## **Understanding the Landscape: What is Healthy Conflict?**

Healthy conflict differs from destructive conflict in its intent and approach. It's not about winning or dominating, but about exploring different perspectives, finding common ground, and ultimately strengthening the bond between individuals.

### **Key characteristics of healthy conflict include:**

1. **Respect:** Treat each other with courtesy and consideration, even when disagreeing. Avoid personal attacks, insults, and hurtful language.
2. **Honesty and Open Communication:** Express your thoughts and feelings openly and honestly, while actively listening to your partner's perspective.
3. **Focus on the Issue:** Stay focused on the specific issue at hand, avoiding bringing up unrelated matters or dredging up past hurts.
4. **Willingness to Compromise:** Be open to finding solutions that address the needs and concerns of both parties.
5. **Focus on Problem-Solving:** Collaborate to find solutions that work for everyone, rather than simply defending your own position.

## **Equipping Yourself for the Challenge: Essential Skills for Healthy Conflict**

Now that we understand the principles of healthy conflict, let's equip ourselves with the tools to put them into practice:

1. **Active Listening:** Truly hear what the other person is saying, both verbally and nonverbally. Summarize their

points to ensure understanding and acknowledge their feelings.

2. "I" Statements: Share your perspective using "I" statements, focusing on your own feelings and needs rather than blaming or accusing your partner. For example, "I feel hurt when you..." is more constructive than "You always...".

3. Time-outs: If emotions run high, call a time-out to cool down and gather your thoughts. Agree to resume the conversation when both parties are calmer.

4. Validate and Empathize: Acknowledge your partner's feelings, even if you disagree with their perspective. Saying things like "I understand why you feel that way" can go a long way.

5. Brainstorm Solutions: Collaborate to explore various solutions that address the concerns of both parties. Be open to creative options and compromises.

### **Survival Tip: Pulling it Together...Using the Pitch/Catch Method**

The number one most important vital, essential, unequivocal principle to remember is that in a conflict, there is never one objective perspective or point of view that is right. Never! Rather, there are always two subjective perceptions of reality that both need to be validated and understood before anything good is going to happen. Bad conflict is like tennis or worse, badminton. One player crushes the ball at the other in hopes that they will be overwhelmed by the shot and give up a point. Healthy conflict is like playing catch. There's still tension, but you are sharing in it together, and though you may struggle to catch each other, you don't feel like adversaries or enemies. If you can talk about something tense or even disagree

without troubling each other, think about how much you could accomplish! You won't only accomplish things and solve problems, you will feel closer doing it.

In healthy conflict, there is always a pitcher and a catcher. Both people pitch, and both people catch, and it won't work to have two pitchers at once. You can use this method with your spouse or co-parent. It also works with children, but they won't be as good at it. Children require you to become a really good catcher. Let's look at how this pitch/catch model works.

Here's what a good pitch consists of:

## **PITCH**

- 1. Share your emotions.** "I feel anxious and upset." Your emotion. NOT: "I feel like you are always late."
- 2. Share the content of what the emotion is about.** "I feel anxious and upset about how late we are running." *hint:* Avoid using the word "you" in this part.
- 3. Share what you appreciate.** "I appreciate that it takes you more time to get ready."
- 4. Share what you need.** "I need you to do the best you can so we can be on time."

Here's another example of a good pitch..."I'm feeling discouraged and stressed out about the dynamics at my workplace right now. I appreciate that you have a lot on your plate too, but I could sure use some encouraging words right now."

If you are not pitching then you are a catcher! Here's what a good catch consists of:

## **CATCH**

**1. Validate.** Tell them something about what they are saying that makes sense to you. Remember, it's their reality, not yours. Ex. "I can see why you felt hurt by what I said." Remember that you don't have to agree with someone's perspective in order to validate them. You just have to let them know that their perceptions and their emotions make sense to you.

**2. Ask questions.** How would they feel if they got what they are asking for? How long have they needed this? What else do they need from you? Interview them as if they were an upset customer at your job. Figure out what would soothe them. Practice asking good questions even when you think you know what they are getting at. It's also a good idea to ask them if they feel understood.

