RON L. DEAL

"I highly recommend Ron Deal."

Dr. Gary D. Chapman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Five Love Languages*

THE SMART STEPDAD



Steps to Help You Succeed

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BETHANY HOUSE
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
www.bakerpublishinggroup.com

Ebook edition created 2011

Ebook corrections 02.16.2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-1-4412-1464-5

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Scripture quotations identified KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Cover design by Eric Walljasper

“At Focus on the Family, we routinely hear from fathers facing the challenges associated with remarriage and living in a blended family. *The Smart Stepdad* is like a lifeline to these men—and to their wives, as well—with practical advice and biblical counsel.”

Jim Daly
President, Focus on the Family

“To climb Stepdad Mountain you need a climbing guide; Ron Deal and this book are it. Get started.”

Dr. Kevin Leman
Have a New Kid by Friday

“*The Smart Stepdad* sheds a bright light on the unique challenges of being a stepdad. Your role is vital to your family and this book can help you find success.”

John Rosemond
Family psychologist
Author of *The Well-Behaved Child: Discipline That Really Works!*

“Finally!!! This book is long overdue. It is an absolute must-read for any stepdad or man who is dating a woman with children. Ron has given a very clear map for success for men who are in one of the most important positions in the kingdom.”

Dr. Chuck Stecker
President / Founder of A Chosen Generation

DEDICATION

To my dad—
mentor, teacher, and coach in what matters most—baayo.

To all the stepdads
who are striving to be a mentor, teacher, and coach to another man's child.

And to the heavenly Father—
thank you for adopting us as your sons and daughters
and teaching us the heart-softening power
of stubborn, determined love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Being a dad and trying to write about being a good dad is quite a humbling endeavor. Thankfully my wife, Nan, and my boys have given me lots of grace. I am so grateful for your patience with my on-the-job training in being a father. I love you into eternity.

For this project I enlisted the help of a few good men. My stepdad focus group contributed an immeasurable amount of wisdom, practical insight, and challenging scenarios that helped me pull together a useful project. Guys, your guidance will bring blessings to families the world over. Thank you.

This book is yet another addition to the stepfamily resource library, all published by Bethany House Publishers. For years I heard complaints about how difficult it was to find practical, value-centered materials to help stepfamilies. Thanks to Bethany House, that just isn't true anymore. I'm especially grateful to Kyle, Brett, Tim, and Jim for your vision and dedication to get the word out. And to my editor, Ellen, thank you. Boy do you make me look good!

And finally, a special thank-you to my friend, fellow struggler in the faith, and literary agent, Chip MacGregor. You nursed me through this one, buddy. I can't thank you enough for the extra time and counsel you put into helping me write this book during a difficult season of my life and yours.

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Section I

Getting It Right

In the United States 50% of children will have a stepparent at some point in their lifetime;[1] *90% of children in stepfamilies live with their mom and stepdad.*[2]

Stepchildren who have a good relationship with both their stepfather and their nonresident biological father have better outcomes than children who have good relationships with just their father.[3]

Introduction

Stepdad: Hero or Hostile Takeover?

Imagine beginning a new job. It's your first day and you show up fifteen minutes early because you can't curb your enthusiasm. You're excited about the new opportunity and the future it will provide your family, but upon arriving, you discover that your boss didn't prepare for you to show up—not just early, but at all. They hired you for a very important position, but no one has done anything to arrange for your employment. There's an empty office but no promised administrative assistant, no budget, and no name on the door (in fact, the name of the person who formerly held that position is still legible on the door—is this your office now, or still his?). Your department goals are unspecified and there's no one to explain your job description, nor do they provide guidance on how your job fits in with the company's mission. You can't even find the lunchroom! With the hope of gaining clarification of your role, you talk to your immediate supervisor and team members only to discover that they have differing opinions as to your role, goals, and even whether you should have been hired. Some consider you a hero for the company, while others judge you a rascal who is moving in for a hostile takeover.

One co-worker is very excited to see you and confesses (while no one else is listening) that she lobbied heavily for you to be hired. She believes you have the skills and knowledge to play this role well—and can't wait for the rest of the team to get to know you.

On the other hand, your staff doesn't understand why they are expected to report to you, and they resent the changes happening around them. "I thought we still reported to our previous supervisor," one worker comments. "You have different expectations and an odd management style. To be honest, I'm not sure I like it—or you."

For Mom

I recommend that Mom read this book as well. In fact, I have added sidebars throughout that provide tips just for her—there are even two chapters in the middle that are specifically written for her (and you). So, Mom, if you sheepishly started reading wondering if you were allowed to peek, go right ahead. Keep reading!

By noon you're wondering if you've made a mistake by taking this job. And your previous enthusiasm has been crushed, pulverized into a mire of confusion.

As a stepdad, you have been "hired" for a very important job. And yet despite its significance, the work environment you have acquired is sometimes very confusing—and other times not. Being successful as the new person in this "company" depends heavily on finding your fit, identifying your responsibilities and objectives, and buddying up with your allies.

This book will show you how.

HEROES BY CHOICE

I have a lot of respect for stepdads. If you ask me, you are heroes. You carry all the responsibilities and obligations of fatherhood, you provide for your family (and sometimes make up for what another man fails to do for his children), and you serve as a leader and coach to children (whether young or old) who are not your own. And you do it all by choice. That's pretty awesome in my book, especially when some "staff" remain unappreciative and think you're launching a hostile takeover.

The judgments placed on stepdads vary tremendously depending on whom you ask. Your biological children, if you have them, will likely declare you a hero (unless they are jealous of the time you spend with their stepsiblings). Your stepchildren may think you're either the best thing since sliced bread or an "invader," and everything in between. And your wife, who "hired" you, obviously wants you there but may not always know how to work with you.

It can be confusing. That's why you must choose to be a hero. Reading this book is not just about pulling out the map (although that is what I'm trying to give you); it is also about choosing who you will be to the family God has given you. There is great honor in that. No matter what your work environment, choosing is your strength. That's exactly what Ritchie did.

Ritchie heard me on a radio broadcast and sent me an email describing his experience as a stepdad. I found his story both encouraging and compelling.

Bottom line—he is a hero by choice.

His first marriage ended with great tragedy when his wife vanished with their three-year-old daughter. At the time Ritchie wrote to me he hadn't had any contact with his daughter in forty-three years. Can you imagine? Actually, I can, in a way. My middle son, Connor, died of an illness in 2009 at the age of twelve. I still count the days—the exact number of days—since I last talked to him. Even still, I struggle with the ambiguous nature of Ritchie's loss; to not know what has become of his daughter must be excruciating. The residue of pain for Ritchie became obvious when he shared how he refused to have any children with his second wife. He just couldn't stand the idea of loving and losing again. By the time he realized his folly, as he would call it, his wife developed cancer that robbed her first of the ability to carry a child and then six years later, her life. He had lost again.

So he gave up, right? Not on your life. At the age of forty-two he met and married a woman (whose husband had died many years before) with four children. It was a five-for-one deal. "I had a tremendous decision to make," he wrote. "Could I love the mother and the children equally? Would I love the mother and tolerate the children? That would only lead to big trouble. In my mind," he continued, "the answer was obvious. It was either all or nothing." Ritchie chose to take the risk of loving again. But without realizing it, he also made the choice to be a hero.

Ritchie spent many years bonding with his stepchildren, adjusting his expectations, and adapting his role as they grew. Their journey together was filled with uncertainty and challenges. But he stuck with it. The kids grew up, got married, and started families of their own. "Today," he wrote, "there are sixteen of us: four spouses, six grandkids, and a whole lot of happiness." Being aware of the challenges many stepdads have, he concluded: "Is my success an exception? I think so. But I firmly believe that the result was set in motion when I decided that all these children would become mine in a way that nature could not have provided. I picked them. They did not arrive in a random fashion, subject to natural laws. I opened my heart to them and they ran in."

Did you catch that? It was his decision to choose love that set in motion his success. I guarantee there were many days when he questioned his decision and wondered how they would survive. But he stuck with it—and reaped the rewards for doing so.

You, my friend, have chosen a noble task. An unappreciated, frustrating, confusing, and challenging noble task. A heroic task at that. Good for you. Let's get on with it.

For Group Discussion

Each chapter in this book concludes with questions to help you apply the material to your own situation. They can be used individually, in discussion with your wife, or with a group of stepdads. I highly recommend you join other stepdads for the journey. There is strength in a band of brothers.

1. What is one thing you would like to understand or manage better as a result of this book?
2. What would it be like to be hired for a job you weren't sure how to manage? Ever felt that way in your home?
3. Share a time that you were confused about your role as a stepdad.
4. In what ways have some of your new "staff" resisted your leadership, new parenting style, or place in the family?
5. Name some stepdads in the Bible. How does knowing that others have gone before you bring encouragement?
6. Making the decision to love stepchildren and embrace your journey as a stepdad may not seem heroic, but the results can be heroic in someone's life. What do you find inspiring about that and intimidating about that?

Chapter 1

Conquering Stepdad Mountain

Whether or not they ever choose to carry on my family name, they will carry on my family legacy and heritage.

JOE, STEPDAD OF TWO TEENAGE BOYS

"How tall is it?" I ignorantly asked a Kenyan missionary.

"Mount Kilimanjaro is over 19,000 feet tall," he smiled. "It's big!"

No kidding, I thought. I could see the outline of the tallest mountain in Africa from my third-floor Nairobi apartment 130 miles away. "It might take a while to climb, huh?"

Boy, is that an understatement. On average it takes an expedition four to seven days to climb to the summit of Kilimanjaro. And why do people climb it? Because it's there, right? Just conquering the challenge is one reason people take on this massive testimony to God's creativity. And then there's the view from the top. On a clear day you can see for hundreds of miles in a 360-degree panoramic view. Oh, yes, there's plenty of reward for those who conquer the mountain. But it often doesn't feel worth it until you reach the top.

For Mom

Without a doubt you have high hopes that your children and husband will bond and enjoy one another. Orchestrating opportunities for them to connect is helpful, but don't add too much pressure or become impatient. Learn to relax about the status of your family and trust them to work out a mutually agreeable relationship over time.

When reflecting on his role as a stepfather, David[4] said, “I simply didn’t have any idea how hard blending a family would be. I lacked any knowledge of how to deal with my stepkids.” Conquering Stepdad Mountain might not be as rugged as climbing one of the world’s tallest peaks, but it will probably take longer than you expect. And you’re not just climbing because it’s there. You’re climbing because it matters. Yes, there is reward for you at the top, but there’s also reward for your family and stepchildren. As Joe implied in the opening quote, how you live, love, and/or lead your stepchildren (and biological children) will create a legacy and heritage that long outlives you. It’s important that you climb well.

So how do you climb? In this chapter we’ll talk through your climbing strategies and map out an overall plan for success. And in the process you’ll hear from fellow stepdads. Beginning in this chapter, I’ll share life-acquired wisdom from a number of stepdads who participated in a stepdad focus group for this book. You are bound to identify with some of their insights and get ideas from their best practices. The first step, they noted, is to begin with the end in mind.

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

In his highly referenced book on leadership *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* Stephen R. Covey says, “To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.”[5]

Where Are You Going?

Obviously you want to go *up* Stepdad Mountain. But what does that mean? What does a successful stepdad know and do? Essentially the goal of stepparenting is to join biological parents in their task of raising and maturing healthy, responsible, faith-focused children. Conquering the mountain is about establishing yourself as a teacher, mentor, and influence in their life. It’s about finding your fit in relationship to your wife and the kids’ biological father (even if he is deceased) so you can be part of the team that leads your family up the mountain of life. You’re not climbing *over* children. You are trying to connect and bond with them so they’ll want to join you as you journey through life together.

Family dynamics and your level of relationship with the children will influence your place among the leadership team. With each step wisdom is needed to determine your role. For example, a stepdad of adult stepchildren in

their thirties and forties living many miles away, who has been married only a year, will not have nearly as much influence or responsibility as a stepdad of children under the age of five who live with him full time. Much more will be said about the process of stepparenting in later chapters, but for now recognize that conquering the mountain is not entirely up to you. Sometimes the incline of circumstances is straight up and your climbing pace is very slow. Other times the incline has flattened and your progress is quick and effortless. A wise stepdad will constantly assess the family dynamics around him and work with his wife to determine his role, but a foolish stepdad will stubbornly attempt to climb at a pace different from those around him.

Adult Stepchildren

All stepdads start as a friend, not a father, to a child. With adult stepchildren, continually seek to define yourself as a friend to them. Depending on time, family dynamics, your interests and theirs, someday you might be considered a mentor.

One stepdad-to-be had high aspirations for his role. He thought it was his job to drop on the scene and take charge. You see, he was an ex-marine, and the only model he knew was one of power and control. A couple of months before the wedding he told his fiancée, “Be sure to tell your kids that once we get married, the marines have landed!” His goal was to take over, and his strategy was to demand that his stepchildren catapult him to the top of the mountain (a hostile takeover). One problem: His stepchildren, and his wife, refused to be walked on. Not surprisingly, the first few years of this stepdad’s climb were filled with conflict. He learned that one can demand a leadership position, but it doesn’t mean anyone will follow or respect you. Again, a wise stepdad seeks to gain trust and respect from his family so he can work *with* them, not *against* them. Thankfully, marine man learned how to reassess his situation. I’ll share more about what happened to him in a few moments, but first, here is another key to knowing where you are going.

Know What You Feel. We guys aren’t always good at knowing how we feel, unless it’s anger. But whether we are aware of our emotions or not, they drive how we act and even what our goals are. Richard, stepfather of two and father of two, felt isolated. “I was now living with what felt like two strangers. I just didn’t feel comfortable in my own home. It was a feeling I never anticipated, but

it was very real.” In an attempt to overcome his isolation, Richard, like many men, showered his stepkids with gifts, which hurt the feelings of his biological children.

For Mom

When your husband shares his confusing emotions, strive not to become defensive. One trap to avoid is responding negatively to his confusion, shutting him down, and making it less likely that he will risk sharing his feelings with you again.

Darrell, stepdad of two, often felt confused about his role, caught between a rock and a hard place. “My wife has my back to a point; I’ve learned where the point is and I don’t cross it. However, I do get confused sometimes because when I back off, she tells me I didn’t back her up. But when I get involved and mix it up, I say the wrong things. Many times I’ve felt it’s a no-win situation.”

Part of knowing where you are going is knowing how you feel. Feeling isolated, confused, frustrated, and jealous (the list goes on) can change your end goal if you’re not careful. Instead of using wisdom to determine your role, frustration or desperation determines it for you. Rarely is that a good thing. Be honest with yourself, your situation, and how you feel about it. A Smart Stepdad will identify and manage his emotions and set goals based on wisdom. (The cumulative advice in this book will supply much wisdom.)

Where Are You Now?

A good climber knows where he is and where he’s been. You have to properly assess your situation. Let’s discuss the vulnerabilities of being at the base, at the top, or somewhere in the middle, and a few best practices for each location.

At the Base of the Mountain. You’re dating a woman with kids (and perhaps you have your own, too) and looking up at what stands before you. Please know that there’s a deceptive mirage from where you stand—the mountain doesn’t look as high or steep as it actually is. In part the mirage is caused by the fog of love, the warm fuzzies of your romance that hide the top of the mountain. And in part it’s caused by not being on the face of the mountain yet. Only after the wedding will you begin to climb and see the actual size of the mountain—until then, you’re just guessing. That’s why the number one disillusionment for adults in stepfamilies is how long it takes to “climb the mountain.” To your credit, you

are reading this climbing guide at a good point—before the climb or early on. Use this book to determine realistic goals, including the pace at which you begin, what gear you should take with you, and what to expect from yourself and others. Doing so makes the climb much more pleasant.

Early Climb Best Practices

1. If still dating, slow down. A quick or sudden courtship slows your progression up the mountain later on. Children and extended family often resent their mom's (or dad's) decision to marry quickly, beginning the family journey with animosity. Not a good way to start. The problem, though, is how adults and children define "quick." What seems too soon for children is often not soon enough for adults. Here's a good rule of thumb from my friends and stepfamily educators Jeff and Judi Parziale: When you are ready to marry, the kids are about a year behind you.[6] So slow the pace of your dating. Spend lots of time studying the mountain and planning your climbing strategy. It will save a lot of headaches later on.
2. Pace with the kids. Pursue the kids, but moderate your attempts to bond based on how open or closed they are. John commented, "The primary thing that has helped me was a lesson I learned from your book The Smart Stepfamily: Allow the stepchild to set the pace of your relationship. So far, that has been super advice that allows me to enjoy a healthy and fun relationship with my stepchildren."
3. Be a Smart Stepdad before becoming a good father. I know that sounds strange, but a stepdad can actually become a good father too quickly. James Bray, a stepfamily researcher whose seminal studies on stepfamilies are among the most referenced, discovered that within the first couple years, stepdads who assume an active, engaging fatherly role with stepchildren often found that it backfired on the entire family. Even when stepdads had their wives' encouragement, well-intentioned stepdads who tried to declare rules and expectations for the home and took initiative to offer children

guidance and direction—all with the expectation of building intimacy with their stepchildren—sometimes found that it caused conflict in the home. This “Good Father Syndrome,” as Bray called it, often left mothers and stepfathers baffled and hurt.[7] Relax. Go with the flow, don’t try to be an instant hero. Becoming a good stepfather is a matter of time.

4. Pursue kids with common sense. Find common ground on which to interact. Pray for them, listen (hold your tongue in the beginning), and give them the benefit of the doubt. “We tried to do many family functions together,” said Richard. “I did not force myself on the kids (ages thirteen and ten) but always included them and tried to get involved in what they enjoyed. One was in band, the other soccer; I went to all the concerts and games. At first I gave hugs to all the kids but it was a bit uncomfortable. I backed off until they were more open to that.”
5. Be patient. A stepfamily is no place for an impatient person. Being pushy and angry only fosters conflict and resentment, usually toward you. In the beginning, Darrell was hard-nosed and threatening. “I had the mentality that it’s my house and my rules—either live by it or get out,” he confessed. “That not only put a strain on my marriage but it made my stepson feel expendable.” By lowering his expectations and becoming more patient, Darrell was able to keep his family together.

Somewhere in the Middle. If you are somewhere in the middle of your climb, you are likely a little tired and may have become discouraged. Perhaps it would be helpful, like Joe, to look back to see how far you’ve come. “Becoming a stepdad is a process,” he wrote. “At first my stepchildren were just ‘part of the package.’ But being involved in their lives—investing my time, effort, and energy in their success—has developed a bond of love. I can’t pray for, root for, support, encourage, cry about, and provide for someone without having love grow as a result. My wife and I will be married five years this November, and I’ve been doing some reflecting on my relationship with the boys. Looking back I can see how it has changed. It has evolved into their not just being her sons—they are now my sons.”

Notice Joe's climb. At first they were "part of the package." (Sounds a little uncaring, I know, but Joe is just being honest.) But over time, he and his stepsons ventured to a new level in their relationship that is very personal. Likewise, if you are in the middle of your climb, notice how far you've come and give yourself and your family credit for the progress achieved (even if it doesn't feel very far). And trust that continued effort will take you even further. Some sections of the climb may focus more on one person in your family or another. Other sections will include everyone and show more progress. The point is to *keep climbing.*

It's also important to be willing to make adjustments when needed. One of the strengths of mature stepdads (and for that matter, healthy stepfamilies) is flexibility. The ability to adapt to the mountain's demands and change your course when necessary is a vital skill. Our well-intentioned marine friend started with an unrealistic goal in mind, but thankfully he was willing to flexibly adjust his expectations. After a couple years of family conflict, anger, and hurt feelings he realized that his "I'm going to make you respect me whether you like me or not" style was sabotaging his chances of a productive climb. He also realized he couldn't carry his stepchildren to the top of the mountain; he had to find a way to earn their respect (not demand it), and thereby invite them to join him in the climb. But at this point, how could he do that? His abrasive manner had already lost their respect and his chances of being part of the leadership team.

I caught up with this marine's wife a few years into their journey and asked for an update. After years of conflict and hostility, she said that her husband looked back down the mountain and saw how ineffective he had been. "He came to me and apologized," she said. "And then he did something amazing. He went to my kids and apologized. He explained that with good intentions he had set out to teach them many life lessons, but had come to learn (from reading one of your books) that he had taken the wrong approach. He then asked them to forgive him and give him another chance. And they did." As it turned out, this woman and her husband had a lot of healing and rebuilding to do. In effect, they stopped climbing and just sat on the side of the mountain for close to a year while he and her kids started over. After a season, they started to climb again. All of that was possible because this marine was willing to reassess his situation, humble himself, and climb smarter. I applaud him.

Best Practices: Bonding With Stepkids

- Stepsons: Share your life experiences when you were their age, how you dealt with them, and how they affected you. Sometimes be willing to just listen instead of offering solutions. Go on hikes or go camping or fishing to get out of the house and create some memories together.
- Stepdaughters: Listen to them, especially if teenagers, and try not to fix things. Ask about their friends and make sure they know their friends are welcome in your home; have them invite friends for dinner or spend the night on occasion. Regarding affection—find a fit that is comfortable for her. Tim shared, "Early on I started playing a game with Madison where she and I would throw a squishy ball at each other when least expected." Bennett noted, "Once she was receptive, I gave her hugs and told her I was proud of her."
- Both: Listen for their heart. "For me the key is to learn where they hurt and then speak into that when the time is right to encourage and build them up." (Gil)

Nearing the Top. Some of you have been climbing for many years and are nearing the top. You have been reading the previous sections thinking to yourself, *Been there, done that.* And with many cuts, scrapes, and a few battle scars you have begun to experience the many rewards of stepfamily living. You have also gained much perspective about how far up the climb really is, and you've learned along the way that out of the next ten thousand steps, the most important one is the next one. You've also learned that my three-step prescription for stepfamily success pays off in the end: persevere, get educated about stepfamily dynamics, and surround yourself with other families on a similar climb.

A recent testimony to that three-step prescription came from a mother named Joy. She and her husband, Dan, had attended one of my conferences many years previously ("get educated"), participated in a study group for stepfamily couples at her church ("surround yourself with other families"), and stuck together through some challenging times ("persevere"). Joy wrote a poem of gratitude after hearing her nineteen-year-old son call Dan (his stepdad) something she never thought she'd hear him say. I share her poem with you here so you, too, can be encouraged in your climb up Stepdad Mountain.

“Stepdad”
music to my ears
an unexpected joy.
My boy called him Stepdad
He lost his Dad
He lost his father
My husband was never meant
to replace his Daddy.
He called him Stepdad
music to my ears.
Years ago
a casual bystander said
“Don’t refer to him as a stepson
just call him your son.”
But he’s not his father
and he has a son.
He called him Stepdad
music to my ears.
Others need to open
their eyes and ears.
Stepdad and Stepmom
Stepson and Stepdaughter
are not bad words.
These titles answer many questions
that don’t need to be asked.
A wise man, The Real Deal,
a man with a heart for stepfamilies
told us on several occasions
“Stepfamilies are not even blended families.
They are like a Crockpot, not a blender,
full of individual vegetables
thrown together
and to get what you want takes time,
cooked over very low heat.”
I think we’re done.
It’s time to say Grace.

Joy Lara Wilson
married to Dan
mom to Emily and Andy, stepmom to Josh

No matter what part of Stepdad Mountain you stand on today, be encouraged. There is reward at the top of the climb—and enough grace along the way to make it all worth it.

Steps in the Right Direction

Here are more best practices of Smart Stepdads, young and old, new and veteran. Consider how you might implement them into your climb.

1. Trust God to lead. Probably the one universal negative experience of stepdads is the feeling of uncertainty. If you find yourself wondering what to do and how to go about it, you're in good company. From a spiritual standpoint, uncertainty is an invitation to faith. God always uses our "I don't know what to do's" to invite us to trust him more—and we should. Don't anguish because you don't know what to do. Ask God to show you. Don't panic in your uncertainty and give up on your family. Seek a word from the Spirit. Don't assume you are alone. Find comfort and direction in his Word. Then you can climb Stepdad Mountain one step at a time.
2. Know your place. A Smart Stepdad understands that there is an inherent dilemma to his task: How can you be Dad when you're not dad? Obviously, you can't. Even if the biological dad is deceased, you will never replace him, so don't try. Playing "who's your daddy" only causes stress in your home. And stress in a stepfamily thickens blood, pitting you against your stepchildren and often your wife. I'll talk more about this in chapter 4.
3. Understand the limits of your role. It's not your responsibility to undo the past. Years of poor parenting from your wife or her ex-husband, the negative consequences of divorce, or the pain children experience when a father dies is not yours to resolve. Come alongside children in these situations and try to offer a positive influence over time, but don't try to be the white knight in shining armor. Just love them.
4. Move in with tact. Don't be a bull in a china shop. Respect children's loyalties (more in chapter 4). "I became a stepfather when my stepdaughter was eight. Her father was very involved in her life and a good dad. There just wasn't room for me in her heart; therefore, we had a very strained relationship. We were never able to build anything. Now that she is a grown woman, I sense she is becoming a little less competitive . . . but I think the best way to describe our relationship even now is 'uneasy toleration.' " Anthony's climb was and is steep. Thank goodness he respected this reality or things might have become worse.

