

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Making blended families work. Blending two families together, after a divorce or the death of a parent, is seldom an easy transition. Always, there are adjustments to be made on all sides.

The starting point for the blended-family process is the actual divorce itself, or loss of a parent, as the case may be. Working through these particular losses take time, understanding, discernment and, in some cases, forgiveness.

However, it’s imperative to deal with these *endings* in healthy ways—ways that minimize unfinished business, like remorse, anger or grief.

For example, in the case of divorced families (where children are involved), it’s important for the children to know that it wasn’t their fault. No matter how we spin it, in the vast majority of cases, divorce is not what the children want. Children want mom and dad together forever—period.

In sorting all this out, however, this is where it gets tricky for divorced parents who remarry or enter into another committed relationship.

Blended parents have to be on the same page. Blending families is often a delicate process because, from the outset, the divorced parent feels guilty over the divorce and is tempted to give up too much of the *high ground* of the parental role.

Whether a parent is divorced or not, children need their mothers and fathers to be healthy parents. What a child does *not* need is for the parent to allow guilt *related to the divorce* to bend their parenting too much toward permissiveness and accommodation.

Again, children need mom and dad to be healthy parents. Having said this, an imperative for blended families is that the parents be on the same page. This is perhaps the hardest part of bringing two families together into one new family unit. And again, it’s related to the residual guilt the parent feels on behalf of their child/ children.

Parents in blended families have to devote serious time to discussing and negotiating their parenting practices for all children involved. It’s absolutely important that parents be on the same page in these practices. This is where the parents need to *let go* of the guilt, stand up, and be the parent the child needs.

Parents don’t have to be perfect; none of us is. But they do need to be in charge and lay out the agreed-upon rules and guidelines for family life. When this doesn’t happen and when there is doubt or ambiguity over the *rules* and *understandings*, children become confused—invariably causing problems and discord down the road.

Everybody's got to give up something. Once the parents are in basic agreement and have worked through their *guilt* issues as best they can, what's left is setting a healthy tone for family life where everybody understands the need to give up something (whatever it is) to make the new family unit unfold in successful ways.

This is hard work. It's hard work because there's a lot of stuff flying around—like residual guilt and lingering expectations. Expectations can easily be self-absorbed and unrealistic beyond the pale.

However, when everyone in the blended family comes to an awareness—however long it takes—that each of them has to *give up something* (make certain sacrifices), and that it's for the good of the family, happy family days lie ahead.

On the other side of all the challenges and struggles to make the blended family work, the truth is, it *can* work—and work quite well. And why not? At this point, everybody has something to gain by doing their best to make it work.

And that's because, in spite of all the ups and downs, the rough edges and bumpy roads, family life is the best of times. It is the times we most treasure, the times that shape our lives and give us the deepest, most heartfelt joy and happiness of what it means to be part of the human family.