



Blended Families: Getting the Recipe *Just* Right

Sara Olsen and Pamela Bartlett, Women's Conference April 2010

When I met my husband, I was so excited to start our new lives together and no longer have the stresses of being a single mom with four little girls that I don't think I really thought about the new stresses I was taking on by becoming a "step" mom and blending two families with six kids. Looking back, I think there are things we could have done differently to make the adjustments easier, but the main thing that I knew I needed to do from the start seems to have been the best thing to do... just love your husband and the kids, all of them, with the most Christ-like love you can muster.

When we were given this topic, it made me sit back and really think about what makes a blended family work... and work well. We certainly are not perfect – I don't think there is a *perfect* family out there. And I haven't had to face any really hard trials with our blended family, so I also don't have all the answers. But, I can share with you what I have found through research and real life experience that has so far worked for us. Hopefully, you can take some of these ideas home and implement them in your life.

The Proclamation to the World states, "Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work and wholesome recreational activities."

I figured, if that is what the First Presidency says will make a nuclear family work, well... then shouldn't that work for my blended family, too? I will be the first to admit that there are more complexities to a blended family than that of a nuclear family, but the basics should still be the same.

This handout will mostly focus on blending the items mentioned in the Proclamation, since I believe that the Lord wants us to focus on these items in order to make our family strong.

Ingredient #1: Faith

Have faith that the Lord brought you together for a reason. Not just you and your husband, but your whole family. You will be amazed at what just having a little faith in your blended family, and knowing that the Lord has specifically brought you together, can help you accomplish. Times are going to be tough – that's true in any family, but having faith in the Lord will help you get through. When your faith seems to be getting a

• • •
"Without faith, nothing is possible. With faith, nothing is impossible."
• • •

little low, then you need to get a little low – down on your knees.

Go back to the basics of the gospel. Make sure your family is doing the following:

- Holding regular family home evening.
- Attending all your church meetings, especially those teenagers – make sure they are going on Sunday and to their mutual activities.
- Attend the temple, often. Let your children see you attending the temple.
- Read your scriptures, daily. Both as a family, and in your independent studies. Let your children see you studying the scriptures.
- Have regular family gospel discussions. Not just on Monday evenings for FHE, but in the car on the way to soccer practice, during dinner (which should be spent together), after your nightly scripture study, etc. Make sure your family knows and understands the gospel so that they can get a strong testimony of it.
- Remain teachable and humble so that you can receive inspiration from the Holy Ghost. Have faith that you will receive personal inspiration.

Ingredient #2: Prayer

True, humble prayer can bring amazing power. Make sure as you learn how to parent more effectively as a blended family that you are utilizing the power of prayer. Pray for strength in your marriage, pray

● ● ●
“When life gets to be
more than you can
stand -- kneel.”
● ● ●

for your teenagers to have the strength they need to not only deal with the daily temptations they must face in this world today, but also to deal with whatever emotions they are for sure having trying to fit into a blended family. Pray for your little ones to grow up loving and caring for their new siblings and parent. When you say family prayers, let the kids hear you pray for them and for the family as a whole. Pray for you to have patience (you’re going to need it!). Pray for you to be humble to accept all of the changes that come with blending a family, knowing that you are not always

going to get your way, and that’s okay. Pray for a feeling a peace in your home and with yourself. Pray for strength to persevere through the tough times, knowing that if you do, you will be blessed with lots of happy times.

Ingredient #3: Repentance/Forgiveness

We are all going to make mistakes in life. The Lord gave us agency, and we all use it, whether for good or bad. Be prepared to forgive others in your family for hurting you while you adjust to being a blended family. It’s probably going to happen. Feelings are going to be hurt as you try to adjust to new schedules, routines, rules, etc. One of the hardest things about blending a family is that you are going to want to stick to what you were used to in your original family, and your husband and/or his kids are going to want to stick to what they were used to in their original family. Family members don’t always know exactly how to express their feelings about what they want, and a lot of the times things will come

out wrong and hurtful. You're going to have to figure out how to get beyond the hurt and go forward, especially as the mom. You will need to set the example. Teenagers who are having a hard time adjusting may even say things in order to make an impact, and be really mean. Forgive and move on. The more they see you forgiving them and loving them, the more they will come to trust you and feel more comfortable in your new family. You're going to make mistakes, too. No one is perfect. Be ready to ask for forgiveness and repent of those mistakes, and move on. The family that gets stuck on the mistakes they are making, and not growing because of the experiences, is going to be the one that continues to have problems. The Lord set a perfect example in forgiveness. We should follow it always.

Ingredient #4: Respect

As you blend families, you will find that there are a lot of new, different personalities in your home. While your original family may have had lots of time to grow up together and get to know each other and each person's personalities little by little, a blended family will find itself thrust together with all new personalities all at once. This can be overwhelming. The best way to deal with it: teach each other respect. This can be taught in so many ways:

- *Respect each other's privacy.* Every child should have their own space, as much as possible. This doesn't mean they all get their own rooms, but a place of their own when they want privacy is important. Especially for those who are used to having their own rooms and now need to share. Respect that need. If they see you respecting that need for privacy, they will know to respect your need for privacy, too.
- *Respect each other's personal items.* Make sure everyone has somewhere to put their stuff, even those kids who do not live with you permanently. And make sure everyone knows to respect each other's own items. Some kids may not be used to having siblings and think they can get into whatever they want. They will need to learn about being respectful of others' belongings.
- *Respect each other's time.* Each child is going to need his/her own time to deal with the changes in his/her life. Don't expect a perfect blending of happiness overnight. Learning to love and trust one another is going to take time, and some more than others. Respect that need. Also, respect that sometimes kids are going to need their alone time, either by themselves to think things through, or with each parent. It is a great idea to spend one-on-one time with each child, as much as is needed, to help each child through the tougher times. Then, as things get to be more normal, continue to spend that time so that each child knows how much they are loved and wanted.
- *Respect the love the child has for the natural parent.* Never say anything disparaging about the child's natural parent. No good will ever come of it. Instead, remember the Lord's example of speaking kindly and loving one another.

Ingredient #5: Love and Compassion

Of all the things that I found to work at bringing our blended family together, none was as important as showing Christlike love. If we could each show that kind of love and compassion for each other, everything else would just fall into place. At a recent Stake Conference, our Stake President talked about when he had his first daughter. He sat one night, rocking his sweet new baby, humbly asking in prayer how we were supposed to raise *his* little girl in this ever-declining moral world. He said a simple answer came to his mind, in a very clear voice, “Chad, she’s not your daughter, she’s mine.” None of the kids we are raising are truly ours. They are the Lord’s, and we are just looking after them for a very short time. We should be raising them the way the Lord wants us to raise them:

- Always showing them love and compassion, even during times of discipline.
- Teaching them to serve and love one another.
- Teaching them faith in their Lord, Jesus Christ, and loving the atonement and the miracle that it means for us.
- To have patience and long-suffering in all that we do, remembering that we are eternal beings who are stuck in “time” for a short period.
- Giving all of our time and effort to our family, no matter what kind of family that is, in order to be able to live together again for eternity, with our Savior.
- Setting a good example in all of our thoughts and actions toward each other.
- Wholly realizing that we are just guardians of these beautiful spirits, whether we gave birth to them or not, and the Lord has put an amazing amount of trust in us to help guide them back to Him.

Decide from the very beginning that you are going to love every member of the blended family, no matter what. That’s what Christ-like love is. Realize that those you love may not have the same attitude, which will, of course, make your task harder. But, with time, they will come around and see your love for them and return it. It may take a long, long time. Kids go through a lot when there is a divorce or the death of a loved parent. Some may rebound quickly, others not; but your love will only help them heal and grow. Don’t expect to ever replace their natural parent, but with love and compassion and patience, a new place will open up in their hearts for you.

● ● ●
“There is joy in every
sound, when there’s
love at home.”
● ● ●

● ● ●
“For our part, we must
remain steadfast in
hope, work with all our
strength, and trust in
God.” Pres. Uchtdorf
● ● ●

Ingredient #6: Work

This may be one area that the kids want to skip – but it really is an important one! The prophets and apostles keep teaching us as parents to teach our kids the value of good work. It is important to who they will be as adults, especially as future leaders in the church.

We need them. Here are a few ways to implement the value of work in your blended home:

- *Give the kids chores.* A larger family typically means more cleaning up to do. And, as the saying goes, more hands make lighter work. Even the youngest can get a chore, like picking up toys in the family room. Kids are able to learn responsibility and feel like a contributing part of the family.
- *Make big jobs a whole-family affair.* If there are big jobs to do, such as planting a garden, cleaning up the yard, spring cleaning, etc., bring the whole family in to split up the work and work on it together. You'd be amazed at how well a family can blend together when they work together. Even if you have a lot of grumbling at first, if you show them that you have a good attitude, it will generally wear off on someone else, and then another person, and so on, until everyone feels pretty good about what you're doing as a family.
- *Be sensitive* to those who are not used to working on chores and family projects. Not every family has the same work ethics, so work may be a new thing to some kids. Add chores and responsibilities slowly, with both parents agreeing on what should be implemented. Sometimes the natural parent will need to implement the changes in rules that both parents have agreed upon, so that the kids don't feel too overwhelmed with a new person telling them a bunch of new things to do.
- *Reward.* Make sure the kids can see some kind of reward at the end, even if it is just a nice pat on the back or hug thanking them for their job well done. Feeling accomplished goes a long way to build a person's, or a family's, self-esteem.

