



## CASE STUDY 11

### BECOMING A FAMILY

Turning Points and Interaction Patterns in the  
Development of a Blended Family

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#### KEY WORDS

■  
*blended family*  
*family development*  
*turning points*  
*dialectical tensions*  
*rituals*

#### NOTES

Lonnie<sup>1</sup> was lugging the last trunk of her clothes down the stairs. The brightly colored trunk, adorned with decals from her new college, made a loud “thump!” as she dragged the heavy load down each of the worn steps. “Which of you kids is making all that racket?” her mother, Gail, called brightly. Lonnie smiled to herself. Even though she was 18 years-old and off to college, she still loved to bug her mother. “Here, let me help before you scratch up all the stairs, for goodness sake!” Lonnie smiled and offered her mother one handle of the trunk. “Where are Tim and your sister? I want to get going soon so the baby will sleep while we are on the road.” Lonnie pointed out to the driveway where Tim and her sister, Celia, were shooting hoops next to the van packed with Lonnie’s treasures. “Thanks, Mom! Go get Emily and let’s roll!”

As she stood at the bottom of the stairs, Lonnie felt strangely sad. It didn’t seem so long ago that she couldn’t wait to get out of this house. Now the day had come, and all Lonnie could do was think back to all the memories she had of life in the old yellow house. In some ways, it was even hard to remember what her life was like before they lived there, but as she stood waiting, she thought back to other moving days and related memories.

#### *Dad Moves Out*

Lonnie had known this day was coming. It was just two weeks after her 12th birthday. Her parents, Gail and Gene, had a huge fight the night before, the biggest one Lonnie and her nine year-old sister, Celia, had ever heard. Things had been bad between her parents for some time. Gail seemed especially intent on trying to keep things as normal as possible—for example, trying to keep up a weekly family-dinner-night out. In the early years, these had been happy occasions, as they ate at a casual local diner run by “Flo and Mo.” But in recent years, Lonnie could only remember coming back from these dinners and listening to her parents going at each other in the front seat of the car. Things would be good for awhile, and then they would get bad again.

Finally, one warm July night, Gail and Gene called Lonnie and Celia together after dinner to explain that they had tried to work things out, but that “sometimes moms and dads just can’t make things work.” Their father was moving out. The girls would be best off living with their mom, “in the only house you have ever known.” Their dad would only be 20 minutes away; they would have dinner with him on Wednesday nights, and spend every other weekend and part of each summer with him. Lonnie was not unfamiliar with this arrangement. Several friends’ parents were divorced, and they had similar schedules.

### *The Single Years*

For the next two years, Lonnie and Celia lived with Gail in their house on Evergreen Avenue. They didn't have much money, and they missed their old family with their mom and dad together. But they were relieved that their parents were no longer fighting. Once their dad got on his feet and bought a condo, the girls shared a huge bedroom there with their own stereo, TV, and VCR. In contrast, things were tight financially at home. They turned their dad's old office into a bedroom for Celia and painted a second-hand bed and dresser for her. Each girl had her own room at least, and Lonnie relished some privacy.

Lonnie was aware that her mom was working hard to support them while going to night school. As the oldest, Lonnie took on a lot of responsibility and learned to cook. She often had a simple dinner waiting when her mom dragged herself home, and they all made it a point to eat together most nights. One of the things the three of them enjoyed was going out for pizza and window shopping on payday. Although they spent a modest amount of money, it felt extravagant. More importantly, they enjoyed these nights out because they got a chance to talk. While they ate and as they walked along looking in the shop windows, their mom asked them about what was going on in their lives, and they shared their concerns and questions. One of their favorite games was to play, "What we would do with a million dollars!" They would fantasize about the wild purchases they would make. For Lonnie, this was the highlight of the week.

