



John Penton and Shona Welsh

Creating a Family Pact

A Workbook from *Yours, Mine and Hours:
Relationship Skills for Blended Families*
www.yoursminehours.com



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Introduction

If you've downloaded this workbook, chances are you have read about the *Family Pact* in our book *Yours, Mine and Hours: Relationship Skills for Blended Families*. However, as some of you may not have read the book, we'll provide a brief overview before you get started on the exercises in the workbook.

Basically, a Family Pact is a clearly-defined set of expectations and obligations of and to each other that everyone agrees to live by, as well as consequences when you don't live up to the agreement.

Why is a Family Pact necessary? Why can't you just all get along? Well, it's simple. Even if you all get along really well at the beginning, after a few months of living together the idiosyncrasies of the other family begin to come out. It's not that you didn't notice them before; it's just that now what seemed tolerable or even cute begins to irritate you.

Our observation is that most conflict arises out of one person having one set of expectations, the other person having no clue about those expectations – or having a totally different set of expectations – and then their worlds collide because they weren't clear with each other.

In creating a Family Pact that governs your whole family, everyone gets a chance to state their expectations of how the family will live together. They explain why those expectations are important to them and what it looks like when people live by them.

A *shared and common* understanding of the ground rules and consequences is absolutely essential. If you stop at having created the list without hashing out with everyone what each item on the list actually looks like in practice, what you have is a beautiful set of Motherhood and Apple Pie statements that sound nice but don't really have any teeth.

We have found the Family Pact to be a great tool to head off most issues before they develop in our blended family or address unanticipated issues as they occur. It's also a great way to teach your children self-responsibility.

Creating a Family Pact

The Family Pact has two elements to it:

- 1 the couple's list of obligations and expectations to one another
- 1 the family's collaborative list of obligations and expectations to one another

Family members' obligations to each other represent one side of effective family communications. Clearly-articulated obligations enable each family member to act respectfully towards one another according to standards everyone has agreed on; there is no confusion about how each person should behave. Furthermore, once you model the kind of behavior you want from others, you have a right to expect the same in return. The more we behave respectfully towards one another, the more it becomes a habit.

Expectations of each other form the other side of effective family communications. These thoughts are more individual rather than collective and center on what each person genuinely believes he or she has a right to receive from the family: Support, loyalty, privacy, etc. Expectations of each other may differ considerably, so it's important to get them out on the table so everyone feels they are getting their needs met. Everyone in the family has a right to expect their home to be their sanctuary, a place where they can go to feel comfortable and safe from the world.

Some people think that writing down such a list is a little formal for a family. We disagree. We believe it's important to put things in writing so it's crystal clear to everyone. You will find, however, that after you have all learned to live by the Family Pact, after a while you won't need to post the Pact in a common space or write down additions to the Pact – it will have become second nature to all members of your family. At the beginning of your blended family or at the beginning of instituting a Family Pact, however, we have found that writing it down is critical to achieving not only understanding but ensuring it stays in everyone's memory.

What you will find on the next few pages are reproducible worksheets that will help you define the obligations and expectations you have of (and to) each other as a couple as well as the same exercise for the children in your family.

Once you have all completed these exercises, you will need to get together as a family and do the really hard part: Decide on a Family Pact all of you can live with. You will discover that even though you may have all written down different things on your list, in reality you want the same things. When you begin discussing individual items, you'll find that what one person meant by saying he wanted 'respect', another person meant the same thing when she said she wanted family members to 'listen'.

Obligations and Expectations for the Couple

Choosing to be a couple within a blended family is much different than choosing to be a couple when both of you are single, footloose, and fancy-free. Chances are one or both of you has been a single parent for a while, or perhaps you have always spent your parenting years as a single parent. Living with and raising your own children is challenge enough in itself, never mind being responsible for *someone else's* children. The behaviors, culture, traditions, and values the new family brings may be quite different than those of your family.

