

Yours, Mine, and Hours

Relationship Skills for Blended Families

By
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Prologue

Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away...

No, this isn't some science fiction novel that tells the tale of exciting adventures on faraway planets. It is, however, a book about one of the most eventful and transforming experiences you can ever have – being part of a blended family. There *are*, however, many similarities between a science fiction plot and a blended family. Both feature, for example, a cast of aliens whose habits and attitudes are completely foreign to yours. Both involve experiencing some kind of conflict (not necessarily life or death in a blended family – although homicidal thoughts do occasionally arise). And both offer the opportunity to completely transform the way we view ourselves, our relationships, and even our world.

Another similarity between science fiction and blended families is there are very few instruction manuals or courses out there to help us navigate through unknown territory. Most of the time, we must fly by the seat of our pants, guessing moment to moment how best to handle new situations. Even though a significant percentage of American and Canadian families¹ are now living in blended family situations, the parenting models we grew up with, while a good basis from which to start, are often devoid of the wisdom and skills we need to survive and thrive in a blended family. That was certainly the case in our situation. We quickly realized that we were guessing our way on almost everything because neither of us had any framework whatsoever in understanding how to be successful stepparents – both of us have parents who have been together over forty-five years. Even if you did grow up in a blended family, you will often encounter new and different challenges you didn't anticipate.

Despite feeling we were quite realistic about the challenges involved in a blended family, we still suffered from a fair bit of naivety about what it would actually *mean*. In the years since that fateful decision, it has been a wild ride indeed. We have both learned a lot about what it is to establish a blended family, keep it going, and most importantly, how to survive as a couple through all of it. That's what brought us to the decision to write this book.

In the course of seeking advice for our family, we discovered some great sources of information on the nature of blended families. While the field of research is relatively young, there are some excellent studies that highlight the challenges and opportunities presented by blended families. However, it was never our intention to write a research-oriented book, nor did we anticipate it would be an exhaustive look at all the issues you will encounter in your blended family – others have already done a great job of that and their books, along with the research studies, are listed in the *Resources* section. Our simple intention was to write a user-friendly, easy-to-remember, practical book that focused specifically on the relationship aspects of blended families: first, the couple relationship within the family, and second, the relationship skills we see as crucial for the ultimate success of your blended family.

It is our hope that we can help other blended families by explaining some beliefs and tools that have worked for us. We certainly can't promise perfection or that all of it will work for you because every person, every couple, every family is unique. Some of you will already have experienced and dealt with the issues we address. In that case, we hope you will find confirmation of what you've been doing or get some new ideas about old situations. For others, some of this information may be completely new. In that case, we wish you much success in using the approaches that have worked so well for us, both from a marriage and a family perspective. If you don't find ideas about your particular situation in this book, consult the *Resources* and *References* sections we have

compiled in the back of the book and find it elsewhere. It matters not where you get the information, just as long as you get it.

No matter what you are facing in your blended family situation, one thing we can promise you is that it takes a lot of time and effort on the part of the parents – you – to help it all come together. That's why we've chosen the title *Yours, Mine, and Hours*. While it does take a lot of time at first, you will find your efforts will pay huge dividends the longer your blended family is together.

As we reflect on our blended family journey so far, we could never have anticipated how much we would learn in the years we have been together. As in those science fiction stories we mentioned earlier, we have learned how to live peacefully among aliens, resolve conflicts without bloodshed, and most importantly, positively influence how our children and we function in relationships. We wish the same for all of you as you learn to survive and thrive in your blended family.

John Penton and Shona Welsh

Part 1

The Recipe for Blended Family Success®

Creating a family in this turbulent world is an act of faith, a wager that against all odds there will be a future, that love can last, that the heart can triumph against all adversities and even against the grinding wheel of time.¹

- Dean Koontz

From the Corner of His Eye

Chapter One

What is the Recipe for Blended Family Success[®]?

*Family isn't about whose blood you have. It's about who you care about.*¹

- Trey Parker and Matt Stone
South Park – Ike's Wee Wee, 1998

It was Christmas Day. We were enjoying a quiet, elegant dinner for two in a nearby resort town. John's three children were with their mother for the holidays, and Shona's son was with his father. Both of us were glad of the opportunity to steal away for a bit of alone time – a precious commodity when you have four children to deal with, whether or not they all live at home.

