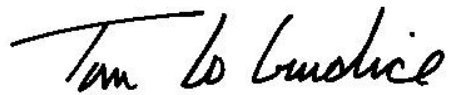


COUNSELING SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILIES

Approved:
Date: June 19, 2015

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Lo Giudice". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

ABSTRACT

The subject of blending families has become more of the “norm” in today’s society and this is clearly the reason why it is important for family education. Blending families can present challenges and for this reason professionals in the counseling field need to know how to address these challenges and help families to work through these obstacles. Keeping families together and teaching them how to grow together and acknowledge their differences will help in this process.

The goal of the writer is to give some of the key strategies is helping families achieve success. These tips can help the couple as well as the children to understand the thoughts that can help them to make a blended family into a positive thing rather than a negative. If everyone involved can see the positive and work toward it rather than allowing the negative to come in there is a better chance of the relationship being successful.

The work is a form of case study with personal references to the findings reported in the literature.

II

COUNSELING SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILIES

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Amy Gunn
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Chapter One:

INTRODUCTION

The subject of counseling successful blended families is reported because so many people are involved in blended families. The statistics show that more people today are getting married a second time, they are blending children from their first marriage with a new spouse, and usually other children which can become challenging. The author is familiar with some of the challenges because of being in a blended family as a child and also having entered into a blended family as an adult.

The emphasis is on blending families with teenagers because this can be very challenging and be an age group that may have difficulty adjusting to this family structure. Teens can have a harder time making the adjustment to new role models, disciplinarians, and “parents” in the home. This can be even more of an impact with the addition of more children in the home to share time and space with.

There are many strategies that can help aid a family in making this very sensitive transition successful. There are always going to be struggles and obstacles but being educated on how to work through those rough spots can be of a great benefit. This can be the difference between success and failure because this can unfortunately be the end of the marriage that could have worked if they had the appropriate strategies.

This is an area that is important because of the increasing statistics of people getting divorced and then remarried to someone who have children from a previous relationship. This new union creates a blended family and there are many strategies that can be used effectively in counseling to help these families to be successful. Strategies with the parents, as well as the

children can make it easier for families to work together to get along as a family even with the obstacles of blending.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to provide a review of the literature related to blended families to inform and improve counseling in the area of making blended families successful. The increasing rate of families being blended makes this an area that is important in counseling.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study of blended families is important to the practice of counseling professionals. This work will make an impact on a personal level and should be of importance to others seeking information related to best practices.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem to be addressed is what are some of the qualities of blended families? What are some common problems in blended families and what are the strategies used to overcome those problems? What are some of the things that can be used in counseling to make blended families successful? What strategies are most effective when working with teenagers?

DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

Blended Families –“a family that includes children of a previous marriage of one spouse or both” (*Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 21 June 2014. [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blended family](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blended%20family)).

Counseling- “professional guidance of the individual by utilizing psychological methods especially in collecting case history data, using various techniques of the personal interview, and testing interests and aptitudes” (*Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 21 June 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counseling>).

DELIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The delimitations are the choice of key terms blended families and counseling. The research was also limited by the search engines. The primary search engine used was Google Scholar with some use of Google. The intent was to provide a scholarly yet friendly review of the research so that the usual client would find the resources used accessible and readable. The search was done during a 75 day period during the summer of 2014. The paper is written as a case study of the author’s family as well as a technical report.

Method of Approach

As a case study the use of “I” and “We” is appropriate to help the reader understand how the literature and counseling personally affects the author and her family. The use of I” is APA appropriate as used (see especially Lee, 2014) The case study method offers a unique insight.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

THE BLENDED FAMILY

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a blended family as a family that includes children of a previous marriage from one spouse or both (Merriam-Webster). This type of family is more common today than it was years ago. I was a child of a blended family from the age of eighteen. Both parents were remarried to people who had children. I am now in a marriage where we both have children from previous relationships.

An examination of statistics show that 60% of marriages will end in a legal divorce. 75% of those people will remarry (Blended Family Statistics). 65% of all those remarriages will involve children from a previous relationship. These statistics came from the website winningstepfamilies.com. According to this site 37% of all children are involved in a blended family (Blended Family Statistics). The statistics for American's under the age of 18 years old are as follows: 52.1% live with two parents, 26.3% live with only their biological mother, 5.4% live with only their biological father, 3.0% live with other relatives, and 1.2% live with non-relatives (Blended Family Statistics).