**3. Reassure.** Say something that would soothe them. Ex. "You make sense to me, and I will try to be more aware of keeping things clean."

**4. Repeat.** Repeat these steps over and over again until they understood. It's okay to ask, "Do you feel like I am getting you? What am I missing?"

When you practice this pitch/catch process in conflict with your spouse, kids or co-parent, you will find that you can start to feel like you are on the same team. You will feel more like you have each other's back.

One more thing, how we act in conflict has a lot to do with how our families dealt with conflict. Your family may

have been yellers/screamers and fought passionately, sarcastically or hurtfully. It's also possible that your family was one where no one talked about emotion or fought much at all. Neither extreme is healthy. You have to find a way in conflict where both you and your wife can feel safe. Conflict will always present itself. How you learn to dance with it is everything.

### **The Benefits of Mastering Healthy Conflict**

By embracing healthy conflict, you can reap numerous benefits:

**Stronger Relationships:** Open communication and collaboration build trust and understanding, strengthening connections with loved ones.

**Personal Growth:** Conflict allows you to see things from different perspectives and potentially change your own viewpoints, fostering personal development.

**Problem-Solving Skills:** Navigating conflict hones your ability to find creative solutions and negotiate effectively in all areas of life.

**Emotional Intelligence:** Learning to manage your emotions and express them constructively improves your emotional intelligence, benefiting all aspects of your life.

Remember, conflict is inevitable. But by embracing it as an opportunity for growth and connection, you can transform it from a battlefield into a fertile ground for stronger relationships and personal development. So, next time you face a disagreement, take a deep breath, equip yourself with these tools, and navigate the terrain of conflict with confidence and respect. Happy disagreeing!

# Chapter 6

## **Bonding Beyond Blood...Fostering Blended Family Connections**

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Blending families is a journey of intertwining lives and creating a new sense of togetherness. A significant aspect of this journey involves building meaningful relationships with new stepchildren. The process of bonding requires patience, understanding, and a genuine commitment to nurturing connections. In this chapter, we explore strategies and insights on how to effectively bond with new stepchildren, fostering a strong foundation of trust, respect, and love.

### **1. Establishing a Solid Foundation**

The initial phase of bonding with stepchildren is crucial for setting the tone of your relationship. During this period, focus on building a solid foundation based on understanding and trust. Be patient and allow the relationships to develop naturally. Remember that genuine connections take time, and there is no rush to force intimacy. Remember this...it takes an average of 7 years for a blended family to accept this new arrangement. The first 4 years tend to be the hardest. Yes, there are exceptions, but you can't force it.

Building a blended family is like raising a magnificent treehouse; a sturdy foundation is key to weathering life's storms. This foundation starts with communication, open and honest, laying the groundwork for understanding and trust. Next, respect becomes the cornerstones, recognizing individual needs and valuing each member's history. Boundaries, carefully constructed with clarity and empathy, provide a sense of security and belonging. Finally, shared experiences, like crafting new traditions and embarking on adventures together, act as the beams, solidifying the structure and weaving the family tapestry. Remember, this foundation isn't built overnight; it requires patience, compromise, and a shared vision of love and laughter, ensuring your blended family thrives for years to come.

## **2. Open Communication**

Effective communication serves as a bridge that connects family members and fosters understanding. Start conversations with genuine curiosity about your stepchild's interests, hobbies, and experiences. Create an open and non-judgmental space where they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. Actively listen and validate their emotions to demonstrate that you value their perspective. I often find it helpful to repeat the following phrase to myself when I feel the urge to make a judgment about someone...

*“The moment I make a judgment about someone or something...I stop understanding it.”*

Letting go of judgments creates hospitality in a family system. Hospitality means that the people in your family space feel free to be themselves. Check yourselves often to see if you feel you are creating this kind of hospitality in your home.

### **3. Shared Activities**

Engaging in shared activities can create bonding opportunities and facilitate natural interactions. Participate in activities that align with your stepchild's interests or introduce them to new experiences. Whether it's playing a sport, cooking together, exploring a hobby, or going on outings, these shared moments can lead to meaningful connections and lasting memories. Again the key here is to not force anything. Take time first to really notice what the different family members are genuinely interested in, then only try new things when you sense people have the energy for it.

