

PFA Tips

Stepparenting and Blending Families

Don't make autism a mystery

If you keep autism a secret, your new family members might interpret that to mean that it's something to be ashamed of or even afraid of. When children are faced with the unknown they often fill-in the missing facts with information pieced together from their limited experiences and their imagination. Depending on the child's age, it may or may not be appropriate to go into the neurological description of autism. But you can tell your stepchild that his new stepbrother's or sister's brain thinks differently and that is why he does things that may not seem "normal." You can further dispel the mystery by using correct terminology such as "autism" or "ASD", and allow for open communication by encouraging questions or even comments about how the child feels when interacting with all of their new family members. One way to encourage communication is to disclose your own feelings and your own narrative for coping during situations that take more time, have added steps or involve novel behavior.

For example: "The first time Joey became upset in a loud way with me, we were in Walmart and I was not sure what to do. Now, I know, this is just a part of who Joey is. It's only for the moment and I remind myself that he is trying to communicate his feelings and is doing the best he can for the moment."

If your family uses a special communication system, or if there are routines that your child with autism must follow, make sure your new family is familiar with them. Share information about autism to new extended family members to close the loop, ensuring that everyone is empowered with the same knowledge base and reinforcing the same positive message.

Give the kids opportunities to become friends before they become siblings

You don't need to wait until after you are married to take the kids on vacation together, attend each other's sports events, or do "family" things. There's no guarantee they will ever be best buddies, but give all of the kids opportunities to become familiar with each

other so they feel less like strangers living together. It also gives everyone the chance to learn about each other's annoyances, meltdowns and behavior triggers. After all, every child and parent has limits and moments when they are not at their best. Involve the whole family in each child's celebrations. Celebrate the differences. Rather than focusing on how the kids are similar, point out the differences and the positives/ strengths of each child. It will also help the kids appreciate diversity among their peers.

TIP: FIND SOMETHING RIGHT

- Understand the complexities of behavior for kids with ASD
- Keep it positive – encourage and compliment
- Keep judgment in check
- Be willing to shift your priorities
- Don't take it personally if the child's behavior is directed at you
- Don't hold your spouse accountable for the child's actions
- Set clear expectations and boundaries

Don't forget the other siblings

Remind everyone that the siblings that have grown up with the child with autism might have beneficial insight about autism or for when the parents aren't available to share their nuggets of wisdom.

Siblings are siblings.... autism or not

Don't panic or believe your blending efforts have failed the first, second, or third time you catch stepsiblings bickering with one another. Remember, biological siblings fight and argue. Don't assume that each grudge match over the remote control is due to a blending problem, or an autism problem. My neurotypical brother and I would probably still be fighting over the Lucky Charms marshmallows if we lived together. Simply normalize the event by calmly stating, "...all siblings argue and bicker at times." Then utilize the existing family rules to follow through and manage the situation.



Don't try to do EVERYTHING together

It's nice to do things as a family, but it's also nice to have one-on-one time with each kid. Try to give your stepson a break from having to listen to your daughter's complaints about hair and shoes. Give your daughter a break from your son's intense passion for quantum physics and nuclear energy. And give your son with autism a break from your stepson's loud and chaotic basketball games. You get the idea. In pairing off (parent/stepparent to one child), try to ensure the number of times spent apart from family and the events are equal and fair. Unfortunately, kids keep score and will quickly let you know if they feel you are playing "favorites" and giving one child more time or more privileges.

The only child

If you are stepparenting an only child with autism, you may find it challenging to insert yourself into the existing parent-child relationship. Figure out the child's special interests (believe me, they'll have some) and get involved in the child's life based on those discoveries. Find some common ground and do things together that you both enjoy. If you can't find a common activity, give the child what all parents give – themselves. They fake interest or simply say right out loud, let's do "this" because it is important to you and that makes it important to me! Selflessness is truly the heart of parenting. It generally takes approximately two years for the stepparent-child bond to form. It might be a stretch at first, but the bond will take hold, grow, and strengthen over time.

Call me Ishmael

What's in a name? Your new spouse may prefer

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Stepparenting – cont.



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to be referred to as “King Father of all who enter the home,” but maybe you should consider going with a name that makes the kids comfortable and does not set up too formal a wall or boundary between the stepparent and child. For example, calling your new stepdad “Mr. Joe” is more formal and similar to a child–teacher relationship. “Joe”, done with respect, allows for a closer family relationship to be acknowledged.