5. Round off your rough edges. In my book *The Remarriage Checkup,* coauthored with David H. Olson, we reported that the number one predictor of strong marriages in stepfamilies was the absence of rough personality characteristics in the couple. According to our research, being stubborn, critical, controlling, moody, jealous, and having a temper predicted with over 92 percent accuracy whether couples were healthy and strong or fragile and unhappy.[8] I've long said that the same applies to relationships with stepchildren. If your personality is naturally angry, critical, aggressive, controlling, or stubborn, don't expect them to warm up to you—and don't expect your wife to entrust her children to you. To make any progress you must change this part of yourself.

> "I blew my stack due to disrespect from a teenage stepson. . . . He deserved it and my wife backed me up, but I later realized what a risk I took by losing my cool."
>
> **GIL, FATHER TO FOUR, STEPDAD TO THREE**[9]

6. Partner with your wife. She needs to believe that you are committed to and care about her, her children, and their past experiences before you will receive her trust. Therefore, do a lot of listening before injecting your opinion; demonstrate an authentic appreciation for all she has done to provide for her children before trying to make suggestions. When you do make suggestions, especially early in your climb, be sure to reveal your heart's intentions first. Consider the contrast between harshly saying, "Your son is a lazy boy. When are you going to make him get up in the morning and get to school on time?" and saying, "I have come to really care about David. I'm hoping to offer some guidance to him and better prepare him for life. I've noticed he's struggling to manage his time and responsibilities with school. Can we talk about how we might encourage more responsibility in him?"

For Mom

You are the emotional center of your home; everyone connects to you and through you. Share with your husband the stress you feel to be "all things to all people."

7. Until you have earned their respect, let your wife handle punishment with her children. This topic deserves much more explanation so I'll devote a lot of

time to this matter in chapter 5. For now, let me make the point that leadership and the ability to offer punishment that shapes character are a function of emotional attachment with a child. As our marine friend discovered, ruling with an iron hand without a foundational relationship sabotages your level of respect and subverts what you are trying to teach. Many stepdads mistakenly assume that not taking the lead is a sign of weakness. Actually, it is an indication of strategic wisdom and strength. So while taking the time to build a solid relationship and gradually moving into discipline, trust your wife to continue being the primary parent to her kids.

> "I learned that it was best to let my wife discipline her children. It never did work very well when I did it."
>
> **BENNETT, STEPDAD TO THREE**

> "Discipline with your stepkids is fragile ground. Without a lot of earned trust, it's best to button your lip and share your thoughts respectfully and privately with their mother. Then she can share the issue with them while you are present."
>
> **GIL, FATHER TO FOUR, STEPDAD TO THREE**

8. Be patient with your wife, especially when her past creates emotional baggage that you can't change. Danny shared that his wife's first marriage left a lot of emotional scars on her that he thought he could change. "I didn't have a clue how hard it would be for her to overcome them," he said. "We have been together for nine years and I'm still dealing with her insecurities. It's part of who she is, so I just deal with it and go on." At first, Danny thought he could "love it out of her," but in time he came to see that ultimately this was her mountain to climb. He could choose to love her as best he could, but in the end, she would have to deal with the emotional residue from her first marriage.
9. Be equitable in parenting. Wayde observed, "I've always felt that my wife has supported my authority with her kids as long as it was fair and equal to what I'd use to punish my kids." If you ever want to turn your wife into an angry mother bear protecting her cubs, just show favoritism to your kids and treat hers unfairly. Believe me, you'll awaken the bear.
10. Unless proven otherwise, assume your stepchildren would pick their dad over you. In chapter 4 we'll discuss a child's loyalty in detail. For now, recognize that a huge step toward gaining your stepchildren's respect comes from respecting their relationship with their father (even if deceased) and not

positioning yourself in competition with him. Doing so just pushes them further away from you and closer to their dad. Tim, a dad of two and stepdad to two, understands this well. “I have always tried to keep in mind what I want my child to hear from my ex or her new husband about me. I then apply the Golden Rule to my stepkids’ dad. If, on the other hand, I put the kids in the position of having to choose between me and their dad, I always assume they would choose him. (This is especially difficult at times when I want to selfishly ‘one up’ him to make myself look better.) This also means that when my wife and stepkids are badmouthing him, I have to keep from being drawn into the discussion. They will turn on me in a heartbeat.”

11. Remain engaged. Through the years I’ve worked with many disengaged stepdads and their families. The reasons for their drift varied: one man had a “these aren’t my kids” attitude; another had an extremely introverted personality and he simply didn’t know how to engage people in general, let alone his stepchildren. Still others found themselves paralyzed by the guilt of not being around their biological children. “How can I really enjoy my stepkids when I feel like I’m shorting my kids of my time?” one man said. “In some bizarre way I think I’m making it up to my kids when I deny myself time with my stepchildren.” Still other stepdads find that once they’ve disengaged, which may have initially been part of surviving the confusion of their role, they can’t find their way back.

> “My children moved out of state when their mother remarried. I feel so much guilt for not getting to see them much and am aware that they feel betrayed since my stepchildren get to see me more. But what can I do?”
>
> **JOHN, DAD TO TWO, STEPDAD TO THREE**

If you have been disengaged, you can’t stay that way; you hold an important role in your stepkids’ lives. When you married their mother, God positioned you as a role model, friend, teacher, and mentor. The specifics of how intimate your role will become cannot be predicted, but you have a responsibility to make the most of the opportunities you are given. You can be a blessing to your stepchildren, but not if you don’t engage. To the best of your ability, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). And remember, if you want to have influence with someone, you must be moving toward them emotionally and them toward you. If one of those isn’t happening, forget about having influence or authority.

12. Don’t go it alone. A Smart Stepdad will also surround himself with a band of brothers. Joe, a stepfather of two, encourages stepdads to be involved in a fellowship with other men where you are open and honest about your life. “You cannot do this alone,” he says. “You desperately need other men to walk with you on this journey. Without my band of brothers I never would have come this far. If there are men in your life that have ‘meddling’ rights, then you can stay on the right path with the right attitude.”

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

For Group Discussion

1. Before marriage, what was your attitude and expectations about how long it would take to “blend” your family?
2. What has gone according to your expectations? What has not?
3. Where are you on Stepdad Mountain—at the base, near the top, or somewhere in the middle? How do you know?
4. What are you learning about the pace of the climb and how long it takes? How will you handle the times that you get impatient with the process?
5. Review the Early Climb Best Practices on page 24. Which speak to your situation and how might they apply?
6. When frustrated with the middle part of their journey, many stepdads stop pursuing their stepchildren. They distance themselves and stop trying to emotionally bond. How might doing this affect their mom? Your marriage? Your stepchildren? You?
7. How does the poem on pages 27–28 written by Joy Lara Wilson inspire you to keep going?
8. Review the Steps in the Right Direction beginning on page 28. Which are most salient for you at this point?

Chapter 2

Sex Stuff:
Did You Marry a Wife (Sex Partner) or a Mother (Business Partner)?

I married a woman with a child. From the moment we said "I do," I lost my "wife" because she focused on being "Mom."

ANDREW

My wife's ex had an affair on her. This left her with a lot of emotional and sexual baggage. No one told me that I would have to pay the price for his actions.

DARRELL

William was being candid. "Having tasted in my first marriage how wonderful sex is, managing my sexual urges while dating my current wife was extremely difficult." Little did he know that maintaining his sexual purity while dating was just the beginning of his frustrations. "Once married, I discovered that we had different expectations and she was unwilling to engage in certain sexual acts that I enjoyed in my first marriage. I really wasn't prepared for this."

Before continuing our climbing guide, I want to talk about your marital sexual relationship. For many couples in stepfamilies, sexuality is much improved compared to previous marriages, in part because their overall marriage is healthier, which generally helps to facilitate a better sexual relationship. Gary's wife, Judy, told me, "Sex is even better than I expected. I really enjoy making love to Gary." Jorge and his wife had both been married previously. He reported that their sex life was far better than their first marriages and that they connected with much more depth.

For Mom

There is something about the psychology of a man that makes sexuality difficult when he feels disempowered and disrespected in his home. You are the clear authority with your children (see chapter 5). But if you overprotect your kids and emasculate your husband, if you silence his voice and disrespect him in front of them, expect that it will negatively impact your sexual relationship.

But sometimes marital sexuality takes a hit in a stepfamily—and it has much more to do with the stepfamily itself than meets the eye. Of course, some sexual frustrations are the result of specific problems in sex or sexual functioning,[10] but other problems are related to the triangle of relationships between a stepfather, his wife, and her role as mother. Gary's wife, Judy, who said sex was even better than she expected, also said, "Even still, I sometimes have to remind myself to be focused on him and not just focused on being a mother."

Peter shared with me, "Our sex life was much more frequent and adventuresome when we were dating than now that we are married. When I try to initiate sex, my wife often says, 'You were better off when we were dating.' " Peter has discovered among other things that premarital sex was more about the hunt, for both he and his wife, than an expression of their committed love. And it set him up to assume things would stay the same. Now he is frustrated, feels lied to, and resents being relegated to "the financial provider, chief cab driver, and otherwise slave" to his wife and stepchildren. One can understand his slipping into being a distant, unwilling stepfather—but that just makes things worse all around.

Smart Dating

"We both wish that we had not had premarital sex. That kept us from learning to be friends and developing our relationship. We took sex for granted and wish we would have saved it for marriage."
Bob

By the way, I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard a stepdad say that before marriage he thought his girlfriend was all about him (a bit narcissistic, I

know), but that after the wedding he felt duped—that she jumped ship and became more of a mother than a wife. This dynamic gets played out in many aspects of marriage and family but is most apparent to men in their sexual relationship. I rarely find these matters addressed in the stepfamily education literature. I can't think of one academic or popular book on the role of stepfathers that even brings it up—so I'm going to. Here's a story I've heard many times in various forms.

"She caters to her kids, spends money on them we don't have, and won't listen to anything I say. It's like I have no voice in my own home when it comes to her kids." Terry—a middle-aged, middle-management professional—was trying to explain his frustration to me and his wife, Sherry, in our first marital therapy session. He brought one child into the marriage, and she had three from her first marriage. He continued, "And to top it off, we only have sex every couple months." This, by the way, is when most men give me a look that invites commiseration. "Ron, my man friend, can you believe I have to put up with this? I am such a victim!" Terry added a summary statement before staring down his wife, "The bottom line is that I'm supposed to pay the bills, keep my mouth shut, and keep my pants zipped. I don't get it."

Sherry was eager to explain her side of the story, as well. "Why would I want to have sex with someone who treats me and my kids with such contempt? [Now she pauses hoping I will immediately console her with a look of understanding.] He is cold, distant, and harsh to my kids. My fifteen-year-old wants to know what he has done wrong because Terry always seems angry at him—what am I supposed to do about that?"

Let me take you behind the therapeutic curtain for just a moment. Terry and Sherry are like most couples who each believe that their side of the story, their explanation of how things have digressed in their marriage, is the right one—the only one. So who's right? Is it that Sherry is a control freak and sexually challenged? Or is it that Terry is harsh and uncaring about her children? This is a chicken or egg argument and, barring the wisdom of Solomon, won't be solved. It's more productive to acknowledge that to a degree, both are right and neither is entirely to blame. Further, both of their explanations are causing a marital and stepfamily gridlock of astronomical proportions. Many things will have to change for this situation to improve. Among the first, both Terry and Sherry will have to stop digging in their heels and start trying to meet the other in the middle. In a word it's called sacrifice.

SHINING A LIGHT ON A HIDDEN STRUGGLE

This complex interconnection between the relational dynamics of a stepfamily home and the sexual relationship of a couple is often hidden to stepdads. It is also frequently misunderstood by their wives. Even if a man tells his wife about his sexual frustrations (which many men don't) or his feelings of loneliness (that many men don't understand themselves, they just whine about not having sex), his wife may not understand. If you haven't figured it out yet, guys, men and women are different in some significant ways. A few of them include how sex communicates respect to a man, how it affirms his importance to his wife, and a man's typical interest in having sex (and how much he thinks about it). Many women struggle to understand these realities, and even when they do, they still don't see the connection to how he stepfathers. I will try to help both of you make those connections in this chapter. A comprehensive perspective on sexuality is not my goal; giving you honest insights for a stepdad marriage is. I hope that you and your wife will read this chapter. Use the practical points as discussion starters about your relationship. Talk, listen, and share so you can deepen your intimacy. If talking about sex is awkward for you, welcome to the club! Awkward or not, it's important. Calm yourself, lower your defenses, and venture out. No pain, no gain.

DID YOU MARRY A WIFE (SEX PARTNER) OR A MOTHER (BUSINESS PARTNER)?

> "My wife really likes sex and pleasing me, and I in turn really like to please her. And yet, if we are having issues with the children—or her ex-husband—it carries into the bedroom."
>
> **GARY**

Let me answer the heading question directly: You married both a wife and a mother. Sometimes wives and stepdads get confused about which is taking priority, but be assured, both are important and both are at play in your marriage, parenting, and sex life.

People often joke about the functional differences of men and women. Women are integrated beings, we say. God, in his infinite creativity, connected all the parts of a woman so that she can fully experience life. Like the worldwide web, her emotions, intellect, body, spirit, and mind are all connected and integrated. This is why sex for women is as much about what's happening outside the bedroom as what's happening inside. Men, on the other hand, tend to compartmentalize the different parts of ourselves—which explains why we can't hear our wives talking to us when there's a football game on and why we can run

into the path of danger when intellect would dictate otherwise. It also explains why we can be interested in sex right after a massive argument with our wives, and why on any given occasion we don't have to feel particularly close to our wives in order to have sex with them (for the ladies reading this—sorry, but it's generally true). This distinctive between men and women is why Billy Crystal says in the movie *City Slickers*, "Women need a reason to have sex, men just need a place." (I should add that if a man doesn't feel emotionally close to his wife over an extended period of time, he will not want or enjoy sex. Feeling bonded is important to male sexual fulfillment but isn't necessarily the ignition switch for any given occasion.)

Enter the compartmentalized nature of dating a woman with children. Many couples begin their dating experience separate and apart from her children. There is good wisdom, by the way, in doing so. It's not healthy for children to emotionally attach to a series of mom's boyfriends only to experience more heartbreak when they break up. Couples should wait to proactively involve the children in their courtship—and, therefore, a bonding journey with the potential stepdad—until the couple is serious about marriage. The problem, though, is that once serious, most couples don't take the time for children to really bond with the future stepdad. They think that since they are ready for marriage, the children are ready for them to marry, which is generally not the case.

The fact that couples spend a good bit of their dating time separate from the children does not mean, by the way, that their mother (a fully integrated being) feels separate from them. She can be out to dinner with the love of her life and be completely aware of where her children are, what is going on emotionally in their lives, and what their schedule is. The man, on the other hand, can easily fall into an "out of sight, out of mind" scenario where he comes to believe that this woman who is falling in love with him is exclusively focused on him and their relationship.

If they have sex before marriage, this tunnel experience of their relationship—where he perceives himself to be the primary focus of her passions—becomes even stronger. This is just one reason God's wisdom of reserving sex until marriage is best: Couples who engage in sex are often misled as to the level of intimacy and commitment in their relationship. This dilutes their ability to make decisions about marriage and widens the gap of how each experiences their relationship. She is learning to love him within the context of her role as mother, while his experience of their compartmentalized relationship emphasizes her "wife" role. But she is very much a mom, even if he doesn't realize it. Any conscious or unconscious assumption that she will remain focused on him after the wedding will result in disillusionment.

This assumption of her focus is not, of course, just about sex (although the feeling of being pushed to the side is often most profoundly felt by men in the bedroom). One man put it this way: “As soon as we got married, I lost my lover because she completely refocused on her children.” Another said, “The more stress there is in our home, the less she wants to connect with me emotionally or physically.”

Stepdad to Stepdad

“In my first marriage we had less sex after the kids came along. We were exhausted and worried about their lives and getting older ourselves. In my stepfamily, all of that has been thrust upon us from the start; there is no two to three years of ‘just you and me’ time before the first baby. Add to it the immediate stress of stepfamily life and conflict and our sex life has taken a hit.”

There are many reasons this dynamic is more of an issue in some marriages; two stick out in my mind. First, if a stepdad does not have children of his own, he may not appreciate the demands of parenting or how deeply it affects parents. For example, if he takes personally sarcasm from a teenager—which all parents get at some point—there will be unnecessary resentment between them.

Second, if a mother is plagued by excessive guilt, once she is married she will likely shift her energies from partnering to mothering. All parents engage in some level of self-evaluation (this does help us improve our parenting). Given the high standards they put on themselves, I’m not sure moms are ever satisfied with their “performance.” One mom told me that guilt was a mother’s middle name. That may be true, but excessive guilt is just plain paralyzing. In chapter 5 we’ll discuss how a paralyzed mom impacts parenting within a stepfamily, but the point for now is that a woman who wins a man’s affections during courtship only to shift her energies completely toward her children after the wedding will sabotage her marriage and create a wedge between her husband and her children.

An Inadvertent Disconnect

While most women have some guilt over what their children have endured, not all mothers shift affections away from their husbands. In fact, in their hearts, most haven’t done anything close to that, but it can seem so to husbands. The practicalities of living under the same roof have brought together the dual focus

of marriage and parenting. If anything, she expects that you will now join her in the important task of child rearing and assumes you will understand that focus in her.

> "My wife and I have had nights that were set aside for dates and sexual intimacy and by the time we got home we were arguing over something her daughter said or did to me. It really killed the moment."

It's my experience that most stepdads are pleased to join their wives in that task—and yet they can't help but feel something has changed. "If I had an argument with my wife's daughter, it spilled over into our bedroom," a confused Andrew shared. "My wife becomes her great protector rather than my partner and lover; she pulls away from me." If Andrew perceives this as rejection and withdraws from her, the couple's distance grows. If his wife perceives his withdrawal as rejection of her children, she is likely to pull away even further. Obviously, this is a potentially dangerous dynamic for the marriage, and it's all inadvertent—he was trying to be her parental partner and she his sexual partner—they just missed each other.

So, How Do You Connect?

Stepdads: Give Permission to Her Motherhood Role; Don't Be in Competition With It. A mother is always trying to fulfill both her role as a mom and as a wife. (If you have your own biological children, I'm confident you are trying to strike the father/husband balance, as well.) If you distrust her heart and compete with her motherhood role, you can unintentionally push her away. Instead, celebrate her efforts as a mom and let her know that you understand the importance of that role in her life. Whether her children are still living at home or on their own, engage her in an ongoing dialogue about her children (e.g., parenting or what's going on in their lives), and take interest in them. Show her that you support her need to care for them. This paradoxically moves her heart closer to yours and likely facilitates the emotional assurance and physical closeness you desire.

Stepdad to Stepdad

"In her first marriage, my wife was married to someone who felt sex was not a priority. So when we married she was ready for a good sexual relationship and looked forward to contributing to that aspect of

our marriage. There were nights where she was in her mothering role and not concerned about enjoying sex so I just gave her space. It worked out okay."
Bob

Wives: Seek a Balance in Your Roles as Wife and Mother. Your first commitment must be to your husband (if you do your job as a parent well, someday your kids will be gone!), but this doesn't require you to neglect your children. Couples in first marriages raising their own children prioritize their marriage, too, and it doesn't jeopardize their children's emotional well-being. Neither will attending to your husband's relational, emotional, and sexual needs. The real issue here for many of you is managing what I might call your mom-guilt. Your role as wife will always be moderated by your role as mother (that's true of any spouse who is also a parent), but if mom-guilt repeatedly short-circuits your investment as a wife, everyone will suffer.

Both Husbands and Wives: Make a Concerted Effort to Ward Off Jealousy in Your Home. Stepdad, if you notice your wife feeling mom-guilt for choosing to spend time with you and not with her children, don't resent it. She isn't necessarily choosing them *over* you. Likewise, moms, if you sense your husband feeling left out, don't judge him as fragile or immature. He is just experiencing the natural feelings outsiders feel. Work to prevent jealousy from eroding your marriage; left unchecked, it will do just that. Recently Dr. David Olson and I published our findings from the largest study of remarriage strengths ever conducted in the book *The Remarriage Checkup* (Bethany House Publishers). We found that jealousy—while commonly a problem for one-third of all couples—was twice as likely in unhealthy couple relationships as in vibrant, healthy ones. And of all the attitudes and personality dynamics that impact a marriage, jealousy is one of the most negative. It increases couple reactivity to one another, conflict in the marriage, and the likelihood of couples taking personally issues related to the children.

Guard your marriage from the eroding effects of jealousy. Choose instead to serve each other by acknowledging the need to remain connected with children and with each other. Stepdads can encourage their wives to spend exclusive time with their children, for example, and wives can say no to their kids every once in a while in order to make time for their husbands. To avoid the hazardous impact of jealousy, remember and apply this paradoxical principle of successful stepfamily living: permission connects, possessiveness divides.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SEX?

Is remarriage sex better, worse, or the same as a previous marriage? The answer, of course, is yes. It can be all of those things. The more serious problem is in the question itself—that is, in comparing.

On Comparing

It is impossible for people previously married not to compare their sexual relationship, sex acts, and pleasure level to a previous partner. On some level, at some point, you can't help but compare them. Gary shared, "Sex in this marriage is definitely better. We both know what we like and are not afraid to let the other know if something is pleasurable or not." But be careful of comparing in excess. It can be hazardous.

In the book *The Remarriage Checkup,* Dr. David Olson and I reported that one quality of couples with poor relationships was significantly more concern over their partner's previous sexual experiences. "What seems to be in question," our study concluded, "is how previous experiences compare to the current couple's sexual relationship or how they might be limiting their sexual fulfillment."[11]

Scott found himself comparing to the detriment of his new marriage. "Our sex life started out better than my first marriage and very satisfying, but as time has gone by it has gotten worse. Five years of stress with five children, including their drug use and disrespect, has taken a major toll on our marriage and our sex life, which is for the most part nonexistent now. My first wife knew me so much better and I do find myself thinking about her. I compare both body and acts." See the domino effect? When stress increases in your family, guard your heart and mind from fantasizing about a previous sexual relationship. The same temptation occurs with pornography. "My sexual relationship with my first wife was practically nonexistent," said Gary, "so I don't compare much. But I have struggled with porn for most of my life, and those images present more of a problem for me than my previous sexual experience." Comparing sex with your current wife to other women—real or imagined—is detrimental to your marriage.

> "While dating, my wife and I talked a lot about sex and our expectations. This openness has definitely enhanced our sex life." Randy

In addition, don't compare apples to oranges. Bob noted that while his remarried sex life is generally better, the longevity of his current marriage has resulted in some challenges he never experienced in his first. "Our sex life started out strong, but now that I am fifty-four and my wife forty-eight, it seems to be slowing down. During our kids' teen years we were exhausted keeping up with their schedules and sex wasn't as big a priority as in the first few years of our marriage. Now that all of the kids are off to college, perhaps we can pick up where we left off!" He was wise not to compare what he never experienced with his first wife to what life took him and his wife through in the second marriage.

So, on the one hand, occasional comparisons are inevitable, but guard your heart so that it is not stolen from your wife. Handle this with great care. And find loving ways of handling it together. "At first this issue was taboo for me. I did not want to discuss it," reported stepdad George. "But after we gained a tremendous amount of trust and confidence between us, we did open up and talk frankly. We committed to helping each other with bad memories and shared our expectations with love and patience. We also read healthy Christian material on sexuality and talked about it."

Remarriage Sex:
Tips for Not Getting Caught in the Past

1. Don't make comparisons in your mind . . . or out loud! "Why can't you touch me the way Jane did?" isn't going to breed confidence in your partner. Keep your comparisons to yourself! Nor should you linger on comparisons in your own mind. Doing so keeps you looking back instead of connecting to the moment at hand.
2. Stay open to new preferences. Your new spouse's sexual preferences may vary from a previous partner's. Don't think that what worked with a previous partner will work again. Listen to verbal and nonverbal messages telling you your partner's preferences.
3. Calm your insecurities. If you were sexually rejected or traumatized in the past, be careful not to let your insecurities or anxiety run ahead of you. Be willing to share your experiences and invite your spouse to help you grow.

4. Give yourself time to develop a couple groove. Learning how to read each other, when to respond with a specific touch, or what your couple sexual style is will take time. Learn as you go; share what you learn.[12]
5. Confront your sexual ghosts. Don't be quick to make negative assumptions about your partner's motivations or behavior. When fearful, try to take small risks to increase your willingness to trust.
6. Don't ignore sexual problems, and don't overreact. It's normal for couples to have a sexual complaint of some kind. Don't panic if you encounter difficulty. Talk it through and if necessary, find a sex therapist who can help.[13]

Wife Worries?

Sometimes women struggle with their husband's previous sexual experiences. For example, there are a multitude of mechanisms that help or hinder a woman's sexual desire, but one of the most powerful is body image.[14] When a woman feels insecure about her body type, her sexual confidence decreases. And women have so many picture-perfect images to compare themselves to, they often don't stand a chance in their own minds. Every magazine cover, movie star, or model is a reminder that she isn't perfect. This can be magnified if your ex-spouse (or ex-girlfriend) has a more attractive body type. Women make lots of comparisons of one another, and your wife's insecurities might then be projected on you. "My previous wife was a fitness model," said Taylor. "She made my wife very uncomfortable and self-conscious about her sexuality. It caused some difficulty, but we have worked through it."

