

## **Blended Families**

**Brizel Trinida., Lisa K. Lashley, Charles J. Golden**

**Nova Southeastern University**

Blended families are more common than ever. Recent statistics show that more than half of marriages end in divorce, with the eventual merge of two new families. The families go through several stages to create their new family structure. Several models resemble the integration of family members into the newly defined family. In 2001, Braithwaite and his colleagues identified five developmental pathways or trajectories that blended families followed as they become a family: accelerated, prolonged, stagnating, declining, and high-amplitude turbulent.

The expression of such stages are dependent upon the levels of “feeling like family.” Another popular model is Papernow’s, developed in 1993, which included a seven-step model that defined the blended family development. The family begins at the “fantasy stage,” second “immersion stage,” third “awareness stage,” fourth “mobilization,” fifth “action stage,” sixth “contact stage,” and lastly the “resolution stage.” It is hierarchical stage model in that one must complete the first stage to advance to the next however, according to his model few families are able attain the final stage due to common setbacks in blended families. These models focus and explore the formation of the family and its new functioning ways. The interaction between each member is important and becomes the lens through which the family forms new roles and functions.

There are negative stereotypes that may affect the blending of new families. Most importantly, stepmothers and stepfathers are often stereotyped as preferring their own children

and biased against the child of the spouse. This can cause serious problems and affect how children and adults experience specific events which can lead to poisoning of relationships within the blended family. Persistence of these negative societal beliefs about blended families makes supporting a strong family difficult and intensified by a notable lack of guidelines for doing so (Kumar, 2017).

There are several protective and risk factors that may affect the process of blending a family. The process begins with the parents. The quality of the newly married relationship is primary to the family survival, for a strong relationship can protect against dissolution. The parental relationship can become the mirror through which the children view the foundation of the family. Parents can exhibit a positive viewpoint shaping the family, serving as a protective factor. The blending of family can be difficult and seeking counseling can serve as another protective factor. However, there are several risk factors, which can be addressed in a positive manner.

Papernow's seven-step model summarizes that some of the factors that become crucial for the new formation of family roles and functions are boundaries within the family and other important personnel. Boundaries are rules or regulations that define a particular relationship or area. Boundaries clearly define inclusion and exclusion. The formation of new family boundaries may be a huge task. Each family member must reestablish his or her roles and responsibilities, which can be difficult with young children. When new roles and responsibilities become difficult to establish it can become frustrating for parents. The ages of the children being blended can cause serious issues when conflicts arise over privileges and role in the family.

The expectations parents have for the blended family become unmet and parents may become disillusioned. Braithwaite (2001) and his colleagues found that unmet or unrealistic expectations was one of the most frequently experienced turning points in blended family development. Braithwaite also detailed two other factors that also inhibit the formation of a blended family. Apart from boundary management, solidarity and adaptation can become impediments. As parents model a positive relationship, maintain a positive outlook, or seek help these factors can become positive and assist in forming the blended family. These mediating factors can help the blended family even when risk factors are present. The increase in blended families requires more detailed studies to identify methods of improving the likelihood of the success of these families.

### **Further Readings**

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