### **4. Respect Individual Boundaries**

Respect is the cornerstone of building relationships. Acknowledge and respect your stepchild's boundaries and personal space. Avoid pushing them to share more than they are comfortable with. Instead, show them that you genuinely care about their well-being and opinions.

I get a lot of questions about privacy in the home, specifically how do we allow privacy with young children, teens and young adults? Parents should have authority in the home that allows them to create safety and awareness, but resist the invasion of privacy to do so. A good rule of thumb is to make sure you have the means to be aware of digital information and be in the know about the kid's social lives, but only peer into these areas when you feel there is some sign of distress or danger. Always invite communication first before choosing to go behind the scenes. The marital couple needs to really be on the same page when it comes to this type of intervention.

## **5. Be a Supportive Presence**

Step into the role of a supportive presence in your stepchild's life. Offer encouragement and praise for their achievements and efforts. Be there to provide emotional support during challenges and setbacks. This consistent presence helps your stepchild feel valued and cared for.

## **6. Quality One-on-One Time**

Spending quality one-on-one time with your stepchild provides an opportunity to connect on a deeper level. Use this time to engage in meaningful conversations, share stories, and express your genuine interest in their lives. This dedicated attention fosters a sense of importance and builds the foundation for a strong bond.

## **7. Be Patient and Understanding**

Building a bond with new stepchildren is a journey that requires patience and understanding. Recognize that they may have their own reservations and emotions about the situation. Be patient as you navigate through challenges and allow the relationship to evolve at its own pace.

## **8. Show Empathy and Validation**

Step into your stepchild's shoes and view the world from their perspective. Empathize with their feelings and experiences, and validate their emotions. When they feel heard and understood, they are more likely to open up and connect with you.

## **9. Respect Their Parent-Child Relationship**

Acknowledge and respect the existing parent-child relationship that your stepchild has with their biological parent. Avoid attempting to replace this bond; instead, focus on building a unique and complementary relationship based on friendship, guidance, and support.

## **10. Create Family Rituals**

Establishing family rituals and traditions creates a sense of unity and belonging. Collaborate with your stepchild to create routines that hold significance for both of you. These rituals can range from weekly movie nights to annual family vacations, reinforcing the idea of shared experiences and memories.

**Here are some examples of family rituals that can give you your own ideas:**

**Weekly family dinners:** Share a meal together, discussing your week and connecting over shared laughter and conversation.

**Movie nights with popcorn and snuggles:** Choose a film everyone enjoys and create a cozy atmosphere to unwind and bond.

**Game nights:** Board games, card games, or even video games can provide fun and interactive experiences for all ages.

**Shared hobbies:** Explore activities you all enjoy, like hiking, biking, or crafting, creating shared memories and skills.

**"Gratitude jars":** Write down things you're grateful for as a family and read them aloud periodically, fostering appreciation and positivity.

**Birthday traditions:** Create special birthday traditions, like personalized cakes, scavenger hunts, or shared outings.

**Holiday rituals:** Celebrate holidays with unique family traditions, like decorating the tree together, making special dishes, or having family talent shows.

**"End-of-summer" or "back-to-school" rituals:** Mark seasonal transitions with special activities, like picnics, movie nights, or shopping trips.

**Cultural or religious traditions:** Participate in traditions specific to your cultural or religious background, creating a sense of identity and belonging.

**Annual family trips:** Plan vacations or outings that become cherished memories, fostering anticipation and excitement.

**Family book club:** Choose a book to read together as a family and discuss it regularly, encouraging reading and stimulating conversation.

**Volunteer days:** Give back to the community together, teaching valuable lessons about compassion and social responsibility.

**"Museum mornings":** Explore museums or cultural institutions regularly, encouraging curiosity and lifelong learning.

**"Talent shows":** Showcase individual talents and celebrate each other's unique abilities.

**"Movie nights with discussions":** After watching thought-provoking films, discuss them as a family, encouraging critical thinking and open dialogue.

