

Childhood Experiences in Blended Families: Insights for Educators, School Guidance Counsellors, and Parents

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Abstract

This paper examines the emotional and developmental experiences of children growing up in blended families, emphasizing the collaborative role of educators, school counselors, and parents which encompasses both biological and stepparents in fostering resilience and well-being.

Blended families, formed through remarriage or cohabitation, present children with unique challenges such as identity confusion, loyalty conflicts, and emotional adjustment. These experiences often manifest in school settings, where educators and counselors are positioned to observe behavioral shifts and provide support. Equally vital are the contributions of parents, whose communication styles, emotional availability, and parenting strategies shape the child's adaptation to new family dynamics. Drawing on psychological research and educational best practices, this paper offers strategies for building inclusive environments, promoting social-emotional learning, and strengthening home-school partnerships. By aligning efforts both educational and domestic spheres, adults can create a cohesive support system that empowers children in blended families to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Introduction

Childhood experiences in blended families encompass the different interactions, relationships and dynamics that influence the child's development. These experiences often include adjusting to different parenting styles, maintaining relationship with biological and step family members and dealing with structural changes in the household.

In today's evolving social landscape, blended families—formed through remarriage, cohabitation, or the merging of households—have become a significant part of the educational community. These family structures bring together individuals from different backgrounds, histories, and emotional experiences, creating both opportunities and challenges for children. While some children thrive in blended environments, others may struggle with identity confusion, loyalty conflicts, and emotional adjustment. For educators and school guidance counsellors, understanding the nuanced experiences of children in blended families is essential. These professionals often serve as the first line of support when children exhibit behavioral changes, academic disruptions, or social withdrawal. Likewise, parents—both biological and stepparents—play a critical role in shaping how children adapt to new family dynamics. This paper aims to illuminate the emotional and developmental journey of children in blended families

and provide actionable strategies for educators, counselors, and parents. By fostering collaboration between home and school, we can create a cohesive support system that empowers children to thrive both emotionally and academically.

Main Body

What Constitute a Blended Family?

Blended families come many forms with some common examples as follows: married couples in which one or both spouses have children from a previous relationship, families with children in a subsequent marriage that have children from previous relationship, and families with children whose spouses have children from a previous relationship (Zelevnikow, et al., 2015). This set-up is also referred to as reconstituted families, sometimes called as multi-parental families.

Emotional Complexity and Identity Formation

Children in blended families often navigate a turbulent emotional landscape. The integration of stepparents and stepsiblings can disrupt established routines and relationships, prompting children to reevaluate their identity and sense of belonging. These transitions may evoke feelings of grief, confusion, or anxiety—especially if the child is still processing the separation or divorce of their biological parents.

Loyalty conflicts are particularly common. Children may feel torn between biological parents and stepparents, especially when one parent expresses discomfort with the new arrangement (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). This internal tension can lead to emotional withdrawal, behavioral issues, or resistance to forming new bonds. Identity fragmentation may also occur as children attempt to reconcile multiple family narratives, surnames, and household norms (Sloan, 2020).

Educators can support these students by fostering safe spaces for emotional expression—through journaling, art, or guided discussions—and by validating their experiences without judgment.

Adaptability and Resilience

Despite the challenges, children in blended families often develop remarkable adaptability and emotional intelligence. Navigating complex social environments and managing change can foster resilience, empathy, and problem-solving skills.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are particularly effective in reinforcing these competencies. SEL helps children articulate emotions, build healthy relationships, and resolve conflicts (Durlak et al., 2011). Peer relationships may also become more significant, offering stability and connection outside the home. Resilience-building activities—such as goal setting, mindfulness, and collaborative projects—can empower children to thrive despite family upheaval.

School guidance counsellors can amplify this growth by facilitating group counseling sessions for children from blended families, where shared experiences foster mutual support and normalize their feelings (Papernow, 2013).

The Role of Educators and Guidance Counsellors

Educators and school guidance counsellors are uniquely positioned to observe and support children navigating blended family dynamics. Their role extends beyond academic instruction to emotional stewardship.

Key strategies include:

- **Monitoring behavioral cues:** Sudden changes in mood, academic performance, or peer interactions may signal distress.
- **Maintaining consistent routines:** Predictability in the classroom offers comfort when home life feels unstable.
- **Using inclusive language:** Avoid assumptions about family structures. Terms like “grown-ups at home” or “family members” are more inclusive than “mom and dad.”
- **Collaborating with families:** Open communication with both biological and stepparents helps align support strategies and clarify the child’s needs.

Timing is also critical. Transitions such as moving homes, gaining new siblings, or adjusting to custody arrangements may require extra sensitivity and flexibility (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

The Role of Parents and Stepparents

The role of parents and stepparents in a blended family is multifaceted and requires a balance of responsibilities and support.

Parents (both biological and stepparents) play a foundational role in shaping a child’s experience in a blended family. Their attitudes, behaviors, and communication styles directly influence how children adjust to new dynamics.

- **Biological parents** can ease transitions by validating their child’s emotions, maintaining consistent routines, and fostering open dialogue. When both parents collaborate respectfully—even across households—they model healthy conflict resolution and emotional maturity.
- **Stepparents** should approach their role with patience, empathy, and respect for the child’s boundaries. Building trust takes time, and forcing closeness can backfire. Instead, stepparents can focus on shared activities, active listening, and gradual relationship-building.
- **Unified parenting strategies**—such as consistent discipline, shared rituals, and inclusive decision-making—help children feel secure and valued.

When parents and educators and guidance counsellors work together, they create a cohesive support system that reinforces the child’s emotional stability and academic success.

Conclusions

Children in blended families are not defined by their circumstances but by the support systems that surround them. Educators, school counsellors, and parents have the power to buffer the emotional turbulence of family transitions and foster resilience, empathy, and growth. By recognizing the unique challenges these children face and responding with compassion and intentionality, schools and homes can become sanctuaries of stability and belonging.

This implies that children in blended family set up needs the support of everyone, be it in the household, implying that communication is so important. Additionally, children in blended families need support groups like friends, educators and counsellors.

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