

Ryan Lowe MA, Mpsych psych, MACP, UKCP

Blending Families: creating a new tribe



Introduction

Modern families come in all shapes and sizes. There are many new ways of living and bringing up children. Cultures and societies change rapidly and Western society is constantly changing. We have come a long way from the huge stigma attached to divorced and single parenting. There is even an increasing respect for single parents and the mammoth task that they face.

However, in light of there being fewer 'rules' that govern how we manage families, we now need to think carefully about what we do to meet the needs of all family members.

There are no wrong ways of bringing up families. Blended families have the advantage of helping children develop strong, close relationships with larger groups of people. New partners are also a huge support for parents who would otherwise be single. However, blending families has a unique set of challenges and things to think about in order to make sure everyone's needs get met. In my view the only 'rule' to a well-functioning family is that everyone's needs get met well enough for them to grow and thrive.

I start this booklet with two psychological concepts that play a strong role in family dynamics—the unconscious and ambivalence. My apologies for starting with the most complicated bit. Those two concepts underpin so much of our behaviour that it is essential to start with them. It gets much easier after that when we look at the children's feeling and perspectives, the adults' feelings and, finally, the common areas of difficulty and conflict and how to resolve them.

1

The Unconscious

The Unconscious plays a tremendous part in all family dynamics. Consciously, we all want to live well together, be kind, control our tempers and just generally get along. Yet there is a part of us that we are not in control of. That part takes over and we suddenly find ourselves acting quite contrary to the way we would wish.

This is the Unconscious; the part of us we don't want. We successfully push it below the surface and pretend it isn't there. However, from its home under the surface, the Unconscious continues to influence our behaviour and harbour resentments that, unless they are aired and dealt with, will cause difficulties.

There has been research that shows as much as 90% of our behaviour to be driven by our unconscious mind. This includes unconscious reactions such as reflexes and instinct, however, it can be frightening to think that we are actually much less in control that we might wish!

Because the Unconscious plays such a big part in family dynamics, communication and honesty are crucial when dealing with the complexities of merging two separate families and asking them to operate as one new entity. Only in talking to people and thinking problems through do we come to be aware of ourselves, how we are acting and what we may be doing that we aren't even aware of.

As an example, a writer, who was the mother of a teenage girl, was in real distress. Her 13 year old, Jessica, had a horrible attitude toward her new 14 year old step-sister. It took some time to talk through because Jessica wasn't really aware of why she disliked the new sister. On the face of it they got on and liked the same things, but Jessica resented her presence in the home.

She talked about her new step-sister as always being so bossy or a know-it-all.

However, when we looked at it and talked with her and her mother, we found that she was worried. The new sister was very academic and loved English literature like her mother. Jessica was dyslexic and had always struggled with English, and felt that her mother would prefer the new daughter to her.

It seems obvious once it has been uncovered, but because Jessica's feelings were unconscious it was not at all obvious to anyone until they sat and talked about the situation. However, when we looked at it and talked with her and her mother, we found that she was worried. The new sister was very academic and loved English literature like her mother. Jessica was dyslexic and had always struggled with English, and felt that her mother would prefer the new daughter to her.

2

Ambivalence

It is perfectly possible and normal to feel two conflicting feelings at once. This is known as ambivalence. For example, children can both love and hate their siblings, their mother or their step-parent.

Just because someone is expressing one side of their feelings, does not mean that the opposite feeling does not also exist. So if a teenager is screaming, 'I hate you', at a step-parent she has previously got on very well with, it is important for the step-parent to remember that the love didn't go away and will come back.

If a little girl regularly says, 'I love you mummy', it won't stop her from also having equally strong feelings of anger and hate when she feels thwarted or displaced. In fact, if she is saying it regularly and compulsively, it might be a defence against strong feelings of anger that she is trying to repress and force into her unconscious.

As important as communication is in any family, it is also important for everyone to be able to tolerate the ambivalent feelings of other family members. Otherwise, communication will always be shut down when someone says something difficult or painful to hear. Try to listen and tolerate what is being said and trust that underneath there are also feelings of love and care between family members. Try to contain your feelings of upset or anxiety when people are saying things that are difficult to hear so that they can feel free to communicate.