Since 1/3 of all marriages are forming step families there are five different scenarios that could be created. Each of these situations will have their own challenges and hurdles, according to an article found from "Focus On the Family-Helping the Family Thrive". There are 5 scenarios to be covered.

The first step parent situation would be a wife with children and a husband with no children marry. This is usually a relief for the new mother because she has a partner to help

handle all the responsibilities but she needs to remember not to put too many responsibilities on the new mate (Gillespie, 2004). If she allows the husband to take over too much the children will most likely rebel (Gillespie, 2004). The children have a dad and as a stepparent discipline should go lightly or at least in the beginning (Gillespie, 2004).

The couple needs a chance to bond as a couple and the wife needs to make sure that she does not favor the children over her husband which can be her motherly instinct (Gillespie, 2004). Children should be required to show the stepdad the same respect as they would show a teacher, police officer, or any other adult of authority (Gillespie, 2004).

This same respect is needed in the next situation which would be a husband with children and a wife with no children. The husband is usually looking for someone to take on the role of his former wife, while the wife is ready for romance and couple time (Gillespie, 2004). Taking on the role of wife and mother can sometimes be overwhelming (Gillespie, 2004). In this situation the husband needs to continue to handle the discipline to avoid conflict with the new wife and just teach the kids how to respect her (Gillespie, 2004).

The third step parent situation, with the most set of challenges and hurdles, is the wife and husband both coming into the marriage with kids (Gillespie, 2004). Even with the most set of challenges, it has the best potential to be successful because both the mom and dad are determined to pull together for the sake of the kids (Gillespie, 2004). Physical space is now shared as well as sharing relationships with parents. There is usually a change of location, house, schools, jobs, etc. which can also be an adjustment (Gillespie, 2004).

In this third type of step family situation the first 2 years can really make or break the family. There will be conflict and lots of grace. It is normal for there to be different levels of relationship, intimacy, connection, and love between all the members (Gillespie, 2004).

The fourth step family situation is a widow or widower with kids remarries. The new parent will be confronted with family past and they needs to remember that grieving the loss of a spouse takes time (Gillespie, 2004). In this situation the family, as a whole, needs to respect the memory of the deceased parent and the new parent needs to take on the role of friend and mentor (Gillespie, 2004).

The final step family is one where divorced or widowed parents of adult children marry. Usually it is a little more difficult to bond because there is not as much daily interaction (Gillespie, 2004). This relationship can be strained for many years while connections are being established (Gillespie, 2004).

I am a firm believer in the last statement of this article and that is, “No matter what type of stepfamily yours may fall under, with the right resources and the help of God, family, and friends, your stepfamily can find encouragement and hope.”(Gillespie, 2004). I think that the spiritual base, friends, and family, all attributed to me finding success in my own blended family situations.

Unfortunately, I was not shocked by any of these statistics because I have seen many marriages that have failed within the first few years and think it is because people think that marriage is just going to be blissful and they are soon met with the work that comes with marriage. They seem to be unprepared for the type of commitment they find themselves facing.

Adding the stress children can create even more obstacles which equal even more work. The key to making it successful is allowing everyone to build a stronger bond with each other.

I think that it was fortunate that the experience of a blended family through her own parents because it helped her to know the things that were not welcomed with step children. Knowing that there just needed to be the feeling of love, respect, and not make difference from biological children, all while maintaining a bond with the spouse. I have learned that is much easier said than done. Many times the kids many become the thing that starts to separate the marriage.

Communication is the key before you cohabitate. Before a couple joins two families together the children should not be left in the dark. They should be involved in the progression of the relationship (Steinke, 2012). Children are smarter then we think they are and things can go much smoother if they are not left in the dark.

When I meet my husband the relationship was good and we introduced our kids together and they got along very well. My husband talked to all the children involved prior to proposing. They were each asked for their input and how they felt about the possibility of a future marriage. All the children were involved in the many areas that lead up to the proposal. Shopping for the ring and the proposal was done with the children. When the time came to “pop the question” the children were there and were more excited. This involvement allowed them to feel more a part.

I commends my husband because had he not communicated with the children to make sure that they approved it could have caused some rebellion from one or all of the kids. The children were all involved in the wedding. They each were a groomsman and the fact that they were involved made the day extra special for them.