So how do you work through it? First, you must keep in mind that you cannot control your wife's body image. You can—and should—regularly affirm her attractiveness to you and your passion for her, but please understand that her self-comparisons and insecurities may continue. Communicate that you don't expect her to be like a previous partner and that you approve of her as she is. And then keep reinforcing this notion throughout your marriage.

If Your Previous Wife Died

Widowers who had a healthy relationship with their now deceased wife need to repeatedly affirm their wife's attractiveness and positive qualities. Some women find themselves competing with a ghost, an idealized image of your former wife. Alleviate her concerns by articulating your heart for her.

Where Did You Get That Idea?

Stephen and Judith Schwambach, in their book *For Lovers Only*, insightfully discuss a way for couples to share with their partner an interest in specific sexual acts in such a way that it doesn't make the other feel criticized. They recommend what they call the ten magic words: "Do you know what I would love to try sometime?" But what if your wife responds with, "Where did you get that idea? Is that something you did in your previous marriage and now you want me to be like her?" Whether you talk about previous sexual experiences at that point or not is up to you, but ultimately you must refocus the conversation to you and your wife. Let her know that you aren't trying to force a preset list of expectations onto her, nor are you trying to re-create some magical moment. Rather, this request communicates your sexual interest in her and is representative of your commitment to her as your wife. Your sole purpose is to deepen your sexual connection and express your love for her.

HEALTHY SEX STUFF

Oddly enough, when the sex stuff is going well, it doesn't seem to play a huge role in a healthy marriage. But when it isn't going well, it can become a key source of frustration and tension. Managing the sex stuff in your marriage really matters. Hopefully this chapter has provided insights to both you and your wife, and many topics for honest conversation. What is happening within your stepfamily can impact what happens in the bedroom and vice versa. Don't minimize, either, and don't hang your entire marriage on either dynamic.

Take advantage of these Christian resources on sexuality in marriage:

- Douglas Rosenau, *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002).
- Chris and Rachel McCluskey, *When Two Become One: Enhancing Sexual Intimacy in Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004).

- Clifford and Joyce Penner, *The Way to Love Your Wife* (Tyndale House, 2007).
- *www.IntimateMarriage.org*, Dr. Michael Sytsma
- Find certified Christian sex therapists at *www.abcst.org*

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

For Group Discussion

1. Essentially this chapter is about the intersection of stepfamily dynamics and husband-wife sexuality. What has surprised you about this dynamic in your life? What insights did you get from the chapter that may be helpful for you or someone you know?
2. If you are single, what did you learn from the chapter about the importance of maintaining sexual purity? What practical steps can you take in a dating relationship to avoid sexual temptations?
3. Men and women often have very different perspectives on what adds or takes away from their sex life. What attitudes do you think are important to help husbands and wives bridge their different viewpoints?
4. What insights did the chapter give you about how sexuality works for women who are trying to balance their wife/mother roles? How might you check out this insight with your wife?
5. In what ways are you learning to give permission to your wife's motherhood role and not act in competition to it?
6. How do you combat jealousy in your heart? In your home?
7. How might comparing previous sexual partners or acts with your current wife/sexual relationship be dangerous?
8. Review the list Remarriage Sex: Tips for Not Getting Caught in the Past beginning on page 46. Which could use improvement in your marriage?

Chapter 3

Understanding Her Kids (Part 1): Loss

> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
>
> **Romans 12:15**

We buried my son in February 2009. It's been just over two years. Connor was just twelve when he acquired an MRSA staph infection that attacked his otherwise healthy body, resulting in double pneumonia. And if that wasn't enough, he also had a case of the flu. The combination of diseases stole his life in a little over a week.

I can't tell you how much I, my wife, and our two other sons miss him. Even more, I cannot even begin to explain how much my life has changed since his death. I still think about him and cry every single day. Losing a child is a nightmare—and I can't wake up.

Over the past year I have learned much about grief and loss. Lessons I never wanted to learn. We have learned, for example, that in situations like this, God shows up in the most unexpected ways—and through unexpected people. Being a Father who himself watched his Son die an untimely death, he knows how much our hearts hurt, and he cries with us and continues to send his faithful human representatives to love us and share our grief. But we have learned some painful lessons, as well. One is that American society does not know how to grieve, nor does it make room for the grief of others. Our culture tries to move grieving people past their grief; this has been very troubling to my wife and me. People mean well, I realize, but in an effort to help (or are they helping themselves?) they sometimes offer simplistic advice, which steps all over our grief.

> I know you miss Connor, but he's having Christmas with Jesus this year. (True, but that knowledge doesn't lessen my anguish.)

It's okay. You'll find your joy again someday. (So, someday I'll feel comfortable celebrating life without him? How?)

I just can't imagine what you're going through. This is a parent's worst nightmare, you know. (Believe me, I know. You don't have to remind me.)

People say things like this because they are trying to help us not hurt anymore. On some level they believe that a well-timed word or phrase can ease the pain; people assume they can talk us into feeling better. Oh, how misunderstood and underestimated is grief.

No, what I really need, even over two years after my son's death, is someone to "hold me": to hold me physically by being a constant presence in my life (check in with me regularly and mention his name so I can talk), to hold my memories of Connor (listen to my stories and watch our videos of him), and to hold my sadness (without minimizing it or trying to fix it). That's what I need.

And that's what your stepchildren need.

I realize the loss of my son is different than the loss your stepchildren have experienced. I'm also aware that each loss brings its own unique challenges. But across the various types of loss there are some aspects that are similar. Parenting a stepchild necessitates that you understand loss.

DR. STEPDAD: GRIEF COUNSELOR

Loss is a centralizing dynamic—often hidden below the surface—of every stepfamily. Children (hers and yours if you have biological children) carry a significant amount of loss and are always grieving. That's why I say if you are a stepdad, you are a grief counselor whether you like it or not.

For Mom

You've been through a lot, too. Besides having had to be a single mom, mothers in stepfamilies have higher rates of depression and poorer physical health. You're also more likely to have had a teen pregnancy and divorced parents.[15] You might need to address your loss issues, as well.

At my Building A Successful Stepfamily conferences I tell my audiences if you are going to understand stepchildren (whether still living at home or adults on their own), you have to understand the impact of loss, loyalty, and emotional attachment on their lives. At every stage of the climb, whether at the base of the mountain, somewhere in the middle, or nearing the top, these significant dynamics can be felt. I will spend the next few chapters helping you to understand loyalty and emotional attachment. But we have to begin with loss because its effect is often difficult to recognize.

When I asked a group of men what they wish they had known before becoming a stepfather, Chad said, "Though I know in my head that God's grace is sufficient, I often feel it is in my best interest to give up and go my own way. The constant conflict just makes me wonder why I am doing this." Chad had two teenage stepchildren who constantly stiff-armed him. They wouldn't let him into their lives or their hearts. Repeatedly hurt by their biological dad, who divorced their mom and abandoned them, Chad's stepchildren withdrew into an angry shell of self-protection. What he failed to recognize was how loss was at the heart of his stepchildren's rejection. Do you see the connection? Refusing to let Chad into their lives wasn't because they didn't like him—they *couldn't* like him. To do so would not only risk more loss, it would be disloyal to their lost father. His stepchildren felt the same way I do when someone tells me I can be joyful again. How do I embrace joy when doing so means embracing being without Connor? I know it's not a logical connection, but grief isn't logical. It's emotional . . . and unreasonable . . . and pervasive in all aspects of our lives.

I guess you could say that Chad was suffering for the sins of his stepchildren's father. Their loss brought about great pain that displayed itself as anger and resentment. Chad was not the only recipient of this anger, but he sure was the easiest target for it.

Not all stepchildren have this level of hurt or anger, but all stepchildren have some measure of loss. Perhaps they have experienced one or more of these losses:

- the death of a parent or the death of their family (through divorce)
- a loss of security and control over their lives
- the uncertainty that comes when death or divorce necessitates moving to a different house, new community, and new church while losing contact with friends, family, and an established social network
- the realization that parents can lie, turn their backs on people they love, and do hurtful things
- the keen awareness that tomorrow is unpredictable

- the instability of learning firsthand that God may answer prayer in a way that disappoints us or causes sadness
- the realization that despite what the pastor says, marriage is not forever and hope does not always win the day

Each loss is significant and each comes at a price. And no matter how much we wish we could talk children into feeling better, we can't erase the magnitude of these losses. Instead, the way you minister to them is to be physically present, hold their memories, and hold their sadness. Before discussing how to do so, it might be helpful to understand the scope of the grieving process for children.

THE ENDURING NATURE OF LOSS

How long do you think it will be before I "get over" my son's death? My wife and I have talked to enough other parents who have lost a child to know the answer is never. While it's true that not all losses are the same or have the same impact, I think it's safe to say your stepchildren (and children) will never get over what has changed their life forever. Does that mean they will be emotionally paralyzed, unable to function or be responsible for themselves? Not at all. But it might mean they burst into tears or express anger at the drop of a hat. Their sadness might also result in ambivalent or hot/cold responses toward you. If they emotionally warm up to you one minute and give you the cold shoulder the next, it can be very confusing. But such is the response of kids who vacillate between enjoying this moment and being angry at how they got here.

Smart Dating: Avoid a Quick Turnaround

Randall's wife passed away after a long battle with cancer. Less than a year later he reconnected with a former high school girlfriend who had been divorced just a few months. Within two months they were talking marriage. Both sets of children were highly resentful of their parents' "selfishness" and opposed the wedding. Such is often the case when parents quickly begin to date. For children the new relationship seems to invalidate the previous family and discounts their sadness. Think of children as being at least one year behind their parent in the grieving process. I recommend that biological parents wait at least two years after the death of a spouse or a divorce before remarriage. This gives children space to begin to

grieve and may prevent unnecessary resentment toward a quick remarriage. A long-term engagement is a good idea, as well.

Developmental Grieving

Loss and sadness endure even when you aren't aware of it. And loss must be reprocessed at varying developmental moments in a child's life. These moments can be related to cognitive, emotional, and physical changes or life transitions. Even relational experiences can trigger the need to again grieve the loss that gave birth to the stepfamily. Brenda brought her seventeen-year-old son, Luke, to see me for counseling. He had been depressed for about six months but it had escalated into anger. On one occasion he kicked a hole in a door because of a minor inconvenience caused by his stepfather. This alerted Brenda to get some help.

When Dad Is Deceased

- From time to time, ask children about their father and listen to their stories.
- Don't be defensive or feel awkward about references to, photos, or videos of their father.
- Give permission to your wife and her children to grieve together (e.g., time to talk, regular visits to the grave).
- Anticipate occasions that resurrect grief (e.g., Father's Day, his birthday), and find ways of openly acknowledging their hurt.

Luke's stepfather, Gary, had been part of his life since he was around four years old. For many years they got along pretty well, but recent transitions in Luke's relationship with his father had changed that. After many years of consistent involvement, Luke's dad, Samuel, dropped out of Luke's life. Samuel started dating a woman with four children and spent all of his time with them. He even missed Luke's high school graduation party. Samuel blamed his unavailability on issues with Luke's mother and stepdad (but from my point of view was hard-pressed to justify his behavior). The bottom line for Luke: he lost contact with his dad, felt rejected, and found himself without his father's validation at a momentous time in his life—high school graduation.

What is obvious is how the loss of his dad's affections impacted Luke's mood; what is not so easily noticed is how that loss resurrected his grief over his parents' divorce. Since loss reminds us of loss, Luke began reprocessing how and why his parents divorced in the first place. "If my mom would not have left my dad back then, my dad would still be living with us today," Luke told me. "And if Gary had not gotten involved with my mom, my parents could have gotten back together again. That's what my dad told me." All of these losses combined, having a cumulative impact on Luke's heart and soul. He became depressed and angry.

This situation reveals a number of developmental grieving dynamics: Luke's changing cognitive maturity (his understanding of the adult world), the emotional climate of his home (his dad's sudden distance), and the life transition —his graduation—that was supposed to be a positive time in his life but was instead a time of great sadness. Life presents many antagonists to children's grief. What is required of you (and your wife) is a compassion for their hurt and courage not to fall victim to it.

Ministering to Their Hearts

At the beginning of the chapter I mentioned that what has been helpful to me in my grief (over the loss of my son) is also a good prescription for what you can do to minister to your stepchildren: be physically present, hold their memories, and hold their sadness. I realize the word *minister* might seem kind of strange; perhaps you haven't ever thought of yourself as a minister. But that is what you are doing. In a sense, every parent ministers to their children—we strive to teach them spiritual and practical life lessons that will shape their faith, character, and contributions to this world. More specifically, stepkids need guidance managing their grief and sadness, and you have an opportunity over time to touch their hearts in this way.

But here's an important reminder: Like many other dimensions of stepparenting, your ability to minister to a child's grief is limited by how open each child is to your influence. In a later chapter I'll discuss in more detail why it is that children sometimes receive a stepdad's authority, affection, and influence and sometimes don't. For now, consider the following strategies as possible action steps that may or may not be received well from your stepchildren. If not today, they may be received at some point in the future as your relationship and trust deepen. In other words, you can only minister to a child as much as they allow you to. Just do what you can, like Darrell.

Be Physically Present. Darrell had three children of his own and became stepdad to two more. “Kyle’s dad cancelled on him every week when I first met his mother,” Darrell told me. “On his visitation night he always had to work or do something else. It really killed Kyle, so I’d jump in to fill the void. I’d play football with him or we’d play music together. That grew into summer Frisbee and even some fishing. Kyle loves his dad, but since he just graduated high school, he now has more important things to do besides try to see his father. The best thing I did was to only take what he gave me. The first thing I ever told him when his mother and I got married was that I’m not here to replace his dad. I’m here if he needs me and here to help him learn things. Over time, I’ve taught him how to fish, how to play guitar, how to drive a vehicle, and how to change his oil.” Darrell did a lot of things right. Mostly he maintained a flexible attitude that allowed him to walk through the doors Kyle opened to him. Sometimes when a child’s father drops out of their life, it actually leads a child to close the door of relationship to their stepdad; in Darrell’s case it opened and he walked through.

For Mom

Recognize how your children’s losses impact their openness to your husband. Also, if he is suffering resistance or rejection at their hands, be sure to express your compassion and appreciation on a regular basis for the challenges he faces.

“But how do you be physically present when a kid won’t let you in?” This great question posted by a stepdad at a workshop I was conducting hits the frustration nail on the head. If a child is not open to you, it’s near impossible to take them fishing, to a concert, or do any other activity that might help you be engaged in their life. In this case, just take advantage of the opportunities you do have—and don’t take their standoffishness personally. Remember that developmental grieving may make a child’s heart closed to you during one season of their life and open to you the next. Many parents of teens know what I’m talking about. In what seems like a flash, the precious son or daughter who has idolized you from the time they were born thinks you are cheesy, ridiculous, and so not cool. It happens to the best of us. When this happened with my oldest son, I began to describe him as “closed for renovations.” His heart, soul, and mind were going through so many changes that he wasn’t very likeable, but more to the point, he didn’t like me anymore, either. It was a rough season of life

for both of us. Even more so, a stepdad can find himself trying to connect with a kid who is closed for renovations for a number of reasons. If—and when—you find yourself there, approach them gingerly, engage when and where you can, and keep trying.

Someone once told me that half of fathering is just showing up. That might be an overstatement, but it makes a good point. Keep trying to engage. The last thing you want to do as a stepdad is not show interest in your stepchild or become so put out by his or her moody rejections that you withdraw yourself. That only makes it worse. They are trying to determine if they can trust you, remember? Don't be easily offended and give them a reason to keep the door to their heart shut. Show yourself, instead, to be a steady, consistent presence in their life—someone who doesn't push too hard but won't easily go away.

Hold Their Memories. When you listen to your stepchildren talk about their memories, you give permission to their feelings and validate their previous family and the ongoing emotional attachments they have with various family members. Encouraging them to share happy stories of their family before the death or divorce, or sharing a positive story about their weekend with their father helps children feel safe with you. Not having to hide their loyalties (see chapter 4) or worry that your feelings will be hurt by such memories ministers to their hearts, but it also paradoxically moves them closer to you. If you are a safe person, they trust you more.

Engage kids and adult stepchildren alike in conversations about their family. Ask questions about family photos or videos, celebrate their time with the other home, and use special holidays or family days to ask them how they are feeling. Saying, "It's your dad's birthday next week. Can I help you think of something to get him?" not only validates the importance of their father but lets them know that you will never stand between them. Again, that makes you more attractive and worthy of respect.

Finally, take advantage of the developmental grieving of children to revisit loss and grief. "I've noticed that whenever baseball season rolls around you want to spend more time at your dad's house. You miss him more this time of year, huh?" starts a discussion that kids need to have . . . again. Of course, when you do, they might get sad . . . again.

Hold Their Sadness. You know a relationship with your stepchildren is deepening when they trust you enough to share their sadness with you. And when they do, you need to hug it. Don't fix it, just hug it.

In a general sense this is what all grieving people need, no matter what their loss. As a father who continues to grieve over the loss of my son Connor, I can tell you that what has served me best is friends and family who honor my

sadness by listening to me, checking on me from time to time, and offering verbal hugs. (It just happened again! As I was typing that last sentence I got a text message from my friend and brother-in-law Kent saying he was praying for me just now. Knowing I was on his mind and in his prayers is a verbal hug.)

Please be clear about this—you can't fix or take away someone's sadness. But you can help them cope with it. The grief book *Tear Soup* by Pat Schweibert tells the story of a woman who has been through a significant loss. To cope, she makes and eats a pot of tear soup. The soup contains her memories, reflections, regrets, and love for the person who is gone. And what ministers to her most are those who come to her home and eat the soup with her on a regular basis. Over time some people fade away and no longer want to eat that same old bitter soup. But others keep coming back to eat what they know she must eat in order to move forward. Helping your stepchildren grieve will not "eat up" their tear soup. But the sharing of it—the repeated sitting down at the table of grief with them—will see them through.

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

For Group Discussion

1. What is your loss story? Share, to whatever extent you choose, about the losses you have suffered in life. (Don't rush this part of the discussion; take time to honor each person's story.)
2. Review the bullet list of possible losses for stepchildren on page 54. Which have your stepchildren experienced?
3. Looking back, what perspectives have you gained on the pace of your dating/remarriage and how children grieve?
4. In what ways have you witnessed your stepchildren's (and children's) grief continuing to show itself in their actions and attitudes?
5. Ministering to your stepchildren's hearts means doing the following. Review and discuss how you are doing or could do each.
   Be physically present.
   Hold their memories.
   Hold their sadness.
6. Ministering to loss and sadness is frustrating for many of us because it doesn't fix it. Our support does help diminish the intensity of loss and keeps the person from becoming isolated and further depressed, but it never erases the loss. How does knowing that your stepchildren's sadness will endure

throughout life frustrate you? How can you keep yourself from pulling away from it?

Chapter 4

Understanding Her Kids (Part 2): Loyalty

Every time my stepdaughter comes home from her father's house she treats me differently and it strains our relationship.

Michael, one stepchild, two "ours" children

Things seemed to go well until my husband and I had a child together. My son started getting ignored by his stepdad. It has created a lot of pain in our home.

Lynae

It's my understanding that some mountain climbs can be accomplished solo (although having a buddy is always advised) while others can only be conquered by a team. Climbing Mount Everest is a good example. It takes teams of climbers months of pre-climbing planning and about a week of travel just to get to base camp (itself at 17,000 feet). From there it only (only?) takes about five days of climbing to reach the summit, but that's if you don't get altitude sickness (which can incapacitate or cause death at those elevations) and need to go back down the mountain for a couple days—and if weather problems don't delay your climb for a week or more. So, as one climber put it, "It takes a week to climb Everest . . . but you spend two and a half months paying for that week."[16]

For Mom

Because you are loyal to both your husband and children it's easy to get caught between them—for example, defending your kids to your husband and vice versa. Don't play peacemaker between your children

and husband too much or you may find that any tension between them shifts back on you.

Everest is not a climb you want to tackle by yourself. Each person in the team carries their own weight (and backpack) but also contributes to the success of the team. Loyalty is at the heart of this team spirit. Because of loyalty, each person knows that they belong, knows their place and role, and can rely on one another. But imagine being on a team climbing Everest and waking up one morning to find that some of your team members have left you to join another team. You'd probably feel betrayed, frustrated, and angry. Even if they came back a couple days later, their divided loyalties have eroded your team confidence and hamstrung your climb.

Stepfamily living is not a climb you want to tackle by yourself. But it's important to remember that not all team members have the same loyalties. Most stepchildren do have another team to which they are loyal, and it's normal and appropriate for them to leave your base camp for a period of time to join the other team. Learning to understand and live with this reality is a must for Smart Stepdads.

Jerry was frustrated and discouraged. He desperately wanted a deep relationship with his stepchildren but felt sabotaged by their time with their dad. "I feel like it's one step forward, two steps back after every visit. Before they leave we get along great—they even call me Dad every once in a while. But after the weekends, I'm back to being Jerry and I get lots of attitude. What is going on here?"

WHAT IS GOING ON?

Loyalty is a blessing for families. Couples need loyalty to experience confidence, permanence, and trust in their marriage. Children need to give and receive loyalty from parents to tell them that they belong and that they are loved. This provides children identity and emotional security. Loss, discussed in the previous chapter, can create a steadfast loyalty in children toward their biological parents ("loyalty on steroids"). Since loss creates the fear of more loss, children fear losing connection with those they love and seek love from most. Typically this increases their defenses against outsiders and bolsters their loyalty toward insiders. Healthy loyalty then morphs into aggressive, steadfast loyalty. When confronted with new family members, children become conflicted as they seek to determine who is considered in and who is not.

Wise stepdads know when to step back. Tim, dad of two and stepdad to two, shared, “Cole doesn’t enjoy doing things with me that he and his dad enjoy, like throwing the football and working out. I think it makes him feel guilty because those things are reserved for them. I respect that and don’t push.”

Now you can understand why Jerry’s stepkids switch back and forth in the names they use for him. It’s likely they feel a strong connection with him, which is why they sometimes call him Dad. But after spending time with their father, steadfast loyalty makes them reluctant to call him Dad. They may even feel guilty for having used it to refer to Jerry. After a few days of settling in at their mom’s house, they may again return to calling Jerry Dad (but not if their biological father is anywhere within listening distance!). No wonder you’re confused sometimes, huh?

You must understand that this type of behavior is normal and to be expected from children. It is not disloyal to you for their primary loyalties to be toward their biological mother, father, and family members. You can expect exclusive loyalty from your wife—that is part of the marital covenant. But you should not expect exclusive loyalty from your stepchildren. Instead, expect them to vacillate back and forth over time in the amount of affection and openness they feel toward you. An outward hot/cold response is typical of a child who is wrestling with internal loyalty conflicts. Children just don’t want to lose anymore; they have already lost so much in life. When circumstances get stressful, steadfast loyalty kicks in and they hold on to their biological family members more passionately, pushing you momentarily—and sometimes frequently—to the outside. This dynamic is fueled by emotional attachments.

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS IN CHILDREN AND PARENTS

When Dad Is Deceased

A child’s emotional attachment to a deceased parent continues well after their death. Children should be encouraged to keep alive their thoughts and feelings toward their deceased parent. Invite your wife to talk with her children about how they can “make room” in their heart for

you while also keeping alive their father's memory. God provides more than enough love in each of us for all the special people in our lives.

Biological parents are the primary attachment figures for children. Emotional attachments, as they are referred to by psychologists, bring a sense of security, safety, protection, and love to our experience of ourselves and others. As children grow, this allows kids to venture out from "base camp" and experience the world (the process of individuation), always knowing they can return home.[17] In addition, this strong emotional attachment empowers a biological parent's ability to discipline, punish, and influence the child.

The Child Attachments chart summarizes some of the ways that you and your wife's emotional attachments with the children will impact their responsiveness to each of you. The essential difference is this: Your wife automatically possesses a level of trust, love, and grace from her children that you must earn over time. In addition, your level of patience, how you and your wife view the children, and how you interpret their behavior will vary according to your attachment.

Take a few minutes to review each side of this chart. Notice the contrast for you as a stepparent.

CHILD ATTACHMENTS	
Children With Biological Parent	**Children With Stepparent**
Quick to offer grace in conflict. Children have a high tolerance for conflict and disappointment.	Low tolerance for conflict, easily angered and offended, capable of turning against.
Insider status. Children view parent as "part of the club" with all the rights and privileges of membership.	Outsider status. Viewed with a "you don't belong" attitude and a "you have to earn the right to membership" status. If an insider (sibling, biological parent, extended family member) has a conflict with the stepparent, the insider will likely be supported and judged right.
Auto-love. Love for the biological parent isn't decided, it's automatic and deeply felt.	Decision-love. Love must be created, nurtured, developed over time, and ultimately decided.
Auto-approval. This attitude says,	Decision-approval. Evaluates the

"If Mom says it, it must be right" and results in a natural bias toward her. It gives the benefit of the doubt and seeks to justify why she is worthy of love (even if acting immoral or irresponsible).	stepparent to determine if they are worthy of approval. Is capable of rejection when in doubt. Harsh or immoral behavior will likely receive disapproval.
Auto-trust. It is assumed that she can be trusted (even when proven otherwise).	Decision-trust. Trust is developed over time after the stepparent proves they have goodwill toward the child.
"My space is your space." This attitude says, "What's mine is yours; you have permission to enter my personal space."	"My space is mine." This attitude says, "Stepping into my space is a violation."

