



Chapter One

The Many Forms of a Blended Family

Love is patient and kind, Love is not jealous or boastful, it is neither arrogant nor rude. Love does not insist on its own way, Love is neither irritable nor resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrong: it rejoices in the right. Love bears all things and believes all things and hopes all things. Love endures all things.

I Corinthians 13

Whether you read the Bible, the Talmud, the Torah, the Koran, or the Book of Mormon, there are the same or similar principles espoused on healthy family living, personal lifestyle, and the importance of love in your life. As a Christian couple we believe that, sometimes, bad things will happen, but we also know that we can make our

marriage successful despite serious hurdles that will arise. The same holds true for all couples entering into a blended family. Most of us would agree with this Chinese proverb:

*If there is righteousness in the heart,
there will be beauty in the character.
If there be beauty in the character,
there will be harmony in the home.
If there is harmony in the home,
there will be order in the nation.
When there is order in the nation,
there will be peace in the world.*

It all comes down to how we live and how we raise our children. Whether biological or step-children, the kind of person we are has a significant impact on what kind of individual our child will become. This book will focus on the importance of seeking the kind of love in the opening scripture verse while bringing two families together. This is the kind of love that we all strive for regardless of what kind of blended family we live in.

Different Forms of Blended Families

Different family forms have always existed, but the formation of step-families has increased dramatically in the twentieth century (at least in western culture). Forming



a blended family involves, as our family discovered, a major role transition for each member of the family: partners, ex-partners, parents, step-parents, children, step-children, grandparents, great grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Many people enter a second or third marriage expecting the impossible. Step-mothers often try to be supermoms. Step-fathers sometimes rush in and try to command and discipline the children immediately. Step-children may balk at being asked to participate in the new venture. Grandparents may feel closed out or uncertain of their roles.

Step-families are different from biological or first families, and it is relatively clear why blended families experience particular tensions. Every new union brings some similarities such as the individual experience of loss, past family histories, and previous sibling/parent bonds, as well as the possibility of individual family members being at different stages in their life cycles. These conditions mean that blended families have special challenges and issues to which they must adapt. The form the blended family takes impacts the development and success of the new family. There are various combinations of these forms:

- Two divorced partners re-marrying
- Single partner marries divorced spouse
- Widow or widower marries divorced partner
- Two partners whose spouses died marry
- Single partner marries widow or widower
- Older male marries younger female
- Older female marries younger male

Add children to the mix and you have one of the above where:

- One partner has children
- Both partners have children
- Both partners decide to have a child together

Then add any number of these other situations:

- Partners have different religions
- Partners come from different cultures
- Partners come from different socio-economic backgrounds
- One or both partners have health problems

Imagine the complexity. Every blended family is different in form and the issues resulting from each unique blend give rise to new and different challenges. It is important to recognize and address this uniqueness. Despite the different forms that families take, and the issues that they bring to the union, there are commonalities. The same questions are asked:

- How does a family adapt while building a new identity?
- How does a family adapt over time?
- What expectations are placed on the family?
- How does culture, community, religion impact the new union?
- How do physical, emotional and mental health factors affect the family?
- How does a family member contribute to change in other members of the family?



- How do family members cope when societal expectations differ from family expectations?
- How does a family member fit into the family as a whole?

Every family blend, with its special characteristics, will encounter some of these questions and have to deal with many of these issues. Statistics Canada says that 8% to 10% never make the adjustments, 8% to 12% simply agree to disagree on answers to these questions, and 50% to 77% adjust reasonably well. Yet, apparently, each of these families agreed to work toward a successful blend at the outset. Every new family realizes that it will have to come to some resolution on matters of money, children, sexuality, in-laws, ex-laws, religion, friends, work, communication, conflict resolution and other matters. Whatever the specifics, these issues will be influenced by the particular blend of the new family. New families will have different concerns at different times. In older-partner blends, the focus might be on conformity, conscientiousness, autonomy and integration, while moving through the stages of an empty nest or retirement. For younger partners with children, the focus might be on child-rearing through different stages in order to provide an appropriate environment for emerging young adults.

