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## How to Keep From Being Pureed by Your Blended Family

*This is Stay Happily Married #124, "How to Keep From Being Pureed by Your Blended Family."*

*Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.*

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We're here today with Barbara Keyworth. She's a licensed clinical social worker with a practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's been doing that for 23 years.

On top of her own practice, she does all kinds of things: She counsels high school and college-age students, she's instructed at Duke University Medical Center, and she's conducted a variety of training programs.

Today she's going to be talking to us about stepfamilies, about the issues you may not realize you'll be running into when you and your new spouse are first starting out, and what you can do to help everybody -- everybody in the family -- ease into this big transition as smoothly as possible.

Now, one thing I haven't mentioned yet -- and I'm going to ask Barbara about this -- but she's not only an expert on this whole blended family idea but she's lived it. So it's one thing to talk to others about it; it's another thing to deal with it at home. So I'll be excited to find out about that.

Barbara, welcome to the show. How are you doing today?

Barbara Keyworth: Oh, I'm fine.

Lee Rosen: You know, I said in the introduction -- I said something like "beginning your new marriage." I guess in a way this whole thing starts before you get married, huh? Blended families?

Barbara Keyworth: Oh, definitely. When you start dating someone and you think it's going to be a serious relationship, you have to start at that point looking at each other's families and your family and thinking about how you're going to work together on this.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. If you don't start planning early I guess you're in awfully deep before you even realize it. Things can get out of hand. How did it go for you? You live in a blended family. What is it; your husband had some children? How did that work out for you? What's the story?

Barbara Keyworth: Two little girls, 5 and 7. And one of the things I have figured out from thinking about all of this is it actually is easier if the children are a little bit younger. They don't have as much of an understanding about what's going on in the divorce and what a new relationship means. And kids that age, they want to have fun. They love everybody who comes into their life. So it makes it easier. That doesn't mean you can't work it out if you have teenagers, but you're going to have a different set of problems with teens.

Lee Rosen: Right. Has it helped you? Do you find yourself at the office thinking about your own life and using things you've learned firsthand to give advice to the people that are coming to see you?

Barbara Keyworth: Oh, absolutely. Sometimes when people say things I just roll my eyes and go, "Oh, yes. I remember that one."

Lee Rosen: I'll bet. Yeah. What about when people come into a blended family, when they're starting one? Do they have realistic expectations or is it really -- do they come in sort of with a fantasy idea of how this is going to work out and really unrealistic expectations?

Barbara Keyworth: I think people definitely come in with a fantasy. And it's totally understandable. They've gone through a relationship that didn't work and, you know, we all want love; we want happiness, security; we want to have fun. We want a relationship where somebody actually listens to us and understands us and we can work things out. All that's very understandable.

But what happens is the mental picture people are carrying around when they're thinking about getting married, or is this going to turn

into a marriage, is one where they're not really thinking as much about the daily problems that happen. And those daily problems are a lot of the things that trip people up.

Lee Rosen: Right. So they just don't -- I guess until you've done it you really -- I don't know. Is there a way to know before you're living it what's coming?

Barbara Keyworth: Oh, absolutely. I use John Gottman's work a lot and he has a really great series called *And Baby Makes Three*. I use his principles in general on helping couples work together and communicate. There's a lot that you can do to anticipate because some of it's operations. Who's going to do the chores? What about allowances? How are you going to handle studying? What do you do when one of the kids refuses to stay out of the other's room? All those basic things that parents have to sort out in a regular family.

A little more complicated in a blended family because you may have kids all of a sudden living together who didn't want to be living together, don't like each other that much.

Lee Rosen: Right. What are the things that -- if you kind of think of that first year, just sort of trying to get things going right, what are the obstacles that you should expect to hit during that first year?

Barbara Keyworth: Well, the first one is this whole expectation thing. You need to lower your expectations and be realistic. Living in a family, good, loving relationship, is hard work. And so put that in the picture and realize that you're going to have to work together. You have to learn to communicate.

