

Blended Family Blueprint: How-To's, Checklists, & Worksheets

This guide empowers parents and stepparents and to approach family blending thoughtfully, strategically, and authentically. Having a blended family can be complicated, but it can also be wonderful.

We developed this guide with the help of experts in family law and mental health. Throughout this guide, we'll speak to both the stepparent and the bioparent. Every family is different, so take only the ideas that fit your family best.

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What Do You *Call* Each Other?

Different families use different terms. None of these words are right or wrong—pick the ones that feel most authentic to you and your stepkids.

Stepparent / stepchild: The most traditional, straightforward terms.

“‘Step’ isn’t a disparaging term, it’s just a factual statement,” explains Dr. Tara Egan, and kids often appreciate clarity. “But if ‘step’ has a negative connotation for you or your culture, choose an alternative.”

Bonus parent / bonus child: These terms capture the positive perspective that blending two families can be a good thing (even when it’s complicated).

Mercy Roberg explains, “I believe in saying bonus—everyone loves a bonus. If you look at the kids and people in your life as bonuses, it’s much more positive.”

Blended family: We love this term because it captures the idea that two families can smoothly and successfully join together.

Biomom / biodad / biokid: These terms are a simple way to distinguish the original parents from the newer stepparents. (But they’re not always the best terms—for example, in the case of an adopted child.)

Avoid This

- ⊗ **Fudging the truth:** In most situations, avoid calling your stepchild simply “my child,” Dr. Egan explains. “Kids can feel distressed when a relationship is presented falsely.”
- ⊗ **Sounding stiff and formal:** Don’t ask a child to call their stepparent “Mr.” or “Mrs.”—it’s too formal, when a stepparent will ideally become a close, trusted adult.
- ⊗ **Crossing boundaries:** Don’t ask a child to call their stepparent “Dad” or “Mom” (or any variation) if a bioparent is also involved—it’s confusing and disrespectful.

Try This

- ✓ **Follow the kids’ lead:** “If your stepkids call you stepmom, call them stepkid,” says Dr. Egan. “Say it with warmth, with your hand on their shoulder or a gesture of affection.”
- ✓ **Notice what the kids call each other:** If your child and your partner’s child refer to each other as their stepbrother and stepsister, that points towards the language they feel comfortable with.
- ✓ **Create a comfortable name:** Create a new nickname for the stepparent, so that it’s still a special name but not encroaching on bioparent territory. This can foster bonding instead of creating a sense of distance.

Our Family's Language

Have a family discussion with your partner, stepkids, and biokids! First, brainstorm together and get everyone's ideas down on paper. You can write multiple options for each answer, and don't forget to talk about why you like those options. Then, work together to choose terms and names that everyone feels comfortable with. *(Whatever language you choose, it's better than feeling awkward when the topic comes up because you're not sure what to say!)*

How will you introduce each other?

What language do the kids like: step, bonus, or something else?

What language do you like: step, bonus, or something else?

What language does your partner like: step, bonus, or something else?

Decision time: What language will you use?

What will the stepkids call their stepparent?

Brainstorm names or nicknames for the stepparent:

What name did you choose together?

How to reframe your stepparenting mindset:

Stepparenting can be complicated—everyone's got a different opinion. Should a stepparent act like an equal parent? Or what's their role in the family? How should they relate to their bonus kids? Consider these points of view, and see which ideas resonate for your family.

Let the parent take the lead: As a stepparent, follow your partner's lead, especially at the beginning. "You play a supportive role—to both parents," explains Natalie Baird-King. "This helps ease tension and sets up a strong support system for the kids." As the parent, try to foster that dynamic.

Support your partner: Co-parenting can be stressful, so it can be a huge relief for a parent to talk to someone who won't judge, argue, or try to take control. And if you're the parent, then support your partner, too—stepparenting can be emotionally complicated.

Join the village: It takes a village, and stepparents become part of the child's village, notes Baird-King. If you're the parent, invite your partner to play a role in the support system. If you're the stepparent, enthusiastically join in.

View the role as a trusted adult: "Stepparents should think of themselves as important other adults who are family members," says Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones, "such as an aunt or uncle."

If you're a new stepmom, "You're a trusted adult," says Dr. Egan. "You're a caretaker. If the neighbor kid skinned his knee or said he was hungry, you would give him a bandaid or a snack. But you wouldn't criticize his grades or tell him to clean his room."

