Alex and Terri were two individuals whose lives took some unexpected turns. Alex served a successful mission, went to college where he met Terri, and was married at 23. In a 15-year marriage, Alex and Terri had three children and held a variety of Church callings, but developed an escalating pattern of bickering that progressed to explosive confrontations and divorce.

Barbara met Kyle in an institute class at the community college, and it was love at first sight. They had two children in their 10-year marriage and their love seemed to grow each day. Barbara’s life fell apart when she received a telephone call informing her that Kyle had been seriously hurt in an automobile accident. He died before she arrived at the hospital.

Approximately three years after Alex’s divorce and five years after Barbara was widowed, Alex and Barbara met, fell in love, and were married. None of their childhood dreams included a wedding reception with five children at their sides. They definitely had never pictured a wedding where the family of Barbara’s late husband was in attendance and expressing genuine feelings of love and best wishes.

Every blended family has its own story. Most parents of blended families freely acknowledge that their marriage and family

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—Elder Neal A. Maxwell

By S. Brent and Janet S. Scharman

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circumstances vary, sometimes dramatically, from what they had anticipated as younger people. Their family experiences are a mixture of good times and tremendous demands. When difficulties arise, some quickly assume the problems are associated with and maybe even caused by the complexity of being in a remarriage.

Unfortunately, like all families who focus on what they don’t have instead of what they do have, blended families may actually create unnecessary problems for themselves. It is true that blended families tend to be more complicated than two-parent biological families, but research supports the notion that the same ingredients vital to developing healthy first marriage families are also essential in remarriages.3

**SUCCESSFUL FAMILIES**

From earliest years, members of the Church have been taught the significance of marriage and of providing a healthy and righteous atmosphere for raising children. For a variety of reasons, people find themselves trying to fulfill this important responsibility in a blended family. Because their families are different in some ways from two-parent biological families, they sometimes wonder if they have the tools or if they can even access the blessings of our Heavenly Father to help their family progress eternally.

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” is a powerful statement given to us by our prophetic leaders to guide our efforts as we desire to raise good families. Sometimes “disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation.”4 To those who worry that required adaptations for their family’s set of life’s complications may be too challenging, President Gordon B. Hinckley has offered this reassurance: “Every home,” he said, “can provide an environment of love which will be an environment of salvation.”5

Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the Seventy reminded us that “family life is by its nature a continual struggle between the ideal and the real. But if your home often knows warm feelings of love and laughter, if your family is trying—even most of the time—to have family prayer, home evening, and honestly shared gospel experiences, you are learning the pattern for happiness.”6 And it is “devotion to God in the home,” President Faust said, that “seems to
forge the spiritual moorings and stability that can help the family cope.”

Factors Increasing the Likelihood of Success

Every blended-family story is a complicated mix of sadness and disappointment combined with optimism. Two hundred years ago, Samuel Johnson said that remarriage “represents the triumph of hope over experience.”8 Half of all recent marriages in the United States are remarriages for either the husband, wife, or both.9 This is a remarkable figure given that all remarriages are born out of loss, either the death of a spouse or divorce. In spite of these painful experiences, most people desire to remarry if given an opportunity. About 75 percent of divorced people, even after a difficult first marriage, remarry,10 with 30 percent remarrying within a year after their divorce.11 The impact of this on children is tremendous. About one-third of children living in the United States today will live in a blended or stepfamily situation before they become adults.12

As blended family and stepfamily life is becoming more prevalent, researchers are trying to understand the complex dynamics of this family structure. In a search of the professional literature, three scholars found that stepfamily research published in the 1990s exceeded the entire output of the previous 90 years of the century.13

The good news is that today we know a lot about what is needed to help these families thrive. Elizabeth Einstein, a family therapist and also a member of a blended family, said of her earlier experiences: “My stepparenting mistakes were not so much misdeeds as misinformation.”14 With good information and the motivation to build on proven principles, all families can be optimistic about their chances to be productive and happy with those who matter most to them. The following are factors that have been shown to help blended families move forward in constructive ways.

Losses are acknowledged and mourned. All family members will have experienced significant losses prior to the organization of the new family, and each may need the opportunity

It is critical that couples view time together as a necessity rather than a luxury.
to work through individual concerns on his or her own timetable.\textsuperscript{15} Losses will vary but may include relationships, money, prestige, security, and dreams. Divorced members of the Church may feel they are off course, stunted in their eternal progression without a way of redeeming themselves. Adjusting to divorce is sometimes more difficult than adjusting to the death of a spouse because of guilt, worries about failure, unresolved issues, and continued interactions with the former spouse concerning children.\textsuperscript{16} It can be helpful for individuals to take some extended time for healing or to seek help in overcoming old injuries.

