

## Blended Families

Almost 20 years ago, when our five kids were all in elementary school, Rique and I blended our families. That's the word the parenting industry uses. "Blend." Talk about euphemism. There is no stress in the word "blend." It's one utterly pleasant syllable.

Blend is how you make smoothies. Another delightful word. You blend the bananas till they are indistinguishable from the strawberries. Put children in a family 'blender' and something quite different happens.

The result will not be smooth. Think chunky. Salsa is a much better analogy. Chunks that sometimes complement, like tomato and pepper, and often contrast, like mango and jalapeño. It's not smooth, and it's certainly not boring.

I tried for years to write this essay. But I was on the front lines, and every time I sat down to start, the battle shifted. The boys were fighting the girls. Then the step-siblings were squaring off. Then when things calmed down — for eight seconds — the bio-parents were on the phone negotiating. So I'm going to start at the end: The kids are all right. And they're not kids anymore. Zack, who at 30 is the oldest, is mine. Jonah, 29, is Rique's. Max, 27, mine. Kaley, 26, Rique's. And Zoey, 24, mine.

By most measures, we could be the poster child for blended families. Our kids grew up largely under the same roof. Rique's kids were with us almost exclusively, and my kids were with us for half of each week. They went to school together and hung out after school just about every day at our house. Sometimes when my kids were at their mother's house, they'd take Rique's kids with them. And vice versa.

Today they are as close as any biological siblings. They don't use the word "step" when describing their relationships. Kaley and Zoey look as if they share the same genes, even though they have only shared the same jeans. Zack and Jonah went to the same college and roomed together in their frat house. Kaley texts Zack almost every day. Max and Jonah live three blocks from each other. Zoey and Jonah tease each other as only real siblings can.

So how did we pull this off? Well, for one thing, we had no idea how bad the odds against us were. Fortunately the Internet was younger than our children, so we were able to keep some semblance of ignorance, which we expressed as optimism. We didn't know that second marriages have only a one in three chance of survival. Or that when you add kids, the chances go down. And yet we survived even this: five teenagers under the same roof at one time.

Here are four rules, developed only after years of crashing around in the blender, rule-less and clueless.

Rule 1: Stop measuring yourself against nuclear families.

You will never achieve the harmony of even a dysfunctional nuclear family. Those families occupy a single ecosystem. Your new blended family is a diverse, sometimes turbulent mix of ecosystems.

Rule 2: Embrace the diversity.

Biodiversity works in nature. Maybe it can work for your family. If there is a storm brewing in one ecosystem, spend your day focusing on another one. Enjoy the variety. Every day is different. (And you may need a spreadsheet to keep it straight.) My kids came back from their mother's on Wednesdays. Every other week they stayed at our house through Sunday. That meant all five kids for five days. Then it was just Rique's kids for a few days. On Tuesdays, no kids. And the schedule would be blown up when one of the other parents wanted to schedule a vacation.

Rule 3: Just say "Yes."

You know that vacation I just mentioned? Say yes to it. And to the special request that Mom makes to spend a mother-daughter night after a soccer game even though the soccer game falls on your night. And to the plea from your kids to change the schedule just for this week. Say yes. You messed with their lives. You're the reason they have a schedule. Be flexible. Say yes with a smile, not a caveat.

Rule 4: Get a dog.

You need a dog. I can hear you saying, "Yeah, like I need a chronic illness." You have enough chaos in your life, especially at the beginning — moving to a new house, divvying up bedrooms, negotiating schedules, figuring out carpools. Well, add to that list, housetraining a puppy. Yes, I said a puppy. You don't just need a dog — you need a needy, couch-chewing, desperately adorable puppy. Go to the pound. Go the day after you move in. Let the kids choose the dog.

That's how we got Ribsy, part terrier/part possibly-Portuguese water dog — pure mutt. A mess of shaggy-sheep-doggish fur, 5 months old, returned to the pound by two different families. She was broken and so were we, and she helped us become one family because she was the one thing that belonged equally to all of us.

In the beginning, we were separate families living under the same roof. The Sollisch kids. The Weiss kids. The new Mr. and Mrs. Sollisch. But within minutes of bringing home this homeless, orphaned puppy, we were Ribsy's family. We were all she had. And that turned out to be enough. For all of us.

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