Ingredient #7: Wholesome Recreational Activities



Having fun can always make things easier! We highly recommend good times, lots and lots of good times, with your blended family. At first it might be more difficult, but you will find over time that getting some happy memories under your belt is very helpful in helping to bond a family. We took a trip to Hawaii after we had been married for a couple of years – all nine of us. Now, this might be an extreme vacation – we had a great opportunity we couldn't pass up – it is also an incredible memory for our entire family and we talk about it often. We also talk about the little things we have done together; surprise birthday parties, girl's nights out, the boys going skiing, and one of our best memories -- one night when my husband and I were out on a date, the kids thought they heard someone downstairs. When they called us frightened, we asked what it sounded like, and our oldest son said, "I think there is a bum downstairs eating Captain Crunch cereal." It turned out to be the washing machine on its final rotation... and we all laugh about it still this day. Make an effort to do fun things together, and when funny, enjoyable things happen, make them a memory that you can recall and laugh about.

We wanted to include some ideas you could use to go and have fun with your family, including some on next-to-nothing budgets. Take a moment to read over them and pick a few that could help strengthen your family -- and **then go do them together!**

Athletic

- Have a nice afternoon in a local park. Take a walk, ride bikes, throw a Frisbee, rollerblade, feed the birds, fly kites, have a picnic-lots of fun possibilities.
- Head out in your yard or neighborhood area and play games like hide-and-seek and capture the flag.
- Take turns sharing your sporting skills, teach the family how to play your favorite sport, and then take turns being the student and learn from other family members.
- Go miniature golfing together or one on one with a child. You could even set up your own course, you could even set up an obstacle course and have a contest by timing the family.
- Go explore some trails nearby your home and go biking or walking, enjoy being in nature and look for bugs or rocks and start a collection. Talk about the beauty and blessings of nature while out.
- Learn how to dance together-get information from a book at the library or look-up online. There are many different kinds of dancing-swing, ballroom, country dancing, etc.
- Support any children or friends in sporting events by going as a family and cheering them on together.
- In winter you can go sledding, build a snowman including a snowball fight, maybe even try skiing.
- Also in winter try and switch up the seasons and play croquet or golf with brightly colored balls.
- Encourage the family to plan or participate in a physical fitness program and set goals to achieve.
- Make up your own family games while playing outside or you could play a sport together but switch the rules or add funny new ones to make it unique.

Educational

- Tour your own city, set out to discover and learn information about where you live. Tour historical buildings, go read the plaques on memorials, visit the library or City hall for info, go to any Museums that are local or any other historical sites.
- Go on a nature hike and learn about the plants and wildlife that you see along the way. A nice early morning hike would be fun, take along snacks and watch the sunrise.
- Make a family movie. Write up some scripts or just have it be spontaneous. Use props that you find around the house. Everyone can watch the production with a bowl of popcorn.
- Find a local arts center and have the family choose something to learn about such as photography, pottery, painting, etc. There might be someone in the ward who could teach or has a unique talent to share.
- Go on an "I Spy" adventure at a museum, zoo or art exhibit. Have the family take turns finding interesting things to point out.

- Take a world tour from your table. Pick a place and make a meal from that country. Try learning more about that particular country through a book, online, or watching a movie about it.
- Have a starry night by studying some astronomy, going to a planetarium or star-gazing. Make star shaped cookies for a treat.
- Go to your school's band or orchestra concerts. There might also be some community musical events that your family could attend. Focus on the interests of the family members to make this fun.
- Have a bookworm night. Go to the library and load up on books for the evening. Read the night away!
- In the Spring, as a family drive around town and look for baby animals of all kinds. Talk about the names of baby animals also.

Service

- Rake a neighbor's leaves, wash windows, visit a nursing home, or volunteer at a homeless shelter.
- Your family could do secret acts of service like shoveling snow or leaving cookies on doorsteps. Offer babysitting to a couple in your ward that needs a night out. Have your family take care of their children by entertaining-playing games and reading to them.
- Buy flowers and arrange them beautifully in planter boxes and give them to people in your neighborhood. You could also plant the flowers in a widows yard and do some clean up too.
- Your family could pick a designated area around the neighborhood or town to pick up garbage. Participate in Community Service Activities, Humanitarian efforts, or fund-raising drives.
- Plan dinner as a family and plan to make extra to take to a family in need.
- Together with your family go clean for someone who has been sick and could use the help.
- Plan a family service project by brainstorming ideas and find out what your family would want to do to help others in the ward. Then plan a time to go and serve.
- Take your family to the Bishop's warehouse and help stock shelves , clean or organize there.

Food/Artistic

- Make sculptures out of play dough, paint rocks, decorate or tie-dye shirts, or finger paint.
- Do an evening at camp inside your home by putting star constellations on the ceiling, make shadow puppets, play card or board games on the floor, tinfoil dinners in the oven.
- Teach your children how to make your family favorite recipes. Have your family plan and prepare menu's together.
- With neighbors have a progressive dinner. Have your family do the planning and assign drinks, appetizers, main course, and dessert.
- Mix, roll and bake holiday sugar cookies and decorate with colored frosting and candies with your family and give everyone a job to do.
- Watch a cooking show together to try and learn how to make something new. Create that same meal in your kitchen with everyone helping from start to finish.

- Develop some family food traditions for birthdays, holidays, and maybe add Chinese New Year and Cinco De Mayo for fun. Seasonal food can also create fun traditions.
- Have Grandparents, family or friends over for dinner for a special occasion or for a holiday. Invite them to enjoy some family food traditions with you.
- Try going out at a different time of day. Go out for breakfast on a Saturday morning.
- Have a photo scavenger hunt to see who can get the most interesting shots of the same subject. If you're using a digital camera, have a computer slideshow of all the photos you take.
- Go to a play that is put on by the community or a local school. You could go out for ice cream after or go home and have ice cream sundaes.
- Have your family work on their artistic creativity by writing a song, poem or story. Have everyone share their masterpieces.
- Have a family talent show by having everyone participate from oldest to youngest sharing something special or unique they can do.

Activities listed from Family First Manual:

- Play Games
- Go out together for dinner or treats
- Learn new skills: Cooking, Setting a table, planning a vacation, enjoying recreational outing, changing a tire, finding locations on a map, appreciate nature, art or service
- A Cake Bake-show ingredients for a cake, talk about ingredients that make up a good family while everyone is helping with a job
- My favorite things-Everyone takes a turn to talk about one family member; what their favorite things are and what special things this person adds to our family.
- Out of the Hat-Everyone takes a turn pulling a question out of a hat and answers the question. Questions are about memories and strengths and traditions and goals about your family.
- Leave love notes for each family member and ask-how they felt about the person who wrote it and if it made a difference in their day.
- A Game about Love-One person describes an Act of Love by someone in the family and the others guess who the loving family member is.
- Family Love Challenge-Within a time limit, see how long a list each of you can create of ways to show love. Discuss the lists and copy these items onto small cards. Mix them up and divide equally among the family members. During the coming week each person tries show love by doing what is on the card.
- Testimony meeting about the Savior-Each family member can share their feelings about the love our Heavenly Father has shown by sending His Son to save the world. Everyone share their love for the Savior and your appreciation for His sacrifice. Everyone share how repentance has brought peace and joy into your life.
- Plan a Service project-Explain that you are planning a family service project together. Brainstorm ideas together to come up with the best idea to help someone outside your family.

When planning, consider what someone is in need of. Remind family members not to tell anyone.

- Preparing for Emergencies as a family-Have the family discuss some emergencies that have happened in your home or area; power out, injury, fire, etc. Discuss what happened and did you have the things you needed and/or could you do what was necessary. Plan 72-hour kits by making a list, gathering supplies and making decisions about where to place them and responsibilities when emergencies come up.
- Fire Safety around the House-Talk about protection against fire and make a to-do checklist of things that you are already doing and improvements that need to be made. Talk about a Escape plan if a fire did happen in your home and everyone's responsibilities to be safe.

From OUR FAMILY Pamphlet

Other Monday evening activities might include:

Family games, Family Service projects, Sharing talents with family members, Home Beautification Projects, Gardening, Inventory of year's supply and other food storage projects, Home production projects, Planning for vacations and special activities, Family council meetings, Planning or participating in a physical fitness program, Fellowshiping nonmember friends, playing kickball, softball, or soccer as a family.