Remember:

The best rituals are flexible and adapt to your family's needs and preferences.

Consistency is key, but don't be afraid to try new things and adjust existing rituals.

Focus on creating positive experiences and meaningful connections, making them something everyone looks forward to.

## **11. Be a Role Model**

Remember that the children are watching you just as much or more than you are watching them. Set a positive example for your stepchild by demonstrating qualities such as kindness, patience, and respect. Be mindful of your words and actions, as children often learn by observing the adults in their lives. Your behavior can influence their perception of you and the relationship you share. The children will also pick up on whether you are making healthy choices for yourselves. They will see it and feel it and respond negatively or positively based on your choices.

## **12. Seek Professional Guidance if Needed**

If challenges persist or if you encounter significant hurdles in bonding with your stepchildren, consider seeking professional guidance. Family therapy or counseling can provide a safe space to address any underlying issues and develop effective strategies for building stronger connections.

Bonding with new stepchildren is a rewarding yet delicate process that requires time, effort, and understanding. By establishing open lines of communication, sharing meaningful experiences, and respecting their individuality, you can forge deep and lasting connections. The journey of building these bonds not only enriches your own life but also creates a sense of belonging, unity, and love within the blended family. Remember that each stepchild is unique, and the key to successful bonding lies in your genuine willingness to create a positive and nurturing relationship that evolves over time.

# **Chapter 7**

## **We Wanted This Right?**

### **Nurturing Your Couple Bond**

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#### **A Healthy Marriage Is the Beginning of a Healthy Blended Family.**

You and your partner, eyes sparkling with hope, embarked on a new chapter: building a blended family. Yet, beneath the excitement lurks a whisper of trepidation. Can two families truly merge into one? Can you navigate the emotional complexities and logistical hurdles to create a lasting, happy marriage?

The answer is a resounding yes, but the journey requires intentional effort, open communication, and a healthy dose of understanding. This chapter is your guide on this transformative path. We'll delve into the unique challenges faced by blended families, shedding light on common pitfalls and uncovering the secrets to overcoming them. Forget the fairy tales - blended families are messy, beautiful, and undeniably complex. Step-children arrive with their own histories, emotions, and baggage. Ex-partners cast long shadows, and dynamics shift constantly.

Remember, your existing relationship is the foundation upon which your blended family thrives. We'll explore strategies to reignite the spark in your marriage, nurture intimacy amidst the chaos, and create rituals that solidify your bond. Whether you're navigating the early stages of blending or facing long-standing challenges, this chapter

provides valuable tools and insights to cultivate a strong, supportive marriage that becomes the anchor of your family.

I would not be able to do any meaningful work with families and couples without the valuable research of Dr. John Gottman and Dr. Susan Johnson. There are many good reference works and books on what it takes to have a healthy marriage, but they all benefit from the headwaters of Gottman and Johnson's work. Let's begin our look on how to foster a great marriage by highlighting 5 principles from Gottman's research<sup>3</sup> that produce a healthy, resilient marriage.

### **1. Have Daily Discussions of Every-Day Events:**

Healthy couples daily update their knowledge of what their partner is doing and experiencing. Take time each day around morning or evening and share the details of your day...what you saw, did, felt...the ideas you had, the things you had to overcome, and any needs you became aware of. Keeping tabs on each other every day helps you stay close and keep your intimate connection alive. Intimacy means deeply knowing each other. Some couples avoid these conversations thinking that their partner doesn't want to hear about their day, but this is a false notion. Even a short update provides a great deal of connection that you and your partner desperately need.

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<sup>3</sup> Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). The seven principles for making marriage work: A practical guide from the country's foremost relationship expert. Three Rivers Press.

Work hard to not let feelings of tiredness or fatigue keep you from sharing. Also, social media on phones can very easily become a huge barrier to your energetic connection. PHONES DOWN! Phones don't belong in your bed like a toaster doesn't belong in your bathtub. Look at your partner's eyes and feel their energy while you talk.

## **2. Make Time for Dates:**

The importance of a date night cannot be diminished. Here's why: Ever watch those reality dating shows where they put two strangers on a date and fly them around in a helicopter or drop them off a cliff strapped to a bungee cord with each other? What do they say afterwards?

