



Parenting Families

Practical Strategies for the Blended Family

By Dr. David J. Ludwig

Why Is Parenting in a Blended Family so Difficult?

So you are a blended family! I know you want to create a good family unit and have healthy, respectful kids. But the forces are against you!

It's natural for children in a divorce situation to want the original parents back together. After all, that is where they will feel secure and normal. Something very powerful stands in the way of accepting the new marriage. In fact, don't be surprised if they try to break the new relationship apart. They even feel that this is their job! The child, for example, just cannot warm up to the new stepmother — that would be disloyal to her real mother.

It is also not unusual for your natural child, the one you bring into this new marriage, to refuse to obey or to treat your new spouse with respect. In fact, be prepared to have your child pull on your heartstrings to get you on her side when she has conflict with your new spouse! It will go something like this:

“Mommy, Mommy, Tom yelled at me,” your daughter will say as she comes to you with tears in her eyes. She will call your new husband by his first name and will convince you that he has been cruel to her. You will then have a talk with your husband, warning him not to do that again, as your daughter makes that smug face at him as if to say, “See, I do not have to obey you.” Your husband will feel powerless and resentful, but will probably back off and let you do the parenting.

Such forces begin to break your new family unit apart. Put simply, that is why it is so difficult to make a blended family work.

Blended Families Can Work!

The true secret of successful parenting in a blended family is the “WE”. But forming the WE is unusually difficult. It is more natural to take up for your child than form the WE with your new spouse!

In blended families, the two parents are presented with a unique challenge as to developing a united front (WE) in the face of “us” and “them” thinking. Without such a united front, however, the children will naturally manipulate the situation and further divide the blended family. The key to successful stepparenting is to develop a solid WE: between you as parents so that the whole family works together as a unit. With the development of this united front, stepparenting can become a positive experience.

With any two parents, there is a multitude of ways you would handle situations differently. You have different backgrounds and different expectations. One of you is probably more the “policeman” and the other more of a “friend” to the child. This difference alone makes it hard enough to create a united front in disciplining the child.

In a blended family situation, creating a united front is much more difficult. Not only will your child not have the natural desire to obey the new parent, she will deliberately manipulate the situation, trying to undermine the authority of the new parent.

But do not be discouraged — the WE is more powerful than this destructive force. If the two of you can form a strong WE, the good news is that the child will actually warm up to the new marriage. As the WE remains strong, the child feels the security of this united front. Gradually the child will actually champion the new marriage and will no longer try to break it down. The child will eventually choose the healthy security of the WE over the natural desire to break the new marriage apart.

When you form a blended family, you want it to work!

Here is a statement from a stepparent who learned the secret of the WE: “I wanted it to work so badly. But the forces we faced were far beyond what I expected. The loyalty to your own child (children) is so powerful, that when things deteriorate, it’s ‘us’ against ‘them’. We were in considerable difficulty when we finally discovered that the new WE that my wife and I formed had to be stronger and more important than the natural us and them forces that we constantly battled.”

What this means is that anyone considering forming a blended family must be aware of the importance of the new WE that is formed. The new marriage relationship must be strong enough to blend both previous families together! Otherwise the us and them forces will tear the new family apart!

An example of forming the WE to control the mood:

Jim’s 22-year-old daughter was coming over for the evening. When Sarah arrived, Jim jumped up to answer the door. He hugged Sarah and grabbed her hand, leading her to the couch. He listened intently as she gave him the scoop on her most current problem. Candice, the stepmother, walked over to join the conversation, but Sarah deliberately turned her back to exclude her. When she sent a signal to her husband, he was annoyed and said that he was busy. Angry, Candice turned away, feeling left out.

So, where’s the WE? It is obvious from this exchange that dad and daughter form a WE against stepmom! Not good for the family spirit!

Sarah had the power to defy her stepmother because the WE broke down. Now let’s see how this blended family can handle the situation as a WE.

When Sarah came for her next visit, the first thing Jim did when the doorbell rang was to go over and hug his wife. Then the two of them went to the door together and greeted Sarah with “Hi, WE are glad you are here. Come on in.” Then they sat down together, still holding hands. They looked at each other and smiled before addressing Sarah. During the conversation, they said “WE” often and looked back at each other every minute or so.