Sabbath Day activities:

Read the scriptures, conf reports & Church publications, Study the lives and teachings of the prophets, Write in journals, pray and meditate, write to or visit relatives and friends, write to missionaries, enjoy uplifting music, have family gospel instruction, hold family council meetings, read with your family, Do genealogical research or family history, sing church hymns, develop appreciation for the cultural arts, plan FHE and other family activities, fellowship neighbors, visit the sick, the aged, and the lonely, hold interviews with family members.

Children spell LOVE by T-I-M-E!!

3 Simple Ways to become a Happier Family:

I thought this whole little booklet is Awesome.....so simple and so perfect! I also thought it makes sense that the first topic and the most important thing our families can do is **Making Time for each other!**

Make every minute count:

- *Determine what is most important in your life
- *Examine how you currently spend your time
- *Allocate enough time to those things that are most important

Block out one evening each week:

- *Teach values that are important to your family
- *Discuss topics of interest
- *Plan for important events
- *Share uplifting stories

Do things together:

- *Musical-attend your children's music recitals or local musical performances
- *Nature-Hike, camp, bird watch, or work together in your garden
- *Service-take dinner to a neighbor, participate in community service activities, or help with fund-raising drives
- *Spiritual-go to church, read scriptures, and pray together regularly
- *Social-go out for ice cream, go on a picnic, have parties with family and friends
- *Sports-attend sports events, play backyard games, ice skate, roller skate, ride bikes, hunt, boat, dance, or ski
- *Work-clean and maintain your home and garden, prepare meals, paint a room, plant a tree
- *Learn-visit historic sites, museums, zoos, planetariums, or libraries

Have meals together:

- *Help your children plan and cook some meals
- *Discuss family plans and events
- *Share favorite family stories or experiences
- *Invite grandparents, friends, or other family members
- *Ask about each person's funniest moment of the day
- *Discuss things they learned that surprised them

Go one-on-one:

- *Participate in hobbies and activities you both enjoy
- *Tell stories or sing songs at bedtime
- *Schedule individual time with each child
- *Read the scriptures together
- *Ask your children what they would like to do

Get involved with your children's activities:

- *Volunteer to help with their school, sports, or club activities
- *Attend sports, recitals, and other events
- *Help them practice and prepare

The First Presidency has given us some specific counsel about the time we spend together as families: ***“Meet together often, and share the problems and successes of the day. Plan your work and activities together so that each person may do his share and contribute to a happy family. We promise that as you do this and as your family members regularly pray together, sing together, read and discuss the scriptures together, and share their testimonies with each other, love and harmony will increase in your home”*** (Personal Commitment [family home evening manual, 1979–80], p. v).

Turn off the television:

- *Establish household rules that eliminate inappropriate or excessive viewing
- *Play games together
- *Help children with their homework
- *Go for a walk together
- *Get to know each other better

Help your children develop their talents:

- *Help your children identify their talents
- *Support and encourage their interest and hobbies
- *Teach them to appreciate other people's talents
- *Help them learn how to use their skills and talents to help other people
- *Show them the importance of being grateful for their unique talents

Make chores fun:

- *After meals, invite everyone to help clean up
- *While working, talk to your children about their day
- *Teach children the value of work by example
- * Ask your children to work together to solve chore-related problems
- *Help them find chores they enjoy
- *Set them up for success by providing tasks that match their abilities

Blending a family can be an amazing blessing with rewarding, happy times. There are bound to be tough times, but with a lot of love, patience, and always keeping an ***eternal perspective***, you can make it through to the other side – and enjoy the rewards of your work.

Following is a little more information we thought was important...*

- **“Be realistic** – things won’t be perfect overnight.
- **Be patient** – good relationships take time and kids need time to trust and count on you.
- **Limit your expectations** – know that you will probably give a lot of time, energy, love and affection that will not be returned immediately. Think of it as making small investments that may one day yield a lot of interest, but don’t expect anything in return for now.

Children want to feel:

- **Safe and secure** – Children want to be able to count on their parents. Children of divorce have already felt the upset of having people let them down, and may not be eager to give second chances to their parents or stepparents.
- **Loved** – Kids like to see and feel your affection, although it should be a gradual process.
- **Seen and valued** – Kids often feel unimportant or invisible when it comes to decision making in the new blended family. Recognize their integral role in the family when you are making decisions.
- **Heard and emotionally connected to** – Kids are eager for real connection and understanding. Creating an honest and open environment free of judgment will help them feel heard. Show them that you can view the situation from their perspective.
- **Appreciated and encouraged** – Children of all ages respond to praise and encouragement and like to feel appreciated for their contribution.
- **Limits and boundaries** – Children may not think they need limits, but a lack of boundaries sends a signal that the child is unworthy of the parents’ time, care and attention. As a new stepparent, you shouldn’t step in as the enforcer at first, but work with your spouse to set limits

Kids of different ages and genders will adjust differently. The physical and emotional needs of a 2 year old girl are different than that of a 13 year old boy, but don’t mistake differences in development and age for differences in fundamental needs. Just because a teenager may take a long time accepting your love and affection doesn’t mean that he doesn’t want it. You will need to adjust your approach with different age levels and genders, but your goal of establishing a trusting relationship is the same.

**Young children
under 10**

- May adjust more easily because they thrive on cohesive family relationships.
- Are more accepting of a new adult.
- Feel competitive for their parent’s attention.
- Have more daily needs to be met.

**Adolescents
aged 10-14**

- May have the most difficult time adjusting to a stepfamily.
- Need more time to bond before accepting a new person as a

disciplinarian.

- May not demonstrate their feelings openly, but may be as sensitive, or more sensitive, than young children when it comes to needing love, support, discipline and attention.

Teenagers 15 or older

- May have less involvement in stepfamily life.
- Prefer to separate from the family as they form their own identities.
- Also may not be open in their expression of affection or sensitivity, but still want to feel important, loved and secure.

Creating clear, safe boundaries in blended families

An important part of building trust in a family has to do with discipline. Couples should discuss the role each stepparent will play in raising their respective children, as well as changes in household rules.

The following tips can help make this difficult transition a bit smoother:

- Establish the stepparent as more of a friend or counselor rather than a disciplinarian.
- Let the biological (custodial) parent remain primarily responsible for discipline until the stepparent has developed solid bonds with the kids.
- Create a list of family rules. Discuss the rules with the children and post them in a prominent place. This may diminish custodial parent-stepparent-stepchild tension.
- Try to understand what the rules and boundaries are for the kids in their other residence, and, if possible, be consistent.

You will no doubt focus a lot of energy on your children and their adjustment, but you also need to focus on building a strong marital bond. This will ultimately benefit everyone, including the children. If the children see love, respect and open communication between you and your spouse, they will feel more secure and may even learn to model those qualities.

- Set aside time as a couple, by making regular dates or meeting for lunch during school time.
- Present a unified parenting approach to the children – arguing or disagreeing in front of them may encourage them to try to come between you. “

*Info. taken from helpguide.org.

Following are some great talks we found on lds.org that teach about blending families:

Ensign » 1981 » June

Blending Family Styles: Making a Second Marriage Work

By Francine Christensen

Hands tightly clasped, Glenn and I knelt in prayer, preparing for our eternal alliance. A few hours later on that beautiful July morning in 1961, we were married in the Manti Temple. Our eternal adventure had begun. Five wonderful years and three children later, we boarded a plane for New Zealand, where Glenn was going to teach at the Church College. Three weeks later, he and another teacher drowned in a fishing accident.

His stepping from mortality into immortality so suddenly and swiftly left me bewildered, confused, and frightened. As I struggled with the problems of coping with the funeral arrangements, my children's needs and my own grief, I went to our bishop for a special blessing the day after Glenn's death. That blessing was immensely comforting to me and helped me to deal with the challenges of getting us started on a new life.

One important part of that blessing was a phrase that I barely remembered at the time. He said, "There is someone being prepared for you." When I was ready, almost two years later, I met Max.

Max had come through his own crucible of pain and grief. On a morning in August 1967, he heard a thud in the kitchen and rushed in to find his wife lying on the kitchen floor in agony. For the next eight weeks, he watched Jean, his sweetheart of twenty-five years, die of cancer. She was released from her suffering on October 11.

We met in the spring of 1968 on a balmy evening. On November 1, we were married. Max had twin girls who were already married, a nineteen-year-old son, and an eight-year-old daughter. My sons were six and two with a four-year-old daughter between. I also had the responsibility of a fourteen-year-old Lamanite girl. The following year, we added a daughter of our own.

Thus, the challenges of putting it all together were vividly real. What happens to children who still miss the departed parent? How are decisions remade which were already made with the first partner?

We've observed that some people remarry to meet physical or emotional needs that they haven't been able to resolve, while others remarry out of a peaceful sense that they are ready to make changes. In the first kind of marriage, there are usually intense problems because the person isn't ready to give up his past and insists that the new companion accept the old pattern instead of forging a new one. We've seen many second marriages flounder and even fail because of these demands and insecurities.