The contrast is striking, isn't it? A child's attachment and, therefore, loyalty to both biological parents versus you as stepdad makes a considerable difference in how they respond to your authority, discipline, and affection. In case you feel a little depressed right now, please know that as your relationship grows over time (as you climb Stepdad Mountain), so does your attachment and, therefore, ability to lead and influence your stepchildren. The above chart represents where you start, not where you finish.

In later chapters I will share with you how attachment influences your role as a disciplinarian, and I'll give you and your wife a prescription for working together to govern your home. But for now, let's stay focused on how attachment and loyalty intersect. By the way, attachment is not just about how the kids view and react to you, but how you and your wife view and react to them.

Both you and your wife need to realize that because your emotional attachments with her children differ, you will respond to,

PARENT ATTACHMENTS	
Biological Parent With Children	**Stepparent With Stepchildren**
Have a fierce love for children. For example, parents can't imagine life without the child, and they have an unconditional commitment to the child based solely on parenthood,	Stepparents have a decision-love for children. For example, they can imagine life without the child (and long for weekends without them). In addition, some stepparents have a provisional

not the merits of the child's behavior or choices.	loyalty to the child based on the success of the marriage.[18]
Have a strong moral obligation to care and provide fairly for their children. For example, parents may want to provide for college tuition or private music lessons no matter the cost.[19]	Obligations are more tentative and less easily defined. For example, stepparents may consider some costs as optional and may not feel the need to contribute to stepchildren's college tuition, instead viewing parents as financially responsible.

care for, and invest in her children differently. It's not fair for her to accuse you of not caring about her kids just because you don't have the same natural affection for them that she does. Her Mom attachment is much stronger than yours and will result in more comfortable shows of affection, compliments, and nurturing behavior. (Of course, this doesn't excuse you from trying.) Plus, both you and your stepchildren are growing a decision-love for one another. Over time this love will deepen and expand, but when stress comes, it will likely weaken for a time. Even when biological parents and children are really angry with each other, stress doesn't weaken their bond. But it does in stepparent relationships. Both you and your wife should find a way to be emotionally accepting of this difference in attachment and not blame each other for aspects of it that you can't control.

Attachment differences help parents understand why the same child can respond cordially to his mom and spitefully to his stepdad. This is similar to what biological parents of teens experience when puberty changes their sweet, innocent child overnight into someone who seems to hate them. For a couple of teenage years, many parents find that they don't know how to relate to their own kids—and don't like them much (even while family friends and teachers say the child is considerate and respectful). Being a stepdad is similar, especially when kids just aren't sure they trust you or can't resolve their inner loyalty conflicts and make space for you in their hearts. Buck up and keep trying to connect where you can.

As I mentioned in chapter 1, stepdad relationships are tentative. A weak attachment means that stress in the home can easily create distance in your relationship with a child. In my DVD series *The Smart Stepfamily*, I teach couples that stress thickens blood in stepfamilies. For you this means being marginalized by the kids (and sometimes your wife when she grows protective

of her children) when conflict, anger, and hurt occur. You must step carefully around these matters so you don't sabotage yourself.

Let me also remind you here to shave off the rough edges of your personality. If you are naturally critical, angry, and reactive, have a temper, are sarcastic, or are moody, you need to smooth off those rough edges. A fragile attachment means you won't get the benefit of the doubt from kids (or your wife). Remember that they need a reason to trust you. They don't need much of a reason to shut you out, so don't give them one.

Favoring Your Kids

Another matter of attachment relates to your biological children (if you don't have any, keep reading just in case you have an "ours" baby someday). One stepdad, Mike, said, "I did not realize how hard it would be to love my stepdaughter the same as my two biological children." His honest statement is one that acknowledges the attachment difference. Stepdads who have their own children recognize more profoundly the differences in affection, responsibility, and love they feel toward their stepchildren. But feeling different should not translate into inequity in how you treat them. The trap is in favoring your children. Noncustodial dads sometimes feel guilty that they are with their stepchildren more than their biological children. Some measure of guilt is to be expected in this situation, but again, that feeling should not impact your treatment of the children. Strive to be fair.

Scripture is filled with stories of parents who favored one child over others. Rebekah favored her younger son, Jacob, over his brother, Esau (see Genesis 27), and conspired with Jacob to steal the paternal blessing from Isaac. This divided the family and resulted in Esau trying to hunt down Jacob to kill him. That's one predictable outcome of parental favoritism: sibling rivalry.

Jennifer could relate. She emailed us at Successful Stepfamilies saying, "I have four children, and my husband, Rob, has two. We very seldom argue, but when we do the issue is that he is harsher in disciplining my children than his own. When he brings up issues, I tend to get upset and defensive. I try to listen objectively but it is very difficult. Plus, my kids resent having to do things his children don't. Now they are fighting." Favoritism, whether related to gift giving, affections, or how punishment is delivered, is very divisive.

The point is simple (though it may not be simple to live out): Do your best to treat your children and your stepchildren fairly. Does this mean that you have to be vigilant in appropriating your time and money so that everyone gets the same amount? Generally yes, but specifically no. Biological parents in first-families

don’t spend, for example, the exact same amount of money on each child during birthdays. That is influenced by the age of the child, their likes, interests, and developmental maturity. Similarly, these considerations may mean you spend more on your child one year than a stepchild, but the next year just the opposite might be true.

Another example relates to special time spent with a child. It is entirely healthy to have special father-child outings (e.g., a hunting trip or a getaway) with just one or two children and not others. But be sure to balance such occasions with other children as time allows. For example, if visitation with your children is on the weekends, you may want to spend a Saturday afternoon with just your children to make the most of your time. You don’t have to feel guilty about making this a priority. However, I would discourage you from making this a habit every weekend. Instead, alternate your outings over time with different combinations of kids. It may be that the special time you set aside with your stepchildren occurs most of the time during the week because it is more convenient. But stay flexible and adjust your schedule in order to communicate a strong commitment to both children and stepchildren. The point is, don’t have obvious inequalities in how you treat your children and your stepchildren over time. You can “exasperate” a child—and your wife—in a hurry by doing so (see Ephesians 6:4).

LOYALTY CONFLICTS FOR CHILDREN

Let’s return to the story of Jerry at the beginning of the chapter. He had a loving relationship with his stepchildren, which is why they called him Dad most of the time. But sometimes they didn’t, especially after spending time with their biological dad. This is a classic illustration of the loyalty conflicts children face on an almost daily basis. Kids don’t want to choose between people they love (nor should they be asked to), but if push comes to shove, their primary attachments to biological parents will probably win out over steprelationships simply because of the steadfast loyalty I discussed earlier. Further, if a child’s biological parents are divided, the child is continuously caught in an emotional tug-of-war. But even when ex-spouses are respectful of each other, children may fear being perceived as preferring one home over the other. Kids don’t want to choose one relationship because doing so might cost them the other.

Let me share some ways loyalty conflicts get played out in children, and then I’ll share some things you can do to help.

Smart Dating

Because dating is inconsistent with actual stepfamily life, loyalty conflicts may not be evident until after the wedding. Keep in mind:

- Dating naturally limits how much children must "share" their mother with you. After you marry, loyalty issues may increase.
- Sometimes ex-husbands who said little about you before the wedding escalate their negative chatter after the wedding. This can add loyalty guilt to children.
- Therefore, move slowly toward marriage. Feeling accepted by your future stepchildren in the early stages of dating is no guarantee of acceptance after the wedding.

Different House, Different Child

Children respond to adults in a way that preserves the relationship with that adult. This includes avoiding the appearance of choosing one over the other, even if it means flip-flopping their posture. This Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior can be very confusing at times.

By all accounts, eleven-year-old David really enjoyed going fishing with his stepdad, Tom. But when a teacher at David's school shared that David had been telling his father he really hated having to go fishing, Tom and his wife were shocked. Had David been lying all along? And if not, why would he tell his dad that?

On the surface this appears to be an issue of manipulation by David. But likely David is protecting his relationship with his father by downplaying his affections for his stepdad. Steadfast loyalty and the fear of making his father angry is leading him to change who he is in each household. (Keep in mind that this works both ways. You and your wife should be cautious in assuming that everything you hear from the children about life in the other home is entirely accurate. Realize children may filter information with an agenda of preserving the relationship with you. Listen and verify.)

When you perceive that a child is skewing information in such a way that makes you look bad, decide as a couple how to proceed. In extreme situations you will need to speak to the situation. Complete unity is necessary before speaking to the child, and Mom should probably do most of the talking. A loving

confrontation may be needed beginning with, “We know that being in the middle stinks. We also know that sometimes you feel compelled to say things to both parents in order to show your loyalty. We understand that you might feel like it’s wrong to side with one parent. Is that right? [Pause for response.] When you tell your father inaccurate stories about this home it leads to conflict between us and him. Please stop. We would rather you be honest with him and with us. If you are afraid to be entirely honest with your dad, we ask you not to say negative things about us. What might you say next time?” Then dialogue with the child to create an action plan.

Parentified Children

Low-functioning parents invite excessive caretaking from children. When a parent cannot manage life on his or her own, children are more than willing to fulfill the role of caretaker for the parent. A child may go to great lengths to take care of a depressed, mentally confused, or overburdened parent. This might include checking on the parent throughout the day or week, worrying about their well-being, spending excessive time and energy looking after the parent, or being abrasive toward their mother and stepdad.

If this is your situation, seek out a counselor, student minister, or influential uncle to spend time with the child and help them see that they don’t have to carry this undue burden of responsibility. They will not be easily convinced to let go of their low-functioning parent. Letting go often requires emotional maturity and an independent self-esteem, which often only comes with young adulthood. In the meantime, your role as the stepdad is to remain patient and understand the child’s dilemma.

Helping Children Cope: What You Can Do

Helping children cope with loyalty conflicts starts with all parental figures remembering that you are not in competition for the child’s loyalty; they have more than enough love to share with everyone. Next, read and share with all adults involved in parenting the free online resource “Parenting After Divorce,” an e-booklet available for download at *www.SuccessfulStepfamilies.com/co-parenting*. It helps parents and stepparents find a cooperative working relationship and encourages parents not to exacerbate the loyalty conflicts of children. Plus, it might be able to share some principles and have a voice with the adults in the other home that you do not.

Affirm Primary Loyalties. Tell your stepchildren, “If I were you, my first loyalty would be to my dad.” This validates their feelings and lets them know

that you are not in competition with him. Stepchildren (especially adult stepchildren) typically respect and respond positively to this quality in a stepfather (although you may not see this respect for some time). A stepdad, on the other hand, who openly competes with the biological dad is usually thought of in negative terms and actively resisted.

Give the No-Threat Message. The next step in affirming a child's loyalties is to affirm the biological dad himself. This respectful and honoring message speaks directly to any perceived threat he may have about you being involved with his kids. If he fears your presence then he might pull on his kids' loyalties, essentially asking them to take care of him by being harsh toward you. The No-Threat Message might help him relax about you.

Verbal communication is best, but for the stepdad coping with a hostile environment, the message can be communicated by email or letter.

> Doug, since we are both involved with your kids, I wanted to take a minute to tell you something. I want you to know that I totally respect your role as father of these children. I'm not their dad—you are—and I will never try to take your place. I am honored to be their stepdad; they are great kids. I view my role as one of support to their mother, and my desire is to be a blessing to them. I promise to speak well of you and work together for their benefit. I desire to make their lives easier, not more difficult. Please know that I pray for them every day. If there's anything I can do to help the situation or if you have any concerns, feel free to contact me.

Then, whenever possible, show this honor and respect to him. For example, defer your seat at a concert, school function, or graduation if only one remains. And make sure you encourage his kids to speak well of him behind his back. This type of behavior will show him that you are not trying to take his place.

Speak to the Child's Circumstances. When kids are really stuck between homes, speak gently to their circumstances. "I can see that you are stuck between your dad's house and ours. I hate that for you. It must be really hard having your dad and stepmom encouraging you to go to one church and youth group while we want you to go to another. That must feel like a no-win situation for you, huh?" This brings compassion to a difficult situation and invites conversation about the predicament. Over time this gracious attitude facilitates trust and emotional closeness.

Celebrate Joy and Relationship in the Other Home. Say things like, "I'm so glad your dad and stepmom took you to the amusement park on vacation! Tell

me all about it." Resist the urge to defend yourself or use the moment as a weapon to vent your anger: "We would have taken you ourselves but since your dad doesn't pay child support on time we just can't afford it." This sort of bitter defensiveness loudly communicates to your stepchild that sharing joys with you is not a good idea. This makes you unsafe.

Helping children anticipate important family events is another form of celebration. Help them to find an anniversary card to give their father and stepmother or a birthday gift for a sibling. This demonstrates a gracious spirit on your part and gives them permission to love.

Speak Well of Their Dad. Did you ever notice that it's okay for you to say something negative about a family member, but if an outsider bashes them you immediately come to their defense? In the same manner, a child's loyalty to his or her father will shift into overdrive if you speak negatively about him. If you have a negative comment to communicate, make sure to say it outside the earshot of the children.

When Dad Is Deceased

Don't offend adult stepchildren by implying that you have replaced their father. This stirs a defensiveness and resistance toward you.

- Let them lay claim to family heirlooms that have sentimental value.
- Tell your stepgrandchildren stories about the deceased grandfather; this sustains the family story and honors his legacy and family history.
- Think of yourself as a new in-law to the family, not a "father" to the children.

Let the Bullet Bounce. Negative comments toward you are almost a given. Poisonous words may come from the stepchildren, your wife's ex-husband, former in-laws, or friends of the first family. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to let the bullet bounce.

Even when wearing a bulletproof vest, police officers who are shot in the line of duty confess that it hurts very badly. The person is often knocked off their feet, and a deep bruise results, but they live to tell the story because the bullet

doesn't penetrate. It bounces off. You, too, can choose to put on a thick shield when cruel, unfair, and hurtful comments are fired. The ammunition will emotionally knock you off your feet and leave bruises, but only you decide whether it will kill you or your marriage.

But don't stop there. Pray for those who speak evil of you. Jesus put it this way: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43–45). Godly love demonstrates itself in countless simple acts of kindness and graciousness, and sometimes thick skin, all of which stand as a testimony to everyone that you are a child of the Father.

With that said, let us now speak to self-protection. Putting on a bulletproof vest does not mean you should passively stand as someone's target. Finding the strength to bear up under the harsh words and praying for your persecutor does not mean you have to passively let someone abuse you. Feel free to physically remove yourself from a harsh situation or speak directly to the person: "Stop. You may not speak to me that way. If you want to discuss an issue I am more than happy to work through it with you, but you may not criticize or judge me that way." If they will not stop, remove yourself from the situation. Be sure to communicate with your wife and create a plan to help shield your heart from future attacks.

Sometimes, Take the Short End of the Stick. A Smart Stepdad knows this sacrifice may be necessary at times. For example, stepchildren who are consistently made to feel guilty by the other home for liking you need your permission to appear disloyal in order to prevent disapproval or anger from the other household. It may be the only way through for them. Sometimes love chooses the "short end of the stick." And the heavenly Father, who sees what is done in secret, will offer reward (Matthew 6:1–4). For example, you might say something like, "Hey, buddy, I really enjoyed our fishing weekend together. But I also know you can't always talk openly about fun times like this. At times I get the feeling that it isn't safe for you to tell your dad and stepmom about our time together; that's understandable to me. It's okay if you choose to downplay it. I just value our time together—that's good enough for me."

When Dad Is Deceased

One young adult said that her mom's wedding felt like another funeral for her dad. Loyalty to deceased parents can be strong and,

in some cases, even more determined than loyalty to a living parent.

- Children need to keep alive the memory of their father. If loving you means risking "forgetting" their father, you will find their loyalty wall very tall.
- Find ways of honoring their father.
- Children (of all ages) still experience an internal tug-of-war between the biological parent and stepparent even when the parent is deceased. They can imagine conversations and things the father might say and find themselves stuck in the middle.

Pass the "Test." After sixteen years as a loving, involved stepfather, Grant started hearing something from his stepdaughter that he had never heard before: "You're not my dad. I don't have to do what you say." Those words stung pretty deep. Grant questioned himself: Maybe he and Cassandra weren't as close as he thought. But their tight daddy-daughter relationship seemed real for many years. Why would she say something like this? I spent some time with Cassandra to find out. At first I thought maybe something had changed in her relationship with her father; sometimes changes in the other home can trigger loyalty conflicts. But not much had changed in her relationship with her biological dad. He had been MIA for many years and remained disconnected from her life. Then I asked when it was that she found herself saying this to him. "When he is telling me I can't do something and I want him to change his mind," she said. Her honesty took me back, but it was refreshing. "Oh, so it's your trump card to try and get what you want," I reflected. Again, she owned it. She just needed something to challenge his authority, and that seemed the best way to get at him (and it was). But more important, our conversation helped Cassandra realize that she also needed to know if Grant would pass the test. "I'm wondering if he really loves me enough to put up with me. My dad said *he* did, but he doesn't. I need to know if Grant is for real." Cassandra knew she loved Grant, but she just wasn't sure she could lean on him.

Part-time Stepdad

Many times you may feel like you're moving two steps forward and one step back with your stepchildren. They may put you to the test repeatedly since your time with them is limited. Don't let discouragement keep you from passing the test.

Whether your stepchildren know they are testing your commitment to them or not, you need to pass the test. Have a stubborn, never-quit love for them (just as our heavenly Father does for each of us), and don't be easily offended when they seemingly push you to the side. They just might be hoping they can count on you to hold your ground.

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

For Group Discussion

1. Share a time when you felt frustrated or discouraged because your stepchildren's loyalties were pulling them away from you.
2. The fear of losing contact or connection with one's father leads children to be *unreasonably* loyal. Share a way this dynamic is true in your family.
3. Review the Child Attachments chart on page 67. Describe the contrasts between children's responses to their mother (and/or father) and you.
4. Given the different level of attachment to you, what are you learning about being a stepparent?
5. If you are a biological father (having full attachment with your children), how is parenting your children different from parenting your stepchildren?
6. Review the second chart on page 68 examining Parent Attachments from biological parent and stepparent viewpoints. Discuss the differences between your wife's fierce love and your decision-love for the children. How does this reveal itself in your family?
7. What kinds of moral obligations does your wife feel toward the kids that you do not?
8. Because in the early years your position in the family is tentative, you must manage your personality and behavioral weaknesses. Reread this sentence from p. 70: "If you are naturally critical, angry, and reactive, have a temper, are sarcastic, or are moody, you need to smooth off those rough edges. A fragile attachment means you won't get the benefit of the doubt from kids

(or your wife).” What rough edges of your personality or parenting style do you need to smooth out?

9. What loyalty conflicts do you see occurring within your stepchildren? Your biological children?
10. Review the “Helping Children Cope: What You Can Do” section beginning on page 74. Which strategies apply to you and your family?

Section II

Getting Smart:
The Stepparenting Team

Okay. Let's get practical. Becoming a Smart Stepdad involves:

- *teamwork with your wife;*
- *having an ambassador attitude toward the other home;*
- *understanding what motivates the attitudes and behaviors of stepchildren; and*
- *having a full set of tools in your parenting toolbox.*

This section will walk both you and your wife (or dating partner) through each of these topics. Her too? Yes, the next two chapters are written for both you and her. Parenting in stepfamilies is a team sport; you must learn to work together. Your success as stepdad is heavily dependent upon your wife's help, support, and partnership in parenting. Chapters 5 and 6 will help your wife (or dating partner) understand her role as your teammate, so invite her to read them with you. Doing your job pivots on her doing hers. Let's start there.

Chapter 5

Mom Smart (Part 1): He Can't Do It Without You

My stepdaughter did not respect me, and my wife didn't back me up; we did not stand together and it caused a lot of arguments and division in our home.

Anthony, stepdad to two, father to one

Welcome, Mom! It's an honor to have you join your boyfriend or husband and me for this part of our journey up Stepdad Mountain. (If you haven't read any of the previous chapters, ask him to explain what that means.)

He can't do it without you. "Do what?" you ask. Be successful as a stepfather. Yes, he's a great guy and the man of your dreams (or hopefully he at least looks like the man of your dreams), but being a stepdad is as much about the mom as it is about him. That's why we've asked you to read chapters 5 and 6 with us, so the two of you can strengthen your parenting alliance and together bring many blessings to your children. (By the way, you are welcome to read the rest of the book, as well. We're not hiding anything.) This, of course, will also reap many rewards for your marriage. After all, couples in stepfamilies are most frequently undone if they can't find a mutually agreeable role for the stepfather. Getting you two on the same parenting page really is important. You don't want to be like Anthony and Linda.

Anthony was smart enough to recognize that Linda needed to be the primary authority for her two daughters. He respected her role and didn't try to force his way in. That was pretty easy with the younger stepdaughter, but not so much with Lauren, the fifteen-year-old. Lauren didn't respect Anthony and was pretty vocal about her feelings toward him. "He's not my dad and never will be," she'd repeat. "He's so annoying."

Linda felt caught between Lauren and Anthony. Peace between them seemed impossible no matter what she did, but nevertheless, she tried to be the peacemaker. Part of the problem was that Lauren knew when to play the game; she rarely showed her venom toward Anthony unless her mother was not around. That's when her icy stares and passive resistance really shone through. Because Linda didn't see this behavior, she found it difficult to hear Anthony's complaints. Instead, she tended to defend her daughter.

Anthony recounted a typical scenario. "Lauren has a hard time answering to me for anything. When her mom's around she will ask her for permission, but if not, she bypasses me altogether and just does it. I would get mad and blow my top, her mother would defend her, and the cycle would repeat itself over and over again. There's nothing worse than feeling divided in your marriage and marginalized in your own home."

There are a number of observations we can make from this story:

- Anthony knew enough to let his wife take the lead with her daughters (I'll say more about this later), but because Linda didn't create an expectation of respect from Lauren toward Anthony, there was none. He felt betrayed and defeated.
- Feelings of defeat brought out Anthony's anger and "rough edges" (see chapter 1). He needs to better manage his reactions; a harsh response makes Linda's support even more unlikely.
- Stepdads have limited power with children, especially in the first few years. It is the mom's job to set him up for success.

Now, let's take some time to unpack these observations.

FROM GOOD TO GREAT

There are lots of good teams, but there are only a few great ones. Here are five key principles to move the two of you toward greatness.

Principle 1: Moms Should Take the Primary Parenting Role With Their Kids; Stepdads the Secondary Role

A stepfather's role has many uncertainties surrounding it for children, adults, and extended family members. But no one questions Mom's role. That's why you must stay the chief parent in your home, especially around matters of nurturance, comfort, and punishment. If you were lax in following through with consequences as a single parent, you must pick up the role of being the "bad

guy.” Don’t try to hand that off to your husband as “man of the house.” Until he has developed a strong bond of trust with your children, which can take many years, he can’t take on that responsibility. It must fall to you.

For Mom

During the early years of stepfamily living, mothers sometimes decrease discipline and supervision of their children. This creates a gap in family structure that tempts stepdads to step in when the timing may not be best. Have you dropped the ball?

In other words, stepdads can be a husband much sooner than they can be a father. The pace and timing of moving into a parenting role is a complicated process that is moderated by several issues, including the ages and personalities of your children, the relationship they have with their biological father, the number of losses they have experienced, how much time they spend in your home—the list goes on. The point is, always and forever, you are the safest, most well-defined parent figure in your home. Therefore, you must act like it.

First Violin, Second Violin. Family therapist Bill Doherty uses an analogy to articulate this principle: Biological parents play first violin, and stepparents second violin.[20] In biological families, both Mom and Dad can play first violin with the children because they hold equal status with the kids. Unless your husband and children have many years of relationship under their belts, it’s likely that he does not have first-violin status whether you like it or not. So play to your strengths.

In a symphony, first violins and second violins play the same notes, but first violins take the lead and set the pace for the violin section. Similarly, you and your husband must play and determine your parenting notes together. Rather than trying to play a solo in every circumstance, you should find ways of making him part of the music. But you will by default take the lead much of the time with your children.

Stepdad to Stepdad

“Function like a parent, but always remember that you are not a parent.”

Ronald

"Understand that generally you are not the lead parent, but that does not diminish at all the importance of your role."

Danny

"Initially I suggest that a stepdad speak to his spouse about what he dislikes about the stepkids' behavior—but more as an observer than as an active participant. It is important that my wife and stepkids know where my boundaries are, but I do not feel that it is my place to discipline them before we have some shared experiences together. I now know that there is so much more to be gained by my expressions of love than my delivering of punishment."