I recently had my capacity to tolerate ambivalence tested when I heard my young daughter casually say to her godfather, 'I wish my parents would die'. When questioned she said it was because she would be able to live with her godfather who did card tricks and played with her all the time, whereas her

parents work too much and don't play enough. Well that told me! As hard as it is to hear these kinds of statements, it's important to believe the strength of the love and attachment that I have to my daughter, and also listen to her message and play with her more often.

3

Preparing Children and Teenagers for Change

Talk to your children about what you are feeling and doing after the divorce. When it is time for you to move on you can discuss this with your children and answer any questions they have about why.

Give your children time to adjust to the idea that the family structure may be changing. They've already gone through a massive change with a divorce, and this will be yet another massive change for them.

Be as honest as you can with your children about dating. See if you can get them to be interested in the idea and talk to them about how they might feel about it. Involve them in the process. For example, teenage daughters might help you chose outfits and boys can give you chat up lines.

The most important thing at any stage is to communicate. If you can see that your child is not able to be interested in the idea of you having a new partner then it is time to talk and see what feelings lie beneath their reticence.

Lack of communication is responsible for many family breakdowns. Sadly, that includes breakdowns between parents and children as well as breakdowns between the adults in the family.

Secrecy

In our culture we tend to have an idea that we should 'protect' our children from the truth.

From a Child Psychotherapy point of view it is hugely important to help our children feel that they are safe and well looked after. However, this is very different from hiding family events from them or leaving them out of important discussions and decisions.

Often, if we don't tell children things, or only partially tell them things, they will make the rest of it up in their minds. What they make up is often worse than the reality. Children have a tremendous capacity for fantasy and it often runs away with them.

Human babies are born so helpless and dependent on their carers that they quickly come to read their parents very well. We may think we are managing to hide a family difficulty from them, but they will have picked up the clues that something is wrong. If they don't have enough information they will quickly jump to conclusions that are often much worse than the reality. For example, children who aren't given the details about a divorce or break-up will almost always assume that they are at fault.

There is a huge difference between blurting out information in a way that makes a child feel scared and sitting down to carefully and honestly talk through changes in the family with the children.

This is particularly important during divorce, as well as when starting the journey of new relationships and blended families. When you are starting a new relationship it will help your children adjust if they can have the same amount of time as you to get used to the idea.

Helping Children to Talk

You can try to see if your children are able to tell you exactly what is bothering them, but bear in mind that many can't, especially young ones. You will have to look to their behaviour or new ways they play to get clues as to how they are feeling.

For example, a little 7 year old who had been very keen on her new step-father suddenly became rude and unpleasant after he moved in. Everyone in the family was confused and hurt. It was an older sibling who noticed that her play with her dolls was all about a daddy that left and couldn't be trusted. This helped the family understand that the little girl's rudeness was because she was afraid of being hurt when this new father left her too.

It is also important to give children permission to feel negative feelings about divorce, separation, and new families so that they know they don't have to tell you everything is fine. Again this takes us back to being able to tolerate ambivalence. If your child needs to say how much they are worried about your new partner or hate the idea of moving in together, it is important to give them the space to say it and to listen carefully without trying to make them feel differently. Ironically this is likely to be what allows them to also acknowledge the other, more positive, side of their feelings.

The reason that many children don't talk openly to their parents is their worry that their parents will be angry at them or upset by what they say. It is hard not to be anxious if your child tells you things that you don't want to hear, but it is of utmost importance that the child feels they are allowed to talk freely and openly.

Find quiet, stress-free times to ask your child questions about the new situation or what you think might be bothering them. Bedtimes are often good times, as are school runs where you are alone with the child in the car or a relaxed morning in bed on the weekend.

4

Common Negative Feelings Children Have About Blended Families

- **jealousy** of both the new partner and any new children
- **guilt** about the other parent
- **conflict** about where their loyalties should lie
- **anxiety** about another change in their lives

To mitigate feelings of jealousy:

Luckily for parents it is really easy to give a heartfelt speech about how much our children mean to us. We can talk about how they will always hold a special place in our hearts. Just because they will always be special to us doesn't mean that there isn't room for different relationships with others.

Talk to them often about what it is you value and love about them. I know that seems basic and we all think we do it, but it is so easy to get caught up in daily life and forget to tell our children how much we love them, how important they are to us and to highlight all the wonderful things that we think are brilliant about them. You can give up on trying not to be biased. Give in completely to your parental bias and tell them how supremely talented, beautiful, clever and wonderful you think they are.