Of course, these dynamics might morph over time. As you build stronger relationships with your stepkids, you might be able to slowly step into a bigger parenting role.

Expect respect: "Of course, you live there," notes Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones. "The kids need to follow your rules, and you have the right to be treated respectfully." If you're the parent, insist your kid(s) respect your partner.

If you're a stepparent...

Avoid This

- ⊗ Taking the role of a primary parent.
- ⊗ Making (or heavily influencing) major decisions about the child's life.
- ⊗ Interjecting your opinion—unless asked for by the parent.

Try This

- ✔ "Speak positively about your partner's co-parent," says Baird-King, "especially in front of your stepchild. Even if the co-parent just arises in conversation!"
- ✔ "If you need to say something negative," Baird-King adds, "the conversation must be out of the home, far away."
- ✔ Strive to be a confidante and a sounding board for your partner.

If you're a co-parent...

Avoid This

- ⊗ Listening to your partner badmouth your co-parent.
- ⊗ Listening to your co-parent badmouth your partner.
- ⊗ Letting your partner make major decisions for your child.

Try This

- ✔ Ask your partner for their opinion when you could use a sounding board.
- ✔ If your partner offers an unwelcome opinion (when you didn't ask), gently ask them to take a step back from the situation.
- ✔ Make sure your child knows they're your absolute priority in the family.

How to join in family life & play a meaningful role in the kid's childhood:

Following the parent's lead doesn't mean you're not involved in the kids' lives. As the stepparent, you might feel more comfortable and confident if you and your partner have outlined concrete ways you can participate in family life.

Stepparents, identify specific ways you can help: This could include daily duties or assistance as needed: Maybe you manage school drop-offs every day, or maybe you handle them when your partner has an early meeting.

Parents, lean into your partner's strengths: "Find out what skillset your non-bioparents are good at," says Roberg, "and let them be the expert. If someone's a teacher, then I advise my client, 'Let's listen to the educational goals of the teacher [step]parent.'"

- If stepdad is a nurse, consider taking his opinion seriously when it comes to healthcare.
- If stepmom is skilled at soccer, maybe she could run practice drills with the kids.
- If a stepparent is a professional or home chef, they could teach their bonus child to cook their favorite meal.

"For both of you, approach the issue thoughtfully," Dr. Tara Egan says: "You, [the stepparent,] can't care more about an issue than the biological parent. If the child gets a low math grade but the bioparents are fine with it, don't get on the child about homework. Don't tell your partner, "Demi's C is so disappointing, don't you care?"

But it's usually ok to suggest, "I'm really good at math, do you think it would be a good idea if I offer to help her a little bit?" If the bioparent agrees, make sure they introduce the idea—then the kid knows the parenting team is supportive.

Stepparents, don't tell your partner how to parent: instead, offer to do things you don't mind doing. "Hey, do you want me to take that off your plate?"

What role should a stepparent play in the family?

Stepparent: What are your areas of expertise, strength, or skill?

Parent: What are some areas where you could use extra support?

Together: What are 3-5 areas where the bonus parent can jump into family life?

- 1.

- 2.

- 3.

- 4.

- 5.

What's the best way to bond with your bonus kids?

These guidelines will help you navigate a tricky process, connect with your bonus children, and create a new normal.

Go slow and be patient: No need to rush—it's actually counterproductive. Trying to force the child to bond with you will make them feel pressured and could make your relationship feel fake. Instead, make small, persistent efforts to connect with the child on an authentic level. Most importantly: Bond with your bonus kids before you start moving into more of a parent role, even as a support parent.

Tailor your efforts to each kid's interests—and yours: If you love shopping, suggests Mercy, and your stepkid likes fashion—whether “fashion” means a sparkly prom dress or a t-shirt with a dinosaur on it—then go shopping together. You can spend time together and contribute meaningfully to their daily lives.

Shift your focus: “Be a good listener, get excited about anything that the child is interested in, and if they don't like what you like, let it go. Focus on having fun. Be really careful not to force physical affection. Be a strong, calm presence who is available but not in their face.” – Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones

Avoid This

Transactional Questions

This stuff is a normal part of parenting, but in the beginning, these questions won't help you establish a relationship—just an authority structure. Plus, these questions just ask for “yes or no” answers—no conversation sparkers here. Dr. Egan suggests limiting questions like these, especially at first:

- Will you be home for dinner?
- Did you walk the dog?
- Have you done your homework?
- Is your room still a mess?