*“Oh my gosh...I feel like Tanner could be my forever partner!!!!  
We had so much chemistry today!!! It just seems like the  
universe is knitting our souls together forever!!!!”*

Well, the reality is...that's oxytocin talking. Oxytocin is often referred to as the "love hormone" or the "cuddle hormone" due to its association with social bonding and positive emotions. Your marriage needs oxytocin...and here's the good news, you can share this natural drug with your partner when you embrace, kiss, have sex, and yes...go on a date night together! You won't need a helicopter or a bungee cord or a private concert with Michael Buble to get the bonding benefits. Go to a new part of town, take a walk outside, eat at a new restaurant, play pickle ball, etc...

Yes it takes some planning and effort, but the value you get is undeniable and essential if you are going to weather the storms you will face while blending together.

### **3. Turn Towards Each Other in Every Day Events:**

A thousand things happen to you and your partner even in one day. The dog barfs during breakfast. A 6 year old utters his first curse word in class that he learned from one of you. A major appliance fails at a crucial moment. Each and all of these moments give us three choices of how to respond to our partner. We can turn against them, we can turn away from them or we can turn TOWARD them.

Try to develop a radar for your partner that is attentive to what they are experiencing (Hence the conversations in point #1). You can't actually feel what your partner is feeling, but when you relate to them, comfort them and validate them, you grow closer to them and solidify your trust in each other. I've seen so many times in my office when couples kick each other when they're down, sometimes without even noticing it. A good way to turn toward your partner is to start your responses to them with phrases like, "I'm with you", "I see you", or "I'm so on your side babe. Help me understand what you're feeling."

### **4. Prevent Distance by Having the Conversations You Need to Have:**

No marriage has ever ended because they had too many conversations. In fact, many marriages end precisely because they weren't taking time to address underlying issues that warranted a good talk. Listen up husbands!! Sometimes you are guilty of avoiding uncomfortable talks. Wives can do it too, but husbands usually more. Gottman's research revealed that husbands are HAPPIER when they initiate difficult or important conversations with their spouses. In the very least, neither partner should avoid tough topics.

If you can practice the pitch/catch method with each other that was described in chapter 5, there's really nothing you can't talk about as long as you don't ignore or blame your partner. If you and your spouse are getting gridlocked in conflict or avoiding each other, be quick to find a counselor who can help you unravel that pattern and start a healthy one. Do it before resentments form and calcify. Even if you have a lot of conflict in your life and marriage, when you know how to address it and discuss it, you will go the distance.

## **5. Maintain Positive Thoughts About Each Other Even When You Are Apart:**

The thoughts we think fuel the attitudes we maintain and the actions we choose. If you are holding onto and recycling negative thoughts about your spouse, they will eventually change the way you see them and the way you choose to respond to them. This is why it's so important to cultivate **relationship enhancing thoughts** about your spouse when you are together and especially when you are apart. Here are some examples of relationship enhancing thoughts:

**Gratitude:** Focus on appreciating your partner's positive qualities and the things they do for you. Regularly reminding yourself of the reasons you value them can strengthen your bond.

**Empathy:** Try to understand their perspective and feelings, even when you disagree. Imagine yourself in their shoes and consider what they might be experiencing.

**Acceptance:** Remember that no one is perfect, and embrace your partner's flaws and quirks. Trying to change them will only create friction.

**Complimentarity:** Appreciate how your differences complement each other, creating a dynamic and interesting relationship.

**Shared goals:** Focus on your shared aspirations and dreams for the future. This creates a sense of unity and purpose within the relationship.

## **Additional Survival Tips:**

### **1. Maintain Individual Identities**

You don't stop being yourself after you're married. While nurturing the couple relationship, it's equally important for each partner to maintain their individual identities.

Encourage and support each other's hobbies, interests, and friendships. This self-care contributes to personal growth and a well-rounded partnership. It's always nice to share some common interests, but don't be discouraged if you don't have a lot of them. Each partner should focus on being a healthy, active, growing person. That's sexy.