The change in Sarah was astounding. She no longer had that whiney voice that hooked her father. She did not have that attitude of disrespect toward her stepmother. Rather, she talked like a mature 22-year-old, asking them for advice in her situation!

How Do You Form the WE in a Blended Family?

The natural parent must take the lead. If you are the natural parent, you have automatic authority over your child. Your new spouse does not have that authority.

To convey this authority to your new spouse, you must look at him, smile, and say, "How are WE going to handle this situation?" Your child will see you forming the WE and will begin to feel some respect for the new WE.

Of course, your child will push against the WE and will try to break it down. She will have ingenious ways of splitting the two of you apart. She will push all the buttons she knows. If that does not work, she will even physically get in between the two of you, trying to diminish the power of the new WE.

You, as the natural parent, must take the lead hundreds of times in forming this WE. It will take a couple of months for your child's attitude to begin to shift. At first she will try everything to break the WE apart, but gradually she will feel the security of the new WE and will start warming up to it.

If the two of you can say "WE" at all times when disciplining your child ... if the two of you look at each other often, smile, and then address your child, "WE have talked about this and have decided what is best for the situation ..." If the two of you keep control of the mood by staying a WE against the onslaughts of your child ... then after several months, your child will begin appreciating the WE.

Better yet, your child will feel the security of the new WE. She will like the feelings she has when the mood stays friendly and warm. There will come a time when it is obvious that she likes the healthy mood of the new marriage!

Your child will actually want the two of you to stay married!

Your Child has a "Spell" Cast on her from the Divorce!

If you are divorced and have now remarried, there is a good chance that your child has strong, unconscious feelings about your remarriage. In fact, you can say that your child has a "spell".

Remember that your child grew up with a mother and father. The beginning of your child's spirit is formed out of the parental relationship. Consider the following:

The child's spirit reflects the marriage relationship.

1. The beginning of the child's inner conversation is the way the parents talk to each other.
2. If you, as parents, generally get along, affirm each other, and handle conflict constructively, the child will have little inner conflict.
3. But if you, as parents, fight a lot, create bad moods as you punish each other, and allow power struggles to dominate the marriage relationship, your child will have considerable inner conflict.
4. The best gift you can give your child is to love one another and develop a vibrant, uplifting marriage relationship!

Your relationship with your former spouse, no matter how dysfunctional, is the basis of your child's inner security. This is what is "normal" for her. When divorce occurs, she feels broken and uncertain inside. Her natural instinct is to get the original marriage back so that she can feel normal again.

Since you and your former spouse are not together, she will then try to gain some security by recreating that relationship with you! She will relate to you just as your former spouse did. She will activate that old relationship as she interacts with you. That is her spell.

When you deal with her, you will feel like you are dealing with your former spouse! You will feel the same frustration, anger, anxiety, upset, and weariness that you felt in your previous marriage.

How do I break this "spell"?

Your normal reaction is to blame your child for your frustrated, upset feelings. You think your child is just being difficult.

That is not true! Your child is not frustrating you deliberately! She is actually caught in a spell, desperately trying to get the old marriage relationship back. She has no choice!

Once you know that it is a spell, you can handle your child differently. You do not have to react to your child like you did your spouse! Perhaps you resented your former spouse for constantly criticizing you. Now your child is using the same accusing voice-tone and you feel the same anger inside.

You don't have to get frustrated like you did with your spouse! You can now break the spell by reacting differently to your child. You can say to your child, "Thanks for pointing that out; I appreciate your input." Saying this in a warm tone of voice breaks the old pattern. You would never do that to your former spouse's critical comments!

Even better, you break the spell by responding to your child as a WE. When your child uses that critical, disrespectful voice in addressing you, you do not have to react to your child the old way you would have with your spouse.

Instead, you can look at your new spouse, smile, form the WE, then address your child, "WE all agree that it is not good for our family that WE speak to each other with disrespect. Right, dear?" The two of you look back at your child and smile; then your spouse continues, "So WE expect you to change your tone of voice and be more respectful next time."

Your child will see the WE form and will hear the new voice-tone and the reference to the WE. This will break the spell quickly.

How do I know if my child is stuck and has a "spell"?

