

## **This Holiday Season, Step Carefully Through the Step-parenting Minefield!**

Whether your family is blended or not, someone close to you probably has had to restructure their family due to divorce and remarriage, or some other cause.

Living in a blended family can be like navigating a minefield, especially during the holidays.

Children and teenagers might act out more than usual as the holidays approach, as they struggle to reconcile feelings of loss while wrestling with understanding their role in the new family.

At a time when adults are trying their best to let their kids know that they want the best for them, don't be surprised if they behave in ways that the adults don't quite understand.

Adult caregivers can avoid potential problems by remembering a couple of important truths.

- Kids need the right to protest. After all, they usually don't make the decisions to end a marriage or to start a new family. Their nuclear family is the place that gives them their sense of safety and meaning in the world. When it is altered or upset, it may take a while for them to realize that the world can truly be a safe place again. If they question or protest, they simply need to be reassured that you hear their concerns and are determined to meet their needs. Sometimes they just need the opportunity to grieve their loss.
- Kids are resilient. They can adapt to almost anything, if given choices. Offer them healthy choices, like including them in planning family activities, or letting them decide whom they will spend time with, or observing a special tradition that was observed in the "old" family.
- Addition works better than subtraction. It is helpful to reassure kids that they still have old family ties, and that their new family is eager to include them. The change won't mean the same to kids as adults. Don't try to force them to accept new realities. They do that better when they have been allowed to grieve their loss. Ritual and routine give kids a sense of security. And, be careful not to send the message that something new is being "substituted" for something they cherish. They can handle addition, but not substitution or subtraction.

It may be easier than it seems to set aside adult conflicts for the sake of the child. It is not necessary to lie about what may have happened, just be careful not to inadvertently place them in the middle of disputes, or otherwise convince them that they can never again be emotionally safe with the most important people in their lives. It's hard enough for them to make sense of the choices adults sometimes make anyway. Be careful not to add to their distress by forcing them to try to take care of or mediate between able-bodied adults. It's too big of a job for a kid.