Keep what you can unchanged

Change can be hard for anyone, especially for someone who thrives on structure and routine. With blending families a lot of change is expected: moving to a new home, living with new people, changing names, changing schools, and changing schedules are all possible stressors. So what can you keep the same? The smallest constants can be significant: stocking your son’s favorite popcorn, maintaining your daughter’s bedtime ritual, keeping DVDs on the shelf in the same order, maintaining rules about who is allowed to touch the LEGOs... it all matters. To learn what is important, ask or listen to the children when they complain, bicker or meltdown. There might be simple items you overlooked.

The way you’ve “always parented” may not be the way you can parent now

Disciplining a child with a developmental disability can be different. Someone with autism may not connect cause and effects, so communicate clearly and concisely. Make sure expectations are reasonable given the child’s age, impact of autism, emotional needs for stability, and the amount of time spent with one parent or the other. In the beginning, the stepparent should watch and learn how to parent all their new children. They can jump in to nurture, structure activities, supervise, and carpool the kids to activities, but if an immediate consequence is not needed, they should allow the biological parent to deliver a consequence if a rule is broken. Parent-only meetings to decide on family rules and routines is useful followed by family meetings to discuss expectations and consequences. At this time a child’s behavioral protocol can also be reviewed. Again, in general, it takes approximately two years for the stepparent–child bond to form and for the children to accept their new parent fully parenting them.

Addressing challenging behaviors

Love the child for who they are. Don’t

compare them to neurotypical children.

There are bound to be bumps in the road: be prepared and plan for it. A child with autism may lack the skills to talk it out and express what’s really going on inside. To successfully parent a child with autism, it’s important to gain a new set of listening skills. Pay attention and observe behavior because behavior is communication. To fully communicate, it’s important to understand what the child is going through. You can also learn about the child’s typical behavioral signals from their parent and siblings.

Preparation, preparation, preparation

Try to eliminate surprises with the kids. Don’t rush in...pick a time that’s right, but definitely find a moment to prepare your kids for the ‘blending.’ Remind them that there are moments that are going to be different. Let your kids know that you may communicate, react, and even discipline differently, at times. There may be moments that catch the neurotypical siblings off guard, but when that happens, remind them that this is one of those times you have talked about. If something negative happens, or there is a problem, tell the kids to let you, the parents, handle it. It might be helpful to specifically tell the children what their “job” or “task” is during the negative event. Your children may even have practiced this while in school when their teacher has to manage situations with other students. Encourage your children to talk with you if they have any questions but know that you might not be able to immediately talk with them in the middle of a negative event. Let your children know that you will check-in with them later to ensure they are ok and see if they have questions or concerns.

Follow through

There are several moments a week, or even a day, when you may need to check your ‘natural’ tendencies and remind yourself to react differently than you have in the past. This is especially difficult when what you have done in the past worked! Try to memorize your “response check list” and then go through it without over thinking the situation. If you still find it hard to break from your standard form of parenting, try removing yourself from the scene for a few moments in order to plan how to respond to a situation. You may not always be successful, but it might help.

When all else fails, ask

Sometimes you can prepare and discipline yourself and your kids all you want, and still find yourself perplexed as to what to do. When those moments come, humble yourself, realize you don’t know all the answers and ask what to do. It’s ok to ask the spouse that has been living in the world of autism for advice. He or she may not know the immediate answer either, but it helps everyone when you communicate that you just don’t know what to do.

Communication is the key to keeping your marriage healthy and strong

Keep the lines of communication open. Be honest about what you feel, think, or don’t know. Be open-minded to your spouse’s views and more accepting of things outside of your control. Know that you will make mistakes and it will be okay. Maintain the ability to see the big picture and actively participate in a shared vision. Don’t forget to routinely schedule “alone time” together. Stay connected and be mindful of each other’s needs. Carve out a little time for each of you to routinely pursue individual interests or hobbies.

Embrace the change

Change is hard, whether good or bad, but it also helps us to grow as individuals. Remember why you are here at this point in your life. You and your spouse love each other and wanted to move through life together with all of the rewards and challenges that life has to offer. I think the vows say, “for better or for worse.” That means that there are going to be rough spots to overcome and awesome times to celebrate. We make plans, but don’t control all of the outcomes. Either way, our experiences can make us better and stronger. Share with the kids that this is how life works and it is what makes it exciting. It is important that we also model that for them. And then see where the journey takes you!

For more resources on this topic visit <http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/home/pfa-tips-stepparenting-and-blending-families/>

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