

## **BLENDED FAMILIES AND TEENS**

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Teenagers can feel anything but “blended” when mom or dad marries into another family system. There will be “hellos” to new people, places, roles and rules, different unspoken expectations, rituals and traditions. These changes can create extra stress for your teen. Sometimes a teen’s birth order will be significantly altered in the new family. Many birth order scenarios/changes are possible; formerly an only child, the teen now has younger or older siblings, or once the oldest child, she is now the middle or youngest child. Whatever the change may be, the teenager often feels a sense of loss and confusion, anger and sadness. How can you help the teenager weather these and other blended family experiences?

Change is inevitable in a new blended family. For the teen and the birth parent then, it is important that some things remain the same. In the world of music, there is a format called “theme and variations.” The main theme is introduced in the first movement, the following movements bring variations to this main melody, with the last movement again clarifying the main theme. What are some of the “main themes” in raising your teenager, which you want to keep in this new blended family symphony? In former family life, perhaps the teen had some uninterrupted time with you. When she needed to talk, your focus could be there. Now, she finds competition with new step-siblings and a new step-parent for your attention. She may also be experiencing her own personal developmental or social stresses, such as hormonal changes, changes in friendships, college/career decisions, and a shakier sense of self-worth. These are a lot of variations on the original theme; the teen’s inner and outer worlds seem further from “how it used to be.”

Your teenager’s expression of this stress is not likely to be direct; i.e. as in her coming to you and saying something like; “Gosh, mom or dad, I am a little unsettled with all the changes lately, and was wondering if we could talk about it?” More likely, your son or daughter will express their angst in indirect ways, such as changes in mood, lack of motivation, poor grades, or increased irritability. If the stress is high, they could drift toward unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as alcohol, drugs, or sexual acting out.

Here are some practical ways to help your teen through blended family changes:

1. Talk to your teen about these changes and validate her feelings. Acknowledge that this is hard for her.
2. One-on-one time with your teen is important. If it can include a former shared activity (watching a movie together, attending worship together, supporting her in a sport activity, etc.). This will help to soften her stress.

3. Lower your expectations around your teen's acceptance of the new family system. Acceptance will take time, which includes the teen building trust in the new relationships.
4. Pray for and with your teen. Ask God, the One who never changes to be the steady rock, the sure foundation, in your teenager's life. Ask God to open your teenager's heart to more of Him.
5. Seek professional help for your teen, and perhaps family therapy if the blended family adjustments are too stressful.

Nothing is impossible with God. Stress resulting from a new blended family is not beyond God's healing touch for you and your teenager!

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