Listen to voice-tone and watch the body language. Check out the nonverbals. You can tell that your child is immature. You can hear the whine of a 3-year-old or the "worrywart" of a 7-year-old in your teenager. You can also check out your feelings to see if your child is stuck at an earlier age.

Quick guide to where your child is stuck.

- **Age 1-3:** Child reverts to being dependent, clingy, and wants your attention constantly. Voice-tone is whiney. Body language shows helpless affect. A healthy child learns to **trust** during this age period.
- **Age 4-6:** Child reverts to immature opposition to everything you want him to do, often with a temper tantrum. Voice-tone is demanding, constantly asking, "Why?" Body language shows an immature defiance. A healthy child learns to act **independent** during this age period.
- **Age 7-9:** Child reverts to a worrywart, constantly anxious about situations and wanting reassurance. Voice-tone is anxious and high-pitched. Body language shows too much seriousness. A healthy child learns to be **responsible** during this age period.
- **Age 10-12:** Child reverts to lying, hiding feelings and actions. There are definite passive-aggressive tendencies – and undercover defiance. Voice-tone is guarded and phony. Body language is closed, trying to reveal nothing. A healthy child learns **independent inner thinking** during this age period.
- **Age 13-16:** Child reverts to immature rebellion, getting upset at any attempt at enforcing the rules. There is a general over-reaction to parental authority. Voice-tone is often dramatic with explosions of anger. Body language is defiant and challenging. A healthy child learns to be **independent** during this period.

Let's assume your child is 18 years old. Do you worry about your child as if she cannot handle the situation (still see her as eight years old)? Do you distrust what your child is saying (still see her as 11 years old)? Can your child get you to explode with your own anger (still see him as 15 years old)?

Of course, you will naturally blame your child for not growing up. You will think your child is lazy, self-centered, unrealistic, or even sneaky. The more you think this, the more your relationship with your child will stay stuck. You will use your parental power to make something happen, only to run into greater rebellion from your child.

The problem is always the relationship. The WE of the family unit has broken down into individual ME's and the inevitable power struggle has taken over. Your child is just as frustrated as you are. Your child does not like to be stuck, but feels like she has no choice. She is in middle school and you still treat her like a 7-year-old.

The child gets "stuck" when the WE of the family unit breaks down.

When there is a strong WE, the family atmosphere is secure and safe. The child pushes against the boundaries, but does not get caught overfocusing on them. The child just "knows" what the family unit expects and will not rebel against that. The child loves the security deep down.

When the child can control the mood by breaking the WE of the family unit into a power struggle, the home is no longer safe. In the same way, when an affair, divorce, alcoholism, etc., breaks down the WE of the family, there is a wash of anxiety into the home. To cope with this anxiety, the child will develop a strategy to feel more secure.

The strategy reflects the age of the child at the time when the WE broke down. Young children seek more attention to feel more secure. Children in grade school will try to make their own environments more secure. Middle school children will detach from the family to find security in friends. High school children will use their “attitudes” and gain security by controlling the mood of the house.

How do you “unstick” your child?

Once you form a strong WE within the blended family, the child automatically gets “unstuck”. For example, your child found that throwing a temper tantrum at age four could control the mood and get the child what he wanted. The child is now eight and still throwing tantrums.

That’s the moment the two of you, as the new blended family, look at each other, smile, and say, “Your tantrum is not good for our family, so WE will not allow you to act that way. In fact, if you choose to act like this, you have just chosen not to have TV privileges today.” Should the child continue with the tantrum, the two of you look at each other and chuckle, “Guess you have made your choice. WE are sad for you and hope you choose better next time.”

You see, as long as the child cannot control the mood, he will grow up! When the two of you can keep the WE from breaking down, you have given your child an incredible gift. Your child can now grow up and not stay focused on manipulating you.

What if we fix the WE and our 13-year-old is still an 8-year-old worrywart?

When the child feels the security of the WE, she will no longer be overfocused on finding security by taking control in some manner. But some damage has been done, and the child will still exhibit immature behavior when placed in a stressful situation.

Instead of the child feeling “full of herself” when she becomes 13, the stress of peer relations brings her back into the worrywart mode. She endlessly worries about her appearance and her social skills. The stress has brought her back to the strategies she used when she got stuck at eight.