Re-marriage in mid-life introduces other important issues such as health, leisure activities, and travel plans. This age group usually has fewer concerns about money matters, about striving to be successful or about child-rearing. Adult children, grandchildren, in-laws, social activities and estate matters will likely be more important in their discussions. The younger re-married partners, on the other hand, will largely

focus on child-management, developing their careers, and trying to blend all the members of their new family. Where one or both partners have been divorced, some or all of the above issues will arise and will be affected by the mental and emotional scars resulting from a divorce. Matters of trust, intimacy, anger, previous experiences (like possible abuse) as well as custody and alimony issues are but a few factors that complicate the process of successful family development and integration. These complications are the result of the sociological and psychological elements with which new families must deal.

Our blended family, an older widower with adult children marrying a younger divorced woman with elementary school-aged children, brought unique circumstances. Susan is eleven years younger than me and her children are ten years younger than my children. Her ex-husband is still alive and now re-married. When we were first married, the five children ranged in age from seven to twenty-one and we all lived in the same home. Our newly formed family now had four boys and a girl who was the youngest. The children immediately liked each other. Susan's younger two had never had big brothers before, and now enjoyed them immensely. The three older boys were very excited about having a little brother again and were open to a new experience of having a little sister. All the children were open and accepting of the evolving situation. I did not have a daughter so the potential for jealousy towards Susan did not exist, but there were other issues that we had to deal with. Child-management, discipline, teenage problems, and how to nurture young adults, (coupled with our busy professional lives) consumed our time and energy. Minor and some not so minor disagreements arose over issues



about communication and discipline of the children. At the same time, we were trying to build a strong and intimate bond between the two of us.

For the first time, Susan had to deal with having teenagers and other adults in the house. She had been an only child and as a single parent was used to elementary school-aged children. It was a big adjustment. Susan not only had to learn to cook for a large group but had to deal with the increased housework. Her children were used to her ground rules and of course these were not the same rules imposed on my boys while they were growing up. For example, just teaching the boys to take off their shoes at the front door took Susan longer than she had hoped. However, it did not take her as long to learn how to cook for a larger group. The first dinner she cooked for the whole family was roast chicken, vegetables and a salad. She put the chicken on the table and went back to get the rest of the food from the stove. By the time she got back to the table the chicken was already eaten by the three hungry boys. She was used to one chicken lasting three days before we met. Now she had to adjust to cooking for three growing teenagers, a husband, as well as herself and two young children. We had fun trying to find a house with six bedrooms to accommodate everyone. We found a wonderful three bedroom bungalow in southwest Edmonton and had three bedrooms developed in the basement. This dynamic only lasted for the first year we were married, however.

My middle son, Troy, got engaged and married the following year. When he moved out we decided that we would help the two other boys, then eighteen and twenty-two, to get their own apartment. We all agreed that this was a good idea. We rented an apartment for the boys close to our church, hoping the boys would attend church more

often. We initially helped them with the rent until they could afford it themselves. This was a win-win situation, because the boys wanted to have their own place and it gave Susan and me more privacy. They lived there for two years but still came home often to eat and do their laundry. Eventually my youngest son fell in love and decided to get his own place. He chose to live with his girlfriend and it was not long before they were parents to a baby daughter. Another major change occurred in our living situation when the mother left town six months later. Susan and I took the baby home with us. As a family we agreed that this would be the best for our new granddaughter. James moved home a year later to be closer to his daughter and lived with us for three years. This was a very difficult time because our roles were reversed. Instead of being just Grandma and Grandpa, Susan and I were the disciplinarians and our roles were more that of parents. However, we knew it was what we had to do to provide stability and economic security for the child. When James moved out we took steps to get legal custody and guardianship of this beautiful little girl. Another huge adjustment for all of us, but as it turned out, a true joy. Charise is now eleven years old and she sees her daddy regularly. Our other children lived at home so Charise has always been surrounded by many aunts and uncles who also love her very much.

To give you a look at how our granddaughter saw our blended family, we enclose one of her drawings. We had asked her to draw every member of our family. This is Charise's drawing. She was five years old at the time.