### *Tim Arrives on the Scene*

That summer she and Celia had spent a month with their dad and his parents at the lake. It was great to be with Nana and Grampa, but Lonnie missed her mom. When they arrived home, Gail seemed overjoyed to see them. Lonnie noticed that her mom had a new hairstyle and she was wearing new earrings. When she asked about it, Gail blushed and said, "Oh, we'll talk about it at dinner." They went out to Flo and Mo's to celebrate their homecoming and, on the way home, Mom said, "Well, girls, I hope you don't mind, but I am going to the movies later tonight." Lonnie was surprised and asked, "Going out? With Betty?" "No, well, um . . . with Tim." "Tim the Tool Man' from TV?" laughed Celia. Their mom stammered, "No, Tim Bartino, a man I have been seeing." Lonnie felt sick. "You mean you've been dating someone and you didn't tell us?" "No, Lonnie, well, I . . . I met Tim at school last spring. We had coffee a few times, but the last couple of weeks we have been going out. Don't worry—it's nothing serious." Lonnie and Celia didn't say anything because they didn't want to hurt their mom's feelings, but as the two of them talked that night they

shared their anger and disappointment that their mom wasn't home on their first night back.

Over the next few months, "nothing really serious" became "something serious" as Gail and Tim began spending more and more time together. Lonnie and Celia were wary of Tim at first. Unlike their dad, he was a quiet man, a studious engineer who was working on his Masters in Business Administration in night school. He was divorced with two children—Tony, who was a high school junior, and Tina, now 18, who had dropped out of high school in her senior year. Tony and Tina lived three hours away and it was two months before Lonnie even met them.

Tim was spending much more time with them. In fact, he was staying at their house most of the time now. Once they had worked through some of the initial nervousness, like seeing Tim at breakfast, things had fallen into a fairly normal routine. For the first time, life seemed kind of like it was before her parents' divorce, when they had been a family. It felt like kind of a turning point when Lonnie heard herself the first time telling her friend that she had to be home for a "family dinner." It was nice and, well, just normal to have the four of them together, and their mom seemed so happy. At the same time, Lonnie was bothered, too. Had her mom been that unhappy with just the three of them? Was her dad really that replaceable? One evening when Tim asked her what time she would be coming home from a party, she blurted out, "Hey, you're not my dad! I am not ready to trade in dads this year!" He looked very hurt.

On Thanksgiving weekend, Tim gave up his apartment and moved in for good. Her mom called a "family meeting," and the four of them discussed the move. Tim had already spoken with Tina and Tony. He said they "are great with things" and "looking forward to spending our first Christmas together." At first Lonnie felt strange when her mom used the term "family meeting." Were they a *real* family? She really didn't feel the same as she had with her real family, yet, as Tim moved in, it seemed like a new period had started in their lives. Family-like routines had developed, and things began to feel different. As she got to know him, Tim was a little easier to talk to. Lonnie started watching football with him on Sundays; it was one of the times he became truly excited.

Things had changed in their household routines. Whereas Lonnie was used to taking care of her mom and making dinner, often she arrived home to find Tim had already made dinner. She had to admit he was a great cook. Gail would come home and make a huge fuss. "Oh, I am the envy of all my friends!" One of the things that really irked Lonnie was that Tim now went along on their payday dinner and shopping nights. Although they ate at the same old place, the talk around the dinner table was now much different. Celia and Lonnie both talked privately about how they missed talking with just their mom. When

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Lonnie brought it up, Gail seemed irritated. “Now, Lon, Tim is just trying to be part of the family. Give him a break!” Lonnie could see her point, but she desperately missed those special times with her mom and the long talks they had shared. Pretty soon they stopped having these nights out altogether.

### *The Wedding*

Spring and the summer after Lonnie’s freshman year were a busy and happy time. Gail and Tim announced their engagement in April and were planning an August wedding. Lonnie was glad to see her mom so excited, and she had to admit she genuinely liked Tim and the way the family was going—especially when it was just the four of them. She liked Tony and Tina all right, but things sometimes seemed tense, especially when Tina was around.

