

Charlotte Egemar Kaaber



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THE FUSION FAMILY



THE
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How to succeed with your blended family
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HOW TO SUCCEED WITH
YOUR BLENDED FAMILY

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IUNIVERSE, INC.
BLOOMINGTON

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PREFACE

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Holding this book *The Fusion Family* in your hand shows that you are aware of the challenges of being part of a blended family. You have decided to look for help and inspiration to succeed with your own family. I am very pleased with your decision and hope that this book can ease your way on a bumpy road.

The divorce rate is higher now than ever before, both in Europe and especially in the United States. In the United States one out of two marriages end in divorce. Sixty percent of second marriages fail, according to the U.S. Census Bureau 66% of marriages and co-habitation end in break up, when children are present, according to Stepfamily Foundation statistics.

Many blended families break up within the first year of co-habiting. Why do they give up?

Why is it so difficult? What went wrong?

What can you do to avoid becoming a part of this sad statistic? How can you prepare for and plan the best possible way for your blended family to succeed?

What kind of challenges, problems, and pitfalls will you encounter and how do you solve these issues within your blended family? How do you as a blended family stand in regard to your exes and their families, and society in general?

First, let me introduce you to my own blended family:

Charlotte forty-two years old, Jégwan forty-one years old, and our four kids: Oscar seventeen years old, Andrea fourteen years old, Nicklas fourteen years old, and Jonas eleven years old.

We live in Denmark, in a town called Slagelse, about 60 miles from Copenhagen.

We have been a blended family now for seven years. Our experience with the many challenges we have encountered, and also discussed with other fusion families, is described in this book. We would now like to share these experiences with you.

We have the children fifty percent of the time. Both Jégwan and I commute a lot, dropping off and picking up the kids. It is our priority to bring the kids together as much as possible.

Jégwan lost his heart to an old villa from 1921 which (still) needs a total renovation and a make-over (a slow and ongoing process.) Jégwan looks at it as his 'castle' and I see it as it-will-be-a-beautiful-home-in-ten-years. In the beginning I was frustrated on a regular basis, because of the slow process, but now I am (a bit) more relaxed and I am use to it.

Jégwan and I do Tae kwon do with the kids once a week. Half of my family enjoys spear fishing and spend many hours in the ocean. I only participate in the cooking part.

I think our four kids are cool. Oscar is very passionate about renovating stuff and spear fishing. Jégwan and Oscar have watched every single movie on this subject on YouTube.

Andrea is very good at playing the guitar. When I am in the living room downstairs, I can hear her from her room upstairs. It is very joyful.

Nicklas loves and knows everything about military stuff. Give him a weapon and he can fill your in on the details. He planned his military future when he was teen years old.

Jonas loves to watch the black belt coach Ehsan Fazli doing Tae kwon do, play his PlayStation 3 and his Wii with his friends. I was very surprised, when he told me that he had learned about meditation from one of his games.

With this book, we hope to inspire and help people who are entering into or who are already in a blended family—especially the single person with kids who meets a new partner and the person without kids who meets a new partner with kids. We will also discuss parents who would like to move in together and families that are already blended. We will also offer advice towards solutions of specific problems and inspiration for a less bumpy road towards success in your blended family.

How do you refer to your partner’s kids? How do you refer to yourself with regard to them?

We say “fusion kids” and our new roles as “fusion parents.” “Step” is NOT a part of our vocabulary; neither is the phrase “bonus kid” which is commonly used in Denmark. We made the conscious choice to use the word “fusion” instead of “step”. The word fusion makes us both smile because we think the word is humorous, descriptive, objective, and up-to-date in a time of increased fusion by companies etc. Think about all the energy created by the fusion of atoms!

Our hope is that people refer to us as a The Danish Fusion Family – a real Atom Family. We spiced up this book with our own experiences and reflections. There are also interviews and effective coaching tools.

We also hope you read this book from beginning to end, since it is written chronologically by time events and includes a diverse set of problems and challenges you may encounter in your own blended family. Our book can also be used as a reference book, if you prefer.

Enjoy!

Charlotte Egemar Kaaber and Jegwan Kaaber

1. INTRODUCTION

The blended family, often including two sets of kids and respective exes, is almost as common as the “nuclear” family. Hurt feelings, jealousy, feelings of guilt, pick-up scheduling, exes, finances, up-bringing issues, habits, traditions – these are all part of the baggage, you accept when you blend families.

I think a lot of people realize that it is incredibly difficult and challenging to get a blended family to function well. The challenges are totally different from those in nuclear families. Complex emotions occur, some of which you never thought existed and therefore never had to deal with. It’s a big personal challenge to become a fusion parent to another person’s child and you will discover aspects of your own personality, you never knew you had before.