Statistics will tell you that second marriages fail earlier and even more frequently than first marriages and the most important factor in these failures is children. This breakdown most often occurs within the first two years of remarriage.

If you like, you can think of Obligations as 'show stoppers'. In other words, if you don't do these things, the marriage is in jeopardy. We have learned the hard way through our own divorces that certain aspects of our marriage must be carved in stone because they are values each of us holds dear. Your values may be quite different than ours – that's okay. As long as the two of you are clear on what threatens the marriage, then you'll know what's important to each other.

An example of a show stopper might be where one partner wants more children and the other one doesn't. It's hard to reconcile those two points of view as there is really no middle ground; either way, one of you gets what you want, the other one doesn't. Only you can make the decision of what a show stopper will be for you.

Similarly, you can think of Expectations as 'preferred practices'. These are things that, in a perfect world, you'd love to have but you can live without them if your partner can't provide them. This doesn't mean to say that you can't compromise on something that responds to part of your preferences; it does mean that if you don't get these behaviors, your marriage won't end over it.

An example of a preferred preference would be driving habits. John thinks that Shona drives too aggressively at times, and has on numerous occasions told her that she follows too closely behind other drivers. While she can see his point of view, and does alter her habits many times, it's also true that she doesn't adhere to John's wishes consistently. It bothers him but it's not a show stopper, it's only a preferred practice.

As a couple, then, you must first get clear with each other what you believe you are obligated to give and do and what you expect from the other person. You can't create an effective Family Pact with the children until the two of you are clear with each other.

Before beginning, take a look at the sample list between John and Shona to get a sense of the kinds of things you may want to consider. Remember – this is our final list. We worked on several versions before we came up with this list both of us agreed on. Also keep in mind that these are statements we both clearly understand the meaning of. Following the chart you will see explanatory notes on what each item means to both of us.

Obligations to Each Other	Expectations of Each Other
<p>Show a united front in front of the children even if we disagree.</p> <p>'Connect' with each other at least once per week at a minimum.</p> <p>Give each other the benefit of the doubt when we make mistakes with each other and our stepchildren.</p> <p>Never take sides with your biological child(ren).</p> <p>Discipline will be jointly decided on at all times.</p> <p>Issues that concern us (couple or family) will be discussed with each other as soon as possible.</p> <p>Large purchases will not be made without the consent of the other person.</p> <p>No grudges.</p>	<p>Show vulnerability by not being afraid to discuss your own shortcomings and errors.</p> <p>Do your share of the housework/yard work.</p> <p>If you've given me the responsibility for doing something, trust that I will take care of it.</p> <p>Communicate every day even if we're in different cities/countries.</p> <p>State issues calmly and in a respectful manner.</p> <p>Work on issues between us but be willing to accept and let go of unsolvable issues.</p> <p>Say 'I love you' frequently.</p> <p>Support and facilitate time for things that interest me or that I need.</p>

Explanation of Items

1. Obligations

i. Show a united front in front of the children even if we disagree.

This means that we never, ever take issue with something the other person is doing to discipline the children in front of the children. This is especially important even if we don't agree with what's going on. We agreed we would take each other aside after the fact, explain our position, and decide together what has to happen next. If an apology to the child is required, then it is given. If a softening of a harsh punishment is required, it is softened – but by the person who gave the too-harsh punishment to begin with. This is important. If the other parent softens the punishment, then your child will conclude s/he can come to you to get future punishments softened. They must see the same parent providing the punishment as well as the change to punishment.

ii. 'Connect' with each other at least once per week at a minimum.

In the book we talked about how we discovered that if we go longer than about seven days without connecting with each other in some way: A long walk, a meal alone, sex, a long conversation, whatever, we find we lose connection with each other. And the more we lose connection with our partner, and the longer it goes on, the more we don't *want* to connect anymore. Worse, sometimes we can get to the point that we've forgotten why we ever wanted to connect in the first place. We have learned the hard way that this erodes relationships and can lead to divorce; that's how it became a show stopper for each of us.

iii. Give each other the benefit of the doubt when we make mistakes with each other and our stepchildren.