Before he asked Gail to marry him, Tim took Celia and Lonnie out to dinner and asked how they felt: “I don’t ever intend to replace your dad, but I love your mom and I think we can have a good life together.” It meant a lot to Lonnie that Tim respected them enough to consult them. It also showed Lonnie that he was sensitive to the prospect of them dealing with “two dads.” Nonetheless, Lonnie had some mixed feelings about it all, and she worried how her dad would feel. She had to admit that she certainly felt much more at home with Tim and Mom than she did with her dad. She knew that she liked Tim a lot, and it would be hard to imagine their little family without him now. The younger Celia didn’t seem to be bothered by any of it and was especially excited that all four kids were to serve as attendants at the wedding.

In June, Tim received a promotion at work, and he and Gail began looking for a larger house. Just before the wedding in late August, they bought a big old yellow farmhouse on three acres of land. It was definitely a fixer-upper, but mom was excited about the huge kitchen and told the girls they would finally be able to have a garden and maybe even a horse! The problem was that the house was about 20 miles away from their present home. Lonnie protested. “Mom, this means I will have to leave all my friends and start a new school for my sophomore year! I don’t want to attend that stupid South High!” Gail seemed too busy to even hear her concerns.

The day of the wedding finally arrived, and Lonnie felt mixed emotions. How could she feel so happy and so sad at the same time? Gail and Tim were so in love. Last night Lonnie had said to Celia, “You know, Celia, I know this sounds stupid, but I guess till today I always thought mom and dad might get back together.” Celia agreed. “I know what you mean. I wish Tim and Mom weren’t getting married! And I am not going to call stupid Tony and Tina my brother and sister!” It was a beautiful wedding and, as Tim and Gail exchanged

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vows, Celia and Lonnie were aware that this was a pivotal moment for them as well. The two girls cried at the wedding—for all they had lost and for all they had gained.

Mom and Tim postponed their honeymoon so that they could move into the new house, which they did the day after the wedding. On Saturday Mom remarried, on Sunday they moved from the only home Lonnie and Celia had ever known, and on Monday, they both started at new schools. These were among the darkest days of Lonnie’s life. She missed her friends, and she absolutely hated the “stupid, drafty old house.” Most importantly, she resented Tim and her mom’s time alone together when she desperately needed her mom’s attention and support. While repairs were underway, Lonnie and Celia had to share a room and they fought constantly. The low point was when Tina came for the weekend and slept in their already crowded room.

### *The First Christmas*

By the holidays, things had settled down a lot. The downstairs of the house was shaping up nicely. She had joined the choir at her new school and Josh McEvan had asked her to the Christmas formal. Christmas had always been very special in their household and Gail promised, “I plan to make this a very special Christmas for us all.” Her family had always come together on December 24th and decorated the tree with all their family ornaments, stringing popcorn and singing Christmas carols. Then they would go to Christmas Eve mass and spend a quiet Christmas Day at home—just the family—opening gifts and having a huge turkey dinner together.

They made their plans and worked hard to have everything ready for Tony and Tina’s arrival the morning of the 24th. When they arrived—late—Tina said, “Geez, it doesn’t look much like Christmas around here. Don’t you people even have a Christmas tree?” They filled her in on the day’s activities, but she did not seem interested. As they decorated the tree, Tim and Tony just sat there for the most part, and Tina was on the phone to her friends. Tim tried to talk them into going to church, but they both begged off. One neat thing was that Tim had gone shopping on his own (and he hated shopping) to buy a special present for each of the four kids. Tina said, “My dad does this every year and comes home with the goofiest stuff,” but Lonnie was touched by his efforts and the sweet music box he chose for her.

On Christmas day, Lonnie, Celia, and their mom worked on the traditional Christmas dinner and Tim joined in. Tony and Tina were trying to get everyone to go to the movies and see the new picture opening Christmas Day. “C’mon you guys, let’s get out and DO something!” Lonnie tried not to show

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it, but she was really pissed off at those two. “Mom, why can’t they just join in and give our traditions a chance?” Gail ran interference, saying to Tony and Tina, “Look why don’t you two go on to the movies, and we’ll move dinner ahead a couple of hours so we can all eat together, OK?” Lonnie hated to admit it, but she felt much more comfortable when they were gone and just the new family was there.

