

Blended Families: Reframing Perspectives, Balancing Relationships, and Creating Belonging

Goal: Participants will gain increased awareness of the challenges faced by blended families and understand the unique opportunities that unfold when stereotypes and bias are defeated with restorative, honor-based relationships. They will identify core components of Relational Wisdom and Peacemaking that are essential skills for family members as well as counselors, coaches, and mediators who assist blended families.

Part 1: Reframing our Perspective of Blended Families

A. Doom and Gloom Statistics

B. Stigma, bias, and (mis)perceptions

1. Academic – research bias – the influence evolutionary worldviews
2. Statistical – reporting bias – casting blame
3. Cultural – literary tropes, anticipatory failure, economic impacts
4. Religious - stigma, bias, exclusion – The Scarlet D

C. Children of Divorce – What messages are they hearing?

1. The illegitimates of the modern age - versus the new norm
2. More likely to fail and be abused
3. Flawed candidates for dating and marriage

D. Shifting our paradigm – What message should we convey to them?

1. We all come from blending families
2. God’s intentional blended family – the eternal norm
3. Bless the Blends! Messages of hope and redemptive grace
4. Our calling and duty to assist, support, and invest in families

Questions:

1. What have you learned about perceptions and bias in studying Relational Wisdom?
2. How would you identify internal biases and perceptions between members of blended families?
3. What aspects of Relational Wisdom could be used to address those stress points?
4. Does what you have observed about family dynamics in blended families differ (or not differ) from your observations of dynamics within intact nuclear families?

Part 2: Balancing Relationships of Blended Families [Navigating logistics of relationships]

A. Challenges of external relationships

1. Court order compliance and visitation schedules that impact planning, decision making, attending events (medical, school, extracurricular activities, travel)
2. Engaging with extended family of both spouses (i.e., the parent and the stepparent)

3. Engaging with ex-spouses, their partners, and ex-in-laws or previous family friends
4. Engaging with community, church, work, school friends and acquaintances – dealing with opinions, unsolicited advice, questions, gossip
5. Navigating post-divorce conflict
6. Gaining awareness of hidden agendas, toxic communication styles, individual interests and needs
7. Maintaining the best interests of the child while supporting the parent-child relationships with both the custodial and the non/joint-custodial parent
8. Be proactive in direct communication with non/joint custodial parent - NEVER use children as information couriers!

B. Complexities of the expanded Intra-family relationships

1. Understanding the Dyad relationships that form the family system
2. Creating a family ecomap – delineate the flow of care and concern
3. Exploring dynamics through individual and group dialogues with family members
4. Identify stress points, power imbalances, negative communication/behavior patterns (teasing, blaming, shaming, bullying), family culture differences, individual hurts, fears, losses
5. Identify individual strengths, needs, dreams, values
6. Fears related to time, space, and resource allocation and consumption

C. Establishing the new, combined family system

1. Managing initial family meetings
2. Naming the family group
3. Deciding how kids will address the stepparent
4. Clarify each parent's role within the combined family system (discipline, decisions, caregiving)
5. Acknowledge past failures, lost dreams, present constraints
6. Identify core shared values, principles to guide family interactions and decision making
7. Share an initial family vision [biblical vision] and collect ideas for a family purpose statement

D. Maintaining balance in the combined family system to nurture relationships and value all members

1. The art of noticing
2. The skill of navigating difficulties
3. The dedication to mirror and teach core values, biblical worldview, practical life skills, and emotional/relational skills
4. The willingness to be flexible while maintaining a stable nurturing environment
5. Infuse joy with a "Good Morning" routine
6. Create breathing room

E. Introducing the gift of Honor

1. Nurture honor-based attitudes and relationships
2. Establish the value of each human soul
3. The Incarnation Declaration and the Philippians 2 model
4. Correlations with Relational Wisdom

Questions:

1. What aspects of RW and Peacemaking would you be teaching or coaching to a newly blended family?
2. How does the concept of giving honor, impact opposing heart issues (selfishness, jealousy)?
3. What biblical stories would be useful comparisons or illustrations of the potential blessing of being part of a blended family?
4. How could balancing relationships create space for belonging and purpose for participating as a family unit?

Part 3: Creating Belonging for Blended Families [Enriching relationships]

A. Context of Belonging

1. Belonging occurs within time and space when safety and kindness are present
2. Setting safe parameters and perimeters
3. Crafting your intentional shared journey

B. Provide Purposeful Gatherings

1. Dream together: a bucket list of memories to create, places to go, things to try
2. Remember when: Create a new portfolio of family history, photos, and memories through shared experiences and adventures
3. Include storytelling and musical experiences
4. Foster a family demeanor of honor, kindness, care, laughter, and joy
5. Reserve time and space for spontaneity

C. Finding a place at the Family Table:

1. Sharing nourishment and nurture through shared meals, shared conversations,
2. Shared decision-making and activity planning
3. Shared Bible time
4. Shared play time

D. Celebrate Life Together

1. Evaluate existing family traditions and cultural norms
2. Explore ideas for blending former traditions and merging new traditions while also nurturing new family themes
3. Identify special holiday foods, decorations, and activities plus the meaning/memories attached to them
4. Explore the role of faith in how we celebrate holidays and our life together

E. Honor the uniqueness of each member –

1. Identify the unique qualities, interests, abilities, and needs of family members

2. Intentionally plan activities, work, and play experiences that expand the capacity and develop abilities of each member
3. Help each member broaden their experience and explore potential new interests – foster wonder and curiosity about the natural world
4. Incorporate skill building and responsibility taking with shared work experiences (home and volunteer opportunities)

Questions:

1. What cautions would you offer to the parents as they develop family plans?
2. How would you ensure that safety of each child (i.e., sleeping arrangements, work assignments)?
3. What precautions would be needed for extended travel as a blended family (hotel arrangements, funds, visiting amusement parks, etc.?)
4. How would educational planning and personal advance planning (wills, power of attorneys, beneficiaries) differ for blended families?
5. What would be your biggest fear about helping blended families?

Final Reminders:

- You will make mistakes – what matters is how you address and recover from them.
- People remember how you make them feel – How do you want to be remembered when the kids leave home?
- Ready or not? Caution: Are you entering a new relationship before you and your prospective spouse have done the personal work needed to resolve past and/or continuing personal issues?

Connect with Susan:

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Follow-up with Susan:

Individual and Small Group coaching opportunities: Email Susan at susan@susanmillsaps.com to schedule a call.

Walking by the Way – a community for Christian women focused on navigating through conflicts and personal change together: <https://susanmillsaps.com/walking-by-the-way/>