

Clash of the Clans

When fusing a family, make kids a priority to avoid an all-out battle

BY CLARE WALTERS

A marriage is not just a romantic coupling. It's accepting your partner, their personal habits, their strengths and weaknesses—and, of course, their family. We're talking about more than a meddling mother-in-law, or the uncle who always wants you to pull his finger. If bride or groom already has children, you might have some warm welcoming to do. And it could get tricky.

LET IT HAPPEN NATURALLY

Merging households is no walk in the park. To make the stroll a bit easier, focus on patience and caring communication, says Karen Ruskin, a family therapist in Sharon, Mass.

"When you come into a blended family, you've got to know there are unique challenges that will take place," Ruskin says. "Overall, you need to evaluate relationship with this person you're marrying, and their relationship with your kids."

These couples battle many obstacles, and the first challenge, Ruskin says, is knowing your role. Just because you have a new spouse, doesn't mean your child is ready to consider that person a parent or authority figure. They might not even get along well.

"Just because there's a connection for you, doesn't mean the kids feel it, too," she says.

The relationship should evolve over time, but don't rush it. Kids will tell you when the time is right.

"Hear the voice of the child," Ruskin says. "Don't push them to have feelings before they're ready."

WHEN SHOULD I CALL FOR HELP?

Therapists usually don't see families until things are already in a bad place, says therapist Karen Ruskin. "It's not until people are to a point where they feel they can no longer cope—that's when people often come for counseling. They wait because they think they're going to be able to make things improve." Ruskin says to seek help as soon as problems arise. "It's amazing, because some of the struggles are so common. And, really, in the early stages, if you go to a family therapist, you can walk away with some great insights."



LIKELY SCENARIO

1 million American children experience divorce every year

Remarriages are **50%** more likely to divorce in the first five years compared to first marriages

40% of children in the country go to bed each night without their biological father in the home

SOURCE: BLENDEDFAMILIES.NET

WALK IN THEIR SHOES

As adults, we're more equipped to handle our emotions and big life changes. But it's not as easy for a child to accept a household overhaul. To help your whole flock better navigate common family issues, put yourself in the kid's shoes.

"You need to understand how the child is feeling," she says. "It's important for adults to realize that it's not about 'me.' This is the struggle of the child. This is a journey for the kids."

Children in single-parent households parents tend to have more of a voice, Ruskin says. In a blended family, the children now have to share that voice, which can be a challenge.

"Often, the adult who is now blended (into an existing family) feels like the kids are not being respectful," she says. "The new parent feels like they should have a bigger voice."

Through arguments, conflicts and stress, adults might instinctively defend themselves against the children. But they simply must avoid this, Ruskin says.

"It's not that the kid doesn't like you or appreciate what you doing," she says. "It's what they're going through. It takes special adults to really navigate through the process."