



## **THE BLENDED FAMILY: LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE**

The high rate of divorce and re-marriage, and the impact this has on children, has created new problems and concerns for families. The following case is one example of the kind of problem we help to resolve. (Identifying information about the family has been changed to preserve confidentiality.)

Mrs. J first called Family Service Counseling and Community Resource Center because of concern for her 15-year-old daughter, Christie, who was doing poorly at school and acting moody and rebellious at home. Mrs. J felt that this was a threat to her relatively recent second marriage. It was agreed that Mrs. J and her husband, the children's stepfather, would come in first.

Mr. and Mrs. J, an attractive couple in their 40s, had been married for two years. This was the second marriage for both. Mr. J had one child from his previous marriage, a 10-year-old boy who visited every other weekend. Mrs. J's divorce, four years earlier, had been quite unpleasant and, though the children visited their father often, there was still conflict between the partners. They felt Christie was making life extremely unpleasant for the family and that there had to be some changes. Mr. J dreaded coming home from the office never knowing what he might find. In addition, 13-year-old Julie was showing signs of following in her sister's footsteps and the fighting between the girls was constant. When 10-year-old Tommy visited, the girls felt he "got away with murder" and was treated as a "pet" by his father.

In sessions, first with the parents, then the girls, and finally the whole family together, some major themes emerged. One was that the girls felt a pressure to choose between their "natural" parents. If they felt warm and loving toward one, they immediately worried that they were being disloyal to the other. The fact that each parent said bad things about the other increased this feeling. If they told their mother they had a good time with their dad, she was critical and vice versa. In addition, the girls felt it was their fault that the conflict between their parents continued – if they didn't ask for things, their mom and dad wouldn't be fighting. When they told their mom they needed something, she would ask, "Ask your dad," and he would deliver a lecture on their mother's poor handling of money. They felt trapped and guilty, yet wanted to have the clothes their friends had so they could be part of the group. They also worried that if they were unpleasant enough, their stepfather would leave, and while at some moments they wished he would, at other times they felt it would confirm that they really were awful children.

They resented the time their mother spent with their stepfather, feeling that there was less for them. They felt that Mr. J only cared for Tommy and "put up" with them because he had to. In an effort to be "part of the crowd," Christie was staying out past curfew, not doing her school work, and had even cut a few classes. Mrs. J had previously been proud of Christie's academic achievements, but now felt angry, frustrated, and helpless at this turn of events. In her frustration, she had become more withdrawn from Christie, who missed the closeness she once had with her mother. According to Mr. and Mrs. J, the girls



spent all their time talking on the phone, listening to loud “awful” music, or fighting with each other, sometime quite violently. While all of this was going on, Christie and Julie were dealing with the usual development problems of adolescence.

Family therapy sessions brought many of these issues to the surface and enabled family members to really hear each other. The J’s began to understand how important it was for the girls to have a good relationship with their father. Mrs. J put it this way, “I can choose not to have him for a husband, but he is the only father they have, and they need to love and be loved by him.”

Mrs. J began to deal with her ex-husband about finances, rather than using the girls as messengers. Though he refused to come in, he responded to Mrs. J’s increased directness by speaking to her rather than the girls about money and arrangements. As is often the case, the unresolved issues of the divorce were affecting the remarriage and especially the children, who were still feeling responsible. As parents resolve these issues, or at least make it clear to the children that they are not to blame, children can move on to the maturational tasks they need to work on.

The J’s began to be aware in therapy that they had become polarized in their discipline – the more indulgent Mr. J saw his wife be, the stricter he became, and she, in turn, became more indulgent. With this awareness, Mr. J was able to become more nurturing and to show some of the warmth he really felt for the girls; Mrs. J was able to set more appropriate limits, and each agreed to back the other one up. This resulted in more consistency, which the girls experienced with some relief. They knew what they could expect and what the consequences of their behavior would be. Christie stopped cutting classes, asked her stepfather for help with her homework, and got home by her curfew most of the time. Julie became more expressive in the family, voicing her complaints and not fighting as much with her sister. Even Tommy, who did not attend sessions, was treated more as a family member – sharing in chores, but also able to talk and joke with the girls.

After several months, the J’s felt the situation had improved greatly, and, more importantly, they could communicate as a family and resolve the issues that came up.

Every family experiences times of difficulty. Sometimes the family is able to resolve these problems themselves; other times, the family may seek outside counseling help. Here are some signals to look for that may indicate your child or family needs help:

- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Excessive outbursts of anger
- Extreme rebelliousness
- Physical complaints with no discernable cause
- Withdrawn behavior in a previously outgoing child
- Behavior that appears self-destructive



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- Fearfulness
- Isolation from peer group
- Inability to concentrate

If these symptoms continue over a period of time, you may wish to contact a professional counselor at Family Service Counseling and Community Resource Center.

*Family Service Counseling and Community Resource Center is only a call away. Fees are based upon an adjusted scale according to income and family size.*