Tim

Practically this means that he must seek a balance in the parenting tasks of conveying warmth and nurturance to children while providing some oversight to their behavior. Behind closed doors you may negotiate household expectations together (see the parental unity rules below), but he'll leave delivering those expectations to you since you are the mom. He can then function in a "supportive to the rules" role: carrying out the morning routine before school, checking on homework, giving allowances, supervising chores and the daily schedule, and teaching moral and spiritual lessons when appropriate. This leaves the more intimate aspects of parenting—for example, coaching children through their fears, struggles, and heartaches—to their mother. Please keep in mind that as his relationship with the children deepens he will be able to grow into a first violin role as well.

It Helps If You Follow the Parental Unity Rules

- Rule #1: Be proactive together. Don't wait until problems occur. Whenever possible, anticipate situations and set boundaries. This should include discussion to determine behavioral expectations, preferred methods of punishment and consequences, and the values you wish to instill in the children.
- Rule #2: When in doubt, call a parental powwow. It's okay for children to hear the words, "I don't know. I'll get back to you on that" from either of

you. You can then call a meeting to discuss the situation. This is difficult for some biological parents who are used to making all the decisions. But do not underestimate the message this communicates to your kids. When you seek, respect, and honor your husband's input in parenting decisions, it will speak volumes about your unity as a couple. This will help to dissolve their efforts to "divide and conquer" and strengthen your marriage. Even if it's inconvenient or uncomfortable, go the extra mile to ensure agreement. You won't regret it.

- Rule #3: If you don't appreciate how your husband handled a situation, have a private discussion. Two big mistakes a mother can make are to make negative, critical comments about the stepdad in front of the kids and to reverse his decisions behind his back. Either of those responses steals his authority, which is already under scrutiny. The appropriate response is to listen to his explanation of what happened (keeping in mind that kids often leave out significant parts of the story). If you don't agree with his actions, acknowledge his good intentions and then calmly share your thoughts about the situation and how you wish to handle it the next time. You could say something like, "I appreciate that you were trying to teach Ryan a lesson. I understand what you were attempting to accomplish, but I'm not sure that's the best way to handle Ryan. Can I share my point of view with you?" Refrain from turning this into a competition. The goal should be to find a solution that you can both support.
- Rule #4: Communicate any major changes, rules, or expectations to the children together. If you as a couple have decided on a rule change, it's best if the mom takes the lead in sharing the change (first violin), with the stepdad standing beside her (second violin). This is particularly important in the early years of your family. He can certainly add to the conversation, but Mom's voice should clearly communicate the change.

Be Sure to Keep Respect a High Priority. Being defined as secondary is difficult for many men since it has the appearance of disrespect. Being a man myself and knowing how important it is to the male species to receive respect, let me clearly say that being secondary is not about value, leadership, or status. It is a matter of relational power.

In chapter 4, I shared with your husband how emotional attachment gives biological parents a constant source of parental power and influence with children. Because you are Mom, your children grant you automatic love, approval, authority, and grace in conflict. Stepdads don't get automatic anything. And since they have to develop attachment with children, they should not press

the limits of their authority too quickly. So, as I'll detail throughout this chapter, the mom-stepdad team needs to lean on your power until such time as he has obtained love and trust from your kids.

That is why you need to continually communicate your respect for him and insist that your children show a basic level of respect for him (as they would to any adult), as well. Stepdads feel disenfranchised as it is; to also feel disrespected and powerless to do anything about it will likely cause him to withdraw emotionally from your children (and perhaps from you). As his wife, it is your responsibility to show appreciation for him; as the primary parent in your home, it is your job to make sure your children respect him.

Servant Leadership. A pastor who heard me talking about this in a workshop asked an excellent question: "Doesn't playing second violin take a man out of his biblical headship role?" "Not at all," I said. "But it does change the way he goes about leading." In my first book, *The Smart Stepfamily,* I discussed this matter in great detail. I'll summarize my thoughts for you again here.

The biblical role of husband as the "head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:23) is not about his having power for personal gain. It is not license for selfishness. Instead, Paul challenges men to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). And how did Christ love the church (that is, us)? Did he use his authority to push her around? Did he become dictatorial and commanding? Not at all. Rather, Christ used his power to make us more than we could be by ourselves (see Ephesians 5:25–29). He sought our best interests and sacrificed himself to make it happen. And in the process, Christ gently invited us to adopt the ways of God and walk in his paths. He was a servant leader.

A stepfather can still perform all of these functions, but he may have to do so from behind the curtain. The stepchildren may never realize how much he is influencing the direction and decisions of the family because their mother is the principle communicator even though he is leading. They may not appreciate all he does for the family in the manner of financial provision, being an example of Christ, or demonstrating a high standard for conduct and love, but he is still serving. The issue is not leadership, but how he leads. A wise stepfather will work closely with his wife to lead through her parental strength until such a time that his relationship with the children is strong enough for him to step out from behind the curtain.

A Vicious Sabotage. Mom, there is one thing you could do that would sabotage this entire plan: be a paralyzed parent. Some moms are well-intentioned and try to protect their children from further stress or disappointment. These moms don't play first violin; they won't even pick up their instrument. Rick

posted a comment on SuccessfulStepfamilies.com. “My stepdaughter was fourteen when my wife and I married. I had no children, but thought I knew how to parent! My wife was paralyzed by guilt over her divorce and the fact that her ex abandoned her and her daughter.” Rick went on to explain that he tried to fill the gap left behind by his wife’s inability to follow through with discipline or to set behavioral expectations for her daughter. But filling the gap when he didn’t have the relational equity to do so just meant more chaos in the home. His stepdaughter would complain or whine to her mother, which kicked in Mom’s protective nature; she would defend her daughter and Rick found himself being sabotaged.

Moms sometimes get paralyzed because they are puzzled by child development and what constitutes good parenting. They love their children immensely but aren’t equipped with discipline strategies and practical tools for parenting. If this is you (and your husband), you will benefit from chapter 7 on good parenting practices.

Other mothers have been paralyzed for some time (often beginning in the single-parent years) due to emotional exhaustion, guilt, or fear. Guilt—for example, over what your children have suffered whether by death or divorce—can make you soft as a parent. I sympathize with these overwhelming emotions. But the belief that taking it easy on the kids will somehow heal their pain simply isn’t true. In fact, it prolongs it. They learn that being sad, depressed, or angry has a secondary benefit because it gets them what they want. They also learn maladaptive behavioral patterns, such as passive-aggression, to cope with their stress and relationship circumstances. “Fine! I’ll just go live at Dad’s house” carries a lot of weight with a guilt-paralyzed parent. It also sabotages any action the stepfather may attempt because he can’t raise the standard of conduct any higher than you do. Empathy and sorrow for your children are normal emotions, but leniency shouldn’t be the result. Guilt is not the problem. Being paralyzed by it is. If this describes how you’ve been parenting, admit it. Talk with your husband about how you might make some changes and start playing first violin—now.

Principle 2: Trust His Heart

Do you ever wonder if your husband loves your kids as much as you do? Perhaps he has expressed criticism about one of your children and it bothered you. And before you know it, you are playing defense for your kids. If you have ever had such a temptation, you are not alone.

Biological parents share a deep attachment bond with their child. This flesh-and-blood connection results in a natural trust from each parent in the goodwill of the other parent toward the child. When biological parents disagree, rarely if ever do they accuse one another of not loving the child; you don't hear one parent judging the other by saying, "You raised your voice to Chris because you don't love her." No, the assumption is always that the other parent loves the child and has good intentions.

This dynamic works differently in stepfamilies. It is very easy for a biological parent to question the motive of a stepparent. That's because the bond between stepparent and stepchild is different and everyone knows it. My caution to you is to avoid the trap of harsh judgment of your husband's motives. You may not agree with how he manages every situation, but be careful not to assume that he doesn't care about them. That accusation sets your heart against his.

Cohabitation and Smart Dating

Many couples who cohabit do so for financial reasons or as a trial marriage. Far from the safety of a committed marriage, a cohabiting relationship actually facilitates relationship decline. Research shows that cohabiting couples are less happy, more depressed, less financially supportive of each other, less sexually committed, more negative about marriage, have lower levels of premarital relationship satisfaction and, if they marry after cohabiting, have a higher divorce rate than couples who do not cohabit. God's boundaries around sexuality are meant to protect us from these and other damaging outcomes. Seek God's best for your marriage.[21]

It is my experience that most stepfathers have exceedingly goodwill toward their stepchildren. They want the best for them. Stepdads who are also biological fathers may not feel the same emotional connection with stepchildren as they do their own children, and that's perfectly natural. Even that doesn't mean he isn't lovingly trying to do what is best for them. His bond with your children can never equal yours, but his goodwill can.

Principle 3: Declare Loyalty to Your Husband

Walking down the aisle of matrimony may seem like a strong enough statement that you are married, but it's not. Your children came first, and when

stress occasionally comes to your home, your children might assume that you will put them first—even over your husband. Your children need to feel your unconditional love, for certain. But they also need to know of your undying devotion to your husband and marriage. Declaring your loyalty has two aspects.

1. Tell your kids. Throughout their lifetime, children need to hear you repeatedly share that you and your husband will always be together. This is not a statement of preference (your husband over your children), but a statement of *permanence*. If your children believe there's a chance that he won't be around at some point, their motivation to include him and respect his role in their lives diminishes tremendously.
2. Show your kids. Actions speak much louder than words. If you say you are committed to your husband but undercut him every time he disciplines the children, your actions are a contradiction to your words. If you typically let a child's opinion or mood sway your decisions more so than your husband's opinion, your actions will sabotage his role in the family. You must make him a full-fledged member of the parenting team by using your actions to back up your stated loyalty.

Principle 4: Understand His Level of Authority

During the past two decades, stepfamily research has consistently shown that stepparents do not walk into the new family with the same amount of parenting power as biological parents.

For Mom: Smart Dating

During casual dating, it is probably best for your boyfriend to have a "hands-off" parenting posture. Once engaged, you can intentionally begin to pass power to him and elevate his status in the minds of the children. Keep in mind that his authority will not be completely tested until after the wedding. Only when he begins to enforce real-life consequences will both of you discover how much status the children are granting him.

Children have a variety of authority figures in their life, and each person has his or her own level of influence or authority status. Teachers have authority over children, but not as much authority as parents have. Coaches, camp

counselors, and youth pastors all have a certain measure of power, as well, but not as much as Grandma. Children accept authority from many sources.

Stepdads have a certain measure of authority status;[22] however, it may change over time. The day you got married, your husband became like a teacher on the first day of school; he had positional authority. A police officer has positional authority, as does a boss at work. Their position offers them an appropriate measure of authority in a given realm. When the school year begins, a teacher can tell students to sit down and be quiet, and the students will obey because the teacher has authority (and perhaps the threat of sending them to the principal's office). But as the school year progresses, something changes. As students and teachers get to know one another and the children begin to like the teacher, the nature of their connection shifts from position to relationship. This results in relational authority that is far more influential. The children now behave because they like the teacher and trust that she cares for them. The relationship is stronger because the children respond due to a bond with the person, not fear or forced submission.

A stepfather's level of authority will evolve similarly as his relationship bond and trust within the family grows. His status likely falls into one of three possibilities: baby-sitter, uncle, or parent mentor. The pace at which he progresses through each level is determined by numerous factors such as the age of the child, the previous family experiences (positive or negative), and whether a biological father chastises the kids for liking him.[23] The tempo is also impacted by the similarities between the couple's parenting styles plus how much you, as the mom, esteem and support his place in the family. Here are the differing levels of stepdad authority:

Level 1: Baby-Sitter. Baby-sitters, like teachers, initially don't possess a great deal of status. In fact, they only have influence (or power) with children because the parent passes power to them. Children who are taught to respect all adults and various authorities in their life during the first-family and single-parent years have an easier time granting this level of status to their stepdad. For these kids, the stepdad is just one more authority figure in their life that Mom expects them to obey. However, children who were not taught basic respect for adults early in life may find it difficult to grant a stepdad even a low-level status.

Stepdad to Stepdad

"Given the relationship my stepkids (ages eleven to sixteen when I married their mom) have with their biological dad, my practice 99

percent of the time is to keep my mouth shut. My wife has my back. After many years I've found that my youngest stepson respects me more because he now realizes how much I shut my mouth when I had every right to speak up and come down on him. My two older stepsons now have a closer tie to me emotionally and spiritually than their biological dad due to my going slow with discipline."
Grant, 4 biological kids, 3 stepkids

All stepparents start at level one. How long a stepdad stays there cannot be predicted. What is clear is that baby-sitters only have as much power as the biological parent allows; they can enforce rules, expectations, and consequences with stepchildren, but ultimately they live on borrowed power from the biological parent.

Level 2: Uncle. Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles typically have more authority with children than non-family members. Children naturally accept them as family and grant them a stronger voice of influence.

Stepdads who grow into level two have relational authority that baby-sitter stepdads do not. They are viewed as an extended family member and afforded a stronger influence. For example, in addition to enforcing household rules, it's possible you'll make your own and find them respected. In stressful times, fall back on your wife's power and let her take the lead when imposing significant consequences.

For Mom: When Dad Is Deceased

A number of unique challenges can be experienced in this situation:

- Each increase in status may resurrect grief in the child's heart. Allowing your husband more room in their heart may feel like "forgetting" Dad.
- Children can unfairly compare how they imagine their father would parent them to your husband's style. Don't get caught arguing about whether or not their father would act a particular way. Say, "That might have been your dad's way, but your stepdad and I have discussed this and this is the rule now."

> Then show compassion: “I can see that you miss your dad; I do, too.”

Level 3: Parent Mentor. Some stepdads achieve a high degree of influence and a healthy bond with stepchildren by taking on the role of parent mentor. When reaching adulthood, these children often refer to their stepdad as “the man who raised me” or “one of my two dads.” Emotional attachments are very strong and parental status high. These stepfathers don’t blink when disciplining the children because the relationship has risen to a level of trust where the child doesn’t question his authority.

There is no way to predict how long it will take for your husband to move from one level to another—or if an advance is even possible. And it’s not all within his control; the emotional responses of your children and their relationship with their biological father make a significant difference in this journey. Therefore, refrain from making the next level a goal. No matter what his current level of authority, try to enjoy what you have going for you, work as a team, and make wise choices. Tim and his wife did this and it really paid off.

> “After marrying my wife, I moved in with her and her two teenagers. I was definitely the outsider. Rituals, duties, and schedules were already in place. It wasn’t my place to change things to make myself more comfortable. And my wife wasn’t comfortable with my inserting myself into situations where she was counseling or disciplining the children. I found that my role was to be there to support my wife and to be patient when things were not being done the way I liked or expected.
>
> “Over the past two years, however, my wife has become more willing to have me step in and be the disciplinarian as she and her kids have grown to trust my counsel and my boundaries. I can now communicate my expectations to the kids, and they are more interested in trying to meet those expectations.”
>
> **TIM**

Finally, as you progress through the levels discussed above, avoid the trap of expecting to hear your children call your husband Dad. If they do use that term, then by all means, let them! But if they choose not to, guard your heart from disappointment. Some moms and stepdads view “Dad” as their ultimate goal, the

top prize for all the hard work, money, time, and grief endured while investing in the children's lives. But receiving that title, even after many years, would be rare. Research clearly indicates that children generally reserve terms like "Dad" and "Mom" for their biological parents, and not using them for their stepparent is not an indication of lack of affection, love, or trust.[24] Ironically, moms and stepdads who grow impatient to hear this special term inadvertently increase the distance and conflict with the stepchildren (especially in the adolescent years). So relax. Let his relationship be the barometer of his significance to your children, not what they call him.

For Mom: When You Have Adult Children

Obviously, passing power to a stepfather of adult children is not critical to his role. He isn't trying to discipline them; rather, he is trying to develop an adult-to-adult relationship or friendship. However, mothers should still communicate to adult children the expectation that they honor their stepfather; if nothing else, out of respect for the mother. For example, children who invite their mom to lunch but never the stepfather are not showing honor. Discuss with your children how family traditions and special family days will change because of his presence (which understandably may cause them irritation), and ask them to accommodate these changes out of respect for you.

Principle 5: Develop Common Ground in Parenting

A tremendous number of the couples I work with in my counseling practice have a fundamental problem: They don't agree on how to raise the children. Even though they share the same mission (i.e., raising individuals who act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God), they disagree on how to accomplish the mission. Do not assume that because you love each other, your philosophies of parenting will fall in line. Finding unity takes communication and hard work.

Agree on Discipline

Research on couples forming stepfamilies reveals:

- Eighty-six percent of all couples have at least one partner who believes the children will put an additional strain on their marriage—and they're right!
- Twenty-five percent of couples realize that their children do not have a positive attitude toward their marriage.
- Twenty percent of all couples have concerns about the kind of parent or stepparent their partner will be; unhappy couples are six times more likely to have this concern than couples in strong relationships.
- Even while nearing the altar, nearly half of all couples have not yet agreed on how to discipline their children and stepchildren, and 40 percent have not discussed how to spiritually train their children.
- Couple dissatisfaction because of parenting issues increases after the wedding.[25]

Most couples assume that relationships with stepchildren will improve after the wedding; actually, they usually get worse before getting better. Proactively discuss these matters before and after the wedding.

In *The Remarriage Checkup*, Dr. David Olson and I reported findings from our national survey of couples forming stepfamilies. We set out to discover the qualities of highly satisfied couples and what sets them apart from unhappy couples. Our results relative to parenting presented a clear contrast. Happy, satisfied couples were twice as likely as unhappy couples to have agreed on how to parent their children. Also, two-thirds of unhappy, struggling couples did not agree on how to discipline their children. If you aren't sure what's the best way to respond in a given situation or you can't resolve an impasse, consult a minister, counselor, or mentor. Better yet, read chapter 7 together; it offers sound advice on parenting and discipline. Finally, don't be too harsh on yourselves when you do disagree; that is common in biological families and stepfamilies alike. But do take seriously your efforts to find unity. Stepfamily success depends on it.

HEROES BY CHOICE

Discussion Questions for Couples

1. The chapter title “He Can’t Do It Without You” speaks to the significance of the mother’s role in setting the stepdad up for success. Discuss the truth of this statement.
2. Review the story about Anthony and Linda beginning on page 86. Are there any parallels to your marriage and family? What lessons can you learn from their story?
3. Review the Parental Unity Rules on pages 89–90. Currently, which are strengths in your marriage? Which aren’t?
4. Stepdads, share from your point of view why respect is such a high marital need for men. Affirm what your wife already does to elevate respect for you in the home. Then share what else she can do.
5. Moms, share with your husband how it feels to be caught between him and your children.
6. Stepdads, to what degree do you feel your wife’s loyalty—that she is permanently committed to you and has communicated such to her children? Rank this on a scale of 1 to 10.
7. Think about each stepchild. Discuss what level of relationship the stepdad has with each.
   Level 1: Baby-sitter
   Level 2: Uncle
   Level 3: Parent mentor
   What has helped or hindered the relationship thus far?
8. To what degree do you as a couple agree on discipline and behavioral expectations? The more polarized your parenting styles, the more difficulty you will have. What needs to change to find more unity?

For Group Discussion

1. What in this chapter brought relief or was insightful to read? What challenged you?
2. Playing second violin doesn’t feel right to many men. What makes this concept difficult to accept? (If matters related to biblical headship enter this part of the discussion, be sure to review the section on servant leadership on pages 91–92).
3. Why is respect such a high need for men?
4. If a man is feeling disrespected, how can he maintain gentleness and meekness within the home?

5. If a paralyzed mom (see pages 92–93) is inadvertently sabotaging a stepdad, what would you advise him to do?
6. What is one way you can reinforce to your wife your parental goodwill toward her children?
7. In what ways is it confusing to be “baby-sitter” with one child and “uncle” or “parent mentor” to another (and if you have your own child, “Dad” to yet another)?

Chapter 6

Mom Smart (Part 2): Pitfalls and Good Intentions

I know I should listen to my husband more, but it's hard not to get defensive when he criticizes my children.

SHARON

My husband is too enmeshed with his extended family. I don't want that for my kids, so we just keep to ourselves.

KIM

As you climb Stepdad Mountain (together), be sure to avoid the loose rock, steep inclines, and weak footholds. And recognize that good intentions can sometimes be problematic. This chapter outlines some common pitfalls for both moms and stepdads. If you have inadvertently fallen into one or more of them, climb out . . . together.

PITFALL 1: PINPOINTING BLAME

When a stepfather and a stepchild do not connect or have a strained relationship, we naturally need something—or someone—to blame. Moms sometimes blame the stepdad for not trying hard enough to connect emotionally with the child. Stepdads may blame the child for not opening up to them or giving them a chance. Children (including adult stepchildren) sometimes blame their mom for the timing of her remarriage (or issues related to the parental divorce) or their stepfather for some personality attribute they find uninviting. Siblings, extended family members, even ex-spouses get into the mix with their theories of why people don't get along.

The first two years of stepfather-stepchild relationships tend to be tense and stressful for the family. Many stepfathers become more distant during this period of time because their efforts are rebuffed by the children, especially adolescents.[26] But research consistently reveals that stepdads who eventually develop close bonds with stepchildren remain persistent in their efforts to communicate with the children and establish a warm, friendly relationship.[27] They engage the children in activities that are of interest to the children (not just activities that are only of interest to the stepdad), find opportunities to talk directly with the children, communicate empathy and compassion, and share their desire to get along.[28]

But while it's clear that Smart Stepdads are persistent in seeking connection with their stepchildren, the absence of this connection cannot be blamed entirely on them. Children can block or ignore their stepdad's efforts to get close to them. They may not value the new relationship, have much in common with the stepdad, or find themselves unable to resolve a loyalty conflict. Sometimes, moms themselves block stepdads' attempts at connection (see Pitfall 2). Whatever the cause, when rebuffed time and again, even the most committed stepdad can become discouraged and pull back.

There can be myriad dynamics at play in the evolving relationships between stepdad and stepchildren. Placing blame is shortsighted and only invites defensiveness. Instead of finding blame for the past, your family is much better served by shared efforts to grow relationships and build toward the future. Stepdad—commit yourself to having a stubborn, loving presence in the lives of your stepchildren, even if they aren't currently open to reciprocating. Success is not found in technique or an amount of shared activity. The most important thing you offer is you; love them with an undeniable, unconditional love (just like God loves you), and eventually most children will be won over.

Mom—commit yourself to valuing the relationship your husband has with your children. Their relationship probably isn't as strong as you'd prefer, but constantly being discouraged over what isn't is a drag on everyone's ability to enjoy what is. To be clear, you don't have to be satisfied if they have a weak, strained relationship. But do try to appreciate what is going well for them.

PITFALL 2: THE OVERPROTECTIVE MOM

Tim, biological father of two and stepfather of two, has had a hard time finding his place. "My wife is very protective of her kids and it has taken the better part of two years for her to feel ready for me to discipline them. If she is out of the room and she hears me talking to the kids, she will still ask me what the problem

is so she can be aware of what I might be asking them to do. Then she goes to them and gets their side of the story; that usually backfires on me."

For Mom

Which of these roles do you sometimes play in your home?

- Gatekeeper—protecting your kids from your husband and/or your husband from the unpleasant realities of parenting your children
- Defender—of either your kids or your husband
- Interpreter—trying to bridge the gap between your kids and husband
- Tutor—helping your husband to understand and parent your kids[29]

When in balance, all of these roles are needed. When out of balance, they become destructive.

In their attempt to create peace, all moms do some "checking up" with family members. That is certainly understandable. But problems arise when a mom becomes overprotective. She will defend her children at all costs, go behind the stepdad's back to undo what he has done, and even block his efforts to create bonds with her children. Moms who are overly connected emotionally to their children often feel the need to protect them from any anxiety or distress and will block stepdads, biological fathers, and all would-be outsiders from challenging the family enmeshment. This kind of overprotectiveness results in arrested childhood development and jealousy within a stepfamily. Ironically, overprotective moms also train their children to manipulate against the stepdad. Don shared that his stepson, age nine, was compliant at school but wouldn't listen to any of his directions. "He whines when he doesn't get his way because he knows his mom will give in. He plays her against me and then she blames me for provoking him. I am completely lost."

If you find that this is a dynamic in your home, start by humbly acknowledging it to each other. Don't cast blame or you will end up on opposite sides. Then, Mom, talk about your fears that are driving the overprotective

behavior. What are you concerned will happen if you don't intervene? What must change for you to risk letting go of control?

Next, if this conversation brings to light actions or attitudes in the stepdad that are hostile, angry, or fear-provoking, then slow down the conversation and take a break. An escalating argument doesn't help anyone. Stepdad—you must take responsibility for any such behaviors. If you continue with a hot temper when she is working on not being overprotective, for example, you may sabotage her growth. Don't expect your wife to trust you if you aren't safe to be around. Whatever the underlying fears for either of you, make it your goal to eliminate them so overprotectiveness will be unnecessary.

PITFALL 3: NOT UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS IN CHILDREN

In chapter 4, I explained why understanding emotional attachment is so important to parenting. Mom, you may want to read that section for yourself, but here's a quick summary. Emotional attachment or bonding between parent and child provides safety, identity, and authority in parenting. As the mother to your children, attachment grants you automatic love, grace, respect, and approval; you are an *insider*. If you make a mistake or speak harshly to your children, they will be quick to forgive because remaining connected to you is vitally important. A stepdad, on the other hand, has to grow attachment over an extended period of time. Your husband is an outsider with your children, and until their relationship matures and solidifies, he will likely receive tentative love, grace, respect, and approval from your children.

