



The Three Biggest Parenting Mistakes in Blended Families

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Part 2 of 3 in Dr. Dabney's "Parenting through Change" series

By: Dr Laura Dabney

Divorce and remarriage are significant life events, and when those changes also involve kids, the stakes multiply for everyone. Many couples, of course, create happy blended families with lasting bonds, while others face challenges their marriage cannot withstand. What's the difference?

In this second article of my "Parenting through Change" series, I highlight the three biggest mistakes parents make when blending their new families, and what it takes to avoid them.

Mistake #1: Allowing step-parents to discipline their step-kids

Overstepping disciplinary boundaries is, by far, the most common mistake I see in newly blended families. In some cases, parents want the blended family to function just as the original family did. In others, biological parents feel overwhelmed by the demands of parenting and want a partner to share the responsibility. Some others worry that if a parent does not discipline a child, the child will not respect them.

But here's the bottom line:

Disciplinary decisions are the sole responsibility of the child's biological parents. Step-parents have no disciplinary role.

Here's why: By the time we start disciplining our biological kids, we've had years to develop a relationship with them. Over the years, that closeness helps balance the inevitable distancing that follows discipline. In other words, a healthy relationship helps cushion the blow of discipline.

When a step-parent disciplines a step-child without that relationship cushion, they are bound to alienate that child forever.

The parent-child relationship required for healthy and effective discipline takes years to develop and cannot be rushed.

Mistake #2: Inappropriate boundaries between the ex-spouses and the newly blended family

Ideally, parents should revise their relationship boundaries before the new family blends. If not, they need to be settled as soon after that as possible.

Here are the basic boundary rules:

1. There should be *minimal contact* between ex-spouses.

Communication between former spouses should be *limited to one topic: their kids*. Exes should discuss the kids' **logistics** (who will be where, when, and how), **discipline** (agreement on discipline and specific disciplinary events), and their **well being** (physical and emotional health). *Everything else (all non-kid stuff) is out-of-bounds.*

2. Contact between ex-spouses happens *only* at specified times.

Contact between ex-spouses is best when it occurs only at expected and *mutually agreed upon times*, such as pick-up and drop-off, weekly planning calls, etc. In contrast, discussions about the kids **should not happen in public**, such as social events, sporting events, etc. Ad-hoc discussions present a greater risk of disagreement, and when disagreement occurs, it happens publicly.

3. **There should be little or no contact between the ex and the new step-parent.**

If ex-spouses manage their parenting responsibilities and boundaries appropriately, there *is almost no reason for the ex-spouse and the new step-parent to interact*. The exes handle all the parenting decisions, and the step-parent has no disciplinary role. However, sometimes contact is inevitable — for example, at a child’s birthday party. In these cases, the interactions should be cordial and brief.

4. **Both couples must be vigilant not to put the child in the middle!**

Above all, a child must be allowed to relax and be a child. They should not, *under any circumstances*, be expected to navigate their parents’ relationships.

This means:

- No talking badly about the other parent or the step-parent.
- No whining, moping or griping if the child reaches out to the other parent.
- No discussing parenting grievances or disagreements in public.

Mistake #3: “Pushing” relationships

Many of the blended families who come to me for help make the same mistake: Trying to force the new family members to like each other. It’s a natural instinct, of course. A divorced mother wants her kids to like her new husband. A divorced dad wants his kids to like their new step-siblings. A new step-father wants his wife’s kids to like him.

However, parents must remember they **cannot force their kids to like anyone** — including a step-parent, step-sibling, or an ex-spouse. After all, this change in family circumstance was not the child’s choice.

Instead of pushing, maintain as many of the old family routines as possible while everyone learns to adjust. **Emphasize respect, and allow relationships to grow at their own speed.**

Blending new families can be a long process, filled with trial and error. The more parents can maintain stability for their kids – preserving a functional and respectful relationship with the other parent, avoiding disciplinary confusion, and not “forcing” them into new relationships too quickly – the better everyone will adjust in both the near-term and the long-run.

This article comes in response to a patient request. Do you have a topic you'd like me to write about? Send it to me at dabney@DrLDabney.com.



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