The wine steward served the wine with a flourish, and we clinked glasses in a toast to our new union – only six months old. It had been a tumultuous few years, both of us having endured stressful divorces as well as needing to overcome deeply ingrained cynicism about the opposite sex. Our partnership had grown slowly over the course of a year, neither of us willing to engage in any kind of serious relationship other than friendship. And then, when Shona accepted a job offer in a distant city, things went on fast-forward. In a three-week period we went from being very good friends to planning our life together. It just seemed natural. We have never looked back, and neither of us has ever been happier.

But that first Christmas dinner together sorely tried our relationship. As Shona took a sip of her wine, she felt a burning sensation all the way down her throat and into her stomach as the wine made its path through her body. While only an occasional drinker, she knew enough to figure out that this was not the usual way alcohol affected her. In fact, she knew enough to remember that the only time alcohol had *ever* affected her in exactly that way was when she was pregnant with her son.

Slowly, she put her glass down and looked across the table at John. "Ah, John?" she began tentatively, absolutely terrified at the thought that her suspicions might be true.

"Yes?" he answered innocently, unaware of the news that was about to change his life. It wasn't that he hadn't liked being a father – it was just that his kids were almost grown at that point, being fifteen, seventeen, and nineteen. And while Shona's son was only six, he spent every other weekend at his dad's, allowing us a regular bit of freedom to establish our partnership more fully.

"I believe I'm pregnant," Shona said, barely above a whisper.

John looked stunned for a moment. "Nah!" he replied. "Not possible." But the look on Shona's face made him hesitate. "What makes you think so?" This time it was his turn to whisper.

Shona explained the wine sensation.

John took a deep breath. "That would mean we'd have five kids..."

We looked at each other with what could only be described as sheer terror. Needless to say, we drank no more wine that night and spent the rest of the evening discussing what it would look like to have a new baby. John was forty-five at the time; Shona was thirty-five. It felt like a huge burden to start all over again, especially with the freedom we were beginning to have, given the ages of the kids and visitation schedules.

We both spent a relatively sleepless night waiting for morning when the stores would once again be open and we could confirm (or deny) our suspicions. When at last we sat together on our family room couch, both peering at the double blue lines indicating a positive pregnancy result, stunned silence was the best we could manage.

Since that day, many things have changed in our lives. We have a beautiful seven-year-old daughter, Shona's son is now thirteen, and John's three older children have all moved out and on to jobs and university. Life, while stressful at times, proceeds on a relatively smooth course, and we all have familiar routines we have negotiated and live by.

But the first two years were the toughest. They were marked by extreme fatigue, misunderstandings, resentments, conflicts, a few tears, and about 3,000 diapers. Blending a family of yours, mine, and then ours, took many, many hours. From the beginning, we had agreed as a couple that we would weather the storms of our blended family of two adults, five children, a bird, a puppy, and the occasional mouse together. It was fundamentally the best approach we could have taken.

Statistics will tell you that second marriages fail earlier and even more frequently than first marriages and the most important factor in these failures is children. This breakdown most often occurs within the first two years of remarriage. What you will read in this book is how we were determined our family would not become a statistic, and the approaches we adopted that have helped our relationship and our family not only survive but thrive. Eager not to fly by the seat of our pants, we drew on John's background in child development and supplemented that with our own research. Some theories we thought would work clearly did not; other relatively simple concepts worked like a charm.

There is also, we discovered, much good news about what we call the regenerative abilities of blended families. In his nine-year study of two hundred families through the Developmental Issues in StepFamilies (DIS) Research Project, clinical and family psychologist Dr. James Bray found that blended families can actually help heal the scars of divorce:

...conventional wisdom has held that divorce permanently scars a child. [Although it is true] that a child is profoundly affected by family dissolution ...we found that a loving, well-functioning stepfamily can help restore a youngster's sense of emotional and psychological well-being. We also found something else: A strong, stable stepfamily is as capable of nurturing healthy development as a nuclear family. It can imbue values, affirm limits and boundaries, and provide a structure in which rules for living a moral and productive life are made, transmitted, tested, rebelled against, and ultimately affirmed.²

What we will share with you in this book is an approach we have used to do the things Dr. Bray has described, an approach we have come to call the Recipe for Blended Family Success[®]. We believe that if you use the Recipe ingredients – Marriage, Acceptance, and Communication – you will experience much success and happiness in your blended family life. It will make the “hours” part of the “yours, mine, and hours” pass a lot more easily.

