

Blending Families Tips for Therapists



**And you thought
there was stress
in your life !**

For questions, comments, please contact:

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"I'm My Own Grandpa" (Willie Nelson)

Now, many many years ago
When I was twenty three
I was married to a widow
Who was pretty as could be

This widow had a grown-up daughter
Had hair of red
My father fell in love with her
And soon the two were wed

This made my dad my son-in-law
And changed my very life
My daughter was my mother
'Cause she was my father's wife

To complicate the matters
Even though it brought me joy
I soon became the father
Of a bouncing baby boy

My little baby then became
A brother-in-law to dad
And so became my uncle
Though it made me very sad

For if he was my uncle
That also made him the brother
Of the widow's grown-up daughter
Who, of course, was my step-mother

I'm my own grandpa
I'm my own grandpa
It sounds funny I know
But it really is so
I'm my own grandpa

My father's wife then had a son
That kept them on the run
And he became my grandchild
For he was my daughter's son

My wife is now my mother's mother
And it makes me blue
Because, she is my wife
She's my grandmother too

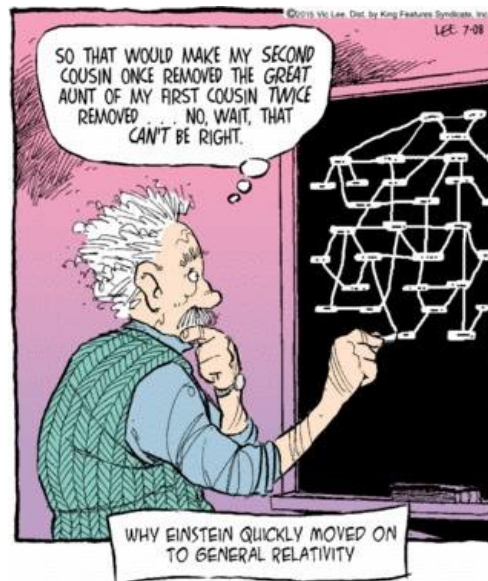
I'm my own grandpa
I'm my own grandpa
It sounds funny I know
But it really is so
I'm my own grandpa

Now, if my wife is my grandmother
Then, I am her grandchild
And every time I think of it
It nearly drives me wild

For now I have become
The strangest case you ever saw
As the husband of my grandmother
I am my own grandpa

I'm my own grandpa
I'm my own grandpa
It sounds funny I know
But it really is so
I'm my own grandpa

I'm my own grandpa
I'm my own grandpa
It sounds funny I know
But it really is so
I'm my own grandpa



Principles of Blending Families*

- ✓ 1st marriage must get past first 4 years, 2nd marriage must get past first 2 years.
- ✓ A stable and satisfying marriage is the goal. A satisfying marriage can be very fragile; a stable marriage can be very unhappy.
- ✓ 2nd marriages - take great pride in beating the odds.
- ✓ www.smartmarriage.org very helpful for 2nd marriage
- ✓ Bad Divorce: 50% of ex-spouses are still angry and bitter. It affects "wise choice" for 2nd marriage.
- ✓ Good Divorce (1/3): Sad but not bitter. Wish one another well.
- ✓ Marriage counseling is biased against the male, thus biased against the marriage
- ✓ 1st session: 1. What tried before. 2. Give something new to try (for hope), 3. Get releases for previous therapist, minister, parent, etc., 4. Give homework and reading assignment, 5. Ask for real story, not the socially desirable one.
- ✓ 76% of marriages are ended by the female (marriage to best friend or soul mate the worst). Most males leave because of an affair.
- ✓ 75% of 2nd marriage have secrets, 2/3 of those secrets are about their previous marriage (hence the value of the individual session).
- ✓ Affairs: Read "How to Deal With the Affair" by Gordon Bacham and Syder.
- ✓ Couples do better with affairs than the therapist.
- ✓ The remarriage that begins in affair will have major trust issues.
- ✓ Most common cause of affairs is "High Opportunity." Most women that have affairs work.
- ✓ "No. 1 2nd marriage issue is the ex spouse. Intervention-auto deposit child support, emotionally isolate the ex spouse.
- ✓ Identify Strengths and Vulnerabilities as a couple.
- ✓ Trust and respect are great strengths, the opposite is leaving, disrespect, public humiliation (portrayal of sensitive information), and contempt.
- ✓ Identify emotionally safe places-church, bed, home...
- ✓ Majority of individuals have sexual secrets. 1/4 of Computer Geeks work is blocking porn sites. 25% of male have variant sex issue (fetish), cannot be integrated into marriage - Too narrow a focus. 0% females have it.
- ✓ Mental health professionals are the most well intentioned professionals.
- ✓ Most marriage counseling fails because most therapists use an individual vs. a systems model.
- ✓ Dx should not define the patient.
- ✓ Pop psychology - Dr. Phil, falsely claim the most intense emotion is the most genuine. Continuity and frequency make an emotion genuine.
- ✓ Ask meaningful questions such as "Are you going to continue the affair?"
- ✓ Secrets and disclosure: More secrets about money than sex.
- ✓ 2nd marriages require a clear and transparent agreement. Money a tie to previous marriage
- ✓ 2nd marriages fight more about income than bills. Plan on predictable/contingent free income, not child support or maintenance.
- ✓ Feel good agreements are the roadway to hell.
- ✓ 2nd marriage needs clear financial plan that is reality bound. Track and modify it as needed.
- ✓ Resilient marriage: Turn toward each other, pull together, in difficult situations.
- ✓ You must invest more of yourself in a 2nd marriage.

THE HEX OF THE EX
A COMPILATION BY:
FRED MAYFIELD

1. "Divorce is a legal delusion." Carl Whitaker
2. The most difficult recurring problem in a remarriage is not stepchildren or money. It is the former spouse. Kelly & Burg survey.
3. The former spouse conflict will parallel the pre-divorce conflict.
4. The former spouse will continue the same role and involvement in parenting the children.
5. Women report the former spouse a problem more often than men.
6. The biggest complaint about ex-husbands is that they fade out of the picture (changing?).
7. The biggest complaint about ex-wives is that they are too present and involved.
8. Ex-spouses that have not accepted the divorce and rebuilt their lives are the biggest problem.
9. Once divorced, a former spouse may seek to maintain the link to the ex in a variety of ways that prove to be destructive.
10. A common issue is for the new spouse to resent financial support of the ex, and the ex resents the remarried spouses newfound happiness.
11. The new spouses often feel like an outsider to new spouse, ex, and stepchildren.
12. The remarried parent often responds to the new spouse's complaints with defensiveness and withdrawal. Usually feels caught in the middle and misunderstood.
13. Most conversations with the ex are about money.
14. The most effective way an ex can maintain control is by triangulating the children.
15. The remarried spouse has the difficult challenge of co-parenting the children with the ex while building up the couple in the new marriage.
16. The new spouse has the challenge of managing the outsider position while their mate is co-parenting with the ex.
17. New spouses and ex spouses can evolve toward a functional and rewarding relationship with patience and perspective. Most achieve harmony by:
 - a. Accepting the situation and ensuing complexities.
 - b. Staying flexible.
 - c. Open communication.
 - d. Avoiding power struggles and triangulation.
 - e. Staying focused on the well being of the children.
18. Nearly 40 % of new wives report the ex spouse as the most difficult issue in their remarriage, leaving the good news of the remaining 60% ranging from a neutral relationship to very positive (good friends).
19. We are pioneers in blending families. There are indications that a trend is developing toward the ex and new spouse becoming close friends. For further information go to www.exetiquette.com.

BLENDING THE MONEY
A COMPILATION BY:
FRED MAYFIELD

1. Money is the topic in 50% of marital conversations.
2. Marital fights are about money 75% of the time.
3. Surveys indicate that 57% of divorces are over money.
4. Remarriages can range from 2-10 times more complicated than first marriages.
5. Remarriage begins in the positive emotion of love and is soon challenged by the negative emotion of financial entanglement.
6. Marriage is a financial as well as a romantic commitment.
7. One or both remarried partners may have been “burned” in the previous marriage, creating apprehension about money.
8. Many conflicts arise when the remarried spouse appears to be more financially generous to their ex spouse and children than to the new spouse.
9. Many remarried husbands feel guilty for leaving their ex and children in a lower socio-economic position.
10. New spouses may measure their worth by comparing the amount of money spent on new and former marriages.
11. The remarried spouse experiences a double bind of financial responsibility to new and former marriages.
12. Remarriages are more successful when the standard of living is clarified as a part of the marriage decision.
13. Every financial item should be spelled out, written out in business form, and filed in accessible manor for both partners.
14. The pre-remarriage budget discussions should include:
 - a. Each partner’s emotional relationship with money (security, freedom, autonomy, status, etc.)
 - b. Disclosure of both party’s assets.
 - c. Disclosure of both party’s liabilities.
 - d. The kind or design of the operating budget.
 - e. Short and long term planning (vacation to retirement)
 - f. Planning for taxes the first year, and management of other unforeseen expenses.
15. Consider it a “deal-breaker” if your future partner is secretive or tells you “its none of your business.”
16. Sharing money is a sign of trust. Honor it. Financial trust is learned by successfully managing money over time. Demonstrate responsibility.
17. Negotiation is not a dirty word. It is essential, and an important way to remain flexible and avoid power struggles over money.
18. Pre-nuptials are positive financial aid for a remarriage.
19. Be prepared for unforeseen expenses including your new spouse’s loss of income or child support.

“It is easier to separate an egg BEFORE you scramble it.”

REMARRIED WITH CHILDREN
A COMPILATION BY:
FRED MAYFIELD

1. About 65% of remarriages involve children from previous marriages.
2. Our own children are enough of a challenge. It is extra ordinarily difficult to deal with someone else's child.
3. Remarried fathers tend to have very high parenting expectations of their new spouse.
4. The new spouse is subject to scrutiny and criticism from their new stepchildren, spouse, spouse's ex, their extended family, as well as the school, church, neighbors, etc.
5. Remarried parents are hoping/expecting their children to be as happy with the new spouse as they are.
6. The childless stepparent often secretly wishes the stepchildren will become the loving offspring they never had.
7. Remarriage after an intense custody battle may be like "formulating a partnership after a hostile takeover." Kelly and Burg
8. The stepparent can expect to put a lot more in than get back from the stepchildren.
9. Stepchildren become the carriers of numerous issues and thus the catalyst for intense marital conflicts.
10. Children often see the new spouse as a threat to their relationship with their parent. The child having the parent all to themselves between marriages intensifies this.
11. Children may see the new spouse as "another nail in the coffin" in the hopes of their bio parents getting back together.
12. The new spouse is a sociological and biological "outsider" to the remarried parent and children.
13. The new spouse must learn to operate within the parenting and lifestyle of the stepchildren that "pre-dates" the new marriage.
14. The stepparent's role begins as the "adult baby-sitter" and may evolve toward a special relationship. There are no instant relationships.
15. The stepparent should not demand to be called mom or dad, to be loved and respected. The relationship must evolve.
16. The bio parent has primary responsibility for disciplining their children. Children see delegating their discipline as not caring.
17. Stepparents can foster relationships with the children by capitalizing on "alone time" and sharing special interest areas.
18. The remarried parent is constantly balancing themselves between their children and their new spouse.
19. Remarried parents tend to be defensive of their parenting style and overprotective of their children, making the new spouse feel even more like an outsider.
20. Remarried parents must hold their children responsible for their behavior for their own good as well as for the marriage.
21. It is common for a new stepparent to be jealous of the attention, affection, time, and energy the stepchild receives from his or her parent.
22. The bio parent can also become envious of a close relationship between their child and the new spouse.

23. It is also common for an insecure stepchild to “buddy up” to the new spouse as a way of being included in activities with their bio parent.
24. The non-custodial parent may feel they are abandoning their children to raise someone else’s. The guilt may lead to the “Disney Dad” syndrome, creating a disparity in the marriage.
25. Boundary ambiguity is the major source of conflict in remarriages. There are gray areas where the stepparent’s role is unclear. The boundaries are always changing for every member of a blending family.
26. The “Disney Dad” ex spouse flies in the face of the stepparent’s efforts to “win over” the children.
27. History may win over fairness. Maintaining parenting styles and extended family rituals will result in stepsibling rivalries.
28. Children adjust to different houses very well, and will also use the issue to test rules very well.
29. Children do not need identical rearing or loving. They do need individual rearing and loving. There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals.
30. Build the co-parenting team first. Kids will conquer if parents are divided.
31. Stepparents should ease very slowly into disciplinary roles. Be very cautious in early disciplinary actions.
32. It is actually helpful for stepsiblings to join forces against parents.
33. The “not fair!” pro-test of stepsibling rivalry is manipulation. Respond with “I am not trying to be fair, just trying to...”
34. Stepsibling sexual attraction may be the explanation for their intense arguments.
35. The remarried couple, grandparents, previous spouses, aunt and uncles etc. are all important to the well being of the children. Be supportive and flexible. “It takes an entire village...”

“Love and marriage may go together like a horse and carriage, however, in blending families the carriage can get so crowded, the horse has trouble pulling it.”

HOW REMARRIAGES SUCCEED
A COMPILATION BY:
FRED MAYFIELD

1. The divorce rate for 1st marriages is 50%, 2nd marriages is 70%, and 80% for the 3rd.
2. It takes an estimated 4-7 years to blend a family.
3. Remarriage success is relative to the length of time between marriages. The more time between marriages, the better the odds. The less time, the worse the odds – leaving remarriages that begin as an affair at the greatest risk.
4. People actually chose better mates in 2nd marriages.
5. Success depends on each individual correcting his or her own patterns of relating.
6. Successful remarriages are clear about:
 - a. The parent child bond predates the couple bond.
 - b. Boundary ambiguity as the greatest challenge requiring the most flexibility and compromise.
 - c. The insider/outsider role is constantly shifting for all family members.
 - d. The remarried parent is the common denominator between their children and new spouse, responsible for maintaining both at the same time.
 - e. Stepparents let the relationship evolve with children vs. imposing and ideal preconception.
 - f. A plan for discipline, household duties, etc. is worked out before the remarriage.
 - g. A clear financial plan is in writing before the remarriage.
 - h. A plan for “our house” is in place.
7. Stepparents work toward a positive relationship with the non-custodial parent.
8. The couple bond is the foundation of the remarriage. It must be strong enough to override the trials and tribulations ahead.
9. Only 24% surveyed found counseling helpful in their 1st marriage while 74% found it very helpful in remarriages, Kelly and Burg.
10. Both men and women contributed being happier in their 2nd marriage to more self-esteem, compatibility, companionship, and maturity.
11. The couple has a more solid sense of their individual selves.
12. Religious involvement is a major characteristic.
13. Remarrieds know how to ask for what they want, yet understand there are limitations, sacrifices, and compromises.
14. Women are less willing to take a secondary position in the remarriage fostering self worth.
15. Ongoing dialog about the relationship including affirmations as well as problem solving is the lifeblood of the remarriage.
16. Remarried couples have found sexuality to be about more than sex.

“I’m deliriously happy in my remarriage. In my first marriage, I was merely delirious” ~
A client

JOHN GOTTMAN:
The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

“At the heart of my program is the simple truth that happy marriages are based on a deep friendship” ~ J. Gottman

1. Signs of a probable divorce:
 - a. Harsh startup. “96% of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes of the fifteen-minute conversation.”
 - b. The Four Horsemen (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling or Withdrawal).
 - c. Flooding. Your spouse’s negative interactions are so overwhelming that it leaves you shell-shocked. The usual response is to disengage and stonewall.
 - d. Body Language. Reoccurring flooding has physiological reactions that make problem-solving impossible.
 - e. Failed Repair Attempts. Repair attempts are maneuvers to deescalate the tension. When these attempts consistently fail, the conflict escalates out of control.
 - f. Bad Memories. When a couple becomes entrenched in a negative view, they often rewrite their entire relationship history with a negative slant.
2. Widely held MYTHS on marriage (why marriage therapy commonly fails)
 - a. Improving communication and resolving conflict saves marriages.
 - b. Personality problems ruin marriages.
 - c. Common interests keep you together.
 - d. Affairs are the root cause of divorce.
 - e. Men & women are from different planets.
3. There are two types of marital conflict, solvable or perpetual. The MAJORITY of marital conflicts (69%) are perpetual.
4. The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work
 - a. **ENHANCE YOUR LOVE MAPS.** Couples develop love maps by collecting relevant information about their partner’s life. Acting on this information demonstrates care and consideration. (for example: closest friends, hobbies, favorite foods, etc.)
 - b. **NURTURE YOUR FONDNESS AND ADMIRATION.** The antidote for contempt is expressing and being aware of what you like and admire about your spouse.
 - c. **TURN TOWARD EACH OTHER INSTEAD OF AWAY.** Strong relationships show partners turning toward each other in little ways every day. (for example: read the paper together, clean the house, go to church, exercise, listen to music, play a board game, etc.)
 - d. **LET YOUR PARTNER INFLUENCE YOU.** In a long-term study of 130 couples, Gottman found that men who allow their wives to influence them have happier marriages. There is an 81% chance that the marriage will self-destruct if the man is not willing to share power with his partner.
 - e. **SOLVE THE SOLVABLE PROBLEMS.** Dr. Gottman found that following five guidelines usually leads to improvement in SOLVABLE conflict:

1. Soften your startup.
 2. Learn to make and receive repair attempts.
 3. Soothe yourself and each other.
 4. Compromise.
 5. Be tolerant of one another's faults.
- f. **OVERCOME GRIDLOCK.** The goal in ending gridlock is not to solve the problem, but to move from gridlock to dialogue. Additional work can be productive by identifying the underlying dreams fueling the conflict. Respect and appreciation of these dreams can lead to compromise and a way to tolerate the on-going differences in the relationship.
- g. **CREATE SHARED MEANING.** A deeper level of appreciation for your spouse and your marital relationship comes from a shared recognition of what each person holds sacred. Family rituals that create positive memories, collaborating on personal goals, and pursuing spiritual realization together can boost this important aspect of a marriage.

*Gottman, John M. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999.



EFFECTIVE STEPFAMILY THERAPY

1. Begin with the end in mind. Help the family to begin thinking about their potential with critical thinking questions – such as: Do you think family can do better than this, how much better?
2. Make a genogram using color.
3. Discuss history: how they met, previous marriage, etc.
4. Psychoeducate, illuminate, validate, and normalize inherent factors of blending families.
5. Teach non – punitive positive discipline.
6. Provide psycho-education. No one is born knowing how to do a new thing!
7. Teach family members to be “good finders,” what members like about one another.
8. Teach the balancing of putting the couple bond first while meeting children’s needs.
9. Instill hope and reduce helplessness.
10. Foster the couple bond (J. Gottman). Teach value of the four daily transitions.
11. Watch your language: bio, original, step, your kids, etc.
12. The counselor must maintain symmetry in an asymmetric emotional system.
13. Teach negotiation and conflict resolution skills.
14. Foster rituals. A new family identity. Creating a new history and memories.
15. Strengths – based approach. Identify protective factors that facilitate resiliency.
16. Teach the three ways to lose power in a relationship:
 - a. Attend, listen to, or react to distracters.
 - b. Allow yourself to rule/operate from a throne that is larger than the one you were elected to.
 - c. Attach yourself to dangerous opportunities for self-aggrandizement.
17. Teach patience. Real change comes slowly. It takes 4-7 years to blend a family.
18. Teach diplomacy. Power struggles, gridlock, polarizations stop the blending clock.
19. Teach team building activities.

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"My parents are divorced, both remarried, I have six new siblings, one bathroom, a new school, and I'm doing very nicely, thank you."

ADVANTAGES OF BLENDING FAMILIES
A COMPILATION BY:
FRED MAYFIELD

Not only do stepfamilies offer many of the advantages that two biological parent families do, such as companionship, emotional and social support, education, recreation and financial assistance, they also have other advantages or opportunities.

1. Members of stepfamilies develop creativity as they devise alternative plans for accomplishing desired goals.
2. Because stepfamily members need to negotiate their many differences, there is an increased opportunity for close and lasting relationships.
3. Members learn effective strategies for dealing with diversity, such as negotiation, cooperation, sharing, etc.
4. Members are exposed to various different traditions and rituals. This can broaden their appreciation for individual differences.
5. Individuals are required to share more responsibility and accountability.
6. There is a broader physical and emotional safety net.
7. There are an increased number of relationship opportunities.
8. There are more adults to supervise, parent, and nurture the children.
9. A stepfamily provides another chance to bond and be a family.
10. There is generally more money.
11. A stepfamily provides another chance for children to belong to, and experience, a successful marriage and family.
12. The new marriage is more likely born in reality vs. infatuation.
13. Step and bio parents together provide more parenting feedback.
14. Step parents may view stepchildren with more objectivity than the bio parents.
15. Greater extended family.
16. Parenting opportunity for child-less stepparent (without the diapers).

All families are built on love – that is true for “blood relatives” as well as blended families.

LOVE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE SAME LAST NAME*

*From www.cyberparent.com

LEADERSHIP – LESSONS FROM GEESE

Teamwork and Geese

Objective – How relying on others promotes the goals of the team.

Read and discuss the following short story.

FACT 1

As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an “uplift” for the birds that follow. By flying in a “V” formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

LESSON

People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of each other.

FACT 2

When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

LESSON

If we have as much sense as a goose, we stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We are willing to accept their help, and give our help to others.

FACT 3

When the lead bird tires, it rotates back into the formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

LESSON

It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each other's skills, capabilities and unique arrangements of gifts, talents, or resources.

FACT 4

The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

LESSON

We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, the production is much greater. The power of encouragement (to stand by one's heart or core values and to encourage the heart and core values of others) is the quality of honking we seek.

FACT 5

When a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation, or catch up with the flock.

LESSON

If we have as much sense as geese, we will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we're strong.

NOTES

"LESSONS FROM GEESE" was transcribed from a speech given by Angeles Arrien at the 1991 Organizational Development Network and was based on the work of Milton Olson. It circulated to Outward Bound staff throughout the United States.