I hope when you read this book that you will smile, recognize yourself in the situations described, and think, “Yes, I have felt the same way.” But most of all, I hope you will listen to your inner voice, which guides you true feelings.

In order to eliminate any confusion, I will define the terminology, I have used throughout this book:

The Fusion family is used instead of stepfamily.

Fusion mom/dad/kids are used instead of step mom/dad/kids.

The ex refers to previous partner or spouse.

The other parent is used by the kids to refer to their biological mom/dad.

The other parent household is used to describe the kids' biological mom/dad from whom you are divorced and her/his new partner.

The real parent is used when the fusion mom/dad is mentioned or compared to the biological mom/dad.

The parents are used as a common referral to the fusion parents and the parents in the blended family or for all the adults in both parent households.



5. PLANNING YOUR BLENDED LIFE: IS IT REALLY NECESSARY?

The answer is: Yes! The most important milestone to reach is matching each other's expectations and demands in order to create the foundation of a well-balanced and functional family. Try asking each other: What do you expect of me with regard to your kids? Start an open dialogue about what you expect, demand, and hope for in each other, making sure to include the not-so-pleasant, emotional, and practical aspects.

The questionnaire below is based on my own family situation. The clarification of and consensus to the issues will eliminate the number of discussions you may have in your fusion family. The importance of these questions will be discussed later on in the book.

I have created the following list of questions and think it's important that both you and your partner know the answers to them:

1. Are you willing to take responsibility for my kids the same way you do towards your own?
2. Will you actively participate in the upbringing of my kids?

3. Will you prioritize my kids the same way you prioritize your own?
4. Will you solve my kids' problems in everyday life?
5. Will you care for my kids when they are sick?
6. What is your attitude towards my ex?
7. How do we handle socializing with my ex?
8. Will you participate in social gatherings with regard to school?
9. Will you participate in activities if my ex is participating as well?
10. Will you drive my kids to their appointments?

5.1 RULES FOR THE BLENDED LIFE TOGETHER

You and your partner will both be carrying baggage that doesn't exist in a "nuclear" family. For example: your relationship with your ex, hurt feelings, jealousy, scheduling/planning, child support, upbringing of the kids, habits, traditions, etc. The odds of a blended family succeeding are bad because of this baggage. You don't start out with a clean slate. I have heard this many times, "It will all work out because we love each other." During the first year, you might have the extra energy in dealing with your hurt feelings, hiding your disappointment and letting things go easily, until the day comes when you can't hold back any longer. By defining a set of rules with regard to the baggage you both carry, you will find yourselves on a straight path.

Below are my suggestions of important rules. Posting these on the fridge is recommended.

1. **Support each other's new role as a fusion parent.**

It's important to let the kids know that the fusion parent has the same authority in the blended family as the biological parent. Let the fusion parent handle situations and support them if problems occur.

- 2. Define for the kids how they are to behave towards the fusion parent. It's important to let the kids know that ignoring the fusion parent is not acceptable.**

In the beginning, because you are careful in your new role as a fusion parent, you may find yourself being ignored by the kids. You feel you should react to it, but you don't reprimand the kids. In this situation, it's important that the parent reprimands the kids and explains to them why the behaviour is unacceptable. Both rules are important because they set the parameters for acceptable behaviour, which then creates a feeling a security for the kids. The responsibility of enforcing the rules belongs to the parents.

- 3. Show affection to each other on a daily basis, even if you are busy with the kids.**

It's a big job becoming a fusion parent. You will spend a lot of mental energy trying to do everything right for the kids. You may also "forget" about each other when the kids are present. It's important to show affection towards your partner in order to handle conflicts better – affection has a positive influence on your mental energy. This will enable you to feel more resourceful in case of a conflict or problem.

- 4. Don't ask questions about your partner's ex if you can't handle the answer.**

Example: My girlfriend Kate couldn't resist asking her new partner about his ex-wife. He answered truthfully saying, "She is very beautiful." Kate didn't stop at that and continued, "What's her figure like?" The answer she got was, "She is what I would call an ideal woman." Kate's new partner thought these questions were based on curiosity, but here is what Kate heard:

He said: "She is very beautiful."

She heard: Too bad I have to settle with you. I'd rather have my ex back.

He said: "She is what I would call an ideal woman."

She heard: I love ideal women. But you are not ideal, so I have to settle for less. If you love me, then do something about it so you will become more like my ideal. I can't stand having to settle with a less perfect body like yours.

Kate's self-worth took a dive due to this conversation and a lot of time passed before it got restored. I asked her if she shared with him what was going on with her emotionally, and she replied that she was too embarrassed to do so. She could just have asked for a compliment if she needed one, but instead she dug deeper. Conclusion: Drop the painful questions about the ex.