So if the couple can start out working on their pattern of communication and presenting themselves as able to talk, able to have a good argument and work it out, goes a long way towards making things go better with the kids.

Unfortunately, what happens that first year -- sometimes even in the first month -- when tension develops, people immediately get into an "us" versus "yours;" my kids versus your kids; my family, your family. And that split is what you want to try to pull back together so that you have, okay, we're a new family. I need to understand what you're going through; you need to understand what I'm going through; and then let's see out of that if we can work out something together.

Lee Rosen: So you really have these kind of split loyalties. You've got one spouse that comes in and has got this connection to his or her kids,

and the other spouse may or may not have kids, and so you end up with kind of two teams.

Barbara Keyworth: Yes.

Lee Rosen: And it puts the couple at odds. I mean, wow. That really -- a lot of tension in that house.

Barbara Keyworth: And that's a pretty normal thing to happen, but what the new couple has to keep doing is building the new team. It's like you're all suddenly thrown in a boat together. You've got to take this trip. Half the people may be resentful about being there or just in shock because they're there. And yet you have to all work together. And you've got two team captains who really haven't probably been together that long and are having to work out their own communication.

Lee Rosen: Right. And I hadn't thought -- I mean, obviously talking to you, I think this is the first show we've ever done on this topic. And I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about it. But, boy, all the issues that you're addressing are thrown on top of all the issues any new marriage has. I mean, it's not an easy thing, whether there is a blended family or not. I mean, it's really like first year of challenge on steroids.

Barbara Keyworth: Yes. And the difference is, when you start out dating somebody and you don't have kids, it might be your first serious relationship headed to marriage, you have time to get to know each other and have a lot of fun together and you don't have all these other things happening.

But if you're coming into a second marriage or you've got a lot of children involved, all of a sudden you're having to do all these things at once. And you're not only dealing with multiple children, possibly, but you also have your ex, who's always in the picture in some form -- possibly two ex spouses -- and there's ex-grandparents and the other grandparents.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. That whole "ex" thing, I hear about that a lot from friends that have gone through this. And the ex-spouse feels like kind of a dark force sometimes hanging over the new marriage. You know what I mean?

Barbara Keyworth: It can be, but I think -- and there are some ex-spouses who are more difficult than others, particularly if they have a lot of their own insecurities or they're really worried. "Is my child going to like their new stepmom or stepdad more than me?" And that begins to show.

Or they start putting the kids in the middle. That can create a lot of really major problems.

But one of the things you as a new couple can do is go out of your way to reassure the exes, "We're going to listen to you. We're going to work together. We're doing all of this for the benefit of the kids and it's best for them to not have us fighting and undermining each other."

Lee Rosen: Yeah. That does sound like good advice. What are the -- would you say that the biggest challenges are -- if you kind of look at the aggregate of all the blended families that you've dealt with, are kid issues the biggest source of the difficulties when folks are coming to you, or is it just marriage difficulties unrelated to the kids?

Barbara Keyworth: I think it's marriage difficulties. Think about the fact that most people don't grow up in a family where they learn really good ways to communicate and have an argument and a disagreement and work it out. So couples in general get stuck.

I mean, I probably see half my practice in marital issues and, I don't know, maybe a third or those folks are stepfamilies. They're all having exactly the same issues; it's just more complex and entangled when you throw in a whole lot more people. But the patterns are similar. And when the couple is able to straighten out where they get stuck in communicating, it carries over to all of a sudden they can work together on the kids.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. Then they're a team. That makes a lot of sense. So thinking about the kids and the issues that come from that, what are some of the important things that people ought to know when they're dealing with these new stepchildren, especially early on in the marriage?

Barbara Keyworth: Well, everybody comes into the relationship with a new family with their own history. And a stepparent may come in feeling like they're on the outside; that's a very common -- "I'm the outsider. I'm the one who's new to all of this." Yeah, you are. You have your history; they have their history. And that history has a lot of traditions and rituals and it's a core part of a child's identity.