Charise drew everyone, with the exception of our married son and his wife, who live in their own home. Her drawing included her father, his brothers and one sister and us as the grandparents. Notice that she drew herself last. In a psychological interpretation usually this means that she knows she is the newest, youngest member, and likely represents her own feeling of family placement and identity. Notice that everyone in our family is lined up. She is the one who gets the most attention and affection. Drawing herself last is not indicative of least important but rather most attended to. Notice also, that Susan and I are right next to her. We have actually become her surrogate parents. Her daddy comes next. He is very important to her, and she very attached to him, but we as grandparents are perceived as more important at this time in her life in meeting her needs. Chris, who was drawn first, and Candice, drawn next, are the furthest in distance from her, yet they both have always had a special relationship with Charise. Remember that, at the time Charise was only five years old. Figures that are drawn first either have special meaning to the child or represent some form of distancing. In this case, Charise has a special place in her heart for Uncle Christopher and Aunty Candice because they read to her and play with her on the computer almost

as much as her grandmother. Candice is also a female role model for Charise and as Charise gets older we can all see the influence that both Susan and Candice have had on her. Both Chris and Candice took on a parenting role with her, teaching her rules of our household and her place in it. Like most five-year-olds, in her case a strong-willed five-year-old, she may feel competition with them for computer fun-time, competing with Chris for attention, and likely resenting his authoritative parenting role. Aside from these tentative hypotheses, Charise sees everyone as happy and important to her in her life.

Blended families are many and the factors arising out of each one are even more. Each situation is special and unique. Nevertheless, there are still common issues, themes, joys and problems in every blended family. Successful marriage, and especially re-marriage requires, above all, maturity and a frame of mind where responsibility, commitment and sacrifice takes priority. That kind of maturity is exhibited in all or many of the following ways:

- a true conception of the new reality
- a commitment to grow in love
- a negotiated mutual philosophy of life
- a realistic appraisal of oneself
- a commitment to build new family traditions
- a plan to solve problems constructively
- an effort to understand others
- an acceptance to take responsibility for mistakes
- a balance between present needs and future goals



- an anticipation of change
- a willingness to sacrifice for others
- a willingness to compromise

There are other characteristics of maturity, but these are important when establishing a new relationship with others. If expectations are realistic then all of the above are attainable to some degree. Every successful blended family that we have met and talked to has exhibited these beliefs and behaviours. It is a matter of choice, preceded of course by careful thought and consideration by both partners. The key is that the partners work closely together.

Predicting Marital Success

Nothing has been more frustrating, or complex, than predicting human behaviour and marital success. Partners in blended families have probably been through dating and perhaps marriage rites. They know that negative emotions like possessiveness, control, jealousy, constant criticism, and over-dependence, are all clear danger signals during or after the engagement process. We all know that there is nothing wrong with arguing, but couples who quarrel quite often about issues before marriage will probably increase those arguments after marriage. We have found that while pre-marital counseling does help, usually such couples are so bound by passion for each other that they ignore the advice and the danger signals before they marry. After marriage, if they come back for counseling, we usually ask them, “When did these problems start?” The answer, in many cases, is, “Well, as we recall, it was on our honeymoon.” When we ask

them to think again, they say, “We saw these things coming while we were dating.” These issues and trouble spots should be discussed extensively during the dating period or the pre-marital counseling sessions. Sometimes they realize this too late because the uncoupling process has already begun.

We have to admit that blended couples have extra baggage to contend with. Each partner has had a unique set of experiences that they are now bringing to a new marriage. Two different sets of personality traits, old scripts, emotions, memories and stresses from the previous relationship are coming together. Yet, despite the past, and given the current temperaments of those involved, we know that the following nine variables are effective predictors of the success of the new union.

Length of Courtship

The longer a couple dates, the more likely they are to have a successful and happy relationship. The happiest couples are the ones who take two to three years to get to know each other and have fewer conflicts and greater satisfaction in their relationship. Two to three years may be too long for older couples, however. The general rule of thumb, based on many surveys, is to date for at least one year. It makes sense. The longer a couple has to get to know each other, the fewer the surprises after marriage or re-marriage.



Age at Marriage

We know many couples who married right after high school and are still together and very happy, but there is a greater risk for the majority of those who marry very young. The only evidence to the contrary are studies of first marriages in cultures where age is predetermined and where couples are literally hand-picked for marriage by others. Life is complicated and when inexperience and immaturity are added to the equation, serious problems sometime arise. The older a person is, the more settled in character and temperament he/she will be. One or both partners may also be further along in their education or more established and secure in their career. That is not to say that some pre-twenties marriage unions do not work out. When they do, it is likely because of some of the other success predictor variables. For re-marriages, however, the age at the time of re-marriage is less of a risk factor. Nevertheless, even here, age can affect the family in matters of health, work, children and mental set.