The Recipe for Blended Family Success[®]

The Recipe for Blended Family Success[®] is a reflection of everything we have learned in establishing and developing our blended family. It has served us well in helping smooth the bumpy patches and allowing us to experience peace, comfort, and – yes! – even joy in our blended family. The Recipe for Blended Family Success[®] centers

on three main ingredients: Marriage, Acceptance, and Communication. We like to think of the first two – Marriage and Acceptance – as the philosophies and attitudes to develop that will help get you through the living day-to-day stuff – and the Communication stuff is the hands-on, practical, what-you-can do stuff.

As you read through the descriptions of Marriage, Acceptance, and Communication in this chapter and also in further sections of this book, there will be some points you will no doubt want to respond to with “yes, but...” To achieve clarity, we have had to separate some of the issues. For example, we briefly address male-female communications in the Marriage section, but go into it in a lot more detail in the Communication section. We ask you to stay with us because it all eventually comes together – but the three themes do significantly overlap each other.

Before we get started, there are a few issues around language usage we want to clarify. When we use the term “marriage,” it is for simplicity only. It also applies in common-law relationships when you have chosen to become partners. We use the term marriage as a short form for couple relationship – please apply it to your common-law partnership the same as you would if you were formally married. In our case, we didn’t actually get around to getting married until four years into our blended family, so many of the experiences you will read about happened before we were married.

We also want to clarify what we mean when we refer to blended families. We have noticed that some researchers distinguish between a stepfamily and a blended family; they define a stepfamily as one that lives with the children of only one parent, and refer to a blended family as one that incorporates children from both parents. For ease of discussion and understanding, we refer to both of these families as blended families, but everything applies even if you’re living in a stepfamily versus a completely blended family.

Another language issue concerns distinguishing between families that have never been divorced and reformed, and a blended family. We have heard the never-divorced family referred to as a nuclear family, an intact family, an original family, a normal family, etc. We don’t like the word “normal” because we believe normal is such a subjective term – what’s normal for you might not be normal for us. Again, for ease of discussion, we have chosen to use the term “intact family” when referring to families that have never been through divorce. We don’t mean to suggest that blended families are therefore not intact. In fact, we think they become incredibly intact once they’ve weathered the first few storms of figuring out who they are. It’s just a decision we’ve made so we don’t have to explain what we mean every time we’re discussing an issue.

Ingredient #1: Marriage

When we give workshops about blended family skills, Marriage is the most controversial ingredient in our Recipe for Blended Family Success®. Specifically, it’s not that anyone disagrees that looking after your marriage is an important blended family survival skill – it’s just that we get a lot of gasps when we say that you must put your marriage *first* – *before* your children. If you find yourself gasping as you read this, bear with us for a moment.

Putting your marriage first in no way means your children are not a priority. It also does not mean you don’t do everything as parents to give the children the best guidance, love, and support you can for a good start in life. What it does mean is that you attend to your relationship with your new spouse *as a primary means* of being the best parents you can be.

Anyone who has ever traveled on an airplane knows that, in the event of a change in cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will fall in front of you from the compartment

above. Flight attendants emphasize that you must always put your mask on first before attempting to assist others (like the child in the seat next to you). The reasoning is that if you can't breathe, your efforts to help others will be hindered at best, fatal at worst.

The same is true of blended families. The parents must first be able to assist themselves in building a strong relationship before they can be of real assistance to their children. Divorce statistics for second marriages are painfully grim, and many couples we know cite stressors around stepchildren as being a key contributor to the failure of that marriage. Frankly, we think putting your marriage first is an excellent concept to keep in mind even for couples who live in an intact family. We'll explain why in more detail later.

It has been our personal experience, along with our observations of other blended families, that a key indicator of survival is the health, strength, and openness of the couple relationship. Simply put, if you can't build a strong, healthy marriage that exists outside your role of parenting, you can't build a strong, healthy blended family.

Key issues that we discuss in detail include:

- Why putting your marriage first is critical to the success of your blended family
- Understanding what you believe about and want out of marriage
- The differences between families that put their marriage first versus those that don't
- Understanding the foundations of a good marriage
- Why establishing and maintaining connection as a couple is critical and how having protected time and space supports that connection
- Why you need to craft a family vision and issues to consider in doing that.