So you as a new stepparent need to remember and try to not be too disappointed when the kids are talking a lot about their history and you're not a part of it. Over time you'll build a relationship with them and they'll begin to include you. You develop your own rituals and traditions. But initially, they're going to be talking about "when

my mom does this" and "when we went to my grandma's," and you're not a part of that.

So for the stepparent, they have to be aware of feeling left out, feeling disappointed, and just know that that's normal. What you can do to counter it some is you have to be encouraging the kids and say, "Well, tell me more about that. What was that vacation like? What do you love about your grandma?"

Lee Rosen: You want to just sort of be a part of it and not let it push you away, I guess, from the kids.

Barbara Keyworth: That's a really good way of putting it.

Lee Rosen: Well, it really would be easy -- I mean, it's like it's tough enough. You're trying to figure this whole thing out and then you've got these kids kind of driving you berserk and pushing your buttons.

Barbara Keyworth: Yes, that's right.

Lee Rosen: It does make you want to just go to the other room.

Barbara Keyworth: Because they will do the same thing with you that they also do to their parents. It's not just you.

Lee Rosen: Right. They can be a pain to everybody. Sweet. Yeah. You're really selling this concept.

Barbara Keyworth: You've got teenagers, right?

Lee Rosen: Well, and -- yeah, I do have teenagers. I have a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old and they are just making us want to jump off a bridge most of the time. I mean, it's always happy times at our house. And I say that very sarcastically.

But when you did this in your family, so you were dealing with -- what'd you say? A 5-year-old and a 7-year-old.

Barbara Keyworth: Yes.

Lee Rosen: What if you're having to do this with teenagers? You're getting married to somebody or they're getting married to you and you have a couple of teenagers at home. It just feels like that must be just all but impossible.

Barbara Keyworth: Not impossible but it's very hard work. Again, it goes back to the communication with your partner. You need to be clear and work

out your own differences about how to handle all these basic things: discipline, rules, enforcing the rules, and being clear. Because of course, teens are going to test this more than younger kids. So if the two of you are getting split or in huge disagreements or undermining each other, you're going to be in deep trouble pretty quickly. So the two of you working that out. And if you really get stuck, going to a counselor to figure out "how can we do this better?" will take you a long way.

The other thing you need to do is take the long view and remember this will work out. You need to notice the things that are going well. Keep paying attention to the progress and the bonds that you've developed.

Lee Rosen: Right. Are you finding that most people are thinking about these issues before they get into the new marriage? Or are the people that are coming to you really just kind of neglected to focus on this?

Barbara Keyworth: I see a lot of people who do think of it and they're worried about it and they're thoughtful about it. It's one of those things where you don't really know what it's like until you're thrown into it. I mean, just as you might have done a bunch of reading when your kids were little about what to expect from teenagers. When you're in the middle of one of them standing there with a disdainful tone, treating you as if you really don't know anything, it's a whole different experience than reading about it.

Lee Rosen: Right. It really is fascinating to think about all the complexities of the relationship. I'm wondering what you're doing with folks that are coming in, how you're getting them from -- I mean, obviously they're not coming in if they're not already having some issues; they wouldn't be knocking on your door. How are you moving them from where they are to where they need to be? How does that work?

Barbara Keyworth: The biggest thing is getting them to see where they get stuck when they try to communicate. For example, I saw a really bright young couple the other day. The woman does not have kids but she's known her fiancé's children for about four years now. She's been very involved with them. She's very thoughtful. Basically, has a good relationship with all of them.

But the couple now is running into their own conflicts in trying to work out things like wedding plans and vacations and where the kids are going to go to school, how to get time together. That's a huge one. When you have kids in the family, it's hard for a couple to get time together. And it's critical that you get some time for just the two of you.



So the pattern almost always is that people are not really listening to each other. They hear what each other says, but their response is, as one person put it, "fight fire with fire." So one person says something; the other one counters. That's not going to get you very far.