The WE can go back and fix this. The child’s spirit formed the original strategy at eight years old by finding out how to reduce anxiety in a real, live, concrete situation. This moment stays frozen in time. The childhood strategy will always be connected to a vivid image the child has of a particular moment when this strategy got solidified.

These “prototype” images are powerful and become “hardwired” into the child’s automatic behavior when in a stressful situation later in life. To “unstick” the child from such automatic reactions, go back and find the vivid image.

The actual process for you as a parent is to form the WE and make sure the mood is safe and secure. Then ask the child to tell you what was vivid when she was eight years old and remembers the awful fighting. Let the child tell you the image of being in her bedroom with the pillow over her head, afraid her parents were going to divorce. Let the child cry and feel the full effect of being eight and feeling powerless.

The love and security of the WE can heal this past damage to the child’s spirit! As long as the memory is private, the child will automatically use the same immature strategy later in life. Bringing the vivid memory into the open with all of its emotion does unstick the child and allow maturation of her spirit.

How Do WE Deal with the Continued Influence of the Ex-Spouse?

It is no surprise that your ex-spouse still causes severe disruption in your own mood and causes problems in your new marriage. Anytime you interact with him, you are bringing the old relationship back into the picture. You will feel the same frustrating things you felt when you were married. That is why the marriage broke apart. You are stuck with these old patterns.

So it is no surprise that an interaction with your ex-spouse can cause a bad mood around your new home! It is just the old relationship coming in and causing the same mood shift that it did when you were married before!

Do not deal with your ex-spouse by yourself! You can do nothing more than relate in the same old way that will ruin your mood and the mood of your new marriage!

Deal with your ex-spouse as a WE! Instead of handling the situation by yourself, invite your new spouse to join you in dealing with things as a WE!

An example of dealing with an ex-spouse the usual way:

Brian's ex-wife, Carey, would call every evening with a concern over their son. She would be upset about how his new wife, Laurie, was handling things. She would go on and on, criticizing the situation. Brian would sigh, listen, and try to calm her down. Laurie would get upset that he was spending so much time on the phone. Brian felt caught in the middle.

Brian was caught in the old relationship. This is why he divorced. He would feel constantly criticized, but would try to placate Carey to keep her from getting more upset. It was an old strategy.

An example of dealing with an ex-spouse as a WE:

Brian's ex-wife, Carey, called again, demanding to talk to Brian about their son. This time they both picked up the phone. Brian started, "Thanks for calling, Carey. WE know you want what is best for our son, so both Laurie and I want to hear what you have to say. Right, Laurie?" With that, Laurie continues with a genuine concern, "WE need to know what you notice so WE can be good parents to our son, and WE all need to work together. Right, Brian?" Brian picks up the conversation with energy in his voice, "So please tell us what you are concerned about."

Carey no longer has the demanding, critical voice. She is taken aback with the new conversation, so she speaks her concern in a short period of time. Brian closes the conversation, "Thanks, Carey, for your concern. WE will talk about it and get back with you. Right, Laurie?" Laurie concludes, "Yes, you have a valid concern, Carey, and WE will look at it carefully. Thanks for calling."

Notice that the conversation does not go on and on, but is a sharing of concern that will be helpful for the son. Also notice that Brian does not get off the phone with the usual heavy, upset feelings, but when he finished the conversation, he went straight to Laurie, hugged her and said, "Thanks for being there with me."