Despite our best efforts we will not be perfect. We need to allow room in our relationship and in the family for our partner to make mistakes. In a blended family, you are very much learning as you go. Remember – there are no rule books for step parenting and precious few models for what works in such a family. We have found it incredibly productive to keep in mind at all times that your partner's intention must be uppermost in your mind. You know that they want everything to work, so if their efforts are sometimes clumsy, it's the thought that counts. However, there is a difference between giving the benefit of the doubt to your partner and acquiescing to ongoing inappropriate behavior that is unacceptable or breaks other aspects of the Family Pact.

iv. Never take sides with your biological child(ren).

This is pretty clear but just in case it isn't, we'll explain. Siding with your biological children against each other is a sure way to divide the family into 'yours' and 'mine' and will guarantee you end up in ongoing turf wars. It is natural to want to defend your own, especially if you agree with them, and we're not saying you don't discuss your different viewpoints. We just mean that, at the end of the day, we remind ourselves that we're on the same team. You may recall that the divorce rate for second marriages with children is grim – and most of that happens within the first two years. See number *i* above as it is related to this element. As we mentioned in the book, we are assuming normal types of disciplinary situations. If abusive and/or highly inappropriate behavior is happening, obviously other tactics must be taken.

v. Discipline will be jointly decided on at all times.

We've already explained that sometimes you need to wait until after a disciplinary action has been taken to speak with your partner. Life is just too messy sometimes to be able to wait until both of you have had time to discuss and agree on an approach to discipline. Still, we agreed we would be absolutely committed to discussing in advance where possible, and deconstructing after the fact if we couldn't talk, just to ensure we're both on the same page. As already stated, you cannot appear divided in front of the children, but both of you need to be happy and comfortable with the final decision. Otherwise, you'll resent it.

vi. Issues that concern us (couple or family) will be discussed with each other as soon as possible.

Nothing can be allowed to fester because it adds to a sense of disconnection (see item *ii* above). It's true that sometimes you're not always sure what's bothering you and haven't fully articulated it to yourself yet. That's okay – we don't mean you must do a massive brain dump the moment your partner comes home from work. We're simply talking about maintaining an ongoing conversation about your relationship, the family, etc. One of our favorite authors Susan Scott, has written a book called *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*. She has many wise things to say, but the thing that stuck with us the most was her assertion that 'the conversation is the relationship'. There is nothing else. She's right. For those who think you've already talked about your issues, think again. Ongoing exploration is the very heart of a healthy relationship and neglecting it gets you into all kinds of trouble (we're back to connection again).

vii. Large purchases will not be made without the consent of the other person.

Money is one of the key concerns many couples get into conflict over. This item on our Obligations list arises from past experiences we both had with former partners. In one case, one of our partners showed up at home one day with a new car. A vehicle can never be considered a minor purchase, and to commit the family to a debt in the tens of thousands of dollars without consultation is not just impulsive, it's dangerous to the relationship. We each have a designated allowance every month that we can spend however we wish, no questions asked. But larger purchases (over \$400) are discussed and agreed upon without exception. That way, there are no nasty surprises.

viii. No grudges.

Arising chiefly out of the Acceptance part of the Recipe for Blended Family Success® we wrote the book around, it's simply not worth the time or energy to linger on past offenses, real or imagined. Life is too short and genuine partnership too rare to waste any time holding things against each other. Discuss your differences, clear the air, accept what you can't change, and move on. Remember – you're together because you love each other and you'd miss each other terribly if one of you was gone tomorrow.

2. Expectations

i. Show vulnerability by not being afraid to discuss your own shortcomings and errors.

