Becoming a Blended Family

"Your children all look different! Which one is yours?'

"Do you know who his/her *real* parents are?"

"Where did you get him/her?"

If you have been asked any of these questions, you probably are a blended family. If you haven't yet, get ready! It is not uncommon these days for families to be "blended" - a mix of adopted and biological children, a mix of different ethnicities and cultures, and/or a mix of different ages. Raising a blended family is a unique, special and challenging endeavor.

Frequently Asked Questions about Blending Families

Blending families can be incredibly rewarding, yet very challenging. From helping your child form an attachment to you, to dealing with

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Transferring Attachments

Calling you "mom" and "dad" - Leave this up to the child, and let them do this in their own time. Give them the option of calling you "mom" and "dad", and let them know they can decide when they are comfortable doing that. Keep in mind that it may take some time for your child to be open to this, especially if they are still very attached to their foster parents, biological parents, or other former caregiver.

relative's comments, families have a lot of questions and concerns surrounding the blending process. The following are some of the more common concerns families have:

Can I love my adopted child just like I love my biological child?

Of course! Just don't expect it to happen overnight. Bonding and attachment takes time, and while you were able to bond with your biological child the day he/she was born, you were not afforded the same opportunity with your adopted child. And neither were they. Adopted children may or may not have formed attachments with previous caregivers, and it is very likely that they have had some disrupted or insecure attachments in their lives as well. Don't be surprised if your child is slow to attach or seems to love you one minute and hate you the next. There will be times when you think your child wants nothing to do with your family, and you may question why you adopted him/her in the first place. It's on those occasions that you need to show him/her how much you love them, and work a little harder to gain their trust.

Will my extended family and friends favor my biological children over my adopted children?

Your extended family and friends may not necessarily favor your biological children, but they may not be sensitive to your adopted child's needs and situation. As the child's parent, it is up to you to model acceptance and love for all your children in front of your family members and friends. During the adoption process, talk to your family and friends about your plans to adopt. Let them know how important it is for them to show acceptance to all your children, and work with them on what is and what isn't an appropriate question or remark to make in front of your children.

How do I get my biological children to accept their new brother and sister?

Set out pictures of the child - Ask your child's former foster parents or caseworker for school pictures, or use photos of you and your child. Set them out where other people may see them, like on the fridge or in the living room.

Include the child in family traditions - But be open to any other traditions they may bring to your family. These traditions may be cultural, spiritual, or something they did with their foster parents or biological parents that are very significant to them.

Take the time to explain the rules - Give your child some time to adjust to the rules of your home, keeping in mind some may be different than those in previous placements. Instead of inundating your child with all of your family rules the minute they move into your home, cover the most important ones and then use each opportunity that arises to cover the other rules. Using

Just like with your extended family, it is important that you talk to your children about their feelings, fears, and thoughts on you adopting. Talk about some of the changes that will occur in your family and find out how they feel about it. Brainstorm some ways you can make your new child(ren) feel included. Above all else, assure them that your love for them will not change. Make sure to include them through every step of the adoption process.

How do we develop and nurture a shared family culture?

Invest time and energy into building a bond among your children. When the opportunity arises, make sure to emphasize with your adopted child what types of things your family likes to do together. Celebrate birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, etc. together in a way that makes everyone feel included, and creates a positive memory for all your children.

For more information and ideas, visit Mother Spaces' article, [Parenting a Biological Child and Adopted Child Together].

Helping Your Child Transition

It is very likely that your child will have experienced multiple placements in different foster homes, and possibly an adoptive placement or two. Making the transition into your family will not be easy, no matter what the child's age. In many cases, your child is likely to have a disrupted attachment style, which will make it hard for them to bond with your family no matter how much they may want to. The following are some ways you can help ease the transition into your family for your adopted child.