But even when both partners feel secure enough in their lives and values to be willing and able to compromise, any couple contemplating a second marriage needs to consider several factors carefully. In addition to being able to talk about how we had coped with our grief, Max and I also discussed living arrangements, blending family patterns, disciplining children, handling finances, and living the gospel. Of course, it's impossible to discuss all of these issues completely before marriage, but every moment we spent discussing them during courtship paid off.

Living Arrangements

Where will you live following marriage? When finances aren't a problem, building or buying another home is probably the most sensible decision. This way, there are no memories to challenge the newly created family. With a neutral home on neutral ground, it is easier to achieve unity.

We know one couple who sold both their previous homes and built a new one, an especially satisfying solution since each of the ten children had a voice in planning the new home and working out the compromises. In contrast, we know another family who moved into "his" house. After more than a decade of problems, he still refuses to move out of the house and she refuses to live there any longer with his memories. Of course, other problems complicated this conflict, but that initial decision did not contribute to a solution.

In another case we know, it was financially advantageous for them to stay in the husband's house, but they agreed that the wife had a free hand to redecorate completely. Wisely, she involved all of the children. His children learned to appreciate her taste, and her children felt that a place was being made for them.

Blending Family Patterns

How do you develop a sense of oneness in a second marriage? So small a thing as "but we always did the laundry on Tuesday" can temporarily disturb the tranquility in either partner's heart or upset a teenager who may feel loyal to a former parent.

A little sensitivity to language can eliminate many problems. One recently married couple was sorting fruit jars when the husband said, "Hey, honey, we used to paint an X on the chipped ones with fingernail polish. Then we knew which ones we could use for jam." It's a great suggestion, but it was a painful reminder to the wife that "we" did not include her. If she had felt defensive or competitive, she might have challenged the suggestion. Wisely, she grinned and said, "I've got an idea. Why don't we paint an X on the chipped ones?"

Problems can multiply when children are concerned. Some children are easy to love, and some are difficult. Often older children resent change, and little ones become frightened and confused. In my own experience, love grows as one senses each stepchild's individual needs and meets them in ways that make each child feel loved, loveable, and worthwhile.

It's easy to ignore a child's needs—adults in a new marriage are under a tremendous strain and have great emotional needs too. And some problems never will be resolved. But an unloved child is a weak point in the family structure.

Sometimes ignorance can be an obstacle to loving. I had young children while Max's were older. I needed a crash course on adolescents while he needed to brush up on the early years. In other families, one half may contribute all girls while the other half contributes all boys. One half of the new family may enjoy museums while the other half prefers the tennis courts.

And the new marriage partners must relate to each other. Both of them have probably been used to making the final decisions alone. Now two must be involved. Usually a widowed father—and a divorced father if he has custody of the children—has learned new ways of nurturing to meet some of the children's emotional needs. A widowed or divorced mother may also have worked outside the home and learned to fix things herself.

Sometimes, both partners go into remarriage with the comfortable assumption that they'll resume old patterns. But it may not always be possible or even desirable. One father, who stopped using his weekends for golf when he needed to take care of the children, realized that his desire to give his children another mother did not mean that he wanted to revert to being the kind of distracted, uninvolved father that he had been before his first marriage ended. And a woman who has discovered resources of self-reliance and independence would certainly want to channel those traits appropriately.

Since the husband and wife must be in accord before the children's needs can be met successfully, they need to plan some time for their own growing relationship—particularly regular times to communicate about the needs and demands that the children make, away from the pressure-cooker that daily living can sometimes be.

Then they can work on meeting the needs of the children. If a child suddenly has to compete with several new brothers and sisters for the attention that was previously undivided, the transition can be difficult. One family solved this problem by each parent taking his or her own children out for a separate evening. They discussed the past, remembered the departed parent, and concentrated on themselves. These trips became less necessary as adjustment progressed, but they helped smooth the beginning.

Another challenge is how to find time to spend with each child when the number of children increases dramatically. One mother, after much fasting and prayer, spent a few minutes alone each evening with each child. In a bedroom with the door closed, they had prayer and set a goal which they wrote down in a "goal book." The child worked on the goal for a week, evaluating his progress each evening. At the end of the month, the mother wrote a letter about the child's progress. All of the children were motivated to improve and the mother became closer to the stepchildren as they became aware of her concern for them. Meanwhile, the father was having his own time with them working on straightening up the house and getting them ready for bed.

Another mother, discouraged by the workload of a suddenly larger family, assigned each child a room in the home to clean in addition to his own bedroom. This room had to be cleaned before school. (There were no preschoolers.) With cleaning less of a problem, cooking and laundry also seemed less overwhelming. The children learned to help each other, and they all went to school feeling satisfied with their accomplishments.

Disciplining Children

Max and I discovered that strict discipline had to wait until we had a good working relationship with all of the children. We also had to learn to attack the problem, not the child or each other.

Parent councils, family councils, and family home evenings were all places where we sorted out the rules, reduced confusion, and increased communication and support. When children knew that they could talk to each other as well as to us, the bickering and tattling dropped dramatically.

Even more important was the time Max and I spent together talking about our values. We could not assume that the children would somehow “know” what they could snack on, when they could watch television, how late they could be out, or even where they should put their dirty clothes. It was hard, detailed work to look at our assumptions about behavior, talk about them, and agree on standards that we both felt comfortable with. But until we did, we could not help the children feel good about following the rules.

Handling Finances

Experts say that money alone is the greatest cause of marital problems—and that includes second marriages. What happens to the father who has been paying child support for three and now has three more? What about allowances? And what about the husband or wife who can’t manage money?

We feel that the best way to start is to pool the financial resources of both partners so that decisions can be made—with the children, when appropriate—on how to spend “our” money. One family we know decided to keep finances separate because the husband was a meticulous bookkeeper and the wife was an impulse shopper. As a result, the father felt no responsibility for his stepchildren, and the mother overcompensated with lavish presents.

This does not mean that every financial detail should be subject to review. Every budget, no matter how tight, should include a sum, no matter how small, that each spouse gets to spend without having to explain. This is sometimes a good solution with older children, as well, particularly if they find themselves with less access to available money than before the marriage.

When a stepparent reaches the point of honestly wanting to provide financially for a child, it’s a healthy sign of adjustment in the new marriage.

Living the Gospel

Other problems concern religious observance. One family may find watching a television show an acceptable Sabbath activity while another does not. Older stepchildren may not share a strong commitment to the gospel. And being sealed to the first spouse may make the couple feel that total unity on religious questions is not necessary.

In one family we know, the husband and wife had formed the family pattern of reading the scriptures aloud each night. As the children came along, they were also included. In another marriage, which also began in the temple, this couple did not set the same goal and had fewer spiritual experiences as a result. When remarriage brought the two families together, the mother objected to the lack of regular family prayer, no spiritual counseling for the children, and stepchildren who complained that “you’re trying to change dad.” She resolved the difficulty by quietly and firmly providing the kinds of gospel

experiences for her children that she thought were important. She discovered that she was being too rigid in some areas; and the stepchildren discovered that they liked participating in some of the experiences.

Sometimes the challenges posed by sealings in previous marriages cause concern. One of the great men that we know is married, for the first time, to a woman whose temple marriage was interrupted by her husband's death after the birth of two children. They now have five children of their own and the father has raised all seven to be fully committed to the principles of the gospel. Even though he has felt some uncertainty about the future, he has felt the spiritual peace that he will be blessed and be happy if he fulfills his responsibilities.

We've discovered that example, as in other areas, is the best teacher in gospel living. Preaching to stepchildren or to a new partner usually backfires. Instead, we recommend teaching your own children what is right, then praying that all might be affected by the Spirit's influence.

Conclusion

Second marriages can work and are working. No marriage become perfect overnight, and some problems may never be resolved. But it is an extremely satisfying experience to see your new family develop individually and learn to love each other.

In summary, here are some suggestions to help your marriage work.

1. Do not criticize each other or each other's children.
2. Do not share troubles outside your family that properly belong within it, but do maintain your former friendships and develop new ones so that you do not put impossible pressures on your spouse or your children to meet all of your emotional needs.
3. Keep a sense of perspective. Your deceased or divorced partner may have been perfect in areas in which your current partner falls short—but your previous partner probably needed improvement in other areas.
4. Do not exclude your present spouse by talking overmuch of former activities.
5. Never argue over the stepchildren. Prayer usually brings better results.
6. Do not think the former way is the only way.
7. Confide in your children and stepchildren only those things which concern them.
8. Try the things your new companion likes—and both of you feel free to try brand-new things. Change is something to be welcomed.
9. Be yourself. Remember, someone fell in love with you because of what you are.

10. Be patient. Not all issues can be resolved your way, and some issues will probably remain unresolved.

Notes

Francine Christensen, mother of nine children, serves as Young Women athletic director in her Orem, Utah, ward.

