

Parenting

Communication is essential for viable 'blended families'

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

As JoAnn and John DeMott prepared for their marriage in 1979, the couple faced a problem few soon-to-be married couples encounter.

They had to discover how to blend each other and seven children from previous marriages into one new family.

Part of the DeMott's solution was selling their separate houses and buying one house large enough to accommodate the entire family at times when they would be all together — and to provide each family member with enough space.

"(The children) needed to feel a part of our family," JoAnn explained. "We needed to find a neutral house — not 'this is my house,' 'this is your house,' but 'this is our house.'"

The DeMotts acknowledged that not all "blended families" — new families that blend together couples and children from previous relationships — can buy a new house to help them to come together. But there are ways for them to address issues that arise in such families — beyond, of course, the normal problems faced by all families.

Blended families have to contend with custodial issues, ex-spouses who remain in contact because of the children, financial pressures due to child support and alimony, the loss of friends, and, in many cases, the fears, hurt and tensions engendered from having at least one partner who experienced a divorce.

JoAnn pointed out that the divorce rate for second marriages is almost double that of

first marriages. Thus couples in blended families have their work cut out for them.

The DeMotts, parishioners at Rochester's St. Monica's Church, use their own experiences to help couples preparing for second marriages through the New Horizons program, which they help to coordinate.

Through the New Horizons sessions, the DeMotts try to let couples know some of the potential problems they might face.

"We never have the answers," JoAnn acknowledged. "We just tell them what we experienced."

"I think the big issue for us was the issue of fairness for our children," John noted. This comes into play, in part, through trying to balance the needs of children who live at home on a more full-time basis and those who, due to custody arrangements, are there less frequently. "You have to make sure that they are still part of the family," he observed.

Another major issue is money — especially when spousal and child support is involved.

"We've dealt with couples where it was a psychological stress even if it was not a real financial stress," John remarked. One solution he used was to deposit any support money in a special account, and thus cut down on direct contact with his ex-spouse.

JoAnn pointed out that the presence of children means the couple has to think of themselves as more than just a "couple" while dating.

"If both have children, there's a courtship involved

where you have to involve the children," JoAnn noted. The children have to get to know their new stepparent, and their new stepbrothers and stepsisters.

At the same time, however, "There's always that aspect of trying to find time for each other, as well as finding time for the children," she observed.

One of the things the DeMotts recommend — both for couples in blended families, and those in any marriage — is setting aside time for being alone, for "dates" — even if they consist of just going out for a walk or getting a cup of coffee.

"During that time, that's when you communicate," JoAnn said, adding, "Communicating isn't about the weather or about what's happening at work. It's how things are going in your life. You need to be able to talk to your spouse and be able to communicate feelings."

Communicating is especially important because of the stresses and pressures involved in blending families, John acknowledged.

"You have to have the ability to identify issues and to be able to talk about them objectively," he remarked. "You have to be able to sit down and say, 'There's this problem. How can we deal with this problem in a way that has the least negative impact on our relationship?'"

Communication lines also have to be kept open with ex-spouses as well because of the children. Holidays need to be worked out. Information about the children has to be shared.



Sacraments, marriages of children, the arrival of grandchildren and other special events in children's lives will likely involve ex-spouses and ex-in-laws.

JoAnn noted, for example, that three of the couple's daughters were married in recent years.

They had to work out who did what and who hosted what with ex-spouses.

This contact can also help bring to the surface old feelings that can affect how members of blended families interact.

Basically, JoAnn observed, people in second marriages —

and especially those in blended families — have to recognize that the end of earlier marriages is not complete.

"You can't close the door on the past," JoAnn observed. "You have to leave the door gently open because the past is part of what you are."

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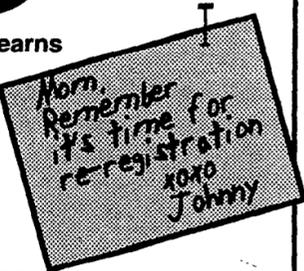


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