In many of our business workshops, we talk about how teams need to build trust. The traditional definition of trust is that we see how people behave towards us and believe it is an accurate predictor of how they will therefore behave in the future. While this is true, we think that trust in a couple's relationship goes much deeper than that. It's about feeling comfortable enough to bare your fears, your frivolous dreams, your weaknesses, your petty thoughts – you name it. We all need a safe haven from the world and we treat our relationship as that sanctuary. This kind of disclosure not only builds trust but also incredible faith in your partner because, having bared your worst fears, you know they still love you, warts and all. It may take a while to work up to this, but it's well worth the effort.

ii. Do your share of the housework/yard work.

We have what we consider a fairly equitable split of house and yard work. John does all the cooking, Shona does the vast majority of the housework. This doesn't mean that John doesn't do housework from time to time and Shona never cooks. It just means that, on a regular basis, this is our division of labor. The laundry tends to fall mainly to Shona for John is often busy renovating our house (he's a bit of handy man) and he also does all of the yard work. This might not work in your family, but it works for us and that's what counts. We negotiate changed duties from time to time and try to be flexible but most of our expectations fall around these parameters.

iii. If you've given me the responsibility for doing something, trust that I will take care of it.

This one is definitely a 'work in progress'! But remember, Expectations are preferred practices, not show stoppers bringing about crisis in a marriage if they're not honored. One example of this is when Shona is out of town, she reminds John to take the children to various activities, the time, and the day of the week. Generally speaking, he handles this no problem. But on occasion, Shona doesn't remind him and the kids miss activities; this happens despite the fact that John insists he needs no reminders. But so what? The worst thing that happens is the kids miss an occasional activity. The world does not come to end. Every time something like this happens, we just tease each other and get on with it. We do try very hard not to micro-manage each other (Shona is a much bigger offender in the micro-management department than John) but sometimes it can be frustrating. Generally speaking, we trust that each of us will take care of whatever it is we're supposed to take care of.

iv. Communicate every day even if we're in different cities/countries.

This has to do with the connection issues we mentioned on the Obligations list. No matter where we are, we phone each other to say hello, even if there isn't much to say other than 'I've arrived at my destination and I'm fine'. When we're on opposite sides of the globe, we do this via email. It's come to be an expected ritual on both sides, so when it happens that one of us can't phone, the other one has a sense of discomfort. Sometimes it's due to meetings running late and time differences mitigating against a phone call; sometimes it's because planes are delayed or diverted and we can't phone. Neither of us gets upset about it but we do notice.

v. State issues calmly and in a respectful manner.

From the beginning, we both expressed a desire to settle our differences in a civilized manner. There is never any yelling at each other. This doesn't mean to suggest that people who yell don't have a good marriage; that's not the case. For us, however, we are both very uncomfortable with yelling during a conflict and don't do it. Sometimes both of us have yelled during a conflict with the children, but we don't like it. This is one expectation we have found relatively easy to live up to consistently.

vi. Work on issues between us but be willing to accept and let go of unsolvable issues.

No matter how much you talk about issues and try to resolve them, some things just don't get solved. One example is John's lack of attention to detail. When Shona first started our company, she set up systems for time sheets, travel mileage, expense claims, etc. She has used them faithfully ever since but John really struggles with it. When he joined the company, Shona explained all the systems, but despite numerous conversations and reminders to John that the paperwork was necessary for tax and client billing purposes, he really struggles. No amount of trying to convince, explain or cajole saw any change in John's behavior, so Shona just had to accept it. She can't remember the last time he completed a time sheet. We have, however, found a system for tracking mileage that seems to work with him. And another staff member takes care of John's expense reports in consultation with Shona. For Shona, it's not ideal, but she realizes it's just something she has to live with.

vii. Say 'I love you' frequently.

This may seem simple to some and over-the-top to others, but not a day goes by without both of us saying this to each other and to the children. John grew up in a family where this was quite normal; Shona grew up in a family where it wasn't. It's not that she didn't feel loved, but she finds she has a higher need to hear it than the rest of her family. We end all phone calls with 'Love you. Bye.' and it's the last thing we say to each other every night. Life is tenuous and unpredictable. We don't want to leave things unsaid. It works for us.

viii. Support and facilitate time for things that interest me or that I need.