Education

It is not the amount or level of education attained, but rather the attitude towards learning that is important. Some research studies generally show that the more education a couple has the more successful in marriage they will be. We beg to disagree. The level of education, we all agree, is closely tied to income and career opportunities, but not necessarily to the success of a marriage. Therefore, it is not education as such that determines a successful marriage.

Can two people with great differences in education still have a successful marriage or re-marriage? We think so. Our own blended union is a small example of this. I went directly from high school into university, then completed my masters and doctoral programs. Susan, on the other hand, finished her grade twelve, got married and then went to work. She always had, and still has, a strong desire to learn new things but at the time she and her first husband decided to play music professionally and that meant a lot of travelling and time away from home.

Even when she was singing six nights a week, Susan always dreamed of someday going to university. She was finally able to fulfill that dream, but not until after we were married. She entered the University of Alberta when she was thirty-seven years old. She had to first take high school Social Studies 30, however, and achieve a mark greater than 70% before she was accepted. She remembers spending sixteen Saturdays sitting with very young students taking her Social 30 at Victoria Composite High School, the same high school she graduated from twenty years earlier. Once she completed Social Studies and wrote her diploma exam she was accepted into the University of Alberta.

She started out slowly by taking two courses per term, but it was especially difficult for her the first couple of years because she was also publishing my books. She persisted and eventually received her Bachelor of Education degree. She was forty-two years old. She said that when she first started attending the university, her biggest concern was the age difference between herself and the younger students. She soon came to realize that a person's age was irrelevant. She enjoyed studying and enjoyed her fellow



students as well. Many of them just called her Mom and she loved it. She found that the students were very accepting of any and all students, regardless of their age.

If a couple values learning for its own sake, enjoys reading and thinking, encourages each other to upgrade themselves, formally or informally, they will enjoy success in this area. If, on the other hand, one partner has this positive attitude about education and the importance of life-long learning, and the other does not, the union may be destined for trouble.

Approval of Family and Friends

Blended families know the importance of support from close friends and family because they have experience in this area. However, young adults who want to get married have told me that they love each other so much that nobody can stand in the way of their happiness. What they fail to understand is that we do not just marry one person, we marry into a social network, and this is especially true when two families come together. We are joining two complete families with children and extended family members into the marriage as well. If family and friends do not offer support it adds continual pressure on a relationship. Eventually, it results in future disagreements and conflicts.

It is important to remember that many couples actually spend as much time visiting family and friends as they do each other. Blended families have a more complex situation. If a previous partner's relatives and friends are still involved, despite the new marriage, it may be a choice that the partner made because of his or her prior

relationship with the children or because the partner just wishes it. The other partner, however, is then constantly reminded about the first spouse. A longer courtship, for both young or older adults considering re-marriage, may give everyone a chance to test the waters and to get used to the new arrangements for all concerned.

A Conventional Approach to Life

Couples who share the same values and beliefs or who agree on a more conventional or traditional approach to life, are usually more successful in their relationship. Going with the flow is always easier, but imagine a union where one partner is more traditional than the other. Most decisions that partners make regarding the children, work, or an approach to anything, may provoke disagreements if they are different from what the other partner would choose. Conventions of behaviour when socializing, love-making, participating in leisure activities, just to name a few, are generally recognizable and acceptable behaviour. Society sets the rules on what is acceptable or normal. We can be unique and hold values different from what society dictates, yet still abide by conventions. It is important for couples to agree on, and to accept, the same basic beliefs and values if their union is to be successful.

A Desire For and Love of Children

The greater the desire for and the love of children, the happier the marriage or re-marriage. More and more couples are deciding not to have children for varying reasons. If both couples agree on this issue before they marry, there is no problem. In a



re-marriage, a discussion of the matter will not make any difference if there are children already involved. In either case, it is important that both partners understand the other's attitude toward children. Do they want children? Will they accept the partner's children? Do the children come first? Are they willing to sacrifice on behalf of the children? Do they expect children out of the re-marriage? Answers to these questions are important.