Try This

Nurturing Questions

This is the good stuff—the friendly, low-demand conversation starters that build a genuine relationship. To spark a dialogue and get to know your bonus kid, Dr. Egan suggests, ask questions that don't have any downside because they don't have a “right” or “wrong” answer.

- Have any plans this weekend?
- Is the new season of Stranger Things any good?
- Should I wear boots or heels?
- Are you in the mood for takeout or should we make homemade pizza?

Treasure the opportunity

It's difficult to connect with someone when you don't know who they are, what matters to them, how their brains work, etc. Fill out this sheet to get a clearer picture of the special person you are now sharing a family with. (If you have multiple stepkids, print this page several times!) If you don't know some of the answers, casually drop the questions into conversations with your stepchild, or ask your partner if they have suggestions.

Child or teen's name

Describe their personality

What are their strengths?

What are their hobbies or interests?

What else do they like? *(Foods, activities, places, bands/singers, animals, movies/TV shows, comfort methods, games, colors, school subjects, etc.)*

What do they dislike? *(Any of the above, plus: Topics of conversation, questions, chores, situations, etc.)*

Ways you can help them with their struggles or burdens:

Ways you can enhance the things they enjoy:

What activities or outings will you *both* enjoy?

Once you have a good handle on your stepchild's personality, likes, and dislikes, it's easier to choose things you would mutually enjoy. Consider this list of active things to do. There's no sitting around watching TV without talking—it's time to interact!

Check the box by any activities you might want to try

Places to go

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shopping mall | <input type="checkbox"/> Concert in the park | <input type="checkbox"/> Library |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Playground or park | <input type="checkbox"/> Froyo or ice cream | <input type="checkbox"/> Duck pond |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arcade | <input type="checkbox"/> Lego store or Disney store | <input type="checkbox"/> Rock climbing gym |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Theme park | <input type="checkbox"/> Ball pit | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Antique mall | <input type="checkbox"/> Zoo | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Activities

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking a walk | <input type="checkbox"/> Bike ride | <input type="checkbox"/> Paint each other's nails |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gardening | <input type="checkbox"/> Nature walk (collect cool stuff) | <input type="checkbox"/> Do makeovers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pick berries | <input type="checkbox"/> Read books | <input type="checkbox"/> Arts and crafts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pick wildflowers | <input type="checkbox"/> Play "go fish" | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking or baking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do each other's hair | <input type="checkbox"/> Make a fort | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go stargazing or find shapes in the clouds | <input type="checkbox"/> Make a model airplane | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

How to *communicate* in a blended family

Communication gets complicated when families have complex structures. It's not impossible (and sometimes it's not even difficult) to create clear communication pathways if you set clear expectations and stick to what works.

Usually, the co-parents should communicate with each other directly: "The primary parents need to communicate on kid matters," recommends Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones. "The stepparent is there for support, not to take the lead."

Of course, if all parents communicate productively, that's a healthy environment for the children. But sometimes, the parent will only feel comfortable communicating with the co-parent.

"Always show the children that the parents are aligned," suggests Baird-King. "Create harmony. You can't say bad things in front of, near, in earshot of, or directly to the child. The child doesn't need to know anything about negative disagreements."

What if the child complains about their other parent?

Your top priority is making sure the child knows it's safe to talk to you. So show empathy, but stay calm, and listen thoughtfully.

Acknowledge and validate their feelings, like this: "That sounds so frustrating." But don't say, "Your rotten parent should never have done that!" Focus on the child's emotions, not the parent's actions.

Exception: In cases of abuse, it is appropriate to make sure your stepchild knows that the behavior was wrong and that they didn't deserve it. Work to make sure the right steps are taken to protect the child.

Try a co-parenting app

“They’re great for not just high-conflict families but also all families,” says Roberg. “There are a lot of advantages of staying in the app and keeping everything on the record.”

A co-parenting app can help you track the truth by keeping everything on the record. That helps keep conversations honest. It also centralizes and organizes your co-parenting tasks, from messages to finances to a parenting time calendar. Altogether, a co-parenting app can make co-parenting easier—and it can even reduce anxiety related to co-parenting.

Try these healthy communication habits

- Solve problems and make suggestions rather than criticizing.
 - Is your stepson staying up past his bedtime because he’s doing his homework after dinner? Offer to move dinner earlier so your teen has more time.
- Speak positively about your stepchild’s other parent—and only positively. Pause before you speak. It’s always easier to align your words with your goals and values if you take a beat.
- Talk to your spouse later, in private, if the child says something concerning.