### **2. Seek Professional Support**

Blended family couples facing persistent challenges should not hesitate to seek professional support. Family therapy or counseling can provide a neutral space to address complex issues, enhance communication skills, and develop strategies for overcoming obstacles.

Once again, when do you know you should seek help? Anytime you are stuck in a pattern for 3 weeks or more, anytime you are having persistent sexual problems, anytime you just don't know what to do, anytime you start to feel the impact of stress on your health.

Guess what though...it's also a great idea to attend couples therapy periodically to simply do a check in with each other even when things aren't in a crisis. Schedule it at the same time you schedule your dental cleanings. Good teeth, good marriage I always say.

### **3. Foster Intergenerational Unity**

A strong blended family relationship extends beyond the couple to embrace the entire family unit. Encourage bonding activities that involve both sets of children and foster connections between step-siblings. By nurturing a sense of unity among all family members, couples create an environment of mutual support and love. Just remember that it takes time.

### **4. Embrace Flexibility and Adaptability**

Blended families are dynamic and subject to change. Embracing flexibility and adaptability is essential for sustaining a healthy relationship. Couples should be open to adjusting their plans and strategies as the family evolves, ensuring that their connection remains strong.

### **5. Celebrate Milestones and Achievements**

Amidst the challenges, blended family couples should celebrate their achievements and milestones. Recognize the progress you've made, both individually and as a couple. These celebrations reinforce the sense of accomplishment and deepen your bond. One way you can do this is through symbols and rituals of connection.

I'll never forget one couple I worked with who had been through some real trauma. They placed a small golden box on their fireplace mantle, and inside they had written on a little piece of paper three words that helped them get through their trials. The words were "forgiveness, compassion, and hope." A ritual can be an inside joke, a special get away spot or special gifts that remind each other of why you chose to commit to a lifetime together. Remember, small things often are a better way to stay close vs. trying to pull off a huge date every 5 months.

Nurturing the relationship within a blended family is a journey that demands dedication, understanding, and continuous effort. By prioritizing effective communication, setting clear expectations, and fostering emotional intimacy, blended family couples lay the foundation for a strong and lasting partnership. As they navigate challenges, practice constructive conflict resolution, and support each other's individual growth, these couples create a resilient bond that serves as the heart of the blended family unit. Through their commitment to one another, blended family couples inspire harmony, unity, and enduring love within their intricate family tapestry.

## **Chapter 8**

# **There's an "I" in Family. You Better Take Care of Yourself.**

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One of the first things they remind you of before any plane you are on leaves the ground is this: If the plane explodes, first place the oxygen mask on your own face before helping the children next to you. If you're incapacitated, their hopes for survival are gone. The same concept applies when it comes to daily health and self-care in blended family life.

Amid the shared responsibilities, dynamic relationships, and unique challenges, caring for oneself becomes an essential foundation for building a harmonious and resilient blended family unit. This chapter delves into the importance of self-care in the context of blended families, exploring its benefits, strategies, and its profound impact on the overall well-being of both adults and children involved.

Self-care should not just be a buzzword; it is a philosophy that places emphasis on nurturing one's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. In the context of blended families, where multiple individuals with distinct backgrounds come together, the practice of self-care becomes a vital tool for maintaining balance and enhancing the family's overall cohesion.

Blended families often face unique challenges, including navigating different parenting styles, integrating step-siblings, and managing conflicting schedules. These challenges can lead to increased stress levels and emotional strain. Here, self-care serves as a buffer against the tumultuous currents that may arise, providing individuals with the tools needed to cope and flourish amidst the complexity.

### **The Ripple Effect of Self-Care**

The act of self-care transcends individual benefit, extending its positive influence to the entire blended family structure. When parents and caregivers prioritize their well-being, they model healthy behavior for their children, fostering an environment of self-respect and compassion. Children, in turn, learn the importance of valuing their own needs and emotions, setting the stage for healthier relationships in adulthood.

Furthermore, self-care enhances communication within the blended family. By maintaining emotional equilibrium and reducing stress, individuals are better equipped to engage in open and constructive dialogues. This open communication forms the bedrock of understanding and empathy, allowing family members to address issues with greater sensitivity and cooperation.