Temper your expectations for the relationship between your child and husband. They will have to grow their attachment at a pace that is comfortable to them. No amount of will on your part will speed that up.

For Mom:
Parent-Child Attachment—Privileges and Challenges

- Grace in conflict. Children have a high tolerance for conflict and disappointment with their biological mother but for years many have a low tolerance with their stepfather.
- Insider status. Children view their mom as "part of the club" with all the rights and privileges of membership; stepdads may

be held at arm's length as an outsider.
- Love. Love for the biological parent isn't decided; it's automatic and deeply felt. Love for the stepfather is decided over time.
- Approval. This attitude says, "If Mom says it, it must be right," and results in a natural bias toward you. It gives the benefit of the doubt and seeks to justify why you are worthy of love. Stepfathers must earn approval, showing themselves competent.
- Trust. It is assumed that Mom can be trusted; a stepdad must prove himself trustworthy.

PITFALL 4: AVOIDING THE MIRROR

What happens when an overprotective mother and an angry stepfather come together—and neither will look in the mirror? Tracy wrote to us at SuccessfulStepfamilies.com: "I am very defensive when my husband makes suggestions about my teenage daughters. Part of it is that he is much stricter than I; he expects jobs to be done exactly the way he would do them. I am more relaxed about this stuff. The other reason I am defensive is because of how he goes about it. He says to me, 'You better tell her that if she doesn't straighten up then blah, blah, blah . . .' He TELLS me what I better tell her. If he could approach me more gently and say, 'I can see your frustration with Rebecca. I am on your side and would like to help if I can. I have some thoughts about what's going on,' I'd be much more willing to listen." Tracy makes a great suggestion: Approach one another with gentleness and kindness, not rejecting anger. But there's more.

Wise moms and stepdads know how to look in the mirror. They are willing to examine their motives, emotions, and beliefs, and how they interact with each other, not point the finger of blame. If Tracy would take a humble look in the mirror, perhaps she would see that her defensiveness is easily sparked by her guilt and self-blame. Or perhaps she had a harsh parent figure in her childhood and she resents anyone who has strong opinions. These types of sensitivities can quickly ignite her anxiety and steal her ability to calmly respond to the situation and her husband.

Likewise, Tracy's husband should look in the mirror and recognize that his snap judgments and black-and-white opinions escalate her defenses. In trying to have a loud voice, he silences himself. In addition, he might discover that feeling

unimportant and marginalized is something he has experienced throughout his life, which causes him to be hypersensitive to it now.

Personal and emotional growth begin and continue with the humility of self-examination. God will reveal to us what we need to learn about ourselves—so we can love others as we ought—when we look in the mirror. To ignore the mirror is to stop growing.

Ironically, what Tracy and her husband might discover is that they each need to be a little more like the other; then and only then will they be a balanced parenting team. If they aren't careful, the dynamics of attachment and loyalty often push the differing parenting styles of couples to the extremes. The more Tracy stubbornly resists her husband telling her what to do, the louder he becomes. And the louder he becomes, the more she believes he cannot be trusted to care for her children, which emboldens her resistance. Each is driven to a more extreme position as they relate to each other, and the couple polarizes.

Smart Dating

A word of caution to those who are dating: Slow down moving toward marriage if you experience a mom who is irrationally overprotective, a boyfriend who is easily angered, or when either actively avoids the mirror of humility. Ignoring these red flags and moving toward marriage is not wise. If you experience them now, they will probably worsen after the wedding. I suggest you seriously consider delaying the marriage until you see significant changes.

As a family therapist I've seen this dynamic occur many times. Dave wrote to our ministry sharing that the blending of his and his wife's parenting styles was very challenging. Dave grew up with strict parents and replicated that style with his children. During his single-parent years, for example, he expected his kids to pick up after themselves and had a rotating chore chart for the kids. Dave's wife, Sandra, on the other hand, was less concerned with such expectations with her children. Now that they are married this polarization has left them in a constant battle over what is best. Eventually, they will have to decide what the chores will be. But until Dave and Sandra realize that their differences—when moderated and brought together—actually strengthen them as a parenting unit, they won't be able to find a happy medium with expectations. Differences tend to make us focus on the other person instead of looking in the mirror at ourselves. But self-

examination and taking responsibility for our extremes are huge steps toward a stronger parental partnership.

PITFALL 5: MAKING EXCUSES

When we make excuses for our children's behavior, we empower immaturity and irresponsibility. Ironically, most parents who do so think they are being sympathetic and understanding. But they aren't helping at all.

Lisa wrote to Successful Stepfamilies after reading an article on paralyzed parents. She identified herself as one. "My son is now seventeen years old and has been smoking and in and out of trouble with school, and he wrecked a car while driving without his license. I am at my wits' end. Thankfully, this article has opened my eyes to my guilty feelings and how I have made excuses for my son's behavior." Lisa, like many other parents, felt sorry for her son and all he had been through. She assumed that sympathy would help lift her son out of his depression and motivate him toward better behavior. Typically it doesn't. In fact, it does just the opposite: it encourages them to stay unmotivated and irresponsible.

Feeling empathy for your child's emotions is healthy in that it communicates your concern for their well-being. But if empathy weakens your resolve to hold them accountable for their choices and behavior, it has paralyzed you and them. Even further, a child who figures out that self-pity strong-arms a parent into making excuses for them (e.g., "He's a troubled child who has been mistreated; he can't help it") will become a terrorist of sorts to the family. No one will be able to stop their power tactics in the form of unreasonable behavior. Want to help your child overcome the emotional wounds they have experienced? Hold them accountable for their behavior and attitudes, letting the chips of punishment and discipline fall where they may. Challenge helps a child grow up and mature much more than sympathy or pity.

PITFALL 6: COWERING TO YOUR EX-HUSBAND

A woman who is over-accommodating and afraid to set reasonable boundaries with her ex-husband will find herself frequently caught between the former husband and her present husband. Many stepdads feel this shouldn't be a difficult choice. ("You love me, not him, right?") But to be fair, it's not that easy, especially when trying to keep peace between the homes for your kids' sake. There are times that accommodating extends a hand of cooperation, but doing so

constantly creates more problems than it's worth. The key is to stand in the gap by standing up for your home and marriage.

This might mean standing up for decent communication between homes. For example, "If you are not able to talk to me first about the soccer league, please don't expect us to be able to get him to all the games. Please don't assume you can make decisions for our family calendar." It might also require you to say no once in a while or speak up for your values even though you know the other home won't abide by them. All of these things can be done with respect and softness, but they should be done. If your former husband is used to controlling your life, it may take a few episodes before he realizes that you are no longer a puppet on a string. Be prepared that he may try to turn the children against your husband, blaming him for the changes in you. Own the changes and move forward. Hopefully a calm, nonreactive but persistent response from you will eventually make a believer out of your ex-husband.

PITFALL 7: FINDING FAIR AND MANAGING CHANGES

Barry is a stepdad, but it's his kids who are complaining. "My kids are not happy," he began. "They live with us half the time, but they hold on to what used to be before I got remarried. We've tried to make chores fair and I routinely remind my children that their half hour of cleaning plus one night of dishes gives them a clean house to live in for a full week. But they still complain about my stepchildren's messes and having to clean up. They say one stepsibling gets away with murder (which is sometimes true) and blame my wife for the increased expectation of cleanliness even though I agree with it. With a combination of part-time and full-time kids, how do we make everyone feel like things are fair?"

Stepdad to Stepdad

"Issues of equality are important because kids remember how you parented others, and they look for it. I knew when I was a stepchild growing up that I was treated much differently than my half-brothers." Danny, stepdad

Barry's question is a good one, and it doesn't have an easy answer. Finding fair for everyone is a challenge because of all the factors that we as parents don't get

to control. In Barry's case, his children live with them part time, his stepkids all the time. Some have lived with a lower level of expectation regarding cleanliness; others are used to the high standard. Your situation might include other common differences that impact what children perceive as fair. For example, the other home(s) might have a lower expectation than yours, which naturally generates resistance to your standards. Or perhaps older children remember a time when they had to do more simply because there were fewer people to share the load. The variables can go on and on.

Children have a high sensitivity to fairness. Sorting through the labyrinth of opinions, feelings, loyalties, and definitions of what is fair can be exhausting. Here are some principles to help you find fair.

Make Use of the Parental Unity Rules Discussed in Chapter 5

Negotiating expectations together for everyone and then communicating them to your children from a unified position is essential. Stepdad and author Gil Stuart shares this same perspective:

> I learned to bite my lip and keep my mouth shut until the right time, that is, after
>
> (1) I review my words and my first gut reaction with their mom;
> (2) I gain her perspective and support of my point of view or allow her to offer insight into a situation;
> (3) I wait to have clear direction as a team.
>
> You can't afford to react out of emotion and not keep your cool.[30]

Strive to Be Equitable, Even If It Isn't Letter-of-the-Law Fair

Parenting isn't "fair." We allow older children to watch movies that younger children cannot. We let structured, self-motivated children decide when they will do their homework, while directing haphazard, random children to "do it now." The differences in how we parent each individual child are numerous, but we always strive to be impartial, equitable, and without favoritism. Children will certainly cry "unfair!" but it doesn't mean you have to succumb to their misgivings. For example, kids who live in your home seven days a week may perceive that they have to do more chores than their stepsiblings simply because their other home doesn't have the same expectations. You do not need to rectify

every inequality. Smile and politely say, “Rats. That is a bummer for you, huh?” And then make them clean the toilet.

Let the Chips Fall Where They May

Which of you responds to a particular child in a particular situation will depend on attachment, loyalty, and your strengths as a parent. But let the chips fall with the same weight. Again, if you have negotiated common expectations and rules for everyone, the weight of your responses generally will be equitable.

Be Consistent Now, Even If It Is Different From the Past

“You’re just saying no because he wants you to.” Kids are really good at sending Mom on a guilt trip, especially when the rules have changed and they feel victimized by them. Let’s face it—the addition of a stepdad to the parenting process will surely result in at least one change of expectation. Unless Mom holds tight to control and never opens to his input (which I don’t recommend), something is going to change eventually. This is acceptable and to be expected. But managing the change with children is the tough part.

From the time they are born, children are learning the expectations and behavioral management style of their parents. They become accustomed to rules and expectations over time and settle into them. When rules change, children adapt (after a bit of grumbling) because they give their parent the right to make the changes (one privilege of attachment). When stepparents enter the picture and influence changes, children often struggle with the stepparent’s authority to make those changes. That’s when kids complain or protest. Moms must support the status of the stepdad. Here are some guidelines to help you communicate the changes, especially when your husband’s opinion has obviously contributed to the change.

1. Powwow to decide how to communicate changes to the children.
2. In general, communicate the changes together. The default position is to let Mom take the lead (first violin) in sharing the change with stepdad standing beside her (second violin). This is particularly important in the early years of your marriage. He can certainly add to the conversation, but Mom’s voice should be clearly heard. If a child disrespects the stepdad, correct them in front of him. This clearly communicates to both the stepdad (who will appreciate being backed) and the child what the expectations are.
3. Mom may need to communicate the change privately (without stepdad present) if:

- a child continually challenges the new rule. Mom can recognize the significance of the change for the child, stand up for the couple's unity, and let her voice be heard. "You are right. You now have to wash your own laundry because he brought it to my attention. But he and I have discussed it thoroughly and I am in agreement. I'm sure you are bummed about this—I can't blame you. But this is how it's going to be from now on." For Mom: When Dad Is Deceased

Mom, you may find that it is a little more difficult to make room for shared parenting with your husband if your children's biological father is deceased. After his death, the mantle of caretaking became your sole responsibility. "Making space" at this point might feel like "letting go." Guilt will certainly be close by. Wrestle with your feelings and realize that allowing someone else to share the load of parenting does not mean you are abandoning the memory of their father. It's a new season of life; embrace it.

- a child is highly sensitive to the issue at hand or feels on display or embarrassed about the circumstances. For example, a struggle with personal matters that may be best handled by the mom alone, or restricting computer use because the child visited inappropriate Web sites. But don't make unilateral decisions about this; powwow together to determine the best way to handle these situations.

PITFALL 8: NOT HAVING A BASIC KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD PARENTING

The previous two chapters have focused on the process of parenting in a stepfamily. By *process* I'm referring to the dynamics of how parenting happens. Once you get the process working for you, you still have to attend to the content of parenting—that is, proper discipline strategies, child development, and the best way to motivate children toward responsibility. That is the substance of most parenting books but deserves some attention here, as well. I'll devote the next chapter to reviewing key ingredients of good parenting.

CLIMBING OUT

After reading these common pitfalls, you may see yourself at the bottom of a few of them. Don't lose heart. It's never too late to climb out. Begin by humbly acknowledging your circumstances and taking responsibility for where you are and how you got there; then work together to climb out.

Mom—I appreciate your reading these two chapters. Your husband's success as a stepdad depends heavily upon you. With your continued support, he can serve your family and children well; without it, everyone suffers. God designed parenting to be a team sport. Strive to work alongside your husband and watch your team thrive.

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

Discussion Questions for Couples

1. How has casting blame prevented the two of you from resolving some issues? Discuss this statement from Pitfall 1: "There can be myriad dynamics at play in the evolving relationships between stepdad and stepchildren. Placing blame [on any one party] is shortsighted and only invites defensiveness. Instead of finding blame for the past, your family is much better served by shared efforts to grow relationships and build toward the future."
2. The following are roles that moms sometimes need to play in stepfamilies, but when done excessively, become problematic. Mom—share examples of each role in your household. How can you keep from being excessive with these roles? What can your husband do to help?

    - Gatekeeper—protecting kids from the stepdad and/or the stepdad from the unpleasant realities of parenting your children
    - Defender—of either the kids or stepdad
    - Interpreter—trying to bridge the gap between the kids and stepdad
    - Tutor—helping the stepdad to understand and parent her kids

3. Pitfall 4 challenges, "Personal and emotional growth begin and continue with the humility of self-examination. God will reveal to us what we need to learn about ourselves—so we can love others as we ought—when we look in the mirror. To ignore the mirror is to stop growing." Would others say you are humble? Would they say you regularly look in the mirror to examine your part of stepfamily dynamics?

4. What excuses are given for children's behavior in your home? Realizing that making excuses only perpetuates irresponsible behavior, what can you do to stop?
5. Review the tips on "finding fair" beginning on page 111. What application can you make to your family?
6. Do you believe you have a good understanding of parenting and behavioral management of children? How similar or different are your viewpoints? Consider reading together the next chapter for a summary of strategies on child rearing.

For Group Discussion

1. What blame games have you played in the past? Blaming others sometimes demonstrates an unwillingness to accept responsibility for your part. Is that true for you?
2. In what ways does your anger limit your attachment and authority with your stepchildren (Pitfall 3)?
3. If someone asked your stepchildren whether you were engaged or disengaged as a stepdad, what would they say?
4. Does your wife sometimes cower to her ex-husband? Are there times this might be the best option for everyone? How can you support her to stand strong?
5. Review Pitfall 7 and the principles for "finding fair." What applies to you? Review Gil Stuart's observations on page 113 and discuss the wisdom of each.
6. What are the strengths of having a different parenting style from your wife? What are the weaknesses?
7. Would you describe yourself as a parent who is knowledgeable about child development and effective parenting strategies?

Chapter 7

Getting the Socks Picked Up: Parenting 101

Everybody knows how to raise children, except people who have them.

P. J. O'Rourke, The Bachelor Home Companion

Not every parenting struggle you face is due to living in a stepfamily. Sometimes it's just the natural challenges of parenting.

"We team up well as parents," said Troy. "I work hard to support my wife in her role with my children and she supports me with hers. But what's the best way to discipline? For example, we are trying to get them to pick up their clothes and be responsible for themselves, but we don't seem to be getting anywhere. What are we doing wrong?"

Troy's question is insightful, as it reveals two key aspects of parenting: process and behavioral management. The *process* of parenting and stepparenting involves how you work together and the underlying dynamics of the family. I discussed these aspects of parenting in detail in chapters 5 and 6. One example is for mothers to take the primary disciplinary role with their children early on while the stepfather builds much-needed relationship and respect with them. A stepdad's authoritative role is tentative in the beginning and requires firm support from his wife. Another process principle I discussed is for parents to be on the same team and united regarding the boundaries and rules. Troy and his wife were applying those principles well, but they still struggled with the daily *behavioral management* of their children. Their parenting questions centered on how to properly motivate the children to be responsible and how to discipline them effectively if they didn't obey.

Befriending Adult Stepchildren

With adult stepchildren your goal is not to increase parental authority, but to find a mutually suitable friendship. If your stepchildren were adults when you first entered their lives, read this chapter thinking of how you might apply the principles with your stepgrandchildren.

In this chapter I'd like to offer a brief tutorial on behavioral management in parenting. The strategies offered here are equally helpful for both you and your wife, because the more you work together, the more effective the results. Understanding and implementing the process principles of parenting is a must before implementing the strategies in this chapter, so it is worth repeating: Read chapters 5 and 6 prior to this chapter. Much of what you will read here will not work if you haven't applied the process principles of parenting and stepparenting first.

The ages of your stepchildren, and whether you are a part- or full-time stepfamily, will influence how many and which of the following strategies will work. Talk with your wife and decide together how to proceed.

PARENTING: WHAT'S THE GOAL?

Our job as parents and stepparents is to work ourselves out of a job. In other words, we want to instill within our children an internal compass that guides them to make godly decisions, and an internal hard drive that results in responsible, self-motivated behavior. We pray that they will become capable, responsible adults who are sensitive to the needs of others. And as Christians we desire that they find their fulfillment and purpose in Jesus.

Effective parenting requires a long-term perspective on the development of the child. We aren't just trying to get the socks picked up; we are trying to create responsible children who understand the value of caring for their possessions.

Therefore, discipline strategies should be aimed at the long-term goal of building the internal hard drive of the child. On occasion, discipline uses *power tactics* to change immediate behavior. For the most part, however, parenting should attempt to *empower* the child to learn lessons that shape his internal hard drive; these lessons will extend well into the future and prepare him for life. For example, yelling at a nine-year-old to clean his room (power tactic) will likely result in immediate behavior, but what has the child learned? That his stepdad gets angry and the only way to calm him down is to clean his room? Wouldn't it be better to teach responsibility by giving him or her the choice of cleaning the

room before or after dinner, and then holding the child accountable for following through? This method teaches self-initiative and personal responsibility, which moves the child a step toward cleaning the room without someone else's initiative. (And just as important, this strategy reminds a stepdad that calming himself down is his job, not the child's.)

For Mom

Research affirms that initially your remarriage and the adjustments of living in a stepfamily may bring about increased conflict between you and your children. But stay the course. Over time, conflict decreases to normal levels and your relationship with your kids might even improve compared to the single-parent years.[31]

Let's contrast the two styles further. Power parents *take control* of their kids (e.g., "Do it now"); empowering parents *take charge* of their children (e.g., "Will you clean your room before or after dinner?").[32] Empowering parents are like the highway department. On a multi-lane freeway they don't tell you which lane you must drive in or how fast you must go (power tactics), but they do mark the right and left boundaries (with solid white and double yellow lines) and put limits on your speed. Within the boundaries, you have lots of freedom and choice; cross a boundary, however, and you will pay the price. Effective parents strive for this environment in their home.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

With a long-term empowering perspective, let's explore five key principles for effective behavioral management of children and teens.

Rooted in Love

> God loved us even before he made us, but he had to make us to prove it.
>
> **CHILD, IN KIDS SAY THE GREATEST THINGS ABOUT GOD**

Do you know what makes God's discipline tolerable? His relentless love. Hebrews 12:5–11 tells us that God disciplines those he loves. His motive is holiness; he is trying to shape us into the image of his Son. When we understand

his reason for discipline, the chastisement becomes bearable. Put another way, we know God has our best in mind when he lowers the boom. Your stepchildren need to be constantly reminded of your love for them. If they doubt your motives, your authority will be questioned.

Consider the matter of helping children find their strengths. It communicates love when you help kids mature into their own God-given unique abilities, not the ones you wish they had. My wife, Nan, speaks of the dangers of cookie-cutter parenting. Like cookies made during the holidays, cookie-cutter parents assume all children are comprised of the same shape, size, and ability. They are not. If anything, children may be cut out in a similar shape, but how God has decorated them makes each uniquely different. It's our job as parents to identify God's decoration and encourage development. Some children have a natural bent toward athletics, others enjoy music, and others are gifted in the arts. Helping a child identify his or her strengths and then exploring opportunities that might enhance the talent is an act of love. This makes a child feel special and reveals that you care.

Learning a child's love language is another way to demonstrate love. In his bestselling book *The Five Love Languages*,[33] Gary Chapman shares that everyone has a primary way of expressing and receiving love. Typically, an individual uses one of five possible languages. Most people appreciate all five types, but one frequently communicates love more loudly than the others. Some children prefer to hear words of affirmation such as "I love you" or "You are a blessing to my life." Another child might prefer receiving gifts, either purchased or handmade. For the child who prefers meaningful touch, a hug, holding hands, or soft touches on the arm convey that you care. A message of love in this kinesthetic language is heard loud and clear. Fourth, engaging a child in activities or conversation are two examples of how to communicate love to the child who spells love *t-i-m-e*. Lastly, some children receive love through acts of service such as kindness, taking care of tasks, and/or serving their needs.

How can you know which love language your stepchildren speak? The first rule of thumb is to notice how they express love to others. I have one child who, for example, from a young age made pictures for me. His face would beam when giving them to me; he obviously felt that he was showing me love with the present. Guess how he most wants to receive love: gifts. I have another child who is quick to articulate love (words of affirmation) and another who enjoyed (he died at the age of twelve) building Lego's together (quality time). All children need to hear love through each channel, but make sure you know what language to speak when it really counts.

Whenever Possible, Let Reality Be the Teacher

Upon a recent visit to Washington, D.C., I learned that you cannot park your car along the National Mall (bordering the White House, U. S. Capitol, Washington Memorial, and Lincoln Memorial) after 4:00 p.m. How did I learn that? I got a parking ticket. Reality is always the best teacher for both adults and children.[34] There are a number of ways to let reality teach.

Natural consequences are the innate outcomes of a child's behavior. If a child goes out in the rain without a coat, they get wet. If they forget their basketball shoes, like one of my sons did one afternoon, and don't realize it until you have driven across town to their practice, then they practice in their bare feet. (After all, it is not my job to rescue him from the natural consequence of forgetting.) Natural consequences are great opportunities for children to learn. In other words, sometimes the best thing you can do as a parent is to do nothing. Allow the child to learn from their own mistakes.

Jason waited till 9:00 p.m. the night before his science project was due to tell his stepdad, Craig, that he needed items from the store. He neglected the project till the last minute and then expected his stepdad to help out. Craig thought about it for a minute and replied, "I'm sorry that you've waited till now to tell me this. You've had three weeks to work on the project. Just because you have decided to act irresponsibly does not mean I should jump in and fix the problem for you. Jason, you're a smart kid and I want you to do well in school. But I'm not going to bail you out this time. I'm sure you can figure something out." And with that, he cut him loose to experience the consequences of procrastination.

Parents sometimes wonder if they are being cruel to let children experience this type of consequence. They are not. They are preparing the child to accept responsibility for their choices. In addition, they are inviting the child to teach themselves how to manage their responsibilities.

Let us pause for an important reminder: Your ability to take action similar to Craig—or implement any of the strategies in this chapter—assumes that you and your wife agree that allowing a child to suffer a consequence when they make a poor choice is a valuable disciplinary tool. If your wife would not respond in this way, your decision to act in this manner will be challenged. You can still respond in this manner, but it might bring a negative response from your wife (which, by the way, doesn't mean you did the wrong thing). Having similar parenting philosophies is vital. If you currently disagree on what is effective parenting, read this chapter together and discuss which strategies you will utilize.

Logical consequences involve consequences imposed by the parent as a result of the child's behavior. If a child spills their milk, they should clean it up

(whether two years old, with some help, or twenty-three). If they agree to finish their chores before dinner and do not, they should not be allowed to eat supper until the chores are completed. If they stay out past their curfew, they should be docked time the next night (or if a pattern has developed, not be allowed to go out at all). We might refer to this as "if—then" consequences: if you do this, then you get that.

Stepdad Wisdom

Letting natural consequences occur is a wise, safe response for "baby-sitter" stepdads, while "uncle" and "parent mentor" stepdads can implement logical consequences.

Providing choices or setting boundaries is another example of logical consequences. "Would you rather finish your homework before or after your favorite TV show?" (Notice that doing homework is not an option, just when they do it.) "Would you rather clean your room or pay your sister with your allowance to do it for you?" Giving choices, even to two-year-olds, is an important part of long-term training. Children learn to schedule their time in order to fulfill commitments, they learn to plan ahead, and they learn to make choices with money instead of having a parent tell them what to do. Just like when the highway department paints yellow and white lines restricting our driving, your job and Mom's is to set the boundaries for the children's choices and then enforce consequences if the child does not drive within the lanes.

