

## Blended Families: Challenges & Opportunities

When adults with children marry again after being divorced or widowed, there are both joys and challenges for parents, children and extended family members. But with thoughtful, mature efforts on the part of the adults involved, a blended family can thrive. Here are Marti's insights, tips and personal examples:

### I. What are some of the common challenges of blended families?

- Each partner brings old patterns, traditions and ways of doing things
- Children may be ambivalent, fearful, jealous and confused
- Adults also may have complex feelings, especially about previous spouses and other family members
- Myths about step-parents and ex-spouses may be barriers to carving your own healthy path

### II. Tips for parents and extended family members

- 1) Establish agreement on the big things in parenting (values, expectations, consequences)  
*Parents have primary responsibility for initiating discussions to establish agreement, but parents also need to engage grandparents and any others who will be involved in providing care and guidance for the children. Decide together what your goals are in parenting and seek out reliable sources to help you learn everything you can about the most effective parenting strategies to achieve those goals. As much as possible, have all adults take a similar approach.*
- 2) Have the parent take the lead in discipline, with the step-parent as a strong ally and back-up  
*Especially early in the formation of a new blended family, it is most effective for the parent of each child to take the lead when it comes to discipline. It takes time for children to build a close, trusting relationship with a step-parent, so it is best for a step-parent to stand as a clear partner with the parent in setting limits and imposing consequences when necessary, but to let the parent take the lead.*
- 3) Empathize with the feelings of children and all family members  
*It is common for both children and adults to have complex feelings about other family members and all the changes that come with blending families. It's important to acknowledge and empathize with each other's feelings, allowing open, respectful communication in the interest of coming to understand and be sensitive to the unique experiences of all family members.*
- 4) Have a big heart and an open mind!  
*Support children's relationships with your ex-partner and his or her family and never speak badly of those people in front of children. In cases where a parent has died, help keep that parent's memory alive for children, being cautious not to compete with or try to replace that person. Don't let others write the script for how you and your new family relate to ex-spouses and their extended family. If you gradually can let go of animosity and let a new way of relating to each other unfold, you may be surprised in wonderful ways by what is possible. Marti, her daughter Erin and the rest of their family are glad to tell you their story of how big hearts and open minds have played out in remarkable ways in their blended family!*