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 Sunday Life

Blended families: How to bond with step children and make a happy home

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When two separate families
come together under one roof,
there are going to be conflicts.
It will take time to build a

history with each other that will someday grow from affection into familial love. It probably won't be easy, but it is well worth the effort, writes **Sarah Tumwebaze**.

In Danielle Steel's novel *Special Delivery*, she tells a story of two different families where in one, the wife passes away in a car accident and in the other, the husband succumbs to a heart attack. During the moment of grieving, Amanda (the widow) meets Jack (the widower). Jack gets attracted to Amanda and they start dating.

However both Amanda and Jack have two children from their previous relationships, though they all are married and living away from their parent's homes. When they hear that their parents are dating, they just cannot take it. Jack's son feels that Amanda is too good for his dad and Amanda's children think Jack is a womaniser and wants to use

their mum. Still, Amanda's daughters feel that it's not right for their mother to be moving out with someone else because their father has not even been dead for a year.

Such are the kind of mixed feelings found in blended families. According to Ms Beatrice Kakembo, a counsellor at Inspirations Centre, a blended family is one where a couple comes together and both or one of them has a child or children from a previous relationship.

Ms Kakembo says the common type of blended family in Uganda is where a partner has a child or children and the other does not. She says that at times, both of them might have but the man will usually leave his children with their mother or his parents. In some cases, the children might all be grown up and living away from home.

Therefore, it's rare that people have tightly blended families (both partners having children)

in Uganda. But whichever way, as long as children are in the picture, there is always need for discussion before any commitment is made.

“The most important part of this discussion is to ascertain if the other spouse’s ex-partner is still alive or not. If they are still alive, you will need to agree on how they are supposed to take care of the children. This will help you determine when to lend a helping hand in terms of school fees and basic needs and when not to,” explains Kakembo.

Put on a united front

The first and foremost rule for blended families is that parents do not disagree with each other in front of the children. When spouses have a conflict, any conflict, it should be discussed behind closed doors. It is important for children to see a united front and stable relationships.

The second and also important

aspect is to talk about the children. The counsellor intimates that you will need to ascertain the terms of taking care of the children. Here, you will have to answer questions like, how will the children feel about your getting together, who will pay their school fees and who is supposed to discipline them, among others.

Paul Nyende, a psychologist at Makerere University, says the most challenging part for a couple that wants to establish a blended family is whether the children will agree to the relationship.

A friend, Cissy, is soon getting married but is tense because her fiancé has four children aged between three and 18. She has only met the youngest, who liked her, but is yet to meet the other three.

She says the whole waiting process is giving her sleepless nights because she is in a panic over meeting the children. “I have a feeling they might not

like me since I am only seven years older than his first born.”

Take things slow

Nyende explains that some children react negatively towards a new spouse because of their age. “If the children are young, it will be hard for them to accept the new spouse because such families are characterised by limited communication, which means the children will not know anything about their new parent and so it will be hard for them to accept a stranger in their life.”

At times children will hate a step parent because some parents force the little ones to accept their new partner. This leads to misunderstandings and creates hatred. “Some step parents try so hard to get into the child’s life forgetting that they are not the biological parent. The little ones end up thinking you are trying to take their parent’s place and end up detesting you,” the psychologist explains.

More so, when they start dating someone else, parents tend to neglect the children. The little ones then start looking at the new partner as an intruder who has diverted their parent's love and attention.

Mr Nyende advises parents to work hard at seeing that the child accepts the new spouse. Failure to do so might end the relationship. "If your child does not like your spouse, there is likely to be tension, accusations, ill will, malice and conflict, leading to the termination of the relationship."

Introduce your partner appropriately

A positive attitude from the child towards the new partner can be attained by introducing the spouse appropriately. You also should not have high expectations, thinking that the children will definitely like the new partner because this is a new person in the child's life who is trying to take the place that once belonged to one of

their parents. “Give children time to get to know your new partner and also learn to love them naturally,” advises Nyende.

If the initial introductions move on smoothly and the children accept you in their life, the remaining task is for the parents to ensure that such a blended family has a stable relationship.

Kakembo says that in cases where the children of both spouses are staying in the same home, it’s important that all the girls are put in the same room and the boys too. “This will help them accept and appreciate the fact that they are now one family and thus have to find ways of staying with each other. It will also create a comfortable relationship amongst them.”

She advises that the other parent studies the children of the new spouse. “If you have fully studied your spouse’s children, you will know who is calm and who can easily throw

a tantrum. This will enable you to easily know when to interfere in an argument and when not to.”

Go easy on the disciplining

It’s also necessary that when one of the children misbehaves, “Leave the disciplining to the biological parent until the stepparent has developed solid bonds with the children because chances are high that a child will disrespect or embarrass the step parent (especially the step mother) if they try to reprimand them.

And in cases where his child fights with yours, the counsellor advises that both of you talk to them but let the man decide on the punishment since he is the head of the family.

Early on, the natural parent needs to talk to their children and reaffirm the control and respect due the stepparent.

Back up your spouse.

Ms Kakembo also discourages partners in blended families

from giving the other partner's children special attention or treating them unfairly by punishing them or assigning them hard chores. This kind of treatment leads to sibling rivalry or even hatred. "If you want a blended family to work out, be yourself. Don't go out of your way to please his or her children because you may not be able to pull it off all the time."

Given the right support, children should gradually adjust to their new family members. It is your job to communicate openly and give them plenty of time to make a successful transition.