

Increasing Trust and Bonding in Your Blended Family

Objective

To identify ways to increase trust and bonding in your blended family.

You Should Know

Combining two families is certainly rewarding, yet it also requires some major adjustments. While you might approach remarriage with joy and excitement, children might feel uncertain or fearful. Even if things seem strained or difficult at first, with open communication, mutual respect, and plenty of love and patience, you can develop a close bond with your new stepchildren – and create a loving and affectionate blended family.

Above all, be patient. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, it can take up to two years for blended families to adjust to the many changes. However parents who are proactive in addressing potential problems can make the transition smoother. If you are struggling with creating a situation that works for everyone, here are some suggestions:

- 1. Encourage everyone to be kind and respectful.** If family members are kind and respectful toward one another, the entire family will benefit. Always try to listen respectfully to one another in a nonjudgmental way.
- 2. Discuss parenting styles.** Sit down with your partner and talk about how you will parent together, and make any necessary adjustments so you are both on the same page.
- 3. Allow for bonding time.** According to research, children feel increasingly bonded and secure when there is open communication and they are given time to adjust to remarriage. Bonding takes time, and you can create routines and rituals to unite the family. Schedule at least one new family weekly ritual, such as visiting the beach, going on a hike, playing a board game, or preparing dinner together. Establishing regular family meals offers a great opportunity for you to bond with your children and stepchildren – as well as encourage healthy eating habits!
- 4. Value everyone's input.** Kids can feel unimportant or invisible when it comes to decision making. Recognize their role in the family when you make decisions and create an honest and open environment, so kids feel heard and emotionally connected. Scheduling a weekly family meeting is a great way to make sure that all family members have a chance to express themselves.
- 5. Accept there will be challenges.** Differences in parenting, approaches to discipline, lifestyles, and so on, might be a source of frustration for everyone. Agree on consistent rules, chores, and consequences for misbehavior. Planning family events might get complicated when there are custody considerations, and kids might become upset when vacations, parties, or weekends require complicated arrangements.
- 9. Establish trust.** At first, children may feel uncertain about their new family, often stemming from having to share their parent with a new spouse and stepsiblings. You can build trust and strengthen your new blended family by considering the following:

- Discuss the role each parent will play in raising their respective children, as well as any changes in household rules.
- Consider allowing the biological parent to be responsible for discipline until the step-parent has developed solid bonds with the kids.
- Discuss rules and post them in a prominent place. Understand what the rules and boundaries are for the kids in their other residence, and stay consistent (if possible).
- Children will adjust better if *all* parents are involved and work toward collaborative parenting.
- Tell the kids your new spouse will not be a ‘replacement’ parent, but another person to love and support them.
- When communication is clear, open, and frequent, there are fewer opportunities for misunderstanding and more opportunities to build trust.
- Address conflict immediately and in a proactive and positive manner.
- Be fair and avoid overcompensating by favoring your stepchildren. This is a common mistake (made with good intentions).

10. **Find support.** If you are having difficulties, consider contacting a step-parenting support group online or in your community. Connecting with other parents might be helpful if you are experiencing challenges.

11. **Build a strong marital bond.** If kids see love, respect, and open communication between you and your partner, they will feel more secure. Make regular date nights with each other, and always present as unified and aligned.

What to Do

First, sit down with your partner and talk about potential challenges, rules, chore expectations, and consequences for misbehavior. Brainstorm ideas – what can you do to make the transition easier for everyone? Use additional paper if necessary.

Will there be changes in rules and guidelines? Explain.

What can you do to clearly communicate your rules and guidelines to your children?

What are some activities you can do as a family each week?

Are you open to have a family meeting? _____

If yes, will it be weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly? _____

If no, why not? _____

What else can you do to make your kids feel heard and emotionally connected? Describe.

What can you do to best deal with challenges and conflict as they arise?

Doing things together will help increase bonding of all family members. Plan to incorporate at least one new family ritual or activity each week for the next two months. Use the following chart to record the date, the activity, and how it went. Get feedback from other family members.

Date	Family Activity	How did it go?	Feedback from other family members

After two months of weekly family activities, do you feel the level of trust between family members has increased? Why or why not?

Are you seeing an increase in bonding among family members? Explain.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn in this exercise that was helpful?