Uniting Blended Families

By Elder *Robert E. Wells*

Emeritus Member of the Seventy and President of the Santiago Chile Temple

Robert E. Wells, "Uniting Blended Families," *Liahona*, June 1999, 29

When my father passed away, my mother was left with two young sons. In time she married a childless widower, and they had one son together. I grew up in what my parents could have termed a "hers-ours" arrangement. However, we thought of the five of us as a traditional family.

We avoided such labels as "stepfather" and "half brother." For example, I accepted the fact that I had two fathers: one was my biological father, who gave me a rich, noble heritage; the other raised me and gave me a second rich, noble heritage. My two brothers and I grew up united and equal, though my youngest brother had a different last name. Our "blended family" was successful because we were given love and respect as well as opportunities to serve and sacrifice. By definition, a blended family is any family in which one or both parents are not the biological parents of the children in that family. Blended families can result from various circumstances, such as remarriage and adoption following divorce or the death of a spouse.

Like nuclear families, blended families within and without the Church can be successful, loving, and unified. However, blended families can face unique challenges as parents and children live together in new relationships and new surroundings. In cases of remarriage following a divorce, for example, children can feel torn between two adults and two families. Parents who create blended families face the challenge of developing and strengthening their marital relationship as well as their relationship with the children in that family.

Deciding to Remarry

A decision to create a blended family requires great care and consideration of many factors. A blended family draws into close association not only the couple planning to marry but also their children, children's spouses, in-laws, extended families, and the couple's former spouses.

"Marriage is perhaps the most vital of all the decisions and has the most far-reaching effects, for it has to do not only with immediate happiness, but eternal joys as well," President Spencer W. Kimball said. "It affects not only the two people involved, but also their families and particularly their children and their children's children down through the many generations" (*Marriage and Divorce* [1976], 10).

The Lord has said, "It is not good that the man [or woman] should be alone" (**Gen. 2:18**). Nevertheless, remarriage and efforts to create a successful blended family can be frustrated without proper preparation by both parties. The decision to remarry is difficult and should not be hastened. Some divorced individuals are left angry or scarred by their previous marriage; others may harbor unreasonable expectations of the future while having difficulty letting go of the past. Those who have lost a spouse to death need time to work through their grief. While it is not ideal to be alone, neither is it good to remarry and undertake the challenges and responsibilities of a blended family before one is ready.

Marriage and a home where children are reared by *both* a mother and a father are part of our Heavenly Father's divine design. But "disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation" ("The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Liahona*, October 1998, 24).

Such was the case in my adult life. After I married my high school sweetheart, we had three beautiful children and were enjoying life together as we had planned and hoped. But then my wife died in a tragic accident. I grieved and despaired for nearly two years before my parents and my wife's parents encouraged me to consider remarrying—both for me and for my children's benefit.

After fasting and taking the matter to our Father in Heaven in earnest prayer, I felt it was right for me to remarry.

Choosing a Spouse

After a person decides to remarry, it may take some time to find a spouse. In my case I wrote to several friends and relatives who understood my circumstances and told them of my desire to remarry. I asked them if they knew of anyone who would be willing to consider becoming a mother to three children and a wife to a Church district president and banker in South America with many demands on his time. After receiving six recommendations, I took a vacation to the United States and ultimately felt prompted to date and eventually propose marriage to my beloved Helen.

Helen brought a two-year-old daughter into our union, and I brought my sons, ages three and six, and my nine-year-old daughter. In time, we had three daughters together, which gave us a blended family of seven children.

Initially, what made our union possible and successful was that we both received answers from our Father in Heaven reassuring us that He approved of our decision to marry. Without that firm base,

marriage after what proved to be a short courtship would have been unwise. But I didn't expect Heavenly Father to do my work for me. Before taking the matter to Him in prayer, I inquired about Helen's family background, traditions, testimony, and commitment to the Lord. She also learned enough about me so that she felt we would be compatible.

As we courted, each of us quickly saw in the other three very important characteristics necessary to make a marriage and a blended family successful:

- **Character.** Does the person you are considering marrying hold a temple recommend? Is he or she living a life worthy of the Spirit? Has he or she led a life of service in the kingdom of God?
- **Capability.** Can your potential husband support a family? Is your potential wife capable and willing to help you rear your children? Do you both have the determination to make your blended family successful and to rely upon Heavenly Father in doing so?
- **Capacity.** Do you each have necessary spiritual reserves—generated through faith, prayer, service, and sacrifice—that you can call upon when faced with the challenges of uniting a blended family?

"In selecting a [marriage] companion," President Kimball said, "certainly the most careful planning and thinking and praying and fasting should be done to be sure that of all the decisions, this one must not be wrong. In true marriage there must be a union of minds as well as of hearts. Emotions must not wholly determine decisions, but the mind and the heart, strengthened by fasting and prayer and serious consideration, will give one a maximum chance of marital happiness" (*Marriage and Divorce*, 11).

Meeting the Challenges

Following the marriage ceremony, the hoped-for "happily ever after" experience can come to a blended family only through a lot of hard work, prayer, patience, and persistence. All families face challenges, but certain challenges can be more difficult in blended families. Regardless of how compatible two newlyweds may be, they need to be prepared to handle the trials that will come to their blended family.

Following are some issues, along with related suggestions, that blended families may need to address openly:

- **Unity.** The Lord has said, "If ye are not one ye are not mine" (**D&C 38:27**). Blended families seeking the Lord's approval need to strive for unity. Family unity starts with the parents. Solidarity and love between couples help generate solidarity and love among siblings. That is why the primary relationship in a strong, unified family is the relationship between husband and wife.

To generate unity, families need to share goals and time together. Church attendance, family home evening, family prayer, family councils, work projects, vacations, and leisure-time activities provide opportunities for togetherness. It is important that blended families use the best of former family goals and traditions and that they also establish new goals and traditions.

Stepparents need to be patient. Because emotional attachments between stepparents and stepchildren require time, it sometimes may take years to establish a united and harmonious blended family. Adults as well as children bring to a blended family experiences and expectations that can affect new family

relationships. Some stepparents may need to play a secondary role in the life of a child. Rather than compete with a relationship between a child and a parent who is no longer in the home, stepparents need to concentrate on building a new relationship with the child.

Though some children may be reluctant to bond with a new parent, they should not have to compete for that parent's love. While a stepmother, for example, may never take the place of a deceased parent in a child's heart, she can create a place of her own in that child's heart by showing love and exercising patience.

All families would do well to remember the words of the proclamation on the family written by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities" (*Liahona*, October 1998, 24).

- **Communication.** Diplomatic yet open and honest communication is essential if a blended family is to define responsibilities, establish boundaries, and resolve emotional issues. The wounds left by death or divorce—insecurity, lack of self-worth and confidence, reluctance to trust others—need to be talked about openly and resolved so that new patterns of healthy familial interaction can occur. Family members do not simultaneously close the door on the past. A widower may be ready for a new wife before his children are ready for a new mother. Those children need parents who will encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings.

"To be effective, family communication must be an exchange of feelings and information," said Elder Marvin J. Ashton, formerly of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. "Doors of communication will swing open in the home if members will realize time and participation on the part of all are necessary ingredients. In family discussions, differences should not be ignored, but should be weighed and evaluated calmly. One's point or opinion usually is not as important as a healthy, continuing relationship" ("Family Communications," *Ensign*, May 1976, 52).

Members of a blended family should respect the sweet memories and feelings others in the family may have about a loved one who has passed on. In the case of divorce, they should be sensitive to the pain and suffering inflicted upon family members and from which they may still be recovering. Kind, thoughtful openness that fosters the sharing of feelings is essential to building new, healthy relationships at all levels: child to child, parent to child, parent to parent, spouse to new relatives, and so on.

- **Sealings.** Former United States senator Jake Garn was reluctant to remarry following the death of his first wife, Hazel, in 1976, but he soon realized he could not be both a father and a mother to his children. When he began dating Kathleen Brewerton, who would become his second wife, questions soon arose about how his first wife would feel should he become sealed to a second wife. The couple took their questions to President Spencer W. Kimball.

"He said he did not know exactly how these relationships will be worked out, but he did know that through faithfulness all will be well and we will have much joy," Brother Garn later recalled. "Kathleen told him that she was afraid of offending Hazel. President Kimball's demeanor seemed to change. From being somewhat hesitant in his earlier answers, he now became sure and spoke with firmness. He looked right at Kathleen and with a tear forming in his eye, he said, 'I do know this: you have nothing to

worry about. Not only will she accept you, she will put her arms around you and thank you for raising her children' " (*Why I Believe* [1992], 13).

Family members need not worry about the sealing situation of blended families as it might be in the next life. Our concern is to live the gospel now and to love others, especially those in our family. If we live the gospel to the best of our ability, the Lord in His love and mercy will bless us in the next life and all things will be right.

I have seen some new blended families become torn apart by worrying about who will belong to whom and who will be with whom in the next life. My mother, who is sealed to my deceased father, is married to a widower who is sealed to his first wife, who died childless. My mother and her second husband have a son, who is my brother. We are not concerned about who will be sealed to whom. We simply trust in the Lord's wisdom and love and try to live righteously.