### **Types of Self-Care for Blended Families**

**Emotional Self-Care:** Blended family dynamics can be emotionally charged, making emotional self-care crucial. Engaging in practices such as journaling, mindfulness

meditation, and seeking therapy provides individuals with tools to process their emotions and manage stress effectively.

**Physical Self-Care:** Taking care of one's body is essential for overall well-being. Adequate sleep, regular exercise, and a balanced diet contribute to increased energy levels and improved mood. Family members can encourage each other to engage in physical activities together, creating opportunities for bonding.

**Social Self-Care:** Nurturing social connections within and outside the blended family is important. Encouraging family outings, game nights, and maintaining connections with friends and extended family members helps alleviate isolation and foster a sense of belonging.

**Personal Time:** In the midst of busy schedules, carving out personal time is essential. Each family member should have the freedom to pursue hobbies, interests, and activities that bring them joy and fulfillment.

**Boundary Setting:** Establishing clear boundaries is crucial for maintaining individual identities within the blended family. Open discussions about personal space and private time can help prevent feelings of overwhelm and resentment.

## **Challenges and Strategies**

While the concept of self-care is appealing, implementing it within the context of blended families can present challenges. Balancing the needs of biological and step-

children, managing co-parenting relationships, and addressing potential differences in self-care preferences are common hurdles. However, with thoughtful strategies and a collective commitment to well-being, these challenges can be navigated effectively.

**Open Dialogue:** Regular family meetings can serve as a platform for discussing self-care needs and preferences. This allows family members to express their desires and work together to accommodate each other's well-being.

**Flexibility and Adaptability:** Recognizing that self-care strategies may need to evolve over time is essential. As the blended family dynamics shift and change, being open to trying new approaches ensures that individual and collective needs are met.

**Teamwork and Delegation:** Blended families thrive when responsibilities are shared. Collaboratively dividing household tasks and child-rearing duties ensures that every member has the opportunity to engage in self-care without feeling overwhelmed.

**Respect for Differences:** Acknowledging and respecting that each family member may have different self-care preferences is vital. By fostering an atmosphere of acceptance, individuals can pursue their well-being in ways that align with their unique personalities.

In the delicate and intricate dance of blended family life, self-care emerges as a fundamental melody that harmonizes the various notes of individual needs and

collective well-being. By prioritizing self-care, individuals within blended families cultivate emotional resilience, enhance communication, and lay the foundation for lasting bonds built on mutual respect and understanding. As the threads of different lives intertwine to form a strong and vibrant fabric, the practice of self-care weaves a narrative of growth, unity, and enduring love within the tapestry of the blended family.

# Chapter 9

## Going for Gold...How Do We Know if We're Healthy?

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Let's use this final chapter to highlight the traits of a surviving and thriving blended family.

A thriving blended family is not a utopia - it's a testament to cultivated strengths and embraced opportunities. So, what are the core traits that empower these families to blossom into havens of love, support, and resilience?

**1. Open and Respectful Communication:** Imagine a family where unspoken anxieties dance in the air and unaddressed concerns fester like hidden wounds. Unhealthy, right? In contrast, healthy blended families prioritize open and respectful communication. This doesn't mean sugarcoating realities, but holding honest conversations where everyone feels heard and valued.

**2. Active and Intuitive Listening:** Truly listening, not just waiting to speak, shows respect and fosters understanding. Acknowledge perspectives, even when differing, and validate emotions to create a safe space for open dialogue.

**3. Clear and consistent messaging:** Mixed messages from parents or step-parents can be confusing and create

conflict. Establish clear expectations and boundaries, ensuring everyone understands the rules and consequences.

**4. Age-appropriate communication:** Tailor communication to each child's developmental level. While honesty is important, consider their emotional maturity and ability to understand complex situations.

**5. Collaboration:** A blended family isn't just a collection of individuals; it's a unit growing together. Collaboration and teamwork are crucial in fostering a sense of "we" rather than "us" and "them."

**6. Shared decision-making:** Involve everyone in discussions about family rules, activities, and household chores. This empowers children and reinforces the feeling of collective responsibility.