During these times the power of the Atonement can be called upon and its comfort felt. In addition to hard work and perseverance, success in family life also requires hope, faith, and trust in our Heavenly Father. The Lord has promised each one of us, in our unique set of circumstances, that He will make up for our shortcomings both during and “after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

Children may be dealing with issues that are quite different from those the adults are experiencing. They may see a remarriage as an end to their hopes of parents’ reconciling at the very time when the adults are full of optimism for a new beginning.\textsuperscript{17} Children often need to be invited to talk about concerns, and they may prefer to talk with someone other than a parent.

\textit{Expectations are realistic.} It is important to remember that remarriage is not a replacement for a first marriage or a second chance to get a first marriage right. Remarriage is an entirely new, potentially rewarding opportunity. Being open to fresh possibilities and new ways of doing things, while keeping long-term, eternal goals in focus, can help families let go of the past and move forward.

Many children experience what Judith Wallerstein calls “reconciliation fantasies.”\textsuperscript{18} Even if children were young when their parents divorced and both biological parents are now happily remarried, some children hang on to the hope that past issues can be resolved and their biological (or adoptive) parents will get back together. Understanding this particular dynamic can help parents to proceed carefully, making it possible for each individual to determine to what degree they will bond on an emotional level, be best buddies, or settle for a relationship that is less close. Openly acknowledging that the integration required for a group of people to feel like a family typically takes years, not weeks or months,\textsuperscript{19} can allow individual members the time and space they need to become comfortable with each other.

Loyalty conflicts can be common in blended families.\textsuperscript{20} Steprelatives do not have to love each other. At the same time, an unexpected side effect of developing feelings of love for a steprelative is a feeling that one is abandoning biological relatives. A young child, for example, may feel guilt at loving a stepfather as though it is a betrayal of his biological father. Such feelings, while they may sound illogical to an outsider who would point out that love is not exclusive or restrictive, may be surprisingly powerful and persistent.

\textit{The couple is unified.} The Lord said, “If ye are not one ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27). Elder Robert E. Wells of the Seventy was raised in a stepfamily and then was a parent in his own stepfamily after the death of his first wife. Based on firsthand experience, he offered this wise observation: “Familial unity starts with the parents. Solidarity and love between couples help generate solidarity and love among siblings. That is why the primary relationship in a strong, unified family is the relationship between husband and wife.”\textsuperscript{21}

In remarriage, couples sometimes choose to put their relationship on hold while they work on the many complexities of their family, including forming good connections with stepchildren. While this is understandable, it is critical that couples view time together
as a necessity rather than a luxury. Spending time together is not only desirable for the couple; it provides good modeling and reassures the children about the stability of the relationship.

Both partners need to decide together how they will deal with major issues. Generally, it is a good idea to phase slowly into parenting one another’s children, allowing the biological parent to handle most of the disciplining of his or her own children initially. As time passes, parents of healthy families come to clearer agreement of how children should be reared.

*Satisfactory relationships are formed.* Gordon B. Hinckley was 20 years old when his mother Ada, his father’s second wife, died. “Gordon had never felt such emptiness or hurt,” his biography states.22 Less than a year and a half later, Gordon’s father announced to his children his intention to remarry. “The resulting silence was deafening.”23 “In our wildest dreams,” Gordon’s sister Ramona said, “I don’t think we imagined Father would remarry. We just couldn’t imagine him with anyone but Mother.”24 After the normal silences and awkward family interactions, Gordon’s father, Bryant, spent the time necessary to talk through the issues with his son; he reassured Gordon of his continued love of Ada but also of his desire not to be alone for the rest of his days on earth. From the first, May, the new stepmother, made it clear that she had no intentions of replacing Ada; she just wanted to find a place of her own in the family. It took time, but “Aunt May,” as they came to call her, was patient and loving and eventually earned the respect of all the family.25

Whether a person comes into the new family because there has been a death or a divorce, stepparents who at least initially define their role with their stepchildren as that of a friend are usually most satisfied.26 No matter how open, caring, sincere, or unselfish a person is, step-relationships may never feel exactly like biological or adoptive relationships, and that’s okay. Many report that, given time and opportunity, their interactions have progressed to a place where they are extremely meaningful and rewarding.