5. Don't look for affirmation of yourself by criticizing your partner's ex.

For the fusion parent it's important not to look for affirmation and affection by criticizing your partner's ex. Your partner chose their ex at one point in time, and should not be held accountable. The decision took place in the past, which is not important for the present.

- 6. Speak kindly of your partner's kids despite being angry.**
- 7. Don't accuse each other of inadequacy when it comes to the upbringing of the kids.**

It's inevitable that you will feel frustration with regard to your fusion kids. If this is an ongoing occurrence, you need to bring it up with your partner. Make sure you speak in a non-accusatory manner and stay calm during the conversation with your partner.

8. Remember to appreciate one another in your new roles as fusion parents.

It's good for your self-esteem when your partner notices and appreciates your actions towards their kids. This then strengthens

your courage and willingness in continuing to work actively toward a loving relationship with the fusion kids.

9. Set time aside to discuss daily matters.

This rule is important especially in the beginning of your relationship when you might feel a little insecure. Be honest with each other and discuss daily situations and/or conflicts you had with the kids. Describe the experiences and emotions you encountered.

10. Mutually praise each other's kids when they deserve it.

When you reciprocate praising the kids, you will strengthen your trust in the fusion parent's love and best intentions for your own kids. When you are good at praising each other's kids, then it becomes easier for the parent to accept those situations when the fusion parent must reprimand their partners' kids.

It can be difficult to always comply by the above-mentioned rules. However, they can be very helpful when something goes wrong and you need to understand the reason it happened. The lack of compliance by any or some of the rules can create feelings of hurtfulness, sadness, jealousy, and anger.

5.2 FINDING THE COMMON THREAD IN ATTITUDES, HABITS, AND UPBRINGING

In a blended family it's important that the adults work towards the kids perceiving them as a single unit. It's paramount to define the most fundamental values of the family, such as the upbringing and well being of the kids. It's difficult to function well in a family where only one parent has kids, if the fusion parent without kids does not want to be actively involved. This situation will result in frustration for both parents. The parent needs to demand participation of the fusion parent in all aspects of the kids' well being. Even if you don't agree with their opinion on different

aspects, do listen and be open-minded. Hopefully this will result in some sort of compromise as to what is best for the blended family, and for the family to thrive and be functional.

The goal of finding a common thread is integrates both the parents and the kids in the family. The kids should be confident knowing that whether they question the parent or the fusion parent, the answer will be the same. This way the kids can rely on the fusion parent to be there for them and they won't always need the parent when they have issues.

My own story

Here is a cute little example of what you can gain when you stand united as parents: After Jegwan and I moved in together in our new house, Thursday/Allowance/Payday came along. Jegwan wasn't home yet. My boys came to me asking for their allowance. His kids, Oscar and Andrea, stood in the background quietly looking on and then went into their room. I handed my boys their allowance and then went into both Andrea and Oscar's rooms asking them about the amount of their allowances. "Here you go," I said, handing them the amount they told me they received each week. They both were genuinely happy and thanked me many times, as if I had done something special for them. I realized that they felt they couldn't ask ME for their allowance and thought they would have to wait until their dad came home.

I felt warm in my heart due to their reaction, and decided that when next Allowance Day came around I would do the same thing. It was a small gesture on my behalf, however my actions showed Andrea and Oscar that I care for them the same way I care for my own boys.

Reflection

If you make an effort to agree upon solutions for the important issues regarding the kids, then you make it easier for the kids. They will no longer have to try to figure out the practical issues. This will make everyday life less problematic.

5.3 CHECKLIST FOR THE PRACTICAL PART OF BLENDED LIFE – ARE WE IN CONTROL?

I am sure a lot of you have experienced the differences in opinion when it comes to disciplining, bed times, table manners, food preferences, TV and computer rules, habits, traditions, holidays, birthdays, hobbies, clothing, allowances, etc. The kids in a blended family expect things to be done the same way, at the same time, in the same order as they were used to before they entered the blended family.

You can imagine how much kids may object if things are done the “wrong way” – that is, not the way they are used to. Therefore, it’s a good idea to prepare the kids for all the adjustments and changes that are going to be different from those to which they’d become accustomed. When the adults have defined the new rules/routines, they can then jointly explain them to the kids.

I have created a list of issues that are important to clarify with each other, as you may have different habit and/or rules for your own kids. The relevance of the ideas below depends on the relationship you have with your kids.

Issues	Example of possible discrepancies
Baths/hair washing	Some kids take a bath and have their hair washed every day and others may only do this 2-3 times a week.
Table manners	Some kids eat faster than others. Are they supposed to wait until every one has food on their plate before they start eating or do they start eating when they are ready? Do they have to wait until everyone is done before leaving the table? Is dinner time for conversation or do they eat quietly? Are they supposed help clear the table?