Lee Rosen: So that's not a good approach?

Barbara Keyworth: Might be in the courtroom.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I'll tell you what, though. It sure is -- fighting fire with fire. I mean, I understand. Objectively speaking, so maybe it's not a good approach. Okay. Okay. But realistically, boy, when those kids push your buttons, that is what you want to fight it with. And then your spouse jumps in the middle of the whole situation and it's like -- you're having to do a lot of work to teach people not to fight fire with fire, I'll bet.

Barbara Keyworth: It's true. It's actually a very simple procedure, though. Once you begin to listen and sit back and really think about, "Okay, why is she so upset about this? Maybe she has a good reason for being upset." If you can make that step over to that, instead of, "Oh, well, she's totally wrong. She's just overreacting. She's making too big a deal of this," all of a sudden you have a whole level of understanding. And then the other person has to do the same thing.

It doesn't necessarily take that many appointments to get people to see the pattern and begin to interrupt it at home. Depends on how stressed out they are and how long they've not been listening to each other, because that sense of betrayal and "you don't care about me because you never seem to really hear what I'm saying," that can run pretty deep. But I'm surprised at how quickly people can sometimes begin to see what they're doing and start to interrupt it. And once you've done that, you begin to have some positive experiences again.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, one thing that I've wondered all along as we've been talking about this is does it make much difference in terms of the success of a blended family if the children are with you part time or full time? In some families the kids are there most of the time; and then in other families they're just there, say, every other weekend kind of thing, or something. Does that have much of an impact on how this blended family works out?

Barbara Keyworth: To me that's like saying, do you feel better if you get to sleep six hours a night as opposed to not sleeping? Yeah.



Lee Rosen: Dumb question. No, I hear you. But what are you seeing with that?

Barbara Keyworth: I think the parents who have a few days with out kids in the house are so much more rested when they come back, especially if they're getting along well. Now, if they're not getting along well, they really need some help so that they can start enjoying their down time again.

Quite frankly, sometimes I look at parents who have kids full time and I think, "How do they do this?" It's very hard work. And I think kids are wonderful. Most of the teens I know, including my own stepdaughters, I mean, they are absolutely fascinating, wonderful people. But it's stressful at times.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, we've covered a lot of ground today. What else should we keep in mind if we're going to have blended families and make them work?

Barbara Keyworth: I think laying the groundwork where you get together with your partner and start talking about practical things early on and get some of those checked off, working on your own communication skills.

I will tell you that one of the things that I think really saved me -- and I loved my girls from the time I met them. I just thought they were just fascinating creatures. Keeping a sense of humor helped a lot. And I have to say, my husband's a very funny person; both the girls have great senses of humor; I have a sense of humor. And sometimes when things were tense, we would watch *Family Guy*, *Futurama*, all kinds of shows that were just fun; *Airplane*. We must have seen *Airplane* 10 times.

Lee Rosen: My wife's favorite movie.

Barbara Keyworth: Oh, it's great stuff. You need it. You need the comic relief and it gives a sense of normality and it eases the tension.

The other thing that really helped me as a stepparent was remembering, I just need to go to the gym. I need to stop focusing on this for a while, go to the gym, go out with my friends, read a good book, get away. And I would come back and realize, you know, I have a life. We all have a life. The kids have a life. We don't have to be overfocused on this. And that's part of keeping the long view an realizing that you build a relationship slowly and over time it develops.

Lee Rosen: Terrific advice. Barbara, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you sharing what you know.

Barbara Keyworth: Thanks for having me.

Lee Rosen: Barbara has a website you can check out. It's at [BKeyworth.com](http://BKeyworth.com). I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And you can find out more about her counseling services and qualifications. You can also reach her at her office at (919) 783-8004.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, as always, we love to hear your feedback, your comments, your questions. You can reach us in a couple of different ways. Our comment line is at (919) 256-3083. You can also e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). We respond to all of your comments and we get an awful lot of great ideas, so keep them coming.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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