Use descriptive praise to show your children that you notice the things they do. Recognise the mundane daily things that have become humdrum as well as the bigger, more important things like when they don't squabble over who gets to go first or when they manage their anger and don't shout when you can see they want to.

To mitigate feelings of guilt and conflict of loyalties:

See if your ex-partner is in a position to be able to give their blessing to the new partner and talk to the children about this. I know this is sometimes a big thing to ask of an ex, but all the research points in the same direction. The less conflict and stress there is between divorced parents, the better the outcome for the children. Sadly, this sometimes just isn't possible, but it is worth making whatever sacrifices necessary to try and aid it. The situation is the same when building a new family. If both parents can find a way to give permission to the children to be happy with the new situation then they are much less likely to feel guilty, torn and conflicted.

Make it clear what the role of the new partner is. It does not take the place of the parent, but does add something valuable to their lives and yours. Try to think about the specifics of what you all gain, particularly in your own situation, and talk these things through with your children. It's especially important to think of the things that aren't so obvious like you not being so tired because there is someone to help with the load, which leads to you having more time to play with them.

Give the children the chance to feel guilty and conflicted if that is how they do feel. It's a fact and its difficult, but its not the end of the world and everyone can survive a little guilt and conflict.

To mitigate feelings of anxiety:

It really is fair for a child of divorced parents to feel anxious about yet another major change in their lives. The first change will have been difficult and full of loss.

Listen to the child so that they feel you have really taken all their worries on board. Even if you can't change anything as a result, it will help children to feel that you have really listened and have their worries in your mind. It is important for them to see that you can listen without also becoming anxious and while you don't dismiss their feelings you also feel that the things they are worried about are manageable and can be resolved.

Help children feel in control in whatever ways are possible so that they don't feel that things are happening to them rather than with them. Give them some say and control when there are decisions that they can make. For example, they can make decisions about their new bedroom or how things will be managed between parents and siblings.

Underline that, unlike divorce, there are many gains in this particular change. As I mentioned above, think about the particular gains that are likely in your specific circumstances and help children keep these in mind.

5

Building a New Tribe

In building a new family there are several areas where parents commonly come unstuck:

- each parent feels protective of their own children and therefore takes sides
- deciding how much power/responsibility the non-birth parent has for the children he or she now lives with
- each adult can have strong feelings about the ex-partner and how much they are or are not allowed into the new family that they are building

All of these feelings are absolutely natural. Parents are fiercely protective over their children. It is a strong natural instinct to protect your own children. It is one that is worth not trying to squash because it will only cause more trouble from its new home in the Unconscious.

However, it is important that blended families start to see all of the children in the family as 'under their protection'. Instead of seeing them as your own children, which is not always appropriate, think of them as wards under your care and very much part of your tribe.

Human beings are very tribal creatures. We survive better in packs and are uniquely adapted to be able to manage group dynamics in the right circumstances. The main circumstance has to be a trust that everyone's needs will be met. Without that there will always be tensions and battles for resources and attention.

It is a great exercise for the whole family to think about yourselves as a new tribe. Perhaps think of silly ways of putting all the surnames together to find a

pack name. On a more serious note, it is also important to build a new set of rules and cultures that apply to your particular new, blended family.

It is a great exercise for the whole family to think about yourselves as a new tribe. Perhaps think of silly ways of putting all the surnames together to find a pack name. On a more serious note, it is also important to build a new set of rules and cultures that apply to your particular new, blended family.

New Partners

Once you have a new partner, you then have to think about their feelings as well as yours and your children's. No one ever said this was going to be easy! It may feel like an overwhelming task to think about the needs of the children, the needs of the new partner and then the needs of any new step-children too. It is a big task, but many do it successfully so it is possible. I cannot lie and say that it doesn't also take a lot of time and effort.

You can apply many of the same principles of communication with children to communicating between new partners. Be aware of the Unconscious and the role it might be playing in any difficulties. Tolerate and be patient with ambivalence and accept their less positive feelings without reacting to them. They will also have many more positive feelings and these will be more likely to surface if they have had their worries listened to.

If your partner has kids they will have all sorts of feelings about bringing the two families together, as will you. If your new partner doesn't have kids then they will have all sorts of feelings about suddenly being catapulted into parenthood. Have patience and sympathy for both these situations. If you are honest you probably also have feelings about your own children and the changes being made for them. If your partner doesn't have children then it really is a huge task to suddenly have to come in, very much on the back foot. You can help them by talking about your own experience of parenting.