Both of us have a high need for solitude, John more than Shona. Each of us tries very hard to gauge when the other seems to be overwhelmed with too many people or activities going on. Sometimes, we straight out ask for time alone. Both of us understand it so both of us are quite willing to facilitate it. Additionally, we each have our own interests and need time to devote to them alone or with friends. Part of this expectation involves not inconveniencing others or over-doing certain activities at the expense of time alone or with the family, but we both expect and receive time to do our own thing without complaint.

Worksheet for the Couple

Use this worksheet to identify your obligations to and expectations of each other. Reproduce one for each of you so you can work on your lists separately before discussing them.

Obligations to Each Other 'Show Stoppers'	Expectations of Each Other 'Preferred Practices'

Obligations and Expectations for the Family

This exercise works in exactly the same way the one you did with each other, with the exception that first you must have a Family Meeting to explain what this is all about.

Obviously, children who cannot yet read and/or write will need assistance. In that case, you can just have a conversation with them and write down their ideas. These will be relatively simple but you may also find that younger children have a hard time coming up with something they can articulate. In that case, it would be a good idea to come up with a few ideas for them on your own and then ask them if they agree with them or have anything to add. You might also find that they'll come up with additional ideas during the Family Meeting once they hear all the others.

One simple example of a Family Pact item that even young children can appreciate is respect of each other's space. In our house, that means that everyone is required to knock before entering another family member's room, regardless of their age. This teaches young children very early to respect others privacy but they also learn that their own will also be respected. When our daughter Kate was three-years-old, she had already learned this lesson.

Older children and teenagers have absolutely no trouble coming up with their lists once they have a clear understanding of the difference between Obligations and Expectations. This is a critical discussion to have during your Family Meeting about the Family Pact. They must clearly understand that Obligations are show stoppers for the family (we wouldn't want to live with you if you did this) and Expectations are preferred practices (we'd really love it if you would do this but will forgive you if you're not always perfect. However, we still expect you to try very hard and we will call you on it if it isn't being done). A great way to simplify this is, instead of referring to Obligations, refer to 'things you are supposed to do for the family'; instead of referring to Expectations, refer to 'things the family is supposed to do for you'.

The one challenge you will run into with older children and teenagers is the tendency to be self-centered. While a normal stage of development, this stage can be challenging when trying to decide on collective rules you all agree to live by. The Family Pact exercise can be a powerful way to teach your children that the world does not revolve around them and that a successful family involves responsibility and decisions made for the collective good of all. You may well find that some of your children's Obligations and Expectations lists will be opposite to the other children's. That's okay. A big part of the Family Pact is learning that compromise is sometimes necessary, and while we may not get exactly what we want, we do get a decision that we can accept. It's not always about everyone liking or agreeing with the decision. Many times, it's just about getting to an agreement they can accept. Some things will go their way, some

things won't. But this is the way of the world, and the sooner you can teach your children coping and negotiation skills, the better off they'll be.

If you're still concerned that your children won't understand the concepts presented here, then there's an even simpler though indirect way of getting at their Obligations and Expectations: Ask them to identify what they're afraid of not getting from the family or perhaps fear they might lose in this new situation. We've included a worksheet for both approaches to the exercise, both of which you can copy as much as you need to. You could even have the children do both exercises to help them clarify their thinking.

We've shown a sample Fears Worksheet as well as a sample Family Pact Worksheet so you can take a look at the kinds of things our children noted. Please note that we don't provide detailed explanations of what each item meant to all of us. This was demonstrated in our explanation of the Couple's Expectations and Obligations; the same thing applies to your Family Pact. Everyone must clearly understand by what is meant on each list as well as the consequences for violating items.

Sample Worksheet from One of Our Children - Fears

I'm afraid that...	I wish the family would...
I won't have as much time with my mother any more.	Treat me like they treat the older kids.
My new stepparent will try to boss me around.	Let me have as much time on the computer as I want.
I'll have to share my things with my new stepsiblings.	Spend more time playing with me.
My mom will like my stepdad better than she likes me.	Not be so loud at night when I'm trying to sleep.
A new baby will make me less important in the family.	
There will be new rules I don't understand.	

