

# Separation, Divorce and the Extended Family

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Over the years, couples have been forewarned: *you don't just marry your spouse, you marry the entire family*. So, does this mean when the couple divorces, they also divorce the entire family? In most cases, the answer is yes. Research shows that typically when a couple divorce or separate, the blood family of that spouse is cut off from the spouse that married into the family. Of course, the residual effects on those family members can be traumatic.

In many cases, the extended family members including sister and brother-in-laws, cousins, aunts, and uncles have grown close to the new addition to their family. Many of these family members (especially if they are in the same age group) formed friendships as they shared good times and holidays during the couple's courtship and marriage. So why, when a couple separates, so goes inclusion with the entire clan; no more good times?

This question is particularly important because, in most cases, the extended family has nothing to do with the conflict that led to divorce. The grief the extended family feels for the loss of their best brother-in-law or ex-husband's cousin is unfair.

The reality is blood often trumps the union of the couple. In many cases, family exhibit loyalty to each other, and when the spouse is removed from the group, he or she no longer has rights to this inner circle and must retreat. Some family members believe that they cannot maintain relations with the ex, as they would be disloyal to their blood relatives, and make the decision to sever the bond. However, children don't often make such decisions, and it is the children who suffer most because they lose an aunt or uncle who was either married or was a domestic partner to their blood aunt or uncle. Often these children grow up and become

adults without the presence of these former family members, losing the opportunity of affection and support because of this disconnect. In-laws are also affected. They often lose the connection with their grandchildren, especially when the primary planner was one spouse who often made it a priority to have the children know their grandparents. The loss of a relationship clearly affects everyone including the extended family.

Grieving the loss of the extended in-law family is not only natural but unavoidable. Therefore, it would be helpful to talk about these losses, and not pretend this family member did not mean as much as they did. Children, especially should acknowledge these feelings because, as stated before, they are the ones affected the most. They form bonds that are then broken. A child's trust is built on reliability and consistency. When a child loses trust in an adult relationship and when that adult is no longer in the child's life, the child may be hesitant to form new relationships to protect him or herself from getting hurt again. The child may also believe that the loss was due to their behavior. This impact also holds true, not only for the in-laws, but for stepchildren as well. If there are stepchildren involved from a previous marriage, it would be beneficial to discuss the arrangement of how the children from separate households will maintain their relationships.

When the couple dissolves their union, all the half- and stepchildren who participated and formed a family may no longer see each other. How does this loss get addressed? How does the separating couple maintain the children's relationships with each other, never mind the relationship with the extended family? These questions should be addressed by the separating couple in order to prevent an unnecessary and devastating blow to the children.

In conclusion, there is a need for more interventions that help to find positive ways of maintaining connections with extended family and stepfamily members. Learning early on how to deal with the feelings associated with connecting with others and then adapting to change is

an important life lesson and can be a wonderful guide for a child's prospective relationships. When handled properly, a child can have a positive outcome during a shift in familial configuration. It is up to the parents to be aware and seek guidance on how to best manage this situation. After all, these outcomes are linked to how the couple handles their separation.



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