- **Intimacy.** Married couples are commanded to "cleave" to each other and to "be one flesh" (**Matt. 19:5**). In order for intimacy in a new marriage to be fulfilling, there must be understanding, care, concern, and consideration.

Couples need to be open in a kind and sensitive way. Misunderstandings can occur if one spouse believes that intimacy is unnecessary because the new blended family is large enough or if the other spouse believes that at a certain age physical intimacy is no longer important. Even if such issues are discussed before marriage, they may need to be reconsidered in light of changing feelings, health, and circumstances.

President Gordon B. Hinckley has counseled: "I have learned that the real essence of happiness in marriage lies not so much in romance as in an anxious concern for the comfort and well-being of one's companion. Thinking of self alone and of the gratification of personal desires will build neither trust, love, nor happiness. Only when there is unselfishness will love, with its concomitant qualities, flourish and blossom" ("I Believe," *Liahona*, March 1993, 8).

- **Finances.** The budget of a blended family can be complicated because of assets and debts carried over from a previous marriage. Alimony and child support may come into play, and previous spending habits may need to be adjusted because of a change in income or an increase in the number of family members to feed and clothe.

All family members need to understand the family's financial situation and monetary constraints. Establishing a sound budget and setting financial priorities with the help of all family members can limit misunderstandings. Review the family's financial situation often, and avoid preferential treatment in money matters. When necessary, advice from a bishop or qualified consultant can be sought.

Blended families, like all families, need to remember the blessings the Lord has promised to faithful tithe payers.

"One of the best ways that I know of to pay my obligations to my brother, my neighbor, or business associate, is for me first to pay my obligations to the Lord," President Joseph F. Smith said. "I can pay more of my debts to my neighbors, if I have contracted them, after I have met my honest obligations with the Lord, than I can by neglecting the latter" (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th edition [1939], 259–60).

- **Discipline.** No parent can effectively correct or discipline a child until after a bond of love, affection, trust, and care has been firmly established. In the absence of love by a new parent, discipline can be interpreted by children as rejection.

“Above all else, children need to know and feel they are loved, wanted, and appreciated,” President Ezra Taft Benson said. “They need to be assured of that often” (“Fundamentals of Enduring Family Relationships,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 60).

Parents of blended families need to reach a consensus early in their marriage regarding proper behavior and methods of discipline, and they both need to be prepared to adjust those plans as they deal with the children in the new blended family. Unless parents are united, children may become confused.

“To understand another’s beliefs about discipline requires active listening and respect for differences. With understanding, though, differences in discipline standards can be reconciled and the couple can develop one unified standard” (Jeffrey H. Larson, “How to Unite a Step-Family,” *Ensign*, February 1987, 48–49).

Children also may become confused as a result of having to divide their time between their divorced biological parents. Because rules and expectations change from home to home, children need time to adjust and internalize what is expected.

Activities such as family home evening, parent-child interviews, and Church attendance create valuable opportunities for teaching, correcting, and reinforcing accepted behavior. Some couples have found it necessary for the biological parent to be the voice of authority for both parents—at least until the nonbiological parent gains the confidence and love of the children.

Some children attempt to divide or manipulate parents. It takes a firm resolve, made in private between the couple, to fairly and consistently enforce rules and consequences. Otherwise, discipline breaks down. Parents can be successful if they treat “my children” and “your children” as “our children.”

- **Former spouses.** In the case of divorce, former spouses need to put aside personal prejudices and resentments, both for their own sake and for the sake of their children. In fact, they should try to maintain a good relationship. Divorced biological parents and their new spouses can more effectively rear children if they work together. Problems with former spouses should be handled privately, and couples should encourage and support ongoing relationships between children and a biological parent who no longer lives with those children. No one benefits from criticism of a former spouse, who may have a significant impact on a blended family’s efforts to become united.

If a former spouse chooses to terminate or otherwise ignore any further association with a child, the family can unite to help fill that void in the child’s life. It is vital that the child feel a high degree of love, acceptance, and support from family members, including the stepparent. The child may need to be reassured that he or she is not to blame for the situation. Perhaps the disaffected parent may one day have a change of heart or be in a better position or frame of mind to maintain a relationship with the child. Family members may need to help the child understand that despite present grief and bewilderment, the child can nevertheless enjoy the blessings of a complete family unit and a normal upbringing.

Children of a blended family can find themselves with twice as many grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins as they had in their former family. Each parent, meanwhile, has acquired another set of in-laws. All of these individuals make up the children's extended family and, to a degree, are interested in a relationship with the children. Visits, family gatherings, and the observance of holidays require compromise and planning.

Family success requires uncommon spiritual stamina and perseverance. Adults in blended families know that for the eternal progress and welfare of those in their families, every sacrifice must be made, every spiritual resource must be called upon, and every effective technique must be used. Those who pay the price to make their blended families successful can know the joy that comes when we "live together in love" (D&C 42:45).

© 2007 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.

How to Unite a Step-family

By *Jeffry H. Larson*

Jeffry H. Larson, "How to Unite a Step-family," *Ensign*, Feb. 1987, 46

Glenda divorced her first husband two years ago; at that time she had two preschoolers. Six months ago, she married a man who had custody of his eleven-year-old son from a prior marriage. Now they all lived together as a stepfamily.

When she remarried, she expected that things would be better "the second time around." She assumed her husband's son would welcome her as his new mother and, in turn, she expected her preschoolers to fall in love with their new father just as she had fallen in love with him.

However, after six months of marriage, things were not going as anticipated. Disciplining the children was becoming nearly impossible. Her stepson often refused to obey her because, in his words, "You're not my *real* mom." No matter how much she coaxed her own children, they were not warming up to their stepfather as quickly as she would have liked. Her ex-husband caused them problems when he changed his visitation schedule. The children often fantasized that their original parents would remarry. These problems with the children and her ex-spouse, and her own occasional lingering feelings of attachment to her first husband, made her wonder if she had done the right thing in remarriage and becoming a stepmother.

Glenda's dilemmas and feelings are common. Stepparenting is different and in some ways more difficult than co-parenting in the nuclear family where parents and children are biologically related. The stepfamily has a unique structure. The children, at least in the case of divorce, have a biological parent living elsewhere with whom they have continuing contact. The relationship between one parent and the children in the stepfamily predates the current marriage, and the stepparent and the children are not legally related in most cases.

Several potential sources of stress confront stepparents in their new role. Perhaps the first stress is helping the spouse and stepchildren deal with a sense of loss as a result of the dissolution of the first marriage. The stepparent may encounter feelings of anger, hurt, and depression from his or her partner and stepchildren as they work through the grieving process.

Children may feel divided loyalties between their noncustodial, or visiting, parent and their stepparent. They may believe that to love their "new daddy" would show a lack of loyalty to their "real daddy." Hence, most stepchildren do not instantly love their new stepparent but must have time to develop close feelings.

A frequent stress on the couple is relating to an ex-spouse—a relationship that can mean custody and visitation problems, children who are upset, and competition between the current and former spouse.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for a stepparent, as a newcomer, is carving out a comfortable role in the stepfamily. Defining this role is especially vital in terms of disciplining children.

Stepchildren tend to challenge the stepparent's standards and right to discipline until the couple determines how they will share the role of disciplinarian. For some stepparents, the fear of being a "wicked stepparent" becomes a barrier that keeps them from being adequate disciplinarians.

Glenda and her husband came to me for counseling about these stresses. Our discussions led me to give them the following suggestions. Others might find them helpful as well.

1. Recognize that you are not alone. With 80 percent of divorcees remarrying within five years of the loss of their first spouse, stepfamilies are becoming more common in the Church and in society. The special needs of this group are now beginning to be recognized and addressed.

2. Be patient. One of the first adjustments a stepparent must make is realizing that the stepfamily has a structure that is significantly different from a nuclear family. This is particularly true in the case of divorce, when one of the child's biological parents (the noncustodial parent) lives in a different household. Hence, the child has membership in two households with different rules, schedules, and expectations. These differences mean that it will take longer for a stepfamily to develop feelings of warmth, unity, and stability. Parents and children alike need to exercise patience.

The expression "time heals" can be applied to the development of unity in a stepfamily. As one stepdaughter said, speaking of her stepmother, "When I saw my two youngest sisters cuddled up to this woman while she sang them little songs she made up, I knew it was right. She was to be our new mother, and we all needed her, especially those two. As we grew to know her, we all eventually grew to love her. ... From then on it was more a matter of time. Slowly, with all of us pulling, we became closer, a family again." (*New Era*, July 1984, p. 29.)

3. *Reject the myths or misconceptions about stepparenting that hamper adjustment.* The wicked stepmother myth often places unnecessary strain on a woman as she tries to assume the stepmother role. In reality, stepmothers and stepfathers are no better or worse than other mothers and fathers.

The instant-love myth assumes unrealistically that love is immediate and takes little time to develop. Such expectations may prompt parents to immediately judge themselves as failures in blending two families.

