

Tip Sheet

One Big Happy “Blended Family:” Tips to Help Fathers Co-Parent Effectively



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“No one parents effectively by accident. Effective parenting must be intentional; it must be planned, focused, and have an expected end in mind. Good parents don’t leave the job to chance; they do everything they can to prepare themselves and to know what they are doing.”
Dr. Myles Munroe

When we hear the words “blended family,” we may think of two adults getting married and creating a new household that includes a child or children from a previous relationship(s). Unfortunately, there isn’t a word that adequately expresses the variety of people who are fathers and mothers to children that aren’t biologically theirs. Therefore, in this tip sheet, “blended family” means something more general: any situation where a parent who is not the birth father or mother is raising a child. For example, grandparents raising a grandchild, foster parents, or a child living with a parent and the parent’s live-in partner.

In 1960, 73% of children in the United States lived with two parents in a first marriage; however, by 2014 that number had dropped to 46%. The number of children living with two parents in a remarriage has increased only slightly—14% in 1960 to 15% in 2014—and the number of children living with no parent saw a similar small increase—4% in 1960 to 5% in 2014. The largest difference is in children living with single or cohabiting parents—9% lived with single or cohabiting parents in 1960, compared to 26% living with single parents and 7% living with cohabiting parents in 2014.¹ In households with only one parent, it is more likely to be the child’s mother. In 2014, the United States Census Bureau reported that 23.1% of children lived with only their biological mothers,

compared to 3.7% living only with their biological fathers (figures do not add to 26% due to rounding).² Growing up with two parents benefits children financially: in 2012, female-householder families had the highest rate of participation in government assistance programs (50%), compared to only 14.7% for married-couple families.³ Therefore, encouraging fathers to be involved in the lives of children, biological or not, might help increase family stability.

One way to help fathers in blended families is to assist them with effective co-parenting. The challenge of parenting a child when you might not expect to become a parent can be overwhelming (e.g., grandparents taking on the care of a grandchild decades after raising their own children), yet managing relationships with other adults involved in the child’s care can be just as stressful. Children in blended families may have one or both birth parents as part of their lives, even if their primary care is the responsibility of another relative or nonrelative. As a result, a child could have multiple father or mother figures, and it is important to recognize that all these adults are parents. Encouraging healthy relationship skill-building and healthy parenting for all individuals who assist in the care of children can help blended families experience less conflict. The following tips for navigating relationships with co-parents in blended families can be shared with fathers or printed and used as a handout in program offices or at events.

Tips for Fathers: Blended Family Co-Parenting Relationships

There are four important skills to help build healthy relationships: communication, parenting, conflict resolution, and financial management. The following tips are meant to help improve these core skills.

Communication

- **Communicate directly** with other parents. Instead of using your child as a messenger, share important information about your child yourself—and follow the “golden rule” of communication: “Always provide the other parent information that you expect that parent to give to you.”⁴
- **Figure out children’s schedules** together. Especially during busy times like summer break, all the adults in a child’s life need to be aware of where the child is supposed to be and when. One helpful tool is a 12-month calendar that parents are responsible for filling in. The calendar should include plans for the holidays, vacations, and other important events.⁵

Parenting

- In any family, parents need to work together to **decide the role of each parent**. This can become more complicated when a child has a mix of biological and non-biological parents, because children may get upset when a new parent starts disciplining them. Non-biological parents can gradually develop a bond with children by building a friendship or “camp counselor” relationship and letting birth parents be in charge of discipline in the beginning.⁶
- **Be consistent** about basic rules and schedules. Having caregivers with different parenting styles helps children learn to be flexible, although major rules such as what

activities are not allowed should be enforced by all parents. When one parent disciplines a child, all others should respect the decision—so no TV for a week means no TV on any parent’s watch.⁷



Conflict Resolution

- **Show respect** for all other parents, especially in front of your child. Even during a conflict, negative comments about a child’s other parent(s) can be hurtful to children and make them feel like they have to pick a side. Your child also might overhear what you say to other adults, so you should be very careful what you say when your child is around.⁸
- **Talk about conflict**. Conflicts happen in every family. You can turn them into learning experiences by talking to children about healthy conflict resolution. If your child overhears a negative conversation between you and another parent, talk to your child about it later, for example: “I was feeling frustrated last night and said something hurtful about your mom. I should have taken a break to calm down when I started getting upset.”⁹

Financial Management

- **Figure out financial roles** before your new family starts living together. Parents need to decide who will be in charge of paying the bills and with what money—for example, if a single mother’s partner moves in with her, what role does he play

in purchasing food for the family? In some situations combining finances may make sense. In other situations, adults may keep separate accounts or only share certain expenses.¹⁰

- **Saving money** is especially challenging in blended families because you might have more daily expenses than you were used to having before. Saving money is still very important—getting connected to a local bank and setting up a savings plan can help you manage your money and still have money set aside for emergencies or large family expenses.¹¹

Free resources that can help improve relationship and co-parenting skills can be found online at:

- The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families: <https://www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org>
- The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse: www.Fatherhood.gov

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