Boundaries

The question of boundaries and responsibility is very often the biggest area of contention for families. Of all the areas that need most work, this is the one that most brings people to look for professional advice. It is difficult for a birth parent to witness their child in distress if the new partner is angry, no matter how justified their anger may be, and strong, instinctive reactions will result.

It may well be that you are bringing together two very different family management styles or ways of thinking about children and their welfare. Again, planning and communication are key. The adults need to think carefully about how they want to run the family. You can think of this as a project. Pick the best of what each parent does and has learnt. Read books together and decide what you like about what you read. Try to build a shared picture of the family that you want to live in and raise. Talk about that picture, what it looks like and how you want to create it.

It is also vital to include the children in the thinking. Sit over meals and talk about problems and times that the children were upset and how it could be managed differently. You can ask their ideas about the family picture and the rules and boundaries that you would like to use to achieve that picture. Obviously you cannot just let the children choose their own rules. There would probably be late bedtimes, lots of TV and regular talk of sweets and ice-cream. However, you can ask for their serious ideas and take on board aspects of what they would like. It is especially important to listen to teenagers. As much as we'd rather not admit it, they may raise valid points about us parents not quite keeping up with their development and them needing more freedom and independence.

Tips for managing boundaries and responsibilities:

- Come up with a plan that everyone has had a chance to discuss and be clear and open about. It may not be agreed but at least it is clear.
- Be firm and consistent with boundaries, but not punishing or unkind when they are broken. Have pre-agreed consequences that are stuck to.
- Parents need to take responsibility for their own mistakes or times that they don't stick to agreements. This helps children feel safe and that the agreements are still in place.
- It is even more important to keep your temper and be even handed with step-children than your biological children. Your biological children will always know you love them whereas step-children don't have the same unshakable belief.

6

Final Thoughts

I will leave you with the things that I think are most important to bear in mind:

- Be kind and patient and gentle whenever possible. Remember that every single member of a blended family is making gains and conceding losses when the family comes together.
- Communicate as much as possible. Don't be too British about children being seen and not heard. Give them a voice and have family meetings about the way that the family wants to live.
- Make space to take care of long-standing relationships with your birth children, but also to build new relationships with new family members.
- Tolerate ambivalence because we all feel it. When you have strong feelings about someone remember they will soon change.
- Encourage the whole family to take pride in being part of a new tribe and make a project out of building the new tribal culture and rules.
- If you don't understand why a problem can't be resolved there may well be some unconscious thoughts and feelings that are in the way and need to be addressed. If you are really stuck, seek outside advice from either friends or wider family or, in the event that nothing else works, professionals. There is no point living in unhappiness and distress if you can fix it.



Ryan Lowe

Consultant Child, Adolescent and Family Psychotherapist

MA, Mpsych psych, MACP, UKCP

I am an experienced, qualified and accredited Child, Adolescent and Parent Psychotherapist who has worked with children for over 19 years both privately and within the NHS. I work with a wide range of issues, from relatively minor difficulties requiring advice and support, to more entrenched family problems, including therapeutic intervention and support for serious mental health difficulties.

I trained at the Tavistock Clinic in London, but have developed my own way of working with and understanding children and families, focusing in particular on bonding, attachment and containment issues within families.

My own upbringing included a great deal of travel through Europe, India, Indonesia and America and this has given me a valuable insight into many cultures, customs and religions. It has also helped me to develop an inclusive view of the world and a respect for the individuality and diversity of people's views and beliefs.

My work has been varied but currently it includes teaching and supervising of other child psychotherapists as well as being employed to carry out assessments for the family law courts in London. I work from consulting rooms in Islington and Waterloo, lecture in various child and family related subjects and run parenting support groups in North London.

I hold two masters level qualifications in psychoanalytic studies and psychoanalytic psychotherapy with children adolescents and parents. I am a

full member of the Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP) and Chair of the ACP's Independent Practice Committee. I am also a full member of the United Kingdom Council of Psychotherapists (UKCP) and registered with AxaPPP healthcare for insurance purposes.

Further experience that I consider relevant is the parenting of my own two gorgeous children.



The Therapeutic Consultancy is a group of experienced mental health professionals working together to help individuals and organisations find the right type of therapeutic service. We are able to offer a full range of interventions ranging from psychotherapy and psychology to full psychiatric support.

Contact us for a discussion of what we can offer you. All calls are answered by a clinical member of staff.