The need-to-overcompensate myth expects stepparents to try to make up to children for the emotional trauma they have experienced. Unfortunately, stepchildren sometimes view such extra attention as an attempt to replace their biological parent, and so they become resentful. Stepparents need to recognize that they cannot make up for past pain.

4. *Put your marriage first.* Developing a healthy stepparent-stepchild relationship should not take precedence over developing marital unity and happiness. A statement by Sister Ann Reese at the husbands' and wives' fireside satellite broadcast on 29 January 1984 especially applies to remarriage: "The primary relationship in any home is that of husband and wife. Energy invested in improving this relationship will aid in building strong, unified homes, and in producing secure, well-adjusted children." (*Ensign*, Sept. 1984, p. 61.)

Stepchildren often challenge the strength and unity of a new marriage, wanting to know how committed their parents are to each other. Divided loyalty between the new stepparent and the noncustodial parent enables the children to fantasize that their original parents might reunite. But as children begin to see unity in the new marriage, their challenges and fantasies will subside, paving the way for the development of a loving relationship with the stepparent.

5. *Be an active listener.* Stepchildren are often full of emotions that need to be expressed, and parents need to create an atmosphere that will encourage them to express themselves honestly and openly. Elder Marvin J. Ashton has explained: "To be effective, family communications must be an exchange of feelings and information. ... Differences should not be ignored, but should be weighed and evaluated calmly. One's point of opinion usually is not as important as a healthy, continuing relationship. Don't display shock, alarm, or disgust with others' comments. ... Don't react violently. Work within the framework of a person's free agency. Convey a bright and optimistic approach." (*Ensign*, May 1976, p. 52.)

More than just being quiet, listening requires individual attention and taking time to really hear what someone is saying. To actively listen, one must establish eye contact, listen for feelings, and paraphrase for the child what he has said without criticism. Such an approach soothes the soul of a child and draws him closer to his parents, just as our prayers, expressed to a listening Father in Heaven, strengthen our relationship with Him.

Helping a stepchild express his feelings can be difficult. Open-ended questions that begin with words like *why*, *how*, *when*, or *what* draw out more information and feelings than yes or no questions.

6. *Hold family home evening.* Family home evenings and family councils held regularly will invite the Spirit into the home and bring family members closer. Stepchildren may not immediately accept or like the family council. But "continue in patience until ye are perfected." (**D&C 67:13.**) As the children see

parental commitment to holding family councils, involving them in family decisions and plans, and recognizing their achievements, they will begin to feel a sense of belonging and unity.

7. Decide on the method of discipline. Discipline is an important key to stepfamily unity. It bonds the children to the parents because discipline shows the children that the parents are concerned about their welfare and behavior.

But unless parents agree early in their marriage on the method of discipline and the rules of behavior in the family, the children will be confused. To understand another's beliefs about discipline requires active listening and respect for differences. With understanding, though, differences in discipline standards can be reconciled and the couple can develop one unified standard.

A frequent difficulty involves the custodial parent undermining the stepparent's efforts to discipline the children. The custodial parent may want the stepparent to discipline his children, but when the stepparent makes an effort, the custodial parent rushes to the defense of the children.

The custodial parent and the stepparent should discuss and, through compromise, reach agreement about specific behaviors that are acceptable or unacceptable to each; methods of discipline based on gospel principles; who is responsible for discipline and under what conditions; and how to incorporate gospel principles into parent-child relations (for example, holding father interviews, using patience rather than forceful domination, spending time alone with each child, encouraging rather than criticizing).

8. Respect the noncustodial parent. A stepparent cannot replace a biological parent in a child's mind—and he should not even try. Children will eventually realize that they can have loving, close relationships with many adults, including a stepparent. By respecting a stepchild's relationship with his noncustodial parent, the stepparent shows genuine love. This respect takes the stepparent out of competition for the child's affection and frees the child to develop a close and often affectionate relationship with the stepparent.

9. Deal with ex-spouse issues when they arise. Perhaps the greatest challenge for those who remarry is getting over the emotional attachments to former partners. It is normal to feel some degree of attachment, but this feeling can have a negative effect upon the new marital relationship if the couple does not deal with these feelings honestly or if the new partner feels threatened or jealous of the ex-spouse.

Ex-spouse problems should not be ignored. They should be dealt with openly. Through communication, patience, and understanding, most couples handle such problems. As James puts it, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." (**James 1:19.**)

10. Learn to forgive. Forgiving an ex-spouse or one's self for a divorce can be challenging. But a lack of forgiveness can pollute a person's relationships with his new spouse and children. Forgiveness involves an understanding and acceptance of each partner's part in the failure of the first marriage. To gain this acceptance requires fasting and praying that the Lord will help one better understand why the first marriage did not work and how to avoid similar mistakes in remarriage. Forgiveness allows a person to spend his emotional energy on the new relationship—on developing a fulfilling remarriage.

Forgiveness also applies to the stepparent-stepchild relationship. By empathizing with the emotional adjustments a stepchild must make, a parent can forgive comments such as, “I don’t like this hamburger! Why can’t you fix it like my *real* mom does?”

11. Remember prayer. In times of stress and adjustment, a person can gain insight into problems and their solutions by inviting Heavenly Father into the home. Family prayers expressing gratitude for stepchildren or stepparents can warm everyone’s heart and soul. Submit solutions to the Lord for approval when appropriate. Learn to lean on him as a family. Since family relationships are essentially spiritual, invite the Spirit into your home.

With a knowledge of the challenges that lie ahead, stepparents can take the first steps to improving the relationships in their new family. The rewards are worth striving for and worth sharing.

© 2007 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.

Growing as a Stepfamily

By Barbara Jones Brown

Barbara Jones Brown, “Growing as a Stepfamily,” *Ensign*, Jul 2005, 61–65

Becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event. The following ideas may help as you seek to build a strong stepfamily.

Our wedding photos aren’t exactly what you’d call typical. Scattered among the quintessential pictures of bride and groom are photos of me with *four* handsome men in tuxedos—my husband and his three boys.

When I married my sweetheart, Matt, I realized I wasn’t just gaining a husband. I was joining a family. On our wedding day we became one of more than 5.3 million stepfamilies in the United States—families in which at least one spouse brings a child or children into the marriage. As any parent can attest, raising a family is challenging. Raising a stepfamily—whether the stepfamily has its origins in the death of a parent, divorce, or a previously unwed parent—is especially challenging because of the complex dynamics involved. We can say thankfully that blessings can come with the challenges.

My purpose in writing this article is not to suggest that my husband and I are perfect parents or that we have all the answers for every situation stepparents may find themselves in. I simply want to share a few things we’ve learned through our experience—supported by the wisdom of Church leaders and family counselors—in the hope that some of it might be helpful to others in similar situations.

Courtship—Again

Looking back, we realize that the formation of a strong stepfamily begins long before the wedding day. Dating when either person in the relationship has children is very different from typical dating. At every stage of the courtship, the couple must give consideration not only to their own relationship but also to the children.

Based on advice he had received earlier from a divorce counselor, Matt did not introduce me to his boys until we both agreed our relationship was exclusive and likely headed for an eventual engagement. Matt didn't want his boys to form relationships that would later be broken. He had been counseled that a breakup with someone his children had become attached to could be painful for them and could make them reluctant to form attachments with anyone else he decided to date, including the person who would eventually become his wife—and their stepparent. We waited until the right time, and it worked out that I was Matt's only dating partner his children ever met. We feel this made it much easier for his boys and me to form a relationship.

For me, it was important to understand and accept that if I decided to marry Matt, I would be committing myself to more than just a marriage. I would be committing to a family—my husband and his children. This was the most difficult part of my decision. Could I simultaneously commit to being a wife and a stepmother of three? Could I accept the corresponding sacrifices? For example, I knew that if I married Matt we would never experience that “newlywed stage” of marriage before children became part of our family. I knew that a major amount of Matt's time and emotional energy would be devoted to his children. I knew that child support obligations would bring significant financial sacrifices. Committing myself before we were married to accept these sacrifices and to support my spouse through them has given me the foundation I've needed to carry on as the challenges of stepparenting have come.

Engaged to Be a Family

When both of you are certain that your courtship will soon become an engagement, take time to give your children as many opportunities as possible to strengthen their relationship with your future partner. “Remarriage and efforts to create a successful blended family can be frustrated without proper preparation by both parties,”¹ says Elder Robert E. Wells, formerly of the Seventy, who grew up in a stepfamily and later raised a stepfamily. Proper preparation includes taking enough time to get to know your intended well and allowing your children that same opportunity. After all, they will be living, at least part-time, with your future spouse, too.

When our relationship was at this stage, Matt invited me to his home for Sunday dinner each weekend he had the children. As a group we'd prepare and share the meal, do the dishes, then have family home evening and play games or make treats. Soon, every Sunday the boys started asking when I was coming over, which made me feel wanted and a part of their family.