It meant a lot that during the reception when the boys all got up and talked about how happy they were to see us happy. We have agreed that there will be no step children. We have 5 boys and 3 grandchildren. It does not matter that 3 boys and the grandchildren are his and 2 boys are mine. I think that this has made a big difference too. The use of the word “step” seems to carry a negative label.

The hardest adjustment for us was probably moving in to the same house 3 months after we were married. I had quit my job, the kids started new schools, and we left our home to move in with my husband. We all needed to learn how to live together because while we dated we had 2 hour drive between us and only had to cohabitate on the weekend. Being together 24/7 was probably the biggest adjustment.

The divorce rate among American's today is 42 to 49% divorce rate for first marriages (Cort, 2010). 60- 67% of second marriages end in divorce (Cort, 2010). 74% in marriage number 3 and it keeps going higher in percentage as the number of nuptials increases (Cort, 2010). It is important after the first marriage that a person takes a hard look and why their first marriage failed so that they make changes before marriage number two (Cort, 2010).

It should be clear to anyone who has been married that a marriage does take work and communication. There is no perfect marriage and there is more complexity when blending families. There is much to be said for knowing the facts on blended families before entering into it but for those who do not there is always the ability to work things out.

BLENDING FAMILIES WITH TEENS

Age can be a factor when a child is introduced into a blended family. Teens that live within a blended family tend to have low grades and behavior problems (Mollins, 2008). A study out of Florida State University shows that children who live with both half and step siblings do better than those who live with one or the other (Mollins, 2008). This can be because a family where there are half siblings means that the parents have committed to starting a family together and have to work together on child rearing (Mollins, 2008). This can be better for the children being raised in these families.

Being a teen in a blended family is difficult but studies show that it is even more difficult for boys (Mollins, 2008). Gender is not the only difference in teenagers but also financial. If a boyfriend or husband come into a family, bring with them income that can help a single mother out of poverty, and those teenagers will have less adjustment troubles (Nelson/ Clark, 2001).

Race can also be a variable on the success of children in blended families. White teenagers in blended families seem to be expelled and have more problems in school than those of single mothers (Nelson/ Clark, 2001). White teenagers are just as likely to have behavioral issues in a blended family as those raised by single mothers (Nelson/Clark, 2001). Hispanics have more school and behavioral difficulties living in a blended family than those of a single mother (Nelson/ Clark, 2001). Black teenagers have just as many emotional and school problems living in a blended family as they would have with a single mother (Nelson/ Clark, 2001).

Research shows that in all children regardless of race and gender there are less educational, emotional and behavioral problems from children who are reared in a home with both biological parents (Pollak&Ginther, 2003). When children are put into a blended family the

research is that they will have most of the same problems as those children that are raised in homes with a single mother (Pollak& Ginther, 2003). Many things can be variables in these statistics. Education level, economic status, race, and gender can all make a difference in family structure and the outcomes of the children they influence (Pollak&Ginther, 2003).

No matter what gender or race there are certain things that can help teenagers in their adjustment to the blended family. It is important that parents keep their teenagers accountable and help them learn to control their impulses (Surviving the Teenage Years: Part 2). Parents should talk out problems with their teens showing respect and modeling self-control rather than battling (Surviving the Teenage Years: Part 2). This will ultimately help teenagers as they come into their adulthood.

It can be a challenge when it comes to talking with teenagers and the key to a successful relationship is communication (Surviving the Teenage Years: Part 2). It is important that parents and step-parents do not take the teenagers disrespectful attitude personally because this is something that comes along with teenagers (Surviving the Teenage Years: Part 2).

It is clear that the teenagers may have more difficulty adjusting to blended families and step-siblings. Parents can be a big factor in the successfulness of this transition. There is not book about blending families but doing research and understanding the challenges and strategies can help.

QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILIES

There are many strategies that parents of a blended family can use to make the transition smoother on the whole family. These are things that can make blending families more successful.

There are 5 effective tips in step-relationships according to an article in *Empowering Parents*):

[http://www.empoweringparents.com/Blended-Family-The-5](http://www.empoweringparents.com/Blended-Family-The-5-Secrets-of-Effective-Step-parenting) Secrets-of-Effective-Step parenting.