The important thing to address first is the list of fears. These are very real and emotionally-based for your children, and unless and until you address them, they won't be able to talk about their wishes without being confused.

Once you've addressed their fears and have come to an agreement about how you will address them (and your child is satisfied), then you can move on to their list of wishes. You will note that some of the wishes this child expressed are unrealistic e.g. letting the child have as much time on the computer as he wants. For younger children especially, you will have some wishes that are less about the family and more about the natural wishes of a young child. These must be discussed but it must also be made clear that those issues are normal guidelines and parameters for any child, blended family or not. The presence or absence of a stepfamily makes no difference; it would be the same if the biological family was still intact.

Other wishes may be quite legitimate e.g. expressing a wish for the adults and older children to keep things quiet at night when the younger child is supposed to be sleeping. This is a great point to discuss in a Family Meeting when you're creating a Family Pact as it is not only a reasonable request, but teaches your young children that their needs and desires will be equally as respected as those of the adults and older children.

Worksheet for the Family - Fears

Make a copy of this worksheet for each of your children and ask them to think about their fears and wishes about the family.

I'm afraid that...	I wish the family would...

Sample Worksheet for the Family – Obligations and Expectations

What are some of the things that you are supposed do for the family?	What are some of the things that the family is supposed to do for you?
<p>Tidy up around the house. This means that I must pick up my own things, but it also means that if I walk past something twice, I must put it away, regardless of whether it belongs to me or not. Consequence: My belongings will be taken away from me for a period of time to be determined by the parents.</p> <p>Knock before entering someone’s room; wait to be invited in before entering. This applies to everyone, regardless of age. Consequence: If I don’t knock, the person I have offended will enter my room unannounced next time.</p> <p>I will turn off all lights/heaters when I am leaving a room or going to bed. This applies regardless of age. If you’re returning within five minutes, you can leave them on. Consequence: For older children, a fine of \$5 for each fixture/appliance each time. For younger children, loss of privileges dependent on his or her interests (no tv, computer games, etc.).</p> <p>I will treat all family members with respect. This includes stating my opinions calmly, not yelling, and hearing people out when they provide their point of view. Consequence: I will be sent to my room, asked to reflect on my behavior, and cannot leave my room until I am prepared to explain why I reacted the way I did. Follow up is mandatory.</p>	<p>Treat my belongings with respect. This means you will not throw them around, walk over them, etc. Consequence: I will not treat your belongings with respect.</p> <p>Let me know when something I’m doing is bothering you. If I don’t know about it, I can’t fix it. Be transparent and honest without criticizing me. This also means I must deal directly with the person who is bothering me and not talk behind his/her back to other family members. Consequence: You have not right to complain about it to me or anyone else. You must simply live with it.</p> <p>Give me advance warning of family plans that involve me. If I don’t know about them, I’m either unprepared or don’t know that I can’t make other plans. As soon as is practical, I would like to know times/dates, etc. In turn, I must inform the family of plans I have made. Consequence: I may not be able to honor the family plans or may have to forego my own.</p> <p>Support me in events in which I am participating. Being part of a family means we show up for each other, even if those events are not of great interest to me. Some of us like sports, some of us like the arts. It’s not about the event; it’s about the family. We understand that other commitments mean it’s not always possible, but that can’t develop into a trend. Consequence: Don’t expect me to support you if you can’t return the favor.</p>

Again, this is not an all-inclusive list but it gives you an idea of how we defined the meaning of items as well as consequences. The important thing is we agreed on them jointly. Not everyone got all of their exact wishes, but we did agree we could all live with the items noted here.

Worksheet for the Family – Obligations and Expectations

What are some of the things that you are supposed do for the family?	What are some of the things that the family is supposed to do for you?