**7. Celebrating teamwork:** Recognize and celebrate joint efforts, highlighting how individual contributions work together to achieve common goals. This strengthens the sense of belonging and encourages cooperation.

**8. Problem-solving together:** When challenges arise, approach them as a team. Encourage brainstorming, active listening, and finding solutions that address everyone's needs. This teaches valuable conflict resolution skills and builds trust.

**9. Empathy and Understanding:** Every member of a blended family carries their own unique experiences, emotions, and baggage. Cultivating empathy allows

everyone to see things from each other's perspectives, fostering compassion and understanding.

**10. Validate feelings:** Acknowledge and validate the emotions of all family members, even when you disagree. Let them know their feelings are important and offer support without judgment.

**11. Perspective-taking:** Encourage everyone to try seeing things from another's point of view. Role-playing or having open discussions can help develop this crucial skill.

**12. Celebrating differences:** Embrace the unique experiences and backgrounds that each member brings to the family. This enriches the family dynamic and promotes acceptance.

**13. Flexibility and Patience:** Embracing the Journey  
Change is inevitable, and blended families experience it in abundance. Flexibility and patience are essential tools for navigating these transitions smoothly.

**14. Adaptability:** Recognize that change is part of the journey and be willing to adjust expectations and routines as needed. Rigid adherence to outdated plans can create unnecessary conflict.

**15. Embrace the messiness:** Accept that things won't always be perfect. There will be bumps along the road, and that's okay. Focus on progress, not perfection, and celebrate small victories.

**16. Patience is a virtue:** Building trust and strong relationships takes time. Be patient with yourselves and each other, allowing everyone to adjust and bond at their own pace.

**17. Boundaries:** Ensuring Healthy Space and Respect  
Boundaries are essential in any relationship, but especially in blended families. They delineate healthy spaces, define roles, and set expectations, fostering respect and security.

**18. Individual boundaries:** Respect individual needs for personal space and alone time. This is crucial for emotional well-being and prevents feelings of overwhelm.

**19. Family boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries for family interactions, such as acceptable communication styles, conflict resolution approaches, and household rules. Consistency is key.

**20. Respecting co-parent's boundaries:** Maintain respectful communication and cooperation with co-parents and step-parents. This reduces stress and creates a more stable environment for children.

**21. Shared Experiences:** Build memories and traditions. Shared experiences are the threads that weave the family together. Creating new traditions and enjoying meaningful activities together strengthens bonds and fosters a sense of belonging.

**22. Family rituals:** Establish regular activities or traditions that everyone enjoys, like movie nights, game

nights, or family dinners. These create shared memories and anticipation.

**23: Shared hobbies and interests:** Explore activities that everyone enjoys, whether it's sports, music, or volunteering. This fosters connection and creates opportunities for quality

## **Embracing the Adventure, Celebrating the Triumph**

You've reached the end of this guide, but remember, the journey for your blended family is just beginning. It will be an adventure - messy, unpredictable, and utterly unique. There will be moments of laughter echoing through the house, tearful conversations filled with vulnerability, and triumphs big and small to celebrate. Embrace it all, for within these experiences lies the beauty of your family's story.

This guide hasn't equipped you with a magic wand to erase challenges. Instead, it's offered a toolbox filled with practical strategies, gentle reminders, and a deep understanding of the complexities you face. Remember, there's no "one size fits all" approach, and flexibility is your friend. Adapt these tools to your unique family dynamic, be open to learning and growing, and trust your intuition.

Most importantly, remember the love that brought you together. Celebrate the victories, big and small. Forgive yourselves and each other for stumbles along the way. And amidst the chaos, never forget the extraordinary gift you've built: a family woven from love, resilience, and unwavering commitment.

So, dear reader, embark on this adventure with courage, open hearts, and a willingness to embrace the messiness and the magic. For within your blended family lies the potential for love, laughter, and memories that will echo through generations to come. Remember, you are not alone, and together, you can build a thriving family that truly embodies the beauty of blending hearts and building dreams.

May your journey be filled with laughter, love, and endless possibilities.

# About the Author