Talk with your child about the changes:

Plan the discussion - Talk to your child about the transitions they will experience when they

statements like "in our family, we do it this way" will remind the child that you are in charge, and will explain the house rules in a way that will not make them feel stupid or overwhelmed.

Send out announcements - Sending out announcement cards to your family and friends is a great way to make your child feel welcome and included. It will also show them that you are excited they are part of your family.

The following are things you should slowly ease your child into:

Involving the child in family reunions or other activities with extended family - Your child is trying to adjust to the people in your house, so meeting additional family members may be overwhelming and scary. Let your child become comfortable with the immediate members of your family before you introduce them to aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Start

move from their current placement into your home. You may have this conversation alone with your child, or with their worker present. Your child will probably have a lot of questions, so make sure to give them pertinent, honest answers.

Help your child use his/her own words to talk about the changes - Ask your child open-ended questions, like "what do you think the biggest difference will be when you are adopted?" Use their answers to gauge how your child is perceiving their adoption and the changes that will follow. Asking open-ended questions will help you make the transition smoother for your child, and allow them to feel like their opinions and feelings were heard and validated.

Help your child draw comparisons to other events in their life- This technique is really helpful for younger children who may not have the comprehension skills to fully comprehend the transition.

Talk with your child about their parents:

Birth parents - Gave the child life, appearance, personality, temperament, and talents.

Foster parents - Provided the child with safety, security, and a home while an adoptive family was sought.

Adoptive parents - Provide the child with love, permanency, support, life skills, and more.

Help your child understand their history:

Your child may have a lot of questions about their family history, including who they are, where they came from, what they were like, etc. Use the following tools to help your child understand their history:

- **Lifebook** - A lifebook is an account of the child's life in words and pictures. Include pictures of the important people in the child's life, your child participating in favorite activities and trips, etc. Work off by showing your child pictures of these family members, so they can become familiar with names and faces. Then, slowly introduce family members to your child. Start off by having your parent(s) or grandparent(s) over for dinner, for example, and slowly ease your way into introducing the rest of the family.

Involving the child in faith-based rituals - Base this off the child's age, faith, and comfort level. If possible, be open to letting your child practice the religion he/she is most comfortable with.

Resources

Parents.com: 10 Questions Not to Ask Adoptive Parents

Adoptive Families - Siblings and Adoption
Resource page on blending families. Includes information and resources for creating sibling relationships, preparing children for siblings, blending families, what to do

with the child's foster parent and caseworker on obtaining pictures of the child before they were placed in your home and also of their parents/other significant relationships.

- **Eco Map** - An eco map is a visual representation of the child and the important people and events in their life. The eco map can be used to explain how the child became part of your family. To create an eco map, place a picture of the child in the center of the paper and have lines coming out of it to other circles showing the child's biological parents, foster parents, friends, school, favorite activities, etc.
- **Life Map/Life Path** - A life map or life path is a visual representation of the different paths the child has taken in their life and how they lead to you. A life map shows the various milestones in a child's life: where they were at during a certain age, who was present, and what they were doing.

Help the child adjust to losses:

Reconstruct an accurate timeline of the child's life - Use a lifebook, eco map or life path.

Identify attachment figures that are important to the child - Gather as much information about these people from the child's foster parents, caseworker, therapist, teachers, etc.

Work with the significant attachment figures - If possible, build a relationship with the people with whom your child is very attached to ease your child's transition into your family.

Ask the attachment figure(s) for "permission" - Have the attachment figure(s) give your child permission to love their new family. This permission can come via a phone call, letter or in-person.

regarding birth siblings, books for parents, and books for children.

Adoptive Families - Teens in Blended Families

Adoptive Families - The Ties That Bind: Making Blended Families Work

Adoptive Families - Transracial Adoption

Before You Were Mine: Discovering Your Adopted Child's Life Story by Susan TeBos and Carissa Woodwyk

Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family by Arleta James

IFAPA - Lifebook Pages

Free lifebook pages from the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.

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