Try more healthy communication habits

- Have a sense of humor.
 - If you’re a bad cook, ask your stepkid, “Do you want a pancake with both sides black, or just one? Because I can’t do none!” says Dr. Egan
- Talk to each other when misbehavior arises. If the behavior breaks a rule, enforce the rule together. If there’s not a specific rule against it, discuss it together before talking to the kid or teen. Make sure the kids know exactly what the rules are.
- “Pay attention. Read the room,” urges Dr. Egan. “If your partner comes home exhausted, don’t read a list of horrible things your stepkid has done.”

Who should talk to *who*? And when? And how?

Most of the time, negative or critical messages should come from the parent. But it's not always feasible, so consider the method of communication. If your teen is in trouble, should you yell at her across the lawn when she's leaving with friends? Should you holler it up the stairs when she's sleeping? Often, explains Dr. Egan, a text from the parent works better than in-person criticism from the stepparent.

But every family is different, so coordinate between the two of you. Start by filling in the guidelines below to help you figure it out together.

Our guidelines for communication with the kids

What topics will the bioparent take point on—even when they're not home?

What kinds of messages are safe for either of you to relay?

When there's a problem in one of those safe areas, who should handle it?

If the stepparent needs to handle it, what method or style of communication should be used?

What happens if a negative or critical message is urgent and the bioparent isn't home?

Our guidelines for communicating with the co-parent

What topics will the parent take point on?

What kinds of messages are safe for either of you to relay?

When there's a problem in one of those safe areas, who should handle it?

If the stepparent needs to handle it, what method or style of communication should be used?

What happens if a negative or critical message is urgent and the parent isn't available?

Why blended families are a blessing

Sure, having a blended family can be complicated. But it can also be great. Remembering the positives can put you in a better frame of mind to handle the negative. Most of all, it helps you find more joy in your family.

1. The family becomes a bigger support system: Whether your child needs an urgent ride to the dentist when you're stuck at work, a makeup lesson, or a shoulder to cry on, having another caring adult in the home only expands the child's resources. Now they have more people to turn to, talk to, and rely on.

And the adults get extra backup. Parenting is a lot—take all the help you get! In a healthy blended family, having three or four parent figures means you have more people sharing the load and contributing to the child's healthy upbringing.

2. "Your kids get exposed to different family cultures:" says Dr. Egan. One family might discuss politics at the dinner table while another does not. You might add a new family tradition or spread the love of a hobby or passion.

Contrasts in family styles can help kids learn more about the options available to them. Maybe one family is super into game nights, or they make an amazing dessert. Maybe one family believes that college is a default choice. Or one mom runs a business and the other is a stay-at-home mom. It's healthy for kids to know there are many ways of living.

3. A new caring adult brings new strengths into the family: Leaning into the stepparent's strengths, skills, or expertise is a smart and thoughtful way to integrate them into the family.

If the stepparent is a math whiz or a history aficionado, they might be able to help with homework more effectively than the parents. That's a net benefit for the child or teen, and it relieves some pressure on the parents.

4. Your kids get built-in playmates: If you both have young kids, there will probably be some squabbling, but blending your families might increase the number of people they can play with at home, too.

If you have older kids, they might be more set in their ways and less open to connecting right away, but they might be open to babysitting. (Another example of expanding your support network.) "Just remember, if it's not their [original] sibling, you should pay them," suggests Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones.

Your turn! What are some benefits, advantages, or blessings of being in your *blended family*?

What's a benefit for the children?

What's a benefit for the stepparent?

What's a benefit for the bioparent?

What's a benefit for the whole family?

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Although Dr. Egan has extensive experience working with children and teens who struggle with anxiety, depression, temper tantrums, power struggles, defiance, school avoidance, and social skill deficits, her work has evolved to primarily support children and their parents as they navigate separation and divorce. She provides therapy to children and teens, offers coparenting counseling, and has recently began offering parent coordination services and forensic psychology courses. She is currently on the board for the Center for Cooperative Parenting.

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Natalie recently authored her book *Forgiving Unforgivable ~ The 4 Essential Secrets to Overcome Trauma, Stand Empowered, and Step into Purpose*. Natalie has also been honored to be a Ted Talk speaker on Forgiveness. Through her personal and career experiences, she shares how the key to freedom is through forgiveness.

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