*Settling In*

Tim and Gail spent all their free time throughout the winter and spring months working on the house. Tim made a special effort to finish the interior of Lonnie’s and Celia’s bedrooms first so they could have their own rooms. Tony came to visit much more than Tina did, and he really was a pretty nice guy. He made an effort, while Tina never did, and he took them to some fun places. Tony and Tim had a long-standing routine of watching sports together on Sundays. Unlike mom and Celia, Lonnie had always liked sports, and she would join in the festivities and watch games with Tony and Tim; the three of them went to several professional baseball games together. On these outings they started calling Lonnie “Fred” and “one of the guys.” Although she could never bring herself to say it to their faces, she often referred to Tim and Tony as “her dad” and “her brother” to her friends.

*Dad Remarries*

They also found out that spring that Dad was dating Victoria, a divorced woman with a four year-old son, Connor. Several years later, Lonnie would discover that her dad and Victoria had been seeing each other during the last year of her parents’ marriage, which was part of “the last straw” that finally broke their parents up. Gene and Victoria married in a quiet noon ceremony at the courthouse in the late spring. In fact, Lonnie and her sister did not even find out until after the wedding and, although she felt guilty admitting it to herself, Lonnie just could not get all that excited about it.

Dad said that they would now “be a family,” but it certainly did not *feel* like a family. Not like what she felt as a child with her mom and dad, and not even close to what she felt with her mom and Tim. In fact, it surprised her to see how strongly she felt about her new family with Tim. Celia, on the other hand, immediately started telling people about “her little brother, Connor.” Lonnie just couldn’t bring herself to say the word “brother” when it came to the little runt.

Lonnie could not say that she truly disliked Victoria, but she could not say

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to Lonnie’s mother, who preferred bare feet to shoes and a picnic in the backyard to a formal dinner in the dining room. Lonnie and Celia were asked to ring the doorbell when they arrived, to leave their shoes by the front door (Victoria had white carpets), and to keep their room at Victoria’s house spotless. Their dad also seemed different around Victoria—older and more stuffy.

Dad said they would keep “family dinner night going,” and they did try that—for awhile. They would go to Flo and Mo’s Diner, and Victoria would look disapprovingly at the menu and inspect the silverware before eating. One Saturday night, Lonnie became irritated and, just to get Victoria’s goat, she said, “I love Flo and Mo’s because it is my mom’s favorite restaurant!” On the way home Victoria announced that she was through going to “that place” and, from now on, “we will have family dinner night at home and I will make a special dinner for us all.” True to her word, Victoria cooked elaborate dinners and they ate in the dining room on the good china, but to Lonnie and Celia these gatherings were a huge chore.

As they got older, Lonnie and Celia found reasons to miss these dinners as much as possible. They didn’t want to hurt their dad’s feelings by telling him how they felt. They still loved him and wanted him to be happy, and missing the dinners meant that they didn’t get to see their dad as often—which they didn’t like. But they just couldn’t take those dinners with Victoria! During the weekends at Victoria and Gene’s they missed their mom, and Tim too. Sunday night could not come too soon for them. As the years went on, they found reasons to stay at home, and their visits became shorter and less frequent.

During the summer after her sophomore year, Lonnie went on vacation with Celia, their father, and Victoria to visit Victoria’s parents, “Grandma Hinter and Grandpa Hinter” (as they were instructed to call them). They were nice people, but rather formal like Victoria. While they obviously enjoyed playing with little Connor, they did not seem to know what to do with the two sisters. Lonnie was bored and missed her friends and home a lot.

