

Blended Families

Blended families come in all shapes and sizes. There is no single way to describe blended families, as family members may not be biologically related or live together all the time.

What is a blended family?

A family can be made up of anyone a person considers to be their family

A blended family is where separate families come together to form a new family. There is no single way to describe blended families - family members may not be biologically related or live with the child or young person all the time. Some children or young people may have one or several parents or carers, including grandparents, step-parents, same-sex parents, aunts and uncles, foster parents or adoptive parents.

As an educator, you'll meet and interact with families of all shapes and sizes.

Many children and young people in your care will be living in blended families. These families may have to consider more complex circumstances when trying to build healthy relationships. For example:

- children and young people may feel their prior relationships have changed because of the new couple relationship and new relationships with step-children
- family members may still be grieving the loss of their original family
- children and young people may spend time with two families who have different expectations of them.

These factors may be stressful for children and young people, and, as a result, there may be a long period of adjustment for families.

Be You Professional Learning

Check out tips for creating and maintaining strong relationships with families in the [Family Partnerships](#) domain.

Challenges and benefits

Here are some things to think about when it comes to helping blended families in the learning environment.

- The impact of parental separation and family breakup can involve a range of feelings. Be alert to signs a child or young person might blame themselves for the breakup.

- Children and young people may not have had a say in any new arrangements. It's not always possible to make arrangements that everyone can agree to wholeheartedly, but a person's perception and experience of being involved can naturally make a difference to their attitude and adjustment to the change.
- Altered living arrangements will often mean also changing learning environments and houses. This may include other factors such as different travel arrangements and getting to know a new area.
- It might be necessary for the child or young person to adjust to new family roles and tasks. For example, one parent may need to work more and be less available or being closer to grandparents might mean additional supports.
- If there is shared care, the child or young person might have to adjust to a different family arrangement on a regular basis.
- There may be contact with the court system, if the changes have involved legal processes. These can be confusing for adults so naturally can be confusing or distressing for children and young people.
- Watch for differences in the stress levels, emotional state and requirements of adult family members following a change of arrangements.
- Every individual will have a different experience. Try to avoid making assumptions about a child or young person's experience of living in a new family. For instance, not all children and young people who live in blended families will be moving between homes. They might be living in one home or may be moving between two different families on a regular or semi-regular basis.
- It's important to remember that a child or young person's experience of a blended family will be unique to their situation. That said, there are some common positive and negative aspects of living in a new family.

Positives

When two families join, this often means children and young people gain a new extended family. The presence of more people who bring different personalities, and new interests and perspectives, can add richness to a child or young person's life. Step-parents can be a great source of extra support for children and young people. Other adults, such as step-grandparents, may also add a new layer of support and connection.

Children and young people in a blended family may become more flexible and tolerant.

Challenges

It can take time to get used to living in a blended family. As with most big life changes, it may take up to two years in a blended family for a child or young person to get used to the new family routines and relationships. Families coming together will have different expectations, so it can also take time and effort for blended families to establish new boundaries and rules.

When people re-partner, their relationship with their former partner may be affected. The former partner might feel angry, insecure, upset or worried about the change. A co-parenting agreement might need to be adjusted and this can have implications for all family members.

When two families join, an adjustment period is natural. But for some children and young people, the changes might be experienced as confusing and difficult.

What can I do if I have concerns?

As an educator, you can assist a child or young person experiencing changes to family circumstances. This, in turn, helps support the mental health and wellbeing of families.

Children and young people will benefit from feeling acknowledged and supported in the learning community. They will also benefit from being provided with resources to manage well and thrive. You're likely to recognise when a child or young person is struggling – you may even be the first to notice early signs of difficulties. Being thoughtful, knowledgeable, skilled and understanding can make a significant difference.

Complex emotions are difficult to manage. The effort of living with confusion and trying to make sense of a situation can be tiring and difficult for children and young people. But be aware that it's normal to feel a mixture of feelings and have confused thoughts at times. Don't assume a person's difficulties relate to being in a blended family – explore any concerns you have and support the child or young person in a sensitive way.

Have conversations

Create a safe space for a child or young person to talk. If you're aware of any adjustments a child or young person may be experiencing, ask them if need anything. You might then offer them resources, someone to talk to, or just acknowledge that change can be hard.

If you decide you need to discuss concerns about a child or young person's behaviour or mood with their family, avoid putting children or young people in the position of 'go-between' – communicate directly with family members as legally required.

If you require further support or guidance, don't hesitate to discuss your concerns about an individual with leadership, wellbeing staff or other colleagues within your learning community.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about providing support to children, young people and their families in the module [Provide](#).

References

beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/relationships/blended-families