Practical Steps for Parenting in a Blended Family

1. Be sure to use the word WE in all discipline situations.
2. When you are together, look at each other and smile, then look back at the child and say, “WE have decided that”
3. When you are alone with the child (or children), say, “I will check with _____ and WE will get back to you.” Or if you know what the decision is, say, “WE agree that you should”
4. To build the WE, recognize the different gifts each of you bring to the relationship. See your differences as gifts, not as differences that undermine what you are trying to do!
5. Work together and value each other’s input as you establish rules and boundaries. Then make sure you enforce them together!
6. Bring the child into the WE. Ask the child for input and value what the child says. In this way the child will feel more a part of the WE.
7. Value time together as a couple. Feed the marriage relationship. Energize the relationship to empower it through the hard times. Go out on dates.
8. Do not be critical of the absent parent. The children will take this as an opportunity to form an us-against-them situation that will be deadly for the WE of the blended family.
9. Do not be critical of a former spouse. Stepchildren are not rubber bands to be pulled and stretched and expected to give and take when it comes to their absent, biological parent. Your children are 50 percent you and 50 percent of the non-custodial parent. If you rear that child in an environment where they feel that 50 percent of themselves is of no good value, what does that do to their self-esteem?
10. Look at your individual expectations of the blended marriage and come up with a mutual picture of your marriage. If you were reared by parents who had a good marriage, your expectations will be for a good marriage. You will have some direction as to what made their marriage a good one. However, what if your parents were alcoholics or workaholics? What if your parents hid behind you in your life, rearing you in an environment of simmering resentment, hostility, or marital apathy? In that case, you may have an inherent view that marriage really isn’t all that great; you may not expect a good one for yourself.
11. Another crucial issue is forgiveness. Have you forgiven yourself for the mistakes you have made? Have you asked for and received forgiveness from your partner? In any relationship, there are mistakes and if the relationship is to survive, it is so much more difficult when old issues surface and are never put to rest through forgiveness. Your faith can be an asset. God can help you forgive.

None of this is easy; in fact, it can be very hard. You will make mistakes, but they are forgiven. Others will make mistakes, but they are forgiven. Forming a WE takes time, effort, patience, and an open heart. But it’s worth it!

Hope

There is hope, no matter what is going on in your family right now.

Creating new patterns of family interaction is not easy; it requires intentional effort. Old habits won't change overnight, but it all begins with making WE more important than ME. This removes the power struggle and brings health to your family system.

Embarking on this type of journey may seem intimidating and difficult, even hopeless. But it is well worth the effort. Yes, you will face mistakes along the way, but even your mistakes become an opportunity for modeling the most powerful WE of all: the power of forgiveness.

Take a step back and look at this through a spiritual lens. Think about the incredible gift of having a child (after all, if you didn't think she was an incredible gift, you wouldn't be reading this book for insight). She was given to you by God the Father, the Creator of the world. He placed each of you into this world, but the world is far from perfect. Imperfection was not part of His design, as He created the world to be perfect and if it had stayed that way, there would never be a conflict between you and your child.

The once-perfect world that God created became fractured and broken by hurt and sin. And our relationship to God our Father is also fractured. But because He loves us more than any parent ever could, He sent His Son to restore this relationship. Jesus Christ, God's very own Son, became the Savior of the world when He took the punishment for every hurt to the cross, died and was buried, then rose in victory three days later!

Now what might seem impossible becomes possible, because Christ is there to give you strength and hope. Christ is there to forgive you (and your child) for every wrong move. Christ is there to be at the center of your WE.

With Christ's presence to help form the WE, amazing things can happen to family relationships ... even those that have been dysfunctional for a long, long time. That is God's gift to your family!

About the Concept

The “ME to WE” concept created by Dr. Ludwig can make an immediate impact on your family life. This fresh approach will challenge you to shift your thinking from ME, or, “How am I going to fix this?” to WE, or “How can WE work this out as a family?” This strategy can be applied to the big or small issues that families face and will prove especially helpful with the day-to-day challenges of parenting children.

The ME to WE concept as outlined in this booklet by Dr. Ludwig is also the basis of a parenting workshop series offered by Lutheran Hour Ministries. The six engaging sessions combine video and interaction between participants to fully reveal the concept.

Whether you have learned about the ME to WE concept through this booklet or through the Parenting Families Workshop, the important thing is to put it into practice within your family today. Approaching everyday situations from a unified standpoint will help your family form a solid WE foundation that will follow your children into adulthood.

Visit **www.parentingfamilies.com** to get more information about the video personalities, and obtain additional resources on parenting.

*Rev. Dr. David Ludwig is a pastor, noted author, family counselor, and retired professor of psychology at Lenoir-Rhyne College, Hickory, NC. He and his wife Kathy have 3 sons and 7 grandchildren. They reside in North Carolina and enjoy helping families through Grace Place Ministries. Discover more about Dr. Ludwig's resources at **www.thinkwe.com**.*

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