There are no doubt other issues but these represent our key learnings about supporting our marriage in a blended family context.

Ingredient #2: Acceptance

The second ingredient in the Recipe for Blended Family Success® is the notion of Acceptance. What this means is that you are going to encounter a whole range of issues that you resist, come into conflict over, and plain just don't understand about the new spouse, the new children, and the new family. Some of them you may not even want to admit to yourself for they seem so small and petty. Trust us – it's the small and petty things that will get you first. Always keep in mind that it's okay to feel these things. (You are human, after all!) What matters is how you handle them.

Some of the issues we examine include:

- How good intentions for having a wonderful family aren't enough
- Common challenges for blended parents
- That guilt thing and how to manage it by not putting impossible standards on yourself

- Understanding that resisting all the issues is a waste of your time and energy, and that you must start with what you've got
- How to deal with all the fear, reaction, and worry living in a blended family brings out in you
- Learning the *Ten Laws of Acceptance* in a blended family and how they'll help you keep your sanity.

There are numerous issues we discovered in the complexity of our blended family, all of which we learned can begin to be solved by adopting an approach of Acceptance.

Notice that we said *begin* to be resolved. Acceptance is your *starting point* for moving ahead, not the cure-all for your numerous frustrations. In the words of The Borg Civilization in television's *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "Resistance is futile." It is simply not worth your energy to resist, argue about, debate, and otherwise stew over many of these issues or other conflicts. Acceptance is an acquired skill, however, and not one that many of us come by naturally. It comes with a lot of hard work and attention, and develops over time.

Acceptance starts with an understanding on the part of both parents that the family will not be perfect. As strange as it may sound, many of us go into blended situations with starry-eyed notions that we'll be one big happy family. Part of that comes from your love for your new partner ("Together we can work anything out!"), and part of it comes from your genuine desire to be a good stepparent. Love and desire are certainly the best places to start, but they won't guarantee a smooth ride. It's Acceptance that will keep you moving forward.

Accept that the kids may not like you no matter what. Accept that you will have conflicts with the ex-spouse(s). Accept that the stepsiblings may not like each other. Accept that you are now responsible for more children. Accept that you may not love your new stepchildren, and that you may never love them. Accept that you have to share your time among the spouse, your children, and the stepchildren. Simply put, Acceptance ensures you will not get caught in a crisis of expectation where you expect things to turn out one way, and then are caught in a crisis when the situation turns out completely differently. Interestingly, this can affect you whether the results turn out more negatively *or* more positively than expected.

Ingredient #3: Communication

We know, we know – it's been overstated, overdone, overemphasized. You've heard it from your parents, your friends, and your boss until you're sick of hearing it. Nevertheless, you're going to hear it from us as well. Communication is, and always will be, one of your key tools in maintaining equilibrium in your blended family.

The Communication ingredient in the Recipe for Blended Family Success® is the practical, how to live day-to-day stuff. The Marriage and Acceptance issues are the attitudes and philosophies that will guide and support you as you live the Communication part, although we've offered you some tools in those two areas as well.

The key issues we discuss in communicating in your blended family are:

- Understanding first and foremost how you communicate with each other as a couple
- Managing the differences in male-female communications so you can be a team
- Understanding the best way to get and hold your children's attention and deal with discipline and rewards
- Understanding how to set boundaries for yourself as a parent
- Using a variety of communication approaches to manage your blended family as well as build self-responsibility in your children
- Using the concept of coaching to enhance communication
- Understanding personality styles that influence how your blended family interacts

One of the challenges of separating the topic of Communication from Marriage and Acceptance is that they tend to run together. Many of the issues we talk about under those first two categories have a lot to do with Communication. Our focus in the Communication section, however, is to provide you with some practical tools that can help you manage some of the challenging *general* communication situations you will encounter in your blended family. The tools presented in the Marriage and Acceptance sections *specifically* relate to those two topics.

That's the basic overview of the Recipe for Blended Family Success®. Like most things in life, the theory is simple, the reality much more challenging. Living in a blended family takes many hours of concentrated effort. So let's dive in and begin to make your day-to-day reality less challenging, if not less complicated...