The most conflict in a re-marriage arises from issues and situations regarding children. This has been our experience, and that of many other blended families. In a blended family, each partner must accept the other partner's children and treat them the same way as they treat their own children. This is more difficult than it sounds. It is hard to not show favoritism to your own children, especially if your partner's children are not that likeable. A decision has to be made that these children, no matter whose they are or what conditions they bring to the new family, will be cared for and loved. The general rule is that both partners should have the same desire when it comes to the children.

The Similarity Principle

In physics opposite poles attract; in marriage they repel. The closer the partners are regarding principles, values, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations, the greater the chance of success. Initially people may be attracted to others who are quite different from themselves. However, after a while, when the infatuation wears off, each comes to realize that they are so different from each other that they cannot possibly form a union. Before Susan and I married, we carefully discussed each one of these factors. True, we had come from different cultures, religious traditions, and were separated by eleven years

in our age, but our basic beliefs, values and principles of life and living were very similar, and in most cases, even the same. We knew that because we agreed on those core or primary principles, the same principles we had shared with our own children, we could disagree on other minor issues without jeopardizing our marriage. The similarity principle had been fulfilled.

Sexuality

We are both conservative when it comes to sexuality. We believe that a couple should get married and then enjoy sex. We do not buy the argument that it is better to have a trial run to see if sex, and the relationship, will work. If a relationship does not work out, the partners must live with what they have done. Before marriage or re-marriage, a serious discussion needs to take place. This is the time when future life-partners openly discuss expectations when it comes to sex. How does each one express intimacy and what are the personal preferences when it comes to intercourse? It is not necessary to try it to find out, but a couple needs to speak openly about their feelings before marriage.

Difficulties in openly expressing ideas about sexuality rank in the top ten reasons why a relationship fails. “But how can we know if we don’t experiment first?” some say. The person who is unwilling to discuss this important issue before marriage will likely continue to be unwilling to discuss it after marriage. New expressions of sexuality will likely happen afterwards once the couple is more comfortable with each other. Attitude and beliefs about sexuality should not come as a surprise.



Relationship with Parents and Family

Those who have parents who are happy in their marriage, who come from a successful family, and who have few conflicts with their parents and/or siblings, have an easier time blending a new family. As stated earlier, we do not just marry our spouse; we marry the entire family and the history that comes with it. This does not mean that a marriage cannot work if either or both partners have a disagreement with parents or other family members. It just makes life more complicated if the issues surrounding the disagreements are unresolved. It is more difficult to make a blended family successful if the couple does not know how to deal with parent or sibling conflicts. Discuss these early on in the relationship and decide how these issues will be resolved. Take a unified stand and remember to back each other up.

Predicting marital success is not easy. We all adjust to change differently. We do know that couples who engage in an objective appraisal of divorce and re-marriage, who are mature and realistic about their union, who approach their re-marriage cautiously, who believe in the necessity to adjust and compromise, who have fewer unrealistic expectations of their mate, who do not mind being vulnerable, and who have an agreed-upon way of solving problems, will have a far greater chance of success and happiness in a re-marriage.

Many unique blends exist when it comes to families. Despite what form a blended family takes, the uniqueness, the maturity factors, the predictors of success, all couples want their re-union to work and to be successful. Despite this desire, however, wars do break out occasionally because everyone comes into a relationship with different

expectations. Whatever form the blended family takes, consider the following list of needs. Use this as an exercise or checklist for each partner and then sit down and decide which needs are important and how to meet each partner's needs.

I Need Someone: to love me
to share my life with
to confide in
to show me affection
who respects me
to appreciate my achievements
who understands me
to help me make decisions
to stimulate and encourage me
to look up to
to help build my self-confidence
to help me cope with stress
to appreciate me as I am
to relieve my loneliness
to share my troubles with

These needs are all common to most of us. They are real, we experience them, and we want a partner who can help us satisfy these needs. Why is it, then, if we know this at the outset, that a second marriage is more difficult than the first? It is because we



come into a new blend with past experiences and old patterns that regulate our present relationship. That is why we feel it is so important to focus on these issues because they need to be discussed prior to the marriage or re-marriage. If these needs are resolved, they will bring not only satisfaction, success, and need fulfillment, but they will also bring a quality and depth to the partnership. Relationships are worth the time and effort put into them. Some people actually spend more time considering buying a new car or an insurance policy than they do considering their relationships. A successful blended family gives attention to the myriad of elements that impact relationships, and takes the time to consider and openly discuss all needs and expectations.