Often under-considered in discussions about remarriage adjustment are the multitude of individuals who do not live under the family roof. Forty percent of all families include step-grandparents, for example.27 Other relatives—uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins, and even friends—are forced to adjust to the new family. One of the factors that make this particularly difficult is that, while a remarriage may significantly influence their lives, they may have had little or no input into the decision. Successful step-families are inclusive and make an effort to identify and reach out to concerned family members.

*Families are informed.* Successful families read enough relevant literature to have a basic awareness of what other blended families say has worked for them. Some individuals have found it beneficial to develop their own support system with one or two other successful, similar families.

It can be helpful to have some understanding of the typical stages of blended or stepfamily development.28 Patricia Papernow offers one model with these typical stages:

- **Fantasy.** This is a time filled with complex, hopeful wishes and expectations.
- **Immersion.** The family structure begins to appear and the stepparent may feel somewhat like an outsider.
- **Awareness.** Family members make more sense out of the confusion.
- **Mobilization.** During this sometimes chaotic, confusing time, differences are openly expressed as individuals are more aware of their feelings and are more comfortable in sharing them.
- **Action.** Enough time has passed that new negotiations are made about how the family
will function and new boundaries are drawn.
• Contact. The family now functions without constant attention to "step" issues, and more authentic one-on-one relationships are formed.
• Resolution. The family now has solid and reliable relationships and a new history is being created.

Most families go through these stages, although the timing and smoothness of progression may vary significantly from one family to another, and different life crises may cause the same family to cycle through some phases more than once. The important point is that families understand there are predictable phases their family is likely to experience. A difficult period of time should not signal to the family that life will always be hard or chaotic. In fact, over time, families naturally adjust and adapt. People tend to do best when they understand that the challenges they are experiencing are normal and most often temporary.

Constructive rituals are developed. Remarriage changes everything, both important and less significant things. Soon after a remarriage takes place the new family will have to decide how to celebrate a birthday, Christmas, the Fourth of July, or how to handle a summer vacation. If the children are older, traditions will have been formed. Traditions are good for families and most people reflect pleasantly as adults on the patterns they lived out in their childhood. In a blended family there may be four different parents and many opinionated extended family members who have a bias about who should be where for specific occasions.

As complicated as these realities can be, they are solvable. Part of the fun of remarriage can be the forming of new traditions. Families where divorced parents have agreed to alternate spending Christmas Eve with children find it works well. Developing new rituals like celebrating the remarriage date as a family, honoring birthdays on the first Sunday of the month, or spending a weekend away together every six months can be satisfying. Of course, maintaining previous rituals such as having regular family prayer, scripture study, family home evenings, and father’s blessings, when possible, offer the stability and continuity that strengthens everyone.

No matter how open, caring, sincere, or unselfish a person is, step-relationships may never feel exactly like biological or adoptive relationships, and that’s okay.
Family members need not worry about the sealing situation of blended families as it might be in the next life. Our concern is to live the gospel now and to love others, especially those in our family.
The family is the basic structure the Lord devised to help train and protect His children so that they might return to His presence. Families are entitled to all the supports and all the blessings needed to fulfill the Lord’s great purpose. Elder Henry B. Eyring said: “The test a loving God has set before us is not to see if we can endure difficulty. It is to see if we can endure it well. . . . To endure well is to keep those commandments whatever the opposition, whatever the temptation and whatever the tumult around us.”

In the midst of the tumult many feel at times, it is important to remember that God wants us to be happy and successful. He will bless our righteous efforts in our families as we endeavor to expand loving networks, develop new and creative traditions, learn from mistakes, and refine the qualities that create maturity and enable us to live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27).

Additional Reading

S. Brent Scharman (2002, April), When you don’t have custody, Ensign, 27(8), 58–63.

Robert E. Wells (1997, August), Uniting blended families, Ensign, 27(8), 24–29.

Notes
1. Neal A. Maxwell (1994, May), Take especial care of your family, Ensign, 24(5), 89.
2. The term blended family is used where there are children of more than one union. Stepfamily is used where all the children are of one union. As information in this chapter applies to both situations, these terms are used interchangeably and are not differentiated in the chapter.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley (1994, November), Save the children, Ensign, 24(11), 54.
18. Ibid., xvii.
23. Ibid., 53.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 54.
29. Ibid., 353.