Robert and his wife, Natalie, let her sixteen-year-old son, Caleb, decide if he was going to play football and serve on the youth praise band at the same time. They made it clear to him that if he chose to do so and his grades suffered, he would lose access to his cell phone and leisure computer time. When the six-weeks grades came in, it was clear to everyone that his grades had suffered. But when it came time to impose the consequence, Natalie decided that Caleb could use a second chance; she rescinded the consequence. This angered Robert because he felt that it was teaching Caleb that choices don't have consequences (and it was). It also hurt him because he felt that their agreement wasn't being honored. After a few days of discussion, Natalie realized that she needed to follow through on the consequence. Caleb was very angry and blamed the punishment on Robert. Thankfully, Natalie was strong enough to tell her son that she was the one who decided to enforce the consequences, not Robert.

Talk Less, Act More[35]

Parents today use too many words. We have this silly idea that if we talk long enough, our children will finally agree with what we believe is best for them and then gladly obey. It really is funny when you see it in print, huh?

"Why can't I go to the movie, Samuel? All the other kids in my grade have seen it!" Samuel had just explained to his stepson Hayden that he could not go to the PG-13 movie. "I don't care if everyone has seen it. Your mother and I have talked about this and our rule is that we preview all movies before you see them. Besides, you're ten and it's unlikely that we'll let you start seeing movies like that until you're at least thirteen. Your mother and I have told you this before; our decision is not based on age, but on the content of the film. If it isn't healthy for your soul, you're not going to see the movie." Hayden fired back with anger: "This isn't fair!"

Let's analyze this situation. The phrase "I've told you this before" reveals that this isn't the first time this issue has come up. So it's time to stop talking (i.e., trying to get Hayden to be happy about this) and do something.

Children need to know our values and how decisions are made. That's how they learn what matters in life and how values impact the way we live. Therefore, talking or *teaching* is an important element of parenting. But once the teaching is over, if the child continues to badger, argue, complain, or misbehave, it's no longer time to talk. It's time to act.

In this case, Hayden continued to badger Samuel. "But that's not fair . . . Why can't I go . . . You don't love me." So Samuel took action. "I have explained this to you. You can continue to argue with me if you'd like, but from this point forward, every time you complain it will cost you five dollars of your allowance," and with that said he walked away (signaling the end of the discussion). Taking charge of yourself and the situation is empowered, self-defined leadership. And it goes a long way toward training children to respect others, work within the boundaries of life, and take responsibility for themselves.

By the way, how do you know it's time to stop talking and act? One way is to apply the mall test. Imagine describing the child's behavior to a hundred people at a mall. What percentage of them would say, "Yeah, that crosses the line. It's time to do something different"? Your anger or resentment toward a stepchild may have taught you to distrust your emotions. The mall test helps to objectively examine the situation and then decide how to proceed. If you're really not sure, withhold action till you have discussed it with your wife.

Catch Them Doing Something Right

Encouraging appropriate behavior is a very effective discipline strategy. It is so easy to notice inappropriate or negative behavior because it catches our attention. What is not as obvious is when children obey, follow through, consider others first, or make the choice to do the *right* thing. Set a standard of what you'd like to see in the children, not merely what you want to experience less, and then draw attention to it.

Think about the last genuine compliment you received—or perhaps a performance raise at work. How did it impact you? Likely it encouraged you to press on (or keep up your efforts), put a smile on your face, and felt good way down deep inside. This is the power of encouragement. Build others up, Paul commends in Ephesians 4:29, "according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Notice that we each have a need to be built up (and at times may have a particular area that needs attention). Children in particular have a need to know that what they are doing meets your expectations. This brings a smile to their face (just like your last raise at work brought a smile to yours). It also has the bonus impact for a stepdad of facilitating closeness with a stepchild.

Brooke's stepdad, Danny, was an encourager. A young professional now living on her own, Brooke reflected on her childhood. "Danny believed in me when I didn't believe in myself," she shared. "When I went through those awkward adolescent years and I didn't think anyone cared for me, he always found something in me to compliment. And when I wanted to quit taking violin lessons, he gently insisted I keep going because, as he said, I 'had so much potential.' I lived off his confidence for a long time."

Catching them doing something right includes commenting on inner qualities, not just outward performance. For example, a straight-A report card could be celebrated as "You're so smart." But it would be even more effective to say, "You obviously applied yourself this semester; you worked hard and it paid off. Congratulations!" The former celebrates the outcome (which might communicate conditional approval that pressures a similar performance in the future). The latter celebrates the inner drive that led to the good grades. It is that quality you want to reinforce, even if a future outcome isn't necessarily the same.

Consider how you might "encourage forward" your stepchild as a way to help him or her move closer to the desired goal. This is the "glass half empty or half full" aspect of catching them doing it right. For example, on your way out the door to school, you could make a "half empty" scowling comment to your eight-year-old: "You forgot to make your lunch again. Why can't you remember to do that?" Rather, try to make a "half full" observation: "We leave in two minutes and I noticed something this morning. You have made your bed, put away your

dishes, brushed your teeth, and gathered your backpack for school all without having to be reminded. Amazing! You rock! Now, I'm wondering if you have everything you need for the day . . . ?" This praise of the child's steps offers encouragement and a subtle invitation for the child to think through what they need, rather than having to be told to get their lunch. It focuses on what is going well while moving the child toward further responsibility.

A related strategy that I like to call solution-oriented parenting calls attention to the child's ability to find resolution for a situation. "Nicely done. How did you know to do that?" is a question that celebrates the child's behavior but more importantly declares them competent. This translates into self-esteem. "I noticed your brother was really pestering you today—getting into your stuff without asking and trying to push your buttons. But you didn't lose your cool. What went on inside you that helped to manage your emotions and do the right thing?" This observation and question offers a compliment and an invitation for the child to reflect and learn.

Solution-oriented parenting invites the child to figure out what they should do to resolve a dilemma (which is better for long-term training than telling them). Upon learning that a middle-school child, for example, isn't managing their study time well, a parent could overreact: "You can't leave your room until your grades are better." Or instead, the parent could ask a question and let the child find a plausible solution: "What will you do differently when you are making better use of your time?" The discussion that follows creates an action plan that originates with the child's input. This is much more likely to be carried out and might alleviate the problem. If the child continues to mismanage time, the next parenting phase might be to impose a logical consequence that restricts them from spending time with friends while focusing on their studies. Keep in mind this rule of thumb: It is better to encourage a child's learning and problem-solving skills before imposing external controls.

What's Not in the List

You'll notice that criticism, name calling, yelling, bribing, pleading, and manipulative threatening didn't make my recommended list of parenting strategies. That's because these harsh strategies can negatively impact a child's spirit. These tactics are tempting because they give the appearance of working, and they can halt inappropriate behavior. But *power strategies* only work for the short term. They do not mold a critical internal hard drive that prepares children for mature living.

There are moments when a parent must immediately change a child's behavior. For example, when a three-year-old is about to walk into the street, or when an older brother is wrestling with a younger sibling and he doesn't realize that his strength is hurting the child. In those circumstances, a non-critical power strategy—like speaking loudly—is necessary to take control. But recognize the training limits of this response. It will bring about immediate safety but will not equip your stepchildren for life. It's best to utilize empowerment strategies liberally and power strategies conservatively.

In addition, these harsh strategies require a high degree of parental status. If someone you really love and admire calls you spoiled, it hurts, but forgiveness is possible. If someone you don't know very well calls you a name, it's much more difficult to work through (see again the chapters discussing attachment and loyalty). When a stepdad has a fragile relationship with a stepchild and he implements harsh discipline, it fractures the relationship and ignites your wife's need to defend and protect her kids. This pushes you further to the outside and undercuts any gains in authority.

Putting It All Together

Discipline and punishment bring to the surface many of the concepts mentioned throughout this book. Here are some thoughts as you put it all together.

- Issues of loss and loyalty are usually at play. When you impose punishment, you test your level of authority in the child's heart (see chapter 5), remind them of their losses (see chapter 3), and possibly ignite a child's internal loyalty conflicts (see chapter 4). There is always more going on than meets the eye.
- You and your wife should not let these realities paralyze you (chapter 6). A loving but firm follow-through is needed.
- Each of the strategies in this chapter has pros and cons. Find what works with each individual child, in this season of life, and use it. Often this requires a "try it and see" approach. Be sure you and your wife talk frequently about what seems to work best with each child.

- Above all, you and your wife must be a team in order to lead your family. Follow the Parental Unity Rules (chapter 5).

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Parenting is a work in progress. We should never stop learning how to parent. This chapter is meant as a primer on parenting, not an exhaustive discourse on the subject. I strongly encourage you and your wife to read books (some recommended resources follow), attend parenting classes and seminars, and keep open a dialogue about how you will parent your children. The more you learn, the better you will function in your God-given role.

God doesn't expect you to be perfect as a parent, just good enough. Be sure to pray constantly about your role. God, our heavenly Father, understands about raising children and is more than happy to offer wisdom for every circumstance.

Recommended Reading

These books do not specifically address stepparenting dynamics, but they offer solid teaching on discipline and child rearing.

- Dr. Kevin Leman, *Making Children Mind Without Losing Yours* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2000).
- John Rosemond, *Parenting by The Book* (New York: Howard Books, 2007).
- Foster Cline and Jim Fay, *Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility* (Colorado Springs, CO: Pinion Press, 2006).
- Foster Cline and Jim Fay, *Parenting Teens with Love and Logic: Preparing Adolescents for Responsible Adulthood* (Colorado Springs, CO: Pinion Press, 1992).
- Dr. James Dobson, *The New Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992).
- Cynthia Ulrich Tobias, *You Can't Make Me (But I Can Be Persuaded): Strategies for Bringing Out the Best in Your Strong-Willed Child* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 1999).

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. In this chapter I state that “our job as parents and stepparents is to work ourselves out of a job.” This is a long-term perspective. When you make parenting decisions, do you tend to think more short term or long term?
2. What’s the difference between trying to *take control* of your children and stepchildren and trying to *take charge* of them? (Keep in mind that because of a strong attachment, it is easier for biological parents to *take control* when they need to; stepparents must step lightly in this arena.)
3. Would your stepchildren say that you love them?
4. Think of each of your stepchildren. What is their primary love language?
   Words of affirmation
   Gifts
   Meaningful touch
   Time together
   Acts of service
5. Whenever possible, let reality be the teacher. List some natural and logical consequences that have worked with your stepchildren. What hasn’t worked?
6. Review the principle Talk Less, Act More. Why do you think we try to talk our children into better behavior? Are you or your wife more likely to keep talking to the kids?
7. Share how you try to “catch” your stepkids doing something right. When someone does that for you, how does it encourage you?
8. List and discuss some items that did not make the top strategies for behavior management list (see page 130). Do you need to resist using some of these?
9. Review the Putting It All Together sidebar on page 131. How does being aware of the various dynamics at play help you to make better decisions as a stepdad?
10. Parenting is a work in progress. What next steps can you take to improve your parenting (for example, taking a class or reading one of the recommended books)?

Chapter 8

Meet Your Ex-Husband-in-Law: Friend or Foe?

> In some ways his actions make me look like a hero. He is manipulative, talks bad about their mother in front of them, and is undependable. My role is to remain loving and keep my mouth shut when "all hell is breaking loose." I want to let them experience an alternative way of fathering in the hope that they have a better role model to carry into the future.
>
> **Tim**

> I have a better relationship with him than my wife does! I try to be very careful not to violate his relationship with the kids—even though I don't think he's the best dad. You have to respect that "blood thing."
>
> **Bob**

The Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr states, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." Here is a truth you cannot change: When you marry a divorced woman, you acquire a mother-in-law, father-in-law, and as I like to say, an ex-husband-in-law.[36] I hope this chapter will help provide some much-needed wisdom to discern what you can change and what you can't regarding his role in your life and family. As I said in my first book, *The Smart Stepfamily*, divorce doesn't end family life, it just reorganizes it. Your girlfriend or wife is an ex-spouse but never an ex-parent. Forever, she and you, her kids . . . and *he* are "extended family" to one another. In other words, your ex-husband-in-law is on Stepdad Mountain and will either help or hinder your climb. Learning how to turn your interaction with him into an asset instead of dead

weight will make a world of difference in your ascent. So let's figure out how to make the best of it.

When Dad Is Deceased

A deceased father is still a member of your family; therefore, this chapter still applies to you. His memory is part of the family story and very important to your wife and her children. This chapter can help you to explore the character traits of your deceased husband-in-law and how his memory might impact your family.

THE GOAL

The primary goal of managing your relationship with the father of your stepchildren is to bring a blessing to the kids. Sure, a mutually respectful relationship reduces stress and advances your role as stepdad, but the primary purpose is to facilitate peace for the children. The more harmony there is between homes, the more your stepchildren are free to live, love, and grow. Research clearly shows that children who have a positive relationship with both their father and stepfather fare better emotionally, academically, economically, and psychologically.[37] By contrast, ongoing conflict between homes is highly predictive of negative outcomes for children on almost every measure[38] (this includes conflict both between your wife and her ex-husband and between you and him). This doesn't have to be. Of course, conflict is a two-way street and you can't control how your ex-husband-in-law behaves, but "as far as it depends on you, live at peace" (Romans 12:18).

There are many other reasons to have an amicable or even better—cooperative—relationship with your ex-husband-in-law.

- Conflict tempts fathers to disengage from their children. As I'll discuss further, deactivated dads cause harm to children, and then everyone loses.
- Conflict automatically pulls children into the emotional tug-of-war discussed in chapter 4.
- Planning and cooperation between homes becomes more difficult when animosity abounds. For example, trying to negotiate simple drop-off or pick-up tasks becomes very complicated, not to mention planning detailed events like family vacations or holiday schedules.

- The more hostile and anxious the climate between homes, the more marginalized you become with your stepchildren. In chapter 4, I discussed how your stepchildren not only have to figure out how to accept, respect, and love you, they have to learn how to do so in a way that doesn't make them feel disloyal to their father. In general, the more conflict between you and him, the more children feel compelled to stand in opposition to you. That's why giving the No-Threat Message is so important.

THE NO-THREAT MESSAGE

In chapter 4, I gave an example of the No-Threat Message as it relates to children and loyalty conflicts, but it needs repeating here relative to your ex-husband-in-law. Biological fathers resent being challenged in their role as a dad. In order to make it clear to both him and his children that you are not trying to take his place, consider giving him the following message. If you have a very cooperative relationship with your ex-husband-in-law, this might not be necessary (as his threat level is already low), but if not, take it under advisement.

Smart Dating

A biological dad may not show his true colors until you are married. Even if he was the one who desired divorce, his former wife's remarriage to you can bring all of his emotions, regrets, anger, or pain to the surface. Around the wedding, a distant father may become heavily involved, and a cordial dad may become challenging (see the Active-Duty Dad below). To try and head this off at the pass, begin communicating the No-Threat Message as soon as marriage seems certain.

"Why shouldn't I be concerned? He gets more time with my kids than I do." I had invited Steve to a consultation and had asked him about his relationship with his ex-wife's new husband. Steve's four children lived with their mother, Lauren, and their stepdad, Jason. I had been asked by Jason to counsel the family and try to help them move up Stepdad Mountain. After a few meetings with various family members, it became clear to me that although Steve was not overtly working to sabotage Jason's relationships with his kids, he sure didn't mind tossing a few verbal sticks and stones at Jason every once in a while. "So you're

worried that Jason's time with your kids, given that they are at his house much more than they are at yours, will steal them away from you. Is that right?" I asked. "I don't know that I would say 'steal' . . . but yes, I don't want him thinking he can just move in and take over."

Steve is afraid. At the heart of his negative comments is the fear of losing his place in their lives. The No-Threat Message tries to settle those fears by clearly articulating respect to the dad and your agenda in relation to his kids.

Face-to-face verbal communication (man to man) is the best-case scenario, but for the stepdad coping with a tenuous or hostile environment, the message can be communicated by phone, email, or letter.

> Ed, since I am involved with your kids, I wanted to take a minute to communicate with you. I want to share that I totally understand and respect that you are the only father of these children. I'm not their dad and I will never try to take your place. They are your children. I am honored to be an added parent figure in their lives. Like a coach, I view my role as one of support to their mom and you. My hope is to be a blessing to them. I promise to speak well of you and work together for their benefit. Please know that I pray for you and for them. If there's anything I can do to help or if you have any questions, please contact me.

Feel free to use your own words, but do you hear the spirit of the message? "I am not a threat to you." That's what he needs to hear . . . and see. Be sure to back up these words with actions. Give him the special seat at the parent-teacher meeting, encourage the kids to enjoy their time with him, take the backseat every once in a while so he gets extra time with them, and respect his boundaries and preferences for the children when you can (as long as it's not a moral issue). Doing so will reinforce that you are not a threat to his role in the family.

Children need to hear this, too. Just the other day an eleven-year-old sat in my office and made it clear that her stepdad was not her dad. "I like Jared, just as long as he doesn't try to take my dad's place or anything." Children often set their jaw against a stepdad who seems to be moving in on the special place in their heart reserved just for Dad. That's why they can relax around you when you make it clear that you aren't trying to do any such thing.

TYPES OF BIOLOGICAL DADS

Not all ex-husbands-in-law are the same, and they don't all stay the same, either. This section will review some types of ex-husbands-in-law. Be sure to read them all, as yours may shift in and out of roles over time (and it's common for more than one descriptor to fit the same man). Deceased fathers live on in the memories of their children and former wife; therefore, go ahead and give consideration to these categories if your wife was widowed.

As you read these descriptions, keep in mind that what is most important in dealing with your ex-husband-in-law is not what kind of person he is, but what kind of person you are. In all things, walk with integrity, humility, and mutual respect as you seek to live at peace.

The Engaged, Open Dad

Stepdad to Stepdad

"My ex-husband-in-law is a good Christian man, a very good father, and has always treated me well. I think one of the mistakes I made early on was not meeting with him regularly and seeking his help with his daughter. He might have been able to better help her deal with her loyalty issues and the ugliness that stemmed from that. He might have been an asset for me."
Andy

This is the dad who makes your life easier. He is actively engaged in the training and encouragement of his children and, because he is secure within himself, he is not intimidated or threatened by you. This leaves him open to your presence, reasonable in negotiation, and considerate of your wife's relationship with their children. This dad might even pray that you be a positive role model for his children, that they respect you and perhaps even love you. I know, I know . . . sounds pie in the sky, doesn't it? But it does happen. If this is your ex-husband-in-law, count your blessings, for they are many.

By the way, the Engaged, Open Dad practices good fathering. That is, he practices at being a good father and knows what a good father is. You might learn from his example—and if you have children of your own, you'll want to be one yourself!

In his excellent manual on fathering, *The 7 Secrets of Effective Fathers*, my friend Dr. Ken Canfield describes the qualities of extraordinary dads. According

to Dr. Canfield's research, engaged fathers are committed to their children. They spend more time with their children than ordinary fathers, think about how to nurture their children, and are committed to maintaining their influence in the child's life over time. They also know their child's needs, temperament, and daily activities. They strive to be involved with their child in many contexts like school, home, and in the community. They also know something about child development (what to expect from children at given ages) and how their children compare to their peers. This knowledge helps them engage the child in appropriate ways. Other qualities include:

Adult Stepchildren

These descriptions can also apply to biological dads with grown children.

- responding consistently to the child over time in mood, morality, ethics, and interests
- protecting children by taking leadership within the home (especially at a time of crisis)
- providing a steady, reliable income for material needs
- providing children with a healthy model for masculine behavior toward a woman
- having good communication skills
- providing spiritual direction in the home[39]

From one father to another, I must confess that I find the above description a bit overwhelming. So I choose to think of it as a treasure map that I can follow, one that brings great reward to everyone in my home. Perhaps you can, too.

The Trying Dad

This father is trying the best he can to be a good parent. He might not have a lot of skills or be as responsible as everyone wishes, but he is trying. Sometimes stepdads will get along nicely with this man; other times you don't see eye to eye and it brings tension. He might say you are a decent guy, but that doesn't mean he won't be a little sarcastic about you at times, as well.

Getting along with this dad is about finding the balance. For instance, having polite, casual conversation at a school event or piano recital goes a long way to

keeping cordial feelings between homes. Staying out of a tiff between your wife and him does, too. I asked a group of stepdads what suggestions they would have for managing relationships with an ex-husband-in-law, and this is what rose to the top. These will likely be helpful with the Trying Dad:

- Make good, direct communication your rule of thumb. Don't use the kids as a conduit.
- When being dispassionate is called for, use email or texting.
- Send status updates on the kids whether asked for or not. This communicates consideration for his feelings and his desire to know how they are doing.
- Don't stoop to his level. If he becomes disrespectful or disagreeable, manage yourself and don't reciprocate. It always makes you look worse than him.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Asking the dad for his opinion on how to deal with his children shows respect and might earn you some respect. Asking for help might complicate things, but it's worth a try.

The Disengaged or Deactivated Dad

Unfortunately, some dads disengage from the process of parenting while others deactivate altogether. Sometimes fathers disengage because they are puzzled by child rearing and child development and just aren't sure what to do. Even though they love their children immensely, they run from "not knowing" to the safety of emotional distance. These fathers would benefit greatly from taking a class or reading Dr. Canfield's book on parenting. Other Disengaged Dads are paralyzed by emotional exhaustion, fear, or guilt. The fear of losing their children to their mother or guilt over what the kids have suffered can make a dad back away from active parenting. Withdrawing for a season is one thing, but completely deactivating is another.

Stepdad Wisdom

"I tried early on to work with him and to offer compromises when the children had scheduled events or activities on his weekends, but he would never cooperate. This resulted in resentment by his children for having to miss something that was important to them. Even when it was within his power to take them to an event or function, he wouldn't

do so. I decided that the best course of action was to cease all interaction with him unless it came to defending my wife or advocating for the boys."
Jack

Fatherlessness is a major issue in America today, and divorce makes it worse. One classic nationally representative study found that less than half of children age eleven to seventeen years with divorced parents had seen their fathers *the previous year* and almost 40 percent had no contact with their fathers *in five years*.[40] There are multiple reasons why this might be, but an all-too-common one is a Deactivated Dad who stops pursuing his children after the divorce. Even men who had been very active fathers sometimes drop out of their children's lives after the family breakup. Dr. James Bray, who studied a group of stepfamilies for over a decade, found that 10 to 15 percent of nonresidential fathers vanished from their kids' lives. These Suddenly Vanishing Fathers, as he called them, were often avoiding the pain associated with their divorce by emotionally disconnecting from their kids and ex-wife.[41]

The Deactivated Dad may be trying to cope with his pain (or displacing the guilt he feels for not being with his kids), but he is creating pain for his children. If this is the scenario for your stepchildren, pray for them diligently; it is a dreadful situation. The challenge for you is to keep a respectful tone when talking about him or dealing with him. When the blind attachment-based loyalties of your stepchildren lead them to speak favorably about him (even though he has disappointed them repeatedly), you may be tempted to set the record straight. Be very cautious about doing so. Trying to change a child's fantasy of their father often bounces animosity back at you. Similarly, when interacting with a Deactivated Dad (or a Disengaged Dad), you may be tempted to challenge him to reengage. Step carefully. While your intentions are on target, you are unlikely to make progress.

Step-Money

It is tempting to pursue back child support from a disengaged dad to punish his bad behavior or to try and activate him. Neither is a good reason. Taking legal measures to pursue back child support should be about the children's needs only—not yours. Choose your battles wisely.

So what should you do in these situations? Look for opportunities to discuss what the child or dad is saying or doing, but do not become emotionally invested in the outcome. For example, with a child who is crediting their father with being responsible when he isn't, engage the conversation gently. "I can tell you are certain your dad will show up as promised this weekend. [Shift the focus to the child, not the dad.] You really are hoping to see him, aren't you? I hope you get to. You are a great kid and deserve to spend some time with him." Again, the trick is not getting caught in the trap of trying to change the child's belief about his or her father. You don't have enough influence to make that happen; unfortunately, that is something the child has to teach himself (and it will be a sad day when he does). Instead, focus on your relationship with the child (not their relationship with their dad), and affirm them. Moving toward the child's heart is what will give you influence—and make you a source of comfort when the reality of their dad's deactivation sets in—over time.

Terminating Parental Rights. In extreme situations, a Deactivated Dad might be so removed that he gives up his parental rights or finds them legally terminated by the courts because of physical or sexual abuse or psychiatric problems. Children in such circumstances sometimes agree to the termination and may or may not then give the stepfather their blessing to adopt them (which you may or may not choose to do).[42]

When children are ambivalent about legally terminating their father's rights, both you and your wife should be very cautious about pushing them in that direction. Again, trying to change the relationship between your stepchildren and their father is a huge path to family stress and self-sabotage. Follow the child's lead; it is their relationship to manage.

Separate from that important factor, here is another consideration in deciding whether to adopt your stepchildren: Think of adoption as the capstone to your relationship with the children, not a path to it. If you have already built a solid relationship of love and trust and the biological father's rights have been terminated, then adoption will simply be a formality honoring what is. People, however, who think of adoption as the path to greater trust and closeness may be setting everyone up for disappointment. Move forward very cautiously.

