

that'slife

A GUIDE TO PERSONAL GROWTH



YOURS, MINE AND OURS

Blending Families
Successfully Takes Time And
Compassion || BY LINDA HAASE

Those who tuned in to “The Brady Bunch” may have been envious of the tightly knit, nearly perfect blended family. But the sitcom was clearly not a reality TV show.

Although blended families can have many idyllic moments, achieving harmony takes a lot of work. Couples and their offspring face many challenges, experts say, including discipline and melding diverse personalities.

“It can take a few years for a stepfamily to establish itself,” says Marni Feuerman, a Boca Raton licensed clinical social worker and licensed marriage and family therapist. “One of the biggest challenges involves parenting and discipline in particular. If a couple takes the time to discuss their expectations around parenting and discipline, it can be very helpful.”

Also, spend a lot of time getting to know each other’s children before blending the families, advises Boca Raton licensed clinical social worker Michele Liffand.

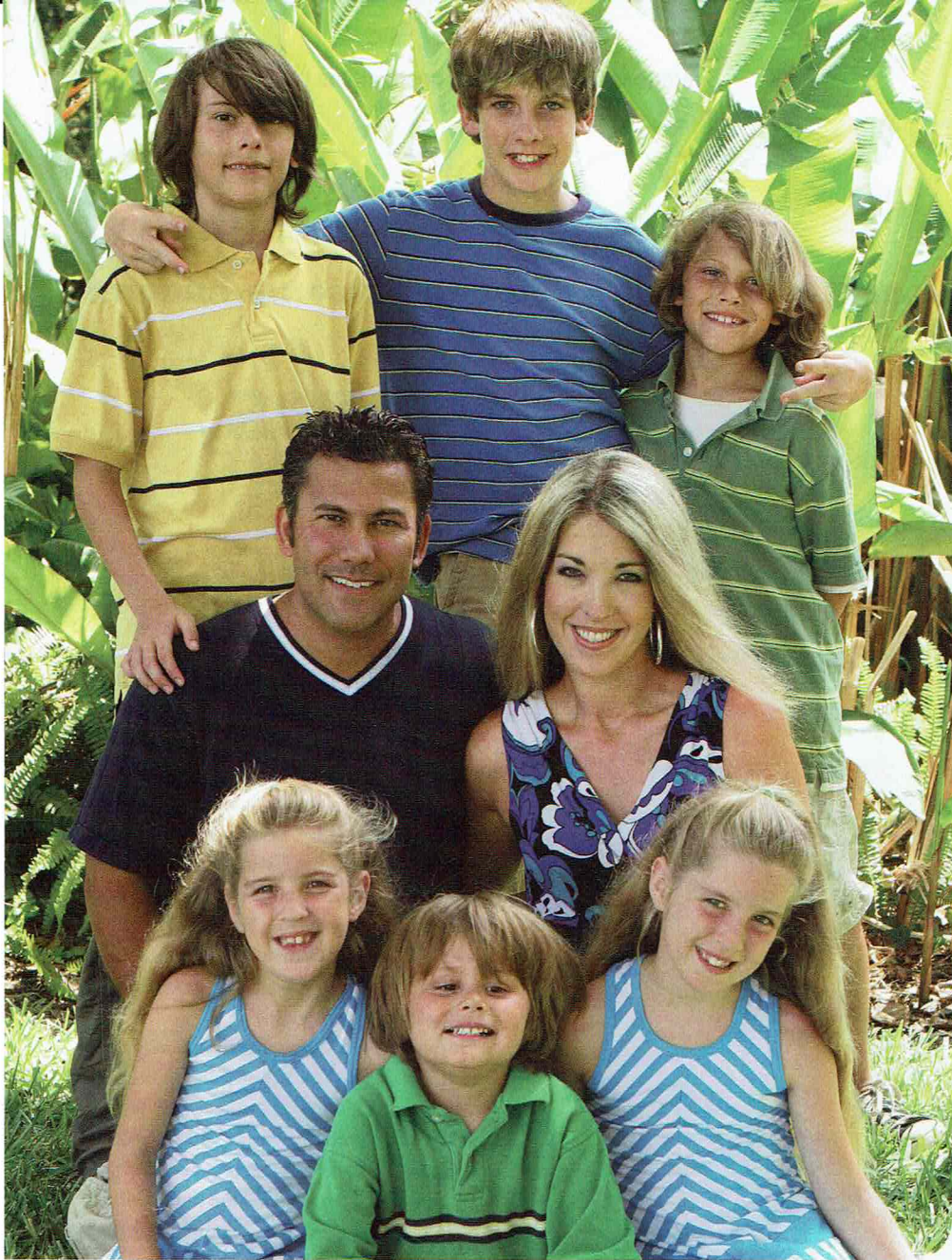
“When families come together quickly and don’t have a natural time to adjust, it can cause a lot of problems,” she explains. “The more time people have to get to know each other before they become a blended family, the better they do. They know each other better and are able to work out some of the issues before they become a unit.”

The age of the children is also a significant factor, she adds, as younger kids may adjust easier.

Clarity is key when it comes to discipline, Feuerman says: “You should be specific, for example, about what the house rules are, who does certain chores and what the rewards or punishments are. I would also talk about your values and philosophy around both parenting and how

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to develop a cohesive unit as a stepfamily. It is particularly critical that there is consistency in the parenting structure.”

And she suggests that the biological parents “take primary responsibility for enforcing rules, with the stepparent acting in a supportive role.”

Making children feel welcome is paramount, experts say.

“The newly married couple can make the [children] feel welcome and loved by checking in with them about their thoughts and feelings about the changes and new dynamics,” Feuerman recommends. “The family must also balance doing things together with doing things as a couple. I would also encourage one-on-one time with each child to help build a bond and connection. Communication needs to be encouraged all the time as a couple and with the children.”

For parents who worry they will show favorit-

ism to their own children, take heart.

“It should be OK for you to feel that you are more connected to your biological child while at the same time acknowledging that these other children are in your life. You need to find a way to contribute to their lives and meet their needs. Ask yourself, ‘How can I be in their lives in a productive way?’” says Lifland. “Although each case is different, the main thing to remember is to practice the golden rule: ‘Do unto others....’ Whatever role you adopt, look at it from that perspective.”

As for what not to do?

“Don’t assume entitlements in your new role, such as, ‘I am your new mother... I can make you do this,’” says Lifland, who grew up in a blended family.

And don’t forget about nurturing yourselves as a couple, she says: “Make time for yourselves outside of parenting; have date nights where

you can honor your relationship; and keep an honest, open line of communication about what is going on with the children. Couples need to honor their own relationship apart from their roles as parents. You need to continue to nurture the unit that brought you together.”

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Although Lifland faced challenges as a stepchild, there were many positive moments as well.

“I was an only child when my mom remarried a widower who had three daughters, so I got three sisters,” she says. “We are very close and have been through everything together as if we were blood relations. I had sisters to be with me that I wouldn’t have had otherwise during some tough times. Being in a blended family is a great opportunity to develop close and lasting, loving relationships.” ○

DOS AND DON'TS FOR BLENDED FAMILIES

DON'T ever bad-mouth or insult your ex-spouse in front of the children. Negativity about your ex will not change anything, and it will only make your child feel bad. This will likely come back to bite you, too.

DO be flexible and reasonable with your ex regarding visitation and time-sharing.

DO pay attention to the feelings your children are having. **DON'T** make them feel bad for having negative feelings around the divorce, the new stepsibling or the situation as a whole.

DO allow special one-on-one time for the biological parent with his or her child. Both parents in the blended family do not have to be part of every activity.

DO realize that you do not have to love your stepchildren, and they do not have to love you either. But you do have to treat each other kindly and respectfully.

Source: Marni Feuerman, licensed clinical social worker and licensed marriage and family therapist