*Tina Moves In*

Lonnie was almost surprised at how happy she was to get back home, and she looked forward to starting her junior year of high school. What a change from a year ago! She realized how homesick she had been. Mom helped them unpack and said that they were having a family meeting that night. At the meeting, Gail and Tim announced that Tina would be moving in with them for “a while, until her money problems are under control.”

While Lonnie dreaded Tina moving in, things went even more badly than she could have imagined. Tina was very rude and demanding. She smoked con-

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to her mom and Tim, they took Tina's side. "Look, Lonnie, Tina is adjusting to a lot here and has a lot of problems to work through right now. Let's try and keep a lid on things, OK?" Finally, Tina got on her feet financially and was able to move out. Lonnie felt guilty to admit it, but she was really glad Tina was gone and the family was back to normal.

### *A Second Dad*

Things were going pretty smoothly by fall of her senior year. Tony had moved to their city to attend community college and lived in an apartment close by. He spent a lot of time with the family now, and he was a great big brother. School was going well and Lonnie was making college plans. Tim was especially helpful with practical advice and helping her write away for college application materials. The big news was that Gail was pregnant and expecting a baby around Easter! Tim was ecstatic, and Lonnie had to admit that she was surprised at her own reaction—she was really excited! When she was a kid, before her parents' problems, she had always hoped for another baby, and now it was going to happen! Celia was less certain about the whole thing and worried, "They will only have time for the baby. What's going to happen to me?"

The week before the big Homecoming dance, Lonnie was out shopping for shoes to match her dress, when she suddenly felt hot and queasy and had pains in her side. When stabbing pains doubled her over, she called home. Tim answered the phone and told her to "hang on"; he would come and get her right away. It was all she could do not to pass out. Tim took one look at her and said, "Lonnie, we're going to the emergency room." He called Gail on the way to the hospital. Tim held Lonnie's hand as he drove like a wild man. Gail showed up soon thereafter, followed by Tony and Celia. Lonnie's appendix had burst, so she was rushed into emergency surgery. The surgeon said that Tim had gotten Lonnie there not a moment too soon.

Tim barely left Lonnie's side while she was in the hospital. She had never seen this side of him. She had always known he cared about them, but she never realized just how much. Tim had rarely hugged her before and, for the first time, he said he loved her. It made Lonnie cry. Much to her disappointment, Lonnie missed the dance. Gail arranged for her friends to stop by the house on their way to the dance, but it was Tim who touched her the most: He bought Lonnie beautiful pink roses, and attached was a little heart-shaped pin for her. She couldn't believe how sweet he had been. Tim told her friends, "Guys, you better get going soon; my daughter needs her rest." He had never called her that before. Later that evening, as everyone got ready for bed, Lonnie gave Tim a kiss and said, "Thanks, Dad."

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Lonnie was returned to the present by her baby sister's crying as Gail carried Emily downstairs. "Shake a leg, Lonnie, or we'll be late to your college orientation!" Gail said as she scooped up a diaper bag filled to the brim. Tim came and carried the baby to her car seat. Gail turned to Lonnie and gave her a great big hug. "This will always be your home, you know, no matter how far away you are."

### END NOTE

1. This case represents a composite of the experiences of members of blended families expressed in research interviews with the authors and their research team. The names of the characters have been changed.

### FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND REFLECTION

1. What makes a group of people a "real family"? In your view, which of the groups in this case study are "real families"? Why so?
2. A theoretical perspective known as *relational dialectics* claims that relationships are organized around opposing tensions, or pulls in opposite directions. What simultaneous dialectical tensions or pulls can you identify in Lonnie's account of the development of her blended families?
3. What are the major turning points, significant points of positive or negative change, in the development of Lonnie's blended families?
4. Lonnie's blended family with Gail and Tim developed differently from her blended family with Gene and Victoria. What factors contribute to the different developmental paths these two blended families experienced?
5. Rituals are recurring interaction events, formalized or informal, that hold importance to their participants. What rituals can you identify in this case study? How did rituals change as Lonnie's families changed? Why were some rituals able to adapt to new circumstances while other rituals were not?

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