1. In this tip the step parent should take more of the good cop role and allow the bio parent to be the bad cop. If the child needs discipline for a behavior let the bio parent deal with it and support their decision (Taylor&Taylor).
2. In this tip it is important not to compete with your counterpart. The bio parent is always going to have a connection and the step parent needs to respect that even when their spouse and ex are still at war (Taylor &Taylor, ND.).
3. This tip is to discover your stepchild's interests. Discovering their interests and finding some common ground can start off any friendship and can give you something to talk about. Doing some of their favorite things with them can draw the connections between step parent and step child (Taylor-&Taylor).
4. It is important not to become a barrier but to get out of the way. It is important for children to have some alone time with the bio parent. Alone time with the bio parent assures the child that they have not been displaced (Taylor&Taylor).
5. The final tip is to always love your stepchildren no matter what. Sometimes it can be difficult to love them as much as your own kids and it might take some work but it is worth the extra effort. In their mind you are the intruder and if they feel that you love them it can make the relationship grow much faster so making sure to show them love is very important (Taylor-&Taylor).

I believe that this goes along with not using the “step” label. I have always felt that calling someone a stepchild made me feel less than a child. There can be a promise in place to not use the step label because it seems to have such a negative meaning that goes along with it. The author does not want my children to think that because they are a “step” they are any less than my biological children because there is no reason to treat them any different. Of course, the personal experience must be translated into the role of the counselor. This is both personal and a part of my professional role.

COUNSELING INTERVENTION WITH BLENDED FAMILIES

One of the other keys to making blended families work is consistency (Steinke, ND). The husband and wife have to have the same approach to all the major issues like bedtime, homework, and household chores. One of the things we did, as an assignment, in our pre-marriage counseling was to sit down and get on the same page about discipline. We had to discuss what was right and wrong for the children and what our punishments would be. We make sure if we don't agree with the other person's punishment we discuss it later and the decision can be overturned earlier.

The tips for a healthy blended family are:

- Understanding that too many changes at one time can make children very unsettled. Waiting for 2 years between divorce and remarriage can prove to be better for the children involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families)

- Do not expect children to fall in love with step parents overnight. It is a relationship that needs to be nurtured and developed involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families). Try to find ways to have “real life” experience together. Family outings are fun but the experience of day to day life is more beneficial involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families).
- Make parenting changes prior to getting married. Adjustments to your parenting style to make sure you and your partner are on the same page before you remarry will make sure you children do not resent your partner for initiating changes involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families).
- Don’t allow ultimatums. Make sure your children and partner know you want them both in your life and you will not choose involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families).
- Insist on respect. You cannot make people like each other but you can insist they treat each other with respect involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families).
- Limit your expectations. You can put a lot of love, affection, and energy into your new partner’s kids and even though it may not be returned immediately you need to look at it as an investment that will yield lot in the future involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families).
- Parents need to let the kids set the pace on the relationship with the new partner or step parent. The more you try to push it the more the child will fight the relationship and this could prolong the process of building a relationship involved (Step-Parenting and Blended Families).

It is important for couples to remember that they need to work on making their relationship solid. Couples need to set aside time to go out for dinner or just meet for lunch or coffee. The focus of your energy is on the kids and it is important to stop and redirect the focus on you, as a couple. The main component in the family is not the kids but the couple and their bond.

I have made it a point to do a “date night” every Friday night but with how busy life gets we started to lose track of our date night. There is the tendency to find ourselves too tired after the work week to go anywhere. Sometimes just ordering pizza for the kids and stopping for dinner on the way home from work became necessary just to try to get it in. Life seems to get so busy and find ourselves just being lucky if we have a few minutes to talk at the end of the day.

The capability to get out because of our kids being old enough to stay home alone for a few hours alone is good. For marriages without that luxury there may have to be some leaning on grandparents of other family to spend time with the kids in order for parents to stay connected as a couple. Our families take our kids whenever we need if we want to get away for a weekend. Some people with younger children might struggle with this more than us. We know it is important to keep time for us as a couple even if it is just attending bible study and going to have dinner together.

BLENDING INTERRACIAL FAMILIES

If blending families was not difficult enough there are even more challenges when those families are interracial. Interracial marriages are becoming more acceptable and more common. 9.5 percent of all marriages in the United States are interracial marriages (Gideon, 2014). This

trend was only approved by 56 percent of black and 17 percent of whites in 1969 but today has increased to 96 percent among blacks and 84 percent among whites (Gideon, 2014).