Saving accounts	Some kids have one, others don't.
TV/Computer/ Video Games	Some kids are allowed to play as much as they want, others only for certain amounts of time per day.
Materialism	Some kids receive everything they ask for, others have to save up and use their allowance if they want a new toy.
Sports	Some kids participate in sports and are dropped off and picked up, others aren't allowed until they can drive themselves to the events. How many sports and how often?
Birthdays	Special birthday traditions? Does the whole family of the child participate including the ex's family or are there two separate birthday celebrations? How much is spent on presents?
Packing for Holidays/ Vacations	Some kids pack their own bag; others have their parents pack for them.
Having friends over	Some kids can freely see their friends and don't have to ask permission, others have to ask and aren't allowed to see friends very often.
Curfews	What time do kids have to be home in the evening? Some kids stay out until darkness falls, others have a set time.
Homework	Some kids have to do homework right after they come home from school; others are allowed to play first. Some get help with homework, others have to figure it out themselves.

Allowance	When and how much? Do they receive an allowance without any chores or do they do chores in order to receive an allowance? Are they free to spend it in any manner they choose or are there limitations?
Food	What are rules for “eating your veggies” and “try it before you say you don’t like it”? Do we make different menus? What are the kids allowed to drink with their meals: milk, water, juice, or sodas? Some kids are supposed to ask for food, others help themselves.
School lunches	What is usually packed? What is preferred? For example, whole wheat or white bread sandwiches?
Breakfast	What is served? Fruit Loops vs. oatmeal?
Bedclothes	On weekends are the kids allowed to wear their pyjamas all day or do they have to get dressed as soon as they get up?
Cleaning up	Some kids are taught to clean up; some have it done for them by the parents.
Chores	How many and what are they?
Bedtime	Despite being the same age, some kids can stay up later than others. If the kids are older, are they allowed to stay up as long as the parents?
To cater or not to cater	Do you respond to every request made by your kid or are they self-sufficient?

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Clothing	Some kids have to wear clean clothes every day, others will wear the same pair of jeans for a couple of days. Some kids decide themselves what to wear while others don't have the choice.
Candy and sodas	How much and how often?
Bedtime routines	Some kids are used to stories and the parent lying down with them until they are asleep, others get a hug and kiss and fall asleep on their own.
Clothes purchasing	Some parents shop at discount stores and some only buy brand names.

Table 1: Example of possible discrepancies

5.4 TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

5.4.1 "JUST-WAIT-TILL-DADDY-COMES-HOME"

As I mentioned earlier, if you want your blended family to succeed, it's a necessity that both of you take responsibility for all the kids, regardless of whether you are a parent or not. The amount of effort you put in depends on the ages of the kids. Again, if you choose the solution "I parent my kids, you parent yours" you will inevitably experience a situation with the fusion kid that you can't handle in the way you would handle with your own kid. You will have to wait until the parent is present, so they can handle it. This may make you look like a "just-wait-till-daddy-comes-home" person, which is respectful neither towards yourself, your partner, nor the kids.

If you handle the situation with the fusion kids yourself, you won't feel like a tattletale and can then inform your partner of what happened and how you handled it. At the same time,

it's important that the kids feel secure and know they won't get reprimanded twice, and feel good that the fusion parent handled the situation. There is no reason for the parent to handle a situation they wasn't involved in. Since expectations of the kids can vary from kid to kid, choosing the "I parent my kids, you parent yours" solution can create discord between the parent and the fusion parent. This solution could also create feelings of inadequacy as a parent.

Because your expectations for the kids might vary from your partner's, you might find yourself pointing fingers at each other for bad parenting. The parent is not directly responsible for ALL the demands of the kids. The pressure that is put on the parent does not create a solid ground for a healthy and mutually beneficial relationship, since the parent will feel monitored, measured, and weighed. In connection with "telling on" each other's kids, I recommend that you read section 5.7.3 Pitfall 3: Being tense and pressuring your kids

Reflection

The parent needs the reassurance of knowing that the fusion parent takes responsibility for situations where their limits are exceeded instead of passively waiting for the parent's efforts.

It gives the parent inner peace and reassurance since they don't have to constantly observe the fusion parent. The fusion parents must know for themselves that situations with children are addressed in proper and orderly manners.

5.5 INTERVIEW WITH A FUSION FAMILY

Thomas lives with Anne and Anne's daughter Eline, who is three and a half years old. They have lived together for a half year.

Questions to Thomas:

Q: What were your expectations and/or requirements for Anne in your role as a fusion dad?