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Blending Families

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When John and Susan decided to marry, neither of them thought that children from their previous marriages would interfere with their new marriage in any way. Susan's son was already living on his own, John's daughter was in college and John's son lived with his former wife. Since none of the children were going to be living with them on a permanent basis, John and Susan mistakenly assumed that the children would not impact their life together.

In thinking like this, Susan and John were not unique. Many of the more than 1,300 couples that create stepfamilies each day falsely assume that the children will pose no real problem. In truth however, children from previous marriages cause very basic problems that contribute greatly to the high divorce rate among those who marry again. While people usually do have a better understanding of marriage the second time around, the complex issues of living in a stepfamily far outweigh any benefit from previous marital experience. Without help, approximately 60% or more of all people who move into stepfamilies will ultimately divorce.

John and Susan did not realize that the bond each of them had with their own biological children was exclusive unto themselves individually and that the new spouse would feel like an outsider in that relationship. While they did not have their children living with them on a full time basis, each still had close relationships with these children that would later create feelings of jealousy, pain, and anger. The children, especially John's daughter, seemed to sense from the beginning that this marriage would impact their lives as well, taking away their one-to-one relationship with the biological parent and forcing them to relate to someone they hardly knew and were not sure they wanted.

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If Susan and John, living in one of the easiest stepfamily arrangements possible, could experience so many problems, imagine the struggles that exist when couples with four, five, or six children all living together experience. The Stepfamily Association of America says that it takes between 4 and 7 years to arrive at a good working relationship in a stepfamily.¹ That is a long time, and many families give up on the struggle before achieving their goal.

With so many stepfamilies being created today, and with all the problems associated with stepfamilies, is there any hope for such families? Indeed there is hope. There is also much that churches can do to help families blend. With just a little help, most stepfamilies can triumph over the difficulties. For example, within our stepfamily support group, for those who have attended the group more than a couple of times, our divorce rate is less than 20%. In other words, with help our stepfamily couples have a better rate of success than couples in first marriages where the divorce rate is approximately 50%.

Our stepfamily support group has been in existence for over 12 years. Most of those who attend have been married less than four years with several couples attending who have not yet married. Most of the time, I

lead the meeting and when I am unable to be there I ask one of the couples who has been in the group for some time to get things started.

Our format is simple. We begin by going around the room and introducing ourselves--telling how long we have been married, how many children we have, their ages and how often we have them with us, and any particular problems we are experiencing right now. To get the meeting started, I usually read a brief article, summarize a chapter from a book on stepfamilies, or show a brief video about stepfamilies. Sometimes we break into groups for discussion (depending on the size of the group that night) but we always allow plenty of time for couples to talk about what they are struggling with at the moment. We keep our meetings to an hour and a half and close with a prayer. We also try to hold a social event every two months. We send out a monthly newsletter to let everyone know what our topic will be on a given evening and any socials we are having.

The stepfamily program has been very successful. Many of the couples tell us they probably would not still be married if it were not for this group. While many of these couples have been in marital counseling, they tell us that the group was the best help they received.

Currently I am working with Discipleship Resources on a workbook for couples preparing to create blending families. In that workbook I recommend adequate premarital counseling using several of the helps we use at Roswell United Methodist Church. First, all of our clergy have been trained to use the Prepare, Prepare MC (married with children) and Enrich (for already married couples) inventories.² There are certainly other premarital aids to help couples assess their relationship, but these are the ones we use. Included in the inventories are 165 statements about various aspects of their relationship to which the individuals agree or disagree. After each fills out the inventory separately, the forms are sent to Minneapolis where they are scored. After the forms are returned (within two weeks) the couple comes back in and we go over together the strengths and growth areas revealed in their statements. I have personally found this to be a great tool in working with couples about to be married.

A second thing we have instituted is a mentoring program where couples getting married are teamed up with a couple that has been married at least 10 years. The mentoring couple has received training and has gone through a screening to assure that they will be good mentors. In the case of couples marrying with children from a previous marriage, they are teamed up with a couple who has also tried to blend a family. The mentoring couples meet with the newly married couple at least three times during their first year of marriage and report back as to how everything is going.

When couples with children from previous marriages come to get married, we encourage them to attend our stepfamily support group even before the wedding. The support group will not keep them from experiencing many of the stepfamily problems that are likely to arise, but attendance at those meetings will certainly make them aware of the issues they are likely to face. I have also found that if I can get couples to attend the support group before they are married, they are more likely to attend after they are married.

In addition to attending the stepfamily support group, I always insist that couples that marry with children from a previous marriage read at least one book about stepfamilies. The Stepfamily Association of America has a whole catalog of such books that they will be happy to send you. Of course, I usually ask them to read one of the books I have written, namely *Willing To Try Again--Steps Toward Blending a Family* (Judson Press, 1993). I intentionally wrote that book as a tool for couples preparing to move into a blending family situation.

Some people today, including some pastors and church lay people, just wag their heads and bemoan the sad state of marriages today. I believe it is much better to help couples and families create the homes they certainly desire when they marry in the first place. Contrary to popular myth, couples do not marry with the idea that if it does not work out they will simply get divorced. Every couple I have met marries with the hope "until death do us part." We can help them fulfill this dream.

That is one reason I never turn down a couple who comes seeking to be married. The only thing I insist upon is that they agree to premarital counseling. I will not marry a couple without that. If the premarital inventory shows a lot of red flags, I usually ask the couple to continue in counseling even after the wedding. I have yet to have a couple refuse. Couples want their marriage to succeed.

Churches today have a wonderful opportunity to really make a difference in the families of our communities. With blending families, I know that difference can be astounding. I suspect the same is also true with couples in first marriages. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the church rather than the government could cause the divorce rate to plummet? The opportunity is there. ➡

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²Life Innovation, Inc.; P.O. Box 190, Minneapolis, MN 55440-0190; 800-331-1661

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