These statistics are not just about black and white mixing because only 7.9 percent are Black and White (Gideon, 2014). 37 percent of marriages are Hispanic and White with 13.7 percent being Asian and White (Gideon, 2014). These interracial marriages blend children and families of different culture and background which can come with challenges.

There are tips that can help the interracial couple that will help make the relationship stronger.

- Be willing to learn about your partners cultural differences and ask questions to have a better understanding (Simmons, 2014).
- Be understanding to that fact that your partner may have different ways of doing things based on the way they were raised. This can be especially true with holiday traditions (Simmons, 2014). Be willing to give and as well as take.
- It is okay to not understand because you were not raised in the same house and under the same upbringing (Simmons, 2014). It is ok to just be honest with your partner.
- Be prepared for questions that may arise, especially from mixed race children. They will realize they are different based on skin color and parents need to be prepared to answer question (Simmons, 2014).
- Make an effort to change the “way things are done” because it might not be your partner’s way (Simmons, 2014). Make an effort to incorporate both ways.

- Remember you are blended and that means having a mix of both cultures and differences to make your own family traditions and memories (Simmons, 2014).

I can speak from experience about this because my marriage is interracial and all our children are of mixed races. They are very clear on who they are and we are open about their backgrounds. Family is important for both of us and the biggest challenge has been the holidays. We each want to be with our families and it has caused us to have to compromise. I think that would happen even if we were not different races.

To summarize and emphasize the most critical point. It is important to remember that we may have different upbringing but we love and respect each other in spite of our differences. With the marriage secure this makes the children secure also.

The discussion above is based in part on personal experience. Of course, it is also informed by the literature. Additional resources, in addition to those already cited may be useful.

RESOURCES FOR COUNSELING

There are several practical resources available for counseling that can be useful for the counselor and the client. These are among the articles that I thought were very noteworthy.

Counselor Resources would include:

- Journal of Marriage and Family (See article by Hannum and Mayer in the references, 1984)
- The Family Journal (See article by Portrie and Hill in references, 2005)

- The Journal of Comparative Family Studies (See the article by Shafer and Schafer in the references, 2010)

Client Resources would include:

- Ebony Magazine (See Davis article in references, 2000)
- Prairie Schooner (See Potter article, 2003)
- Young Children (See Skeen article in references, 1984)

Chapter Three

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Communication is the key to all successful relationship and the same holds true with blended families. There may just be different things to be communicated and different ways to have a family meeting or discuss respect. With all this being said it still remains true that communication can allow us to learn to respect each other, even with our differences, and learn how to live together and respect each other for our differences.

I knew there were going to be many challenges in blended families because of personal experiences. There were many bumps but the fact that my father tried to keep the families divided created the feeling of not belonging. The result of there never being any consulting prior to marrying his new wife and his actions drove a wedge between all the children.

It is important to remember that the most important element in the family is the marriage. The husband and wife need to keep the focus on their marriage and not allow the children to draw a wedge between them because the statistics show that each marriage has a better chance of failing and ending in divorce. In our marriage we have chosen to commit and we do not speak the word “divorce”. This is a negative word that we do not want in our marriage.

My mom and step dad were the complete opposite and asked for permission to marry their mother. The author’s step father stepped up to the plate and was more of a nurturing figure to the children than their biological dad. The author’s biological dad had passed 1 year before marrying her husband and without hesitation asked the step father to walk her down the aisle.

I consider it a blessing to have been raised in a blended family because it taught many lessons. It taught to really appreciate a family structure for what it was even if it was different from what was looked at as “normal”. Today the family structure the author grew up in is very much the “norm” and there is hope because we can make sure that children have the same positive experience and the negative can be changed. Children just want to feel the acceptance and to know that they are part of a family. Parents are the key to making sure that children are involved, accepted, and respected in the family structure.

It is important when counseling with these families to take into consideration all the members of the family and their individual needs. Educating all the members of the family on how those needs can be met will allow the family to operate better together. Knowledge can be power when we understand the needs and work towards meeting those needs.

The statistics are very much stacked against the blended family but families need to elevate above the statistics. This will not come without knowledge, challenges, and a lot of hard work. We have to realize that we do not want to be another statistics but rise above. If we need to seek out counseling to have someone share with us the work that needs to be done. The work and effort will definitely be time well spent.

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