The Active-Duty Dad

On the surface, the Active-Duty Dad appears to be an Engaged Dad. He is supportive, present, and interested in his children's lives. But there is a key difference. He is motivated not with self-confidence and a pure passion for his kids, but with fear. His activation is duty driven by the fear that if he doesn't

engage, he might lose his kids. There are two types of Active-Duty Dads reacting to two types of crises: The Divorce-Activated Dad and the Remarriage-Activated Dad.[43]

Sometimes divorce is a wake-up call that results in positive growth for a father; the divorce activation in his life is a blessing for his kids. But other Divorce-Activated Dads are just reacting in fear to the possibility of losing their kids. In effect, parenting is another field of play for the power game between them and their ex-wife.

Similarly, Remarriage-Activated Dads are selfishly trying to protect their turf. "He is jealous and upset at the prospect of another man—a stepfather—supplanting him in his children's lives. He is their father, and he does not want another man stealing that role away from him."[44] This man is competitive and you are the competition.

Sometimes the Remarriage-Activated Dad blindsides his ex-wife because her co-parenting history with him misleads Mom to believe that he won't be an issue in her new marriage. During courtship, you may have even thought you benefitted from his emotional distance. But marriage often changes things (lots of things!). Once it's clear that you aren't going away anytime soon, the remarriage activates his presence. You might have been able to pretend that you had "blended" as a family before, but not anymore. In addition, unresolved issues from your wife's previous marriage to him—issues that had long been lying dormant—can be resurrected upon his activation. All of a sudden your wife finds herself fussing and feuding with him in the same way that they did before the divorce.

Obviously, either the Divorce- or Remarriage-Activated Dad is a challenge for you because he is defensive and easily threatened. So what can you do?

- The No-Threat Message will likely fall on deaf ears because this dad's fear and insecurity are immense. But it's still worth a shot; what do you have to lose?
- Resist the temptation to stand as protector against his controlling behavior. Ironically, the best way for you to defend your wife is to encourage her to deal with him directly. Spend time talking about how she can respond and help her develop a game plan, but let her take the lead. Unless there is significant reason your wife can't do it, you need to play second violin in this situation, too.
- Your stepchildren probably won't discern their dad's motivations; they don't care, they just enjoy having him around. So try to encourage and

celebrate their time with him and again resist the urge to set the record straight.

Finally, a gut check for those of you with kids of your own: are you a Disengaged, Deactivated, or Divorce/Remarriage-Activated Dad? Perhaps you wrestle with guilt over not being available to your children (drawing close to your stepchildren can make that feeling more intense). Or perhaps you feel disloyal, finding it hard, for example, to really enjoy your stepchildren because you know your kids feel cheated of their time with you. If so, begin your journey toward pure motivations and the freedom to love by acknowledging your intense emotions. You must be honest with yourself so that your actions won't be dictated by your fear, guilt, or hurt. Next, if you need to reconcile a relationship with one of your children, talk to your wife and start working on it now. You and your children won't be able to find forgiveness or freedom in your current family situations until you reconnect. By the way, many conflictual stepdad-stepchild relationships are improved when the stepdad finds peace with his own children. And finally, while working on reconciling your relationships, humbly acknowledge to your stepchildren how your feelings have contributed to any distance or difficulties between you. That act of humility might soften the discord and give both of you a second chance.

The Angry or Addicted Dad

This dad is chaos waiting to happen. He may float in and out of the children's lives with renewed commitment only to vanish again for his favorite drink, drug, or latest obsession. He is irresponsible and undependable; instability is his middle name. When anger is part of the dynamic, it might even be hidden in religiosity.

"He is still a hostile jerk," Tim began about his wife's ex. "He destroyed two marriages, and his four older children want nothing to do with him. Our oldest son recently stopped visiting him, and it is only a matter of time before the twelve-year-old stops, too. He calls himself a Christian. He knows Scripture very well, but he uses it to bludgeon people into submitting to his will; he is a religious Pharisee. His continual attacks, calling my wife and me adulterers because we remarried (there was no adultery), liars because we disagree with his views on Scripture, and thieves because he pays child support, certainly make for a very difficult dynamic. We do our best not to speak ill of him and even find that we must stop the boys from ridiculing their father. It is a very difficult situation."

This dad presents a huge challenge. He poses a constant threat to the stability of your home. His children resent him one day and miss him the next. And although he repeatedly hurts them, their fierce loyalty keeps them longing for his return. The resulting ambiguity keeps everyone, especially you, searching for solid ground. Surviving in this situation requires learning to live with a lack of predictability or control and gaining tolerance for the vacillating closeness and distance mechanisms in your stepchildren. Unfortunately, their openness to you is often a direct reflection of his movement in and out of their lives.

These circumstances also demand strong communication with your wife, who is also often overwhelmed and defeated by her ex-husband's chaos. If he speaks harshly or angrily to her, the protective side of you will naturally want to stand up for her and perhaps fight her battles—any man can turn into the Incredible Hulk if his wife is being threatened! But it may not be best for you to do so. To be clear, I'm not speaking so much here of his being physically intimidating or abusive (if he becomes so, feel free to turn green), but more of times when he hurts her feelings. Haphazardly jumping in to take over, even with the best intentions, may backfire.

A couple approached me at a conference one weekend with this very issue. Her ex-husband would belittle her (just as he had done during their marriage) when discussing co-parenting matters. The stepdad had been quick to defend her and had inadvertently escalated the negativity between homes. His wife was very resentful—appreciative, yes—but also resentful. Part of the problem was that his wife didn't know why he was doing this. I suggested he pull back from being the white knight and give attention to communicating clearly with his wife about his feelings of anger and concern for her and then dialogue with her about how he could be helpful. What develops at that point will be a tailored prescription suitable to the couple. And, of course, that's the point: negotiating a solution that keeps you connected as a couple.

For Mom

What type of dad is the father of your children? Share your insights with your husband and discuss the implications for co-parenting and between-home cooperation.

Without question, the Angry or Addicted Dad is destructive and difficult to deal with. So how else do you cope?

DEALING WITH A DESTRUCTIVE DAD

This portion of Stepdad Mountain is often extremely taxing. Actually, I should clarify the word *portion*. It's not a section of the climb that you conquer once and move on with it behind you. In reality, if you are dealing with any of the above difficult ex-husbands-in-law, you know that this portion of the climb is cyclical, ever before you. The intensity of the conflict may subside from time to time, but until there is significant growth and change in his heart and life, his weight will add burden to your climb.

In our book *The Smart Stepmom,* my coauthor Laura Petherbridge had some encouraging words for stepmoms dealing with similar circumstances.

> Philippians 2:5 tells us that the Holy Spirit is willing and capable to give us the mind of Christ: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (KJV). That means we now have the ability to think and act like Jesus. I can't speak for you, but for me this is incredibly good news. Because left to my own thoughts and actions, I can be nasty—in particular if I'm being slandered, criticized, or ridiculed. . . . But God's Word tells me there is a better way to respond, a method that can motivate peace rather than destruction.[45]

I offer those same words of encouragement for you here.

In addition, God gives us specific instructions in the latter half of Romans 12 on how to respond to an unreasonable person.[46] There Paul outlines the attitudes and actions needed in order to love difficult people. God's prescription for overcoming an evil person is to respond with good. The temptation we all face is to repay evil with more evil. But that is not in keeping with the mercies God has shown us (Romans 12:1). The goal, in spite of the hurt we experience at the hands of others, is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices and repay evil with good. But what about revenge? Isn't that justified?

Vengeance, according to our Lord, is not ours to take. Romans 12:19 makes it clear that God is the only one who should seek vengeance. He is the only one who is pure and holy, with no ulterior motives. He always desires our higher good (even when we don't deserve it). If your wife's former husband chooses to continue with evil, destructive deeds instead of good, it is God's job to do what is best. Not yours.

But what is your role in the meantime? Are you supposed to sit around and passively wait for more persecution? No, the answer is to become aggressive

with good. When wicked behavior is running rampant, it seems to have control. However, God's Word tells us that good is more powerful than evil. God does not say that doing good to others will help us tolerate their evil. He says that we can *overcome* it. Light overwhelms darkness. Hope triumphs over discouragement. Love casts out fear. It is our task, in the face of evil, to offer good. Why? Because good invites repentance. Consider Romans 12:20: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." The phrase "heap burning coals on his head" refers to awakening the conscience of another. With good, we can melt the heart of evil with burning shame. Constantly repaying evil with good holds a mirror up to the perpetrator reflecting their evil; in some cases this will bring about a change of heart.

But what if repentance does not happen in the heart of the destructive dad? Then it's between your ex-husband-in-law and his Creator. You may suffer much at his hand, but you must trust God to do what is right. And what do you get for your obedience? Another place in Scripture concludes that the Lord will reward those who do good to those who are evil (Proverbs 25:22). The evil of some ex-husbands-in-law can be overcome, others cannot. Either way, the Lord will notice your sacrifice and reward you.

Until then, live this way (see Romans 12:14–20):

- Bless and do not curse.
- Do everything you can to live in harmony.
- Do not be proud; be willing to associate with him despite his behavior.
- Do not become conceited.
- Be careful to do what is right.
- Do not take revenge.
- "Feed him" and "give him something to drink" even when undeserved.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. What frustrations have you had with your ex-husband-in-law?
2. Discuss this statement: "Of course, conflict is a two-way street and you can't control how your ex-husband-in-law behaves, but 'as far as it depends on you, live at peace' " (Romans 12:18).
3. What is the point of the No-Threat Message?

4. What type of dad is your ex-husband-in-law?
   The Open, Engaged Dad
   The Trying Dad
   The Disengaged or Deactivated Dad
   The Active-Duty Dad
   The Angry or Addicted Dad
5. What tips or insights did you discover in the chapter to help you cope with your ex-husband-in-law?
6. Romans 12 reminds us that vengeance belongs to the Lord. What, then, is our role in dealing with difficult people?
7. Review the qualities of effective fathers mentioned on pages 140–141. What can you do to move toward being this type of father and stepfather?

Chapter 9

Your Kids: What Do They Need?

I've felt extremely pulled to choose between my wife and my kids. I regret that very much.

ANDY

What my kids have needed most from me is stability and the assurance that I will never leave them like their mother did.

JERRY

No Children of Your Own?

Two-thirds of stepparents also have biological children of their own. But even if you don't, I recommend you read this chapter. You will receive insight into the emotional dilemmas your wife faces while parenting her children. Balancing parental responsibilities and spousal commitments can be challenging. Read this chapter with an eye for how it applies to your home.

"Please tell your husband I sympathize with his struggles in your family. I can't imagine how frustrating it must be to be him." I was talking with Juanita, a remarried mother of three, and hoping to eventually communicate with her husband, Henry. The couple had been married about four years when Juanita and her three children came to therapy. She had invited her husband, but so far he wouldn't attend.

"I think he's afraid of being blamed for all that's going on," she theorized, "but I know it's not all his fault. All of us share the blame." She was right. There was enough responsibility to go around: Her children had banned together to keep

Henry marginalized; Juanita felt caught between her kids and her husband; and her ex-husband moved across the country and was terribly inconsistent as a father. And then there was Henry's part. Though I had never met him, stories shared by Juanita and her children made me wonder if he wasn't feeling like a powerless outsider in his own home and a frustrated father (of his children). He was stuck trying to be a good dad and stepdad with a wife and ex-wife who wouldn't allow him much influence. He was falling down everywhere he stepped.

A TOUGH BALANCING ACT

When you have children of your own, the Smart Stepdad balancing act is even more difficult. Instead of juggling three objects (as if that's not hard enough), you're tossing around five or more. You add in things like how your stepchildren and children are getting along and the guilt of not being available to your kids as much as you'd like.

For Mom

Read this chapter to understand more of your husband's balancing act. Being dad and stepdad is often confusing and guilt producing. Consider reading The Smart Stepmom to help you partner with him to raise his children.

But having your own children can also work to your advantage. Being a dad yourself tends to help you sympathize and get along with your ex-husband-in-law; after all, you know something of what he's going through. And some studies suggest that having their own children helps stepdads to be closer to their stepchildren and have more positive feelings toward them[47] (in part because your kids have already taught you that even great kids can have sour attitudes sometimes).

Whether for the good or the not-so good, there's no doubt that having your own kids adds complexity to your life. But compared to moms who become stepmoms, dads who become stepdads have an easier time maintaining positive relationships with their children. If your ex-wife has remarried, you may be pleasantly surprised to learn that it's easier for children to have a positive

relationship with a nonresidential dad when their mother has remarried than when she is still single.[48]

This is a bit more complicated if your kids' primary residence is with you. When residential single fathers marry and a stepmom takes over many of the daily caretaking responsibilities formerly performed by the father, the change is a more dramatic one for the children and more difficult to adapt to. Even then, though, once the stepfamily has stabilized, resident father-child relationships are often similar to father-child relationships in biological two-parent homes.[49] In other words, being Daddy to your children is very possible, but never take it for granted.

MINISTERING TO YOUR CHILD'S HEART

You may not be a paid minister, but if you are a parent, you are called upon to minister to your child's heart. Essentially our work as parents is teaching, training, and equipping our children for life—this life and the one beyond. The loss (i.e., death or divorce) that brought you and your children to your current family situation demands a special dose of ministry from you. The first part of this chapter outlines general ministry strategies that most dads/stepdads will need to implement, and the second half deals with a few specific dilemmas for some dads/stepdads.

Stay Physically Connected and Emotionally Engaged

Your children need your continued presence in their lives. Remember the chapter 8 discussion of ex-husbands-in-law and how some dads vanish from their children's lives following a divorce or after the mother remarries? You cannot afford to be that dad. Countless books have been written on the critical role of a father—and they are right. No matter what society or the "dumb fathers" of TV sitcoms communicate about fatherhood, you are vitally important to the emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual development of your children. Even if circumstances or distant living arrangements make your engagement infrequent or difficult, never stop pursuing your kids. (If you are being blocked from involvement, see the section on Daddy Dilemmas at the end of this chapter.) Your kids are better off with an engaged, active father. And so is your stepfamily.

1. Strike a balance in your roles. Think about it. How can your children celebrate your role as a stepfather if it means losing you to their stepsiblings? Watching you abandon ship only to invest in your stepchildren would cause

them to think of their stepsiblings and stepmother as the enemy. This competitive environment would certainly sabotage household harmony and cause many conflicts. What is needed is balance between the roles of father and stepdad, not an over-investment in either.

No, you probably won't be able to give equal time to each, but you can strive to be fully present with whomever you are with. Use modern technology (e.g., email and texting) to keep in touch even when you can't be physically present, and seek to play all the roles a father plays, even when at a distance. For example, some dads are tempted not to engage in stern talk or boundary setting with their kids when they don't get to see them much. But your children still need to know you approve of wise choices and disapprove of poor ones. Don't ditch your disciplinarian role just because time is limited.

Stepdad to Stepdad

"Resist playing favorites with your kids. When with my stepchildren, my attention easily switched to my kids. It's natural to do this, but I had to be intentional—I had to pace myself and balance my attention. My stepchildren are now in their twenties and it has paid off."
Gil, stepdad

Striking a balance also means managing your guilt when circumstances give you more time with your stepchildren than with your biological children. Some men try to solve their internal guilt by remaining distant or critical of their stepchildren. But this won't improve your relationship—or your conscience—with your biological children. Researcher James Bray notes, "The man who complains about the sloppy state of his stepchild's room or the child's awful taste in music is really complaining about something else: the loss of his own biological children and how much pain that causes him."[50] This is similar to the loyalty conflicts some stepchildren feel over calling their stepdad Dad. Liking you presents a problem. The answer for them is not in being angry or distant from you. Nor is your solution to displace your guilt on your stepchildren. If you find yourself struggling with this dilemma, try to think of relationships with your children and stepchildren independent of each other and give yourself permission to fully engage in each as you are able. You have enough love to go around.

2. Communicate commitment to your kids while also making it clear that your marriage is a priority. It serves no one's best interests to make an either/or choice between your marriage and your children. Instead, make a both/and decision. Be committed to both your children *and* your marriage. I know this sounds good in theory, but the truth is, living it out is challenging, especially when a child throws a major guilt trip at you: "Do you love your wife more than me?" This either/or choice feels like a no-win situation for you. Recognize it as a both/and dilemma. Your answer needs to reflect a deep love for *both* your children *and* your wife. You might communicate it this way:

> Please know that I love you with all my heart. I can see from the way you've been acting lately that you wonder if I still love you as much as I did. You need to know that my marriage and becoming a stepdad has not changed my love for you. I know I'm not as available as I used to be, and we have less time together, but you are still my child and nothing will change that. Yet you need to know that I am choosing to love my wife and stepchildren, too. It's not a competition; God has given me more than enough love for you and them. I love them differently than you, but I do love them. Know this: I will never stop loving you even while I love my wife and will always be her husband, till death do us part. I am hers and she is mine, for life.

Smart Dating

A word of caution: If you are not ready to fully commit yourself to your wife and risk making your children uncomfortable, I strongly urge you to refrain from marriage until you are ready. Resist the temptation to believe that there will never be tension between these two "firsts."

From time to time, children who have experienced tremendous loss and instability in life need to hear in no uncertain terms that you will never stop loving them. We all know that God loves us unconditionally, and yet we all still need to hear the words of the Lord found in Hebrews 13:5, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." The permanence of love brings calm in the storm and peace in the darkness. Flood your children with it. They also need to hear that your marriage is a lifelong, never-say-die, permanent commitment that is

second only to your love for the Lord. Over time, those two messages reinforced by your consistent, loving actions will keep your children from getting lost in the shuffle.

3. Stay predictable in your availability and activities. Of course, some change before and after marriage is inevitable. But as much as it is within your power, remain consistent in your visitation schedule, phone calls, and pattern of involvement. Doing so builds bridges of trust and encourages your children to be open with you. They need to know that you still care to hear about their daily lives and their thoughts, concerns, and feelings.

4. Compartmentalize special time. From time to time, make opportunities for exclusive time with each of your children. Take your daughter to lunch or your son to a baseball game. Planning special time with individual children happens regularly in biological families and no one thinks anything of it (when balanced between all the children over time). But for some reason, people get paranoid about doing so in stepfamilies. Your wife might object to you taking your daughter to a special concert without taking all of her children, as well, or your ex-wife might accuse you of favoritism for not including all the kids in an activity. But special time helps to feed a child's heart, and as long as everyone gets included over time, it doesn't have to add up to favoritism. Find a balance; have entire family activities where everyone is included, and enjoy individual special events meant to communicate ongoing dedication to your children.

Stepdad to Stepdad

"The number one thing my kids needed and still need to know every day is that I'll never leave them as long as God wants me on this earth, and that they'll always have my attention when dealing with any issue they come across. Without question, stability is key."
Thomas

5. Don't buy the lie. I said it before, but it deserves restating: Don't ever be fooled into believing that cutting yourself out of your child's life is to their advantage. Nothing could be further from the truth. "It just seems that my kids' lives would be less complicated if they didn't have to travel to see me every month," Dan explained to me. "Aren't I making life easier for them by letting them stay at their mom's house?" It is true that visitation causes inconveniences

for children (and adults), but the blessings far outweigh the difficulties. Don't buy the lie.

Be Fair and Consistent in Parenting Your Kids

This principle is stated simply enough. But here's the rub: Being respectful of your limited authority with your stepchildren may give the appearance of unfairness and inconsistency to your children. Francis put it this way: "With biological kids, you are not limited in your role, but with stepkids you are because you are not the lead parent. I struggle to be fair in these situations, but letting my wife take the lead with my stepkids makes my kids question why I'm unfair." Here are a few suggestions.

1. Explain the limitations of your stepdad role. For example, when referencing behavior of your stepchild that your son or daughter witnessed, say, "You and I both know that I would not let you get away with speaking to me that way. But I'm not Karen's father, and this needs to be handled by her mother just like when I let our neighbors punish their own kids. As for you, however, you may not talk to me or your stepmother in that tone." Some people think that saying this out loud is revealing a big secret or something, as if the child doesn't already know. But it's just being honest. The trick is to not criticize your wife for her values or how she is handling the situation. The point is, clearly define yourself as your children's father and, therefore, capable of managing them as you see fit even if it's different from how you manage your stepchildren.

2. Remain consistent with your pre-marriage rules and expectations. Things will change and parenting evolves as we and our children grow, but try to avoid dramatic changes to rules if possible. Unless, of course, before becoming a stepdad you were inconsistent and undisciplined as a father. Giving yourself a pass because you were permissive isn't helpful to anyone. Talk with your wife and try to set mutual expectations for the home and raise the expectations for your children (see chapters 5 to 7). This will come with a price tag (resistance and objections from your kids), but better now than later.

Don't Push Your Children Into Steprelationships

In my first book *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family,* I suggested that stepfamilies should not be combined in a blender. Trying to force relationships between the ingredients of your family just creates stress and expectations of love or affection that can't be demanded. Instead I suggested cooking your stepfamily slowly and with much patience, as in a Crockpot. Charles and his wife, Debra, caught the wisdom of this approach and stuck to it.

After a few years, he wrote me with reflections of how his children, stepchildren, and wife formed their relationships.

> When my kids came to visit for the weekend, they would hug some and shake hands with others, but after a while, her kids would migrate back to her and mine to me. At first we thought we had to group everyone together all the time so they would like each other. But we learned that it was okay to let them go where it was safe. We let them have their own space and do their own thing, and respected when and how they chose to come together. Things got better when we relaxed and didn't throw on the blender switch. We let them simmer and come together with a long, moderate heat.

Let your kids work out their degree of openness to and fondness for their stepmom and stepsiblings in their own time. But balance this with sources of low heat for the family Crockpot: Encourage shared activities when it is of natural interest to everyone involved, and create a climate that fosters relationship development. For example, expect basic respect and courteous behavior toward one another. Until children trust that others respect their personal space and property, they won't care to deepen their relationships with one another. And finally, be sure to give your children permission to love and remain loyal to their biological mother (see chapter 4). The paradox is this: If you insist they love their stepmom, you may inadvertently embolden their loyalty to their mother, but if you insist on mother respect and make love for their stepmom their choice, they may feel freer to gravitate toward your wife. (To be clear, respectful and courteous behavior toward your wife is not optional, but love and feelings of affection are.) The difference is freedom. When love is demanded, it becomes more difficult to obtain. But when love is a free choice, it can be discovered sooner.

Adult Children

Don't underestimate how left out adult children sometimes feel. They may feel jealous, for example, of the time you spend with stepfamily members. Maintain connections (e.g., regular phone calls, monthly lunch dates, and annual Christmas celebrations) with them and your grandchildren. When both her children and your children are together,

be sure to balance your attention. Focusing too much energy on your stepkids can be a mistake.

Help Maintain Social Connections

Another way to minister to your child's heart throughout the transition to a healthy stepfamily is to make decisions that maintain your child's social network and connections. This is especially true for preteen and adolescent-aged children. Within a year of the death of our middle son, Connor, my wife and I were faced with some career decisions that would have meant moving our family. Our oldest son was fifteen at that time and had some healthy school and youth-group friendships that we saw as an asset for him. Our life had been traumatized enough; throwing one more unwanted transition his direction would not have been wise. So we passed on the opportunity—and I don't regret it a bit. If at all possible, don't let your role as stepdad force your kids into an unwanted move away from family, friends, or a church community that is serving their needs.

Advocate for Your Kids When Necessary

God intended for parenting to be a two-person job. It's good to share the weight of responsibility with someone else; I think we make better decisions that way. Another advantage is that each parent gets to help the other be a better parent. My wife has coached me many times and I her. Sometimes we reflect observations to the other ("I'm not sure you realize how angry you were"); other times perspective ("Just because a male is silent for a while doesn't mean anything is wrong"). Over time, we help each other to be better parents.

You and your wife can and should do the same. One added complication to be aware of, however, is how easy it is to become defensive about your own children. Guard against this, for it closes you off to how the other is trying to help. But what do you do if you don't care for how she managed a situation? How do you approach her without igniting her defenses?

Humility is a good start. You might try saying something like, "Sweetheart, I'd like to talk with you about what happened last night when I was out of the house. I know in the past I've been pretty defensive about my kids and made you feel small compared to them. I regret that very much and am trying hard not to do that now. Having said that, can I share some things with you that I think will help both you and them? [Get confirmation of her readiness to hear you.] I'm concerned that the way you respond in X situation is coming across as mean or uncaring to the kids and it's putting a bigger wedge between you. I know you

don’t want that, and neither do I. I know you are trying to teach the kids responsibility—and I love you for that. I’m wondering if we can talk about how to go about handling this in the future so they get the responsibility message. Knowing my kids, perhaps you could respond this way . . .”

Hopefully this will lower everyone’s defensives and open the door to cooperation. Negotiating a set of parental responses on which you agree is important. If repeated discussions do not result in agreement, take the matter outside your marriage. Attend a class together or seek counsel from a parent educator or therapist so you can develop a shared system of parenting. Most important, don’t turn the discussion into a you-versus-us battle or everyone loses.

DADDY DILEMMAS

Let’s turn our attention to some specific dilemmas that not all dads/stepdads face, but many do.

If You Are Blocked From Your Kids

Earