

Blended Families: Starting with Compassion

By Suki Wessling

Hannah Stubblefield knew immediately that her relationship with her future husband was going to be different.

“I don’t want to say I was *dating* two people, but there were two people involved in the new relationship I was in,” she recalls.

The second person was her husband’s son by a previous marriage. Irene, another local mom, says that the dating period with her future husband had to be extended in consideration of his children.

“I knew that with kids involved this was going to go slowly,” she explains. “He didn’t want them to be introduced to a series of women.”

“My expectations of what a blended family would be were unrealistic and not what I had hoped or thought,” says Isabella T., a local step-mom to two and the mother of a baby with her husband.

Unrealistic expectations and unexpected challenges are part and parcel of the modern blended family, in which one or both spouses enters marriage with a previous marriage and children. Local Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist Ann Hines (www.AnnHines.com) says that the most successful blended families start by acknowledging that it won’t be easy.

“A path to success involves a lot of compassion for how difficult it is to merge families and honor a child’s sense of loyalty to both biological parents,” she explains. But intentions often collide with reality.

After their long courtship, Irene expected that she would be a helper, someone like “a fun aunt” who would be able to lend a hand but wouldn’t step directly into parenting.

“I expected that I was walking into a situation with a broken family that was mending,” she explains. “But within a couple of weeks after I moved in, we found out that their mother was having health issues and there was a court date set to find out what to do about the kids’ safety.”

Irene ended up taking on the full role of “mom” of two children, having never had children of her own.

Isabella reports that all talk of civility and positive relationships stopped once the reality of her husband’s remarriage hit.

“Instead of having this part-time larger family with normal life drama, I got a lot of drama, court dates, and a biological mom to the kids that makes our lives a daily struggle, even on days that we do not have my husband’s kids,” she says. “The children are constantly thrown in the middle by their mom, with my husband and I always trying to make things civil.”

Ann Hines says that she sees blended families come in with a variety of issues that stem from one important mistake: one or more of the adults puts the children in situations where they must align with one parent.

“Kids do well when they feel absolutely free to love both biological parents and the new stepparents in their life,” Hines says. “Where the children end up in my office with ulcers, panic attacks, behavior problems, and suicidal ideation, that comes from a situation like ‘I love a parent or stepparent but I’m hearing all this horrible stuff about them.’”

Hines points out that problems arise from three complicating factors:

First, the biological parents’ trauma history with each other can affect their ability to have faith in the other parent’s ability to parent warmly and effectively.

Second, the two new households will have differences in parenting and expectations, and the co-parents need to work out how they will negotiate this difference with the children.

Finally, Hines says, the small details of life between two households cause a surprising number of problems; for example, when clothing or toys are seen as the parents’ property rather than the children’s.

The solution to these problems starts with open communication.

“We did some counseling at first when we started dating and it really helped establish us as a family and establish clear roles that we’re all comfortable with,”

Hannah Stubblefield says. “One thing our family has been able to do is meet once a month to talk about logistics about the child that we’re all raising together. That doesn’t mean that we’re all best friends—it just means that we are able to put him first.”

Hines points out that parents have a tendency to blame outside influences rather than their own reactions to co-parenting situations. And it’s more complicated than what you say. Hines explains that research shows that most communication is done non-verbally.

“When you’re doing drop-offs and pick-ups, and you see that other parent, you grab the child’s hand tightly because you’re afraid or angry about the other parent,” Hines describes. “You’ve communicated 97% using body language.”

Hines says that parenting, including step-parenting, involves complex biological and psychological interplay that therapists call “attunement.” In each relationship, it takes time to get in synch with the other person, and the complexities of blended families often exacerbate the difficulty of this process.

Parents negotiating the minefield of blended family life say that it’s easy to forget that they also need support.

Irene remembers that reaching out to her church community was a vital first step. “Since I didn’t have a lot of experience and I was expecting just to be a helper, I needed a lot of support. Meals, recipes, childcare. What do you do when they don’t want to put their clothes on? What do you do for aftercare help?”

Hannah says that she noticed right away that moms were always there to support each other.

“I’ve been able to find so much support as a mom and make friends with so many other moms,” she points out. “It’s easy to be friends because we have that thing in common and our kids can play together.”

Aside from online groups, however, Hannah felt that there was a hole in our local community’s support system.

“I found no support for this role of being a stepparent,” she says, pointing out, “It’s like being a parent, but very tricky!”

Taking a DIY attitude, she decided that if she couldn’t find what she wanted, she’d make it herself. She now facilitates a support group at the Live Oak Family Resource Center. (See sidebar for details.)

Life in blended families can be tricky, but parents report that all the work pays off in the great relationships they have with their step-children.

“I am happy that most of the time we are able to hang out, and have fun,” Isabella says.

Hannah says that every blended family faces different issues, but in her support group can help them overcome difficulties and blend happy families.

Irene relates a recent incident that illustrates how much of a personal challenge step-parenting is.

“Our stepfamily was in the middle of an unfolding drama over Thanksgiving,” she says. “I was uncertain about whether the girls would celebrate with their dad and I, or with their mom's side of the family. Would there be a peaceful resolution, or would I have to witness divorced parents battle over their children? I had a choice—I could dwell on the possible problems and relive all the past issues and dramas we've had over holidays. But I realized that I could have had a lot more fun if I'd let go of the worry just a little sooner.”

“If I've learned anything it is that you cannot change a person, just your own reaction to people,” Isabella says. “Try not to get caught up in other people's drama.”

Suki Wessling is a local writer and the mother of two children. Learn more at www.SukiWessling.com.

SIDEBAR:

Support for blended families

Online:

Online forums and blogs that provide anonymous support for stepmoms:

- FinelyMineDivas.com
- groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/stepmoms/info
- www.stepmomhelp.com

Local:

Santa Cruz Step-Parents Support Group—For anyone in the step-parenting role

2nd Thursday of each month, 6:30-8pm

Live Oak Family Resource Center

For more information: 1notsoevilstepmom@gmail.com

Books:

Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's Blended Family by Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green