Matt and I also started taking the boys with us on many of our dates, to sporting events, arts festivals, family movies—any activity we could all enjoy together. During these “group dates” Matt and I focused our attention on the children, rather than on each other, so they wouldn't feel threatened or jealous. We wanted the boys to feel they were getting twice as much love and attention—rather than half as much—because I was there.

Rather than detracting from our developing relationship, my directing attention and love to Matt's boys actually strengthened his love for me. "Love feelings are enhanced when parents see their partners treating their children well," confirms Brent Scharman, a psychologist with LDS Family Services. Brother Scharman and his wife, Jan, a psychologist and vice president of Student Life at Brigham Young University, have a stepfamily of 10 children and are former board members of the Stepfamily Association of America.

If both dating partners have children, as the Scharmans did, the children from both families also need opportunities and time to form relationships with each other. The more this can be done before the wedding day, the less difficult the adjustment will be afterward, says Sister Scharman. But at the same time, she says, "allow your children to choose not to be a constant companion or best buddy to a stepsibling."

After your children have formed a relationship of trust with your intended, let them be the first to hear of your engagement. Realize that no matter how much your children may have come to love your fiancé, your announcement might still be quite difficult for them.

After we announced our engagement to Matt's boys, we were surprised when his youngest son, with whom I had grown particularly close, broke out in tears. When Matt asked him why, he explained that he wanted to always be the "baby" of the family, and now that was probably going to change because Matt and I hoped to have children together.

Encouraging your children to talk about concerns such as this while expressing your understanding and love will help them come to an eventual acceptance. Today this youngest son—and his older brothers—absolutely adore their new little sister.

As you prepare for your wedding, says Brother Scharman, remember that while this may be the happiest time of your life, it can be a difficult time for children whose parents have divorced, because it marks the end of any dreams they may have had of their biological parents getting back together. Rather than expecting your children to be as excited as you are, you will better serve them by acknowledging that this might be a difficult time for them while assuring them you love them and always will.

In all the hustle and bustle of your wedding preparations and wedding day, remember to show extra sensitivity, love, and attention to your children. To help our boys feel included, we explained to them beforehand the significance and meaning of the sealing ceremony. On our wedding day we met them outside the temple immediately following the ceremony. With all our loved ones waiting there to greet us, our boys were the first ones we embraced and expressed our love to. We also let them invite some of their friends to our wedding reception so they would feel the celebration was for them as well as for us.

After the Wedding

After the wedding, recognize and respect the fact that, when divorce is involved, children have two immediate families. Make it a point to never say anything derogatory to the children or even in front of the children about their other parents or family. Don't try to replace your stepchildren's parent or ask them to call you "mom" or "dad" if they aren't comfortable with that. "Rather than compete with a

relationship between a child and a parent ... stepparents need to concentrate on building a new relationship with the child," says Elder Wells.

Establishing family traditions will help build these new relationships. Traditions have a great power to bond, unite, and help new family members feel welcome, all of which are especially needed in stepfamilies. Traditions should include some established customs from both families and some that are new to the entire stepfamily.

"The Family: A Proclamation to the World" provides spiritual principles on which to base family traditions: "Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities." In our family, spiritual traditions of family prayer, Church activity, temple attendance (including baptisms for the dead with our children who are old enough), and family home evening have strengthened us. As a stepfamily, we've made adjustments where needed so that we can carry on these traditions. For example, because we don't have the boys in our home on Monday nights, we hold family home evenings on the Sunday evenings they are with us. Traditions of working together, community service, and playing together have also unified us. An annual vacation to the beach with my extended family has become something we all look forward to.

Along with having family activities, Matt and I also spend individual time with each child. This has helped our children to feel secure in their relationship with their dad and to strengthen their new relationship with me. For example, when I've felt tension between myself and one of my stepsons, I've invited him to choose something fun for the two of us to do together. Invariably, he chooses basketball. Now, I'm really awful at basketball, but I've humored him by agreeing to a little one-on-one, in which he always soundly defeats his stepmom. I don't know if it's just because he enjoys beating me, but I've been amazed afterwards at how much better our relationship feels.

In developing these relationships, "stepparents need to be patient," says Elder Wells. "Because emotional attachments between stepparents and stepchildren require time, it sometimes may take years to establish a united and harmonious blended family."

While it is important to make time for each of your children, it is even more important for stepparents to take time for each other. "View time alone together as a necessity rather than a luxury," says Brother Scharman. To meet the many challenges of forming a strong stepfamily, the couple must develop an especially strong relationship. For Matt and me, doing things we enjoy together and communicating frequently and openly about family issues have strengthened our resolve and commitment to each other and to our family.

Along with relying on each other, don't be afraid to seek help when necessary from a professional who has experience in counseling stepfamilies. Such counselors are available through LDS Family Services.

Most important, seek support from Heavenly Father through temple and church attendance, fasting, prayer, and scripture study. At a time when I was struggling and praying over my role as a stepparent, it struck me that I have been entrusted with a sacred role in our boys' lives. I shed tears of gratitude.

Such are the blessings that can come with raising a stepfamily.

This was a great talk we found about spending time with your family:

Good, Better, Best

Dallin H. Oaks, Nov. 2007

Some of our most important choices concern family activities. Many breadwinners worry that their occupations leave too little time for their families. There is no easy formula for that contest of priorities. However, I have never known of a man who looked back on his working life and said, "I just didn't spend enough time with my job."

In choosing how we spend time as a family, we should be careful not to exhaust our available time on things that are merely good and leave little time for that which is better or best. A friend took his young family on a series of summer vacation trips, including visits to memorable historic sites. At the end of the summer he asked his teenage son which of these good summer activities he enjoyed most. The father learned from the reply, and so did those he told of it. "The thing I liked best this summer," the boy replied, "was the night you and I laid on the lawn and looked at the stars and talked." Super family activities may be good for children, but they are not always better than one-on-one time with a loving parent.

The amount of children-and-parent time absorbed in the good activities of private lessons, team sports, and other school and club activities also needs to be carefully regulated. Otherwise, children will be overscheduled, and parents will be frazzled and frustrated. Parents should act to preserve time for family prayer, family scripture study, family home evening, and the other precious togetherness and individual one-on-one time that binds a family together and fixes children's values on things of eternal worth. Parents should teach gospel priorities through what they do with their children.

Family experts have warned against what they call "the overscheduling of children." In the last generation children are far busier and families spend far less time together. Among many measures of this disturbing trend are the reports that structured sports time has doubled, but children's free time has declined by 12 hours per week, and unstructured outdoor activities have fallen by 50 percent.²

The number of those who report that their "whole family usually eats dinner together" has declined 33 percent. This is most concerning because the time a family spends together "eating meals at home [is] the strongest predictor of children's academic achievement and psychological adjustment."³ Family mealtimes have also been shown to be a strong bulwark against children's smoking, drinking, or using drugs.⁴ There is inspired wisdom in this advice to parents: what your children really want for dinner is you.

There are, then, some serious and soul-searching questions that we must ask ourselves. One of these questions would surely be, do I have time for prayer? I don't mean just an occasional, quick, repetitious prayer that is like giving a wave of the hand to your Father in Heaven as you pass Him on your way to something important. I mean sincere, honest, "from the depths of a contrite spirit and a broken heart" prayer; kneeling in humility, demonstrating to the Holy Father that you really love him; private prayer which involves you in the process of repentance and pleading for forgiveness and allows time for pondering and waiting for the answers to come.

As you examine your list of basics, the next question would be, do I study the scriptures? If you do, you know that Lehi saw a rod of iron, which, interpreted, means the word of God. (See [1 Ne. 11:1–23](#).) Those who held to the rod, using it as a guide at all times, came safely through the mist of darkness and arrived at the tree of life and partook of its glorious fruit. (See [1 Ne. 8:19, 30](#).)

Now the question again: do you study the scriptures? I solemnly testify that the holy scriptures are the word of God. Constant study of them is the act of holding to the iron rod. They will guide you to the tree of life. If you are one who has said, “I want my life back,” I exhort you to go to the tree of life, where you will find the pure love of God.

With an uncluttered life, you will not be so busy doing terrestrial things that you do not have time to do those things which are celestial. God’s plan is a plan of simplicity. It involves being obedient to simple laws, laws that have within them an automatic blessing and happiness for obedience and an automatic punishment and unhappiness for their disobedience.

I urge you to clear away the clutter. Take your life back. Use your willpower. Learn to say no to those things that will rob you of your precious time and infringe upon your agency to choose to live in exactness to God’s plan of happiness and exaltation.

Don’t let the subtle influences of Satan take away any part of your life. Keep it under your own control and operated by your own agency. This life is a probationary period. It is a marvelous gift of time during which we can learn to be like our Heavenly Father by following the teachings of His Son, Jesus Christ. The path He leads us on is not a cluttered path. It is simple and straight and lighted by the Spirit.

It is my humble prayer that by our choices we may preserve our individual agency from the subtleness of Satan and live our lives bright and clear and on the path that leads us back to the presence of our Holy Father.