

**His, Mine & Ours: Multi-Divorce & Blended
Families
Custody and Visitation Issues & the GAL
Investigation**

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“The step-parent relationship is the barometer of how (or if) the family is coming together---and the child (ren) will determine this outcome because you can not force a child to like you....” (Gillespie, 2013)

It can be difficult to find the right balance when you are a stepparent. Many well-intentioned adults try to blend their families with high expectations. Their new marriage is all about finding a loving spouse after divorce. High expectations and hope convince them that their separate households will come together under one roof and live harmoniously. This is most often not the case. Yet, more and more, the blended family is becoming the norm. According to the 2006 US Census:

- 50% of children in the United States are being raised in blended families.
- 1,300 new stepfamilies are formed every day.
- By 2010 there were more stepfamilies in the United States than any other type of family.
- 500,000 adults become new stepparents each year in the United States
- 75% divorced men and women will eventually remarry.

Why is this a Family Court issue? Why does this apply to the work of a Guardian ad Litem?

*only about 1/3 of blended family marriages will last. The other 2/3 results in divorce.
* blended children are at greater risk of living in high conflict homes.
*over 50% of second and third divorces within blended families were determined to be caused by stressors involving the children. (US census 2006).

Blended Families can include a mixture of children and parents from various marriages and biological/legal relationships. The dynamics are complicated within a nuclear family. When you start combining and blending families the result can put a new marriage in crisis. With blended families more often than not come ex-spouses. The process of blending families is inherently stressful. The additional stress of custody litigation can be over whelming. The dynamics of a blended family in the midst of a custody case can over

whelm the Guardian ad Litem. The Guardian is often given the task of determining (sometimes with the help of other professionals) whether the children are in an impossibly stressful home that may be caused by the blending of two households.

Guardian ad Litem Investigative Issues of the Blended Family

I. Effective Parenting:

It is important to realize that everyone's role shifts when you create a stepfamily. It can take time for the members of a blended family to figure out where they fit within the new system. If they don't believe they have a place, or, if they believe someone else has taken their place, they will often act out. Children acting out as a result of fear or anger can prevent the family from reaching a new stable equilibrium. Stepparents who try too hard and/or force themselves onto new stepchildren often do not fare well.

The biological parent is often blind to these issues involving the blended family. The stepparent may assume a role that creates tension rather than harmony.

The Grieving Child: Children in blended families are grieving, and are more often not mature enough to explain their unhappiness. They may feel uprooted from a biological parent. Their environment is changing to the point where they may not have the confidence that they will be ok.

- *They may feel unwanted or disliked by a stepparent*
- * Feelings of Alienation in the blended family*
- * Torn by the tension between their biological parents.*
- *Discomfort around the Holidays and major events.*
- *Feel competition between their parent and the new stepchildren.*
- *loss of parent:child traditions that existed before the new family*
- *loss of their dream or fantasy that their parents will reconcile*
- *stress of new house, new schools, new friends, new church....*

Parents can provide the way for bringing unity into their blended family, without threatening original bonds.

II. Five Tried and True Keys to Successful Step Parenting

A. Defer to the Biological Parent i.e.; Take the Back Seat!

As a stepparent, it is important to defer to the biological parent-especially in the beginning when the blended family is new. Stepparents need to 'earn' their

relationship with the stepchildren. The ‘earning’ comes from mutual respect and gradual development. This takes time.

“If a stepparent is leading and no one is following they are simply out for a walk...all alone”.

A Guardian ad Litem needs to evaluate whether the parent or the stepparent is handling the unpleasant disciplinary tasks with the children. Is the stepparent disciplining the stepchildren? Is the bio parent allowing, even encouraging, the stepparent to be forceful? Or, is the stepparent taking a ‘back seat’, more supporting, role? These are important issues to address as the Guardian because a blended family will fare better when a stepparent does not become a disciplinarian. The stepparent will enjoy greater success when they are focused on the interests of their stepchild.

B. Do Not Compete with Your Counter Part!

As part of the Guardian ad Litem investigation one should develop an understanding of how the stepparent views the children’s other parent. It is important that the stepparent respect their counter part’s importance. No matter the stepparent’s opinion he or she does not need to disparage the stepchildren’s bio-parent counter part. Over compensating for the ‘deficient’ counter part is also a pitfall to be avoided by the stepparent. If the stepparent perceives his or her counter part as being deficient they need to resist the temptation to take on that role. Being overly rigid, controlling, or, even overly emotional with your stepchildren can greatly impair the ability to connect with the stepchildren on any meaningful level.

C. Discover Your Stepchild’s Interests:

One of the stepparent’s tasks is to learn and encourage the stepchildren’s interests. A Guardian ad Litem might inquire of both the stepparent and stepchildren if they have developed any new traditions together or as a new family.

D. Get Out of the Way!

Children often fear they have lost the love of their bio parent when he or she remarries.

Does the parent continue to have one-on-one time with the children without the stepparent's involvement? Are the children continuing the traditions they once had with their parent before the family blended? The stepparent needs to understand that they do not need to be involved in every family activity. This will help reduce the displacement the child may have and reassures them they still belong.

E. Act Lovingly.

Love is an action as well as a feeling.

Often, when one uses empathy skills to truly understand the child and understand how they are feeling; acting lovingly toward them comes easily.

A Guardian ad Litem can include as part of their investigation, an assessment of the level of empathy a stepparent has toward their stepchildren. How does the stepparent react to the defiant, acting-out child? Frustration? Yes, certainly. Also, hopefully, will the stepparent use empathy to understand the pain and the fear. With true empathy for someone else and their situation, the stepparent can then act in a loving manner.

Is the stepparent encouraging the children to talk about their feelings? Depending on their age, a child's emotional state may last a minute, a day, a month, or longer. When families are in flux (in other words, upheaval, crisis), children's reactions can be even more unpredictable and require careful attention and sensitive responses.

Children want to Feel:

- *Safe and secure: children need to count on their parents.
- *Loved: affection and emotional support. Approval.
- *Seen and valued: their opinions and input matter
- *Heard and Emotionally Connected: empathy skills!

*Appreciated and Encouraged: Praise

*Limits and Boundaries: a lack of boundaries sends children a signal that they are unworthy of a parent's time, care, and attention.

“It is not simply a matter of providing opportunities for a child to speak; it also is a matter of being attentive to what we hear the child say” (Carol Smart, Family Sociologist, Family Court Review 2010).

Each of these “**5 Tried and True Keys**” in family blending reflects differences in how families communicate, develop, and maintain boundaries; learn to manage and resolve conflict; and engage effectively in role negotiations within the family. Studies of blended families show that family members feel most satisfied when there is open communication. Open communication in this sense is described as family members' ability to discuss family roles and boundaries. The ability and willingness of family members to talk about their shared identity and to provide opportunities to explore and develop ways to acclimate to the evolving family are other important factors for successful communication within blended families. Finally, the success of a blended family also depends on their ability to express the diversity of expectations within the family, develop effective conflict resolution, and acknowledge and talk about each other's feelings.

III. This Too Shall Pass.....Maybe.

It takes time to for a family member to adjust to their new role within a blended family. The studies show that blended family dynamics change over time. Often, with patience, persistence and some proven strategies to assist, family members will form a system that will work for most involved. Like any organic system, the family reaches a homeostasis that quiets the disorder.

*Couples, who share their feelings without blaming and explore possible solutions, will most likely blend their family at a faster pace.

*Don't set rigid rules and systems. If one approach doesn't work, make change!

*Learn and practice conflict resolution skills.

*Acknowledge that the conflict and upheaval does not need to be that way forever. It is amazingly comforting to say,..."this too shall pass".

IV. 7 Stages of Stepfamily Development

Blended families move through these 7 stages of development in 4-7 years. Some stepfamilies never move through the 7 stages; often getting caught in a stage unable to progress. This is often why many stepfamilies do not stay together because this unrest often leads to divorce. Movement through these stages does not happen neatly and smoothly. Speed and movement through these stages has been shown to be successful with blended families that have and/or seek support and gather their resources.

- 1. Fantasy Stage:** a newly minted marriage with the glow of opportunity and great intentions. Not reality.
- 2. Immersion Stage:** The reality of blending unrelated people into a family begins to be felt. Often feelings of insecurity with both stepparent and stepchildren start to occur here.
- 3. Awareness Stage:** the fantasy of an instant family is relinquished and the members start to become better acquainted.
- 4. Mobilization Stage:** Differences are openly expressed; this may be a chaotic and embattled period.
- 5. Action Stage:** Negotiations begin as family members learn their new roles in the blended family. New boundaries are formed.
- 6. Contact Stage:** it is ONLY NOW that a clear stepparent and stepchild relationship starts to emerge.
- 7. Resolution Stage:** the stepfamily is now blended and has solid and reliable relationships.

The most successful blended families are the ones who get help. Whether they look to a therapist, religious leader, family, or support groups; they will have a much better outcome with a support system in place. It might be advisable for a family to seek help from a professional if:

- *a child openly directs anger toward a stepparent or stepsibling
- *a parent is openly favoring one child over another.

*members of the family derive no joy from shared activities and are, in fact, highly stressed when together.

Guardian ad Litem Tool Box:

Age of Children as Factors with the Blended Family:

Young Children (10 years and younger)

- *may adjust the most easily due to their need for cohesion in their relationships.
- *more accepting of new adults in their life.
- *feel competitive for attention from adults
- *have more daily care giving needs

Adolescents (ages 10-14)

- *may have the most difficulty adjusting
- *move at a slow pace to bond with a new adult
- *do not demonstrate their feelings openly, but may be more sensitive, than a younger child.
- *very difficult to accept a non-parent's discipline

Teenagers (15 and older)

- *may have less involvement with family life
- *push away and separate from family to form their identities
- *may not express themselves but still crave approval and acceptance

Questions for the Guardian ad Litem: to use when interviewing children in a blended family environment

(Developed by Jonathan W. Gould, Ph.D. Forensics.)

1. Where do you feel like you belong?
2. What does it mean to you to be part of a stepfamily?
3. How is your relationship with your other biological parent?
4. Do you have a relationship with both sets of grandparents, cousins, extended family, etc.?
5. Do you fit into your stepfamily?
6. Are you allowed to talk about your stepfamily with your other bio parent?

7. Do you ever feel disloyal to your bio mom/dad because you like your step mom/dad?
8. Do you feel comfortable discussing any confusion or issues of distress with stepparent and/or bio dad/mom?
9. Do you feel forced into a situation you did not choose?
10. Do you feel like you lost something or someone but cannot say what, who, how?
11. Do you trust your stepparent?
12. Do you feel your stepparent is replacing your bio mom/dad?
13. Do you get different rules for conduct from stepparent and bio parent homes?
14. Do you feel disloyal to anyone?
15. Do you feel like you are on a team?
16. Do you feel like you are abandoning your other parent for your stepparent?
17. Can you communicate with both bio parents?
18. Do you feel left out?
19. Do you feel responsible to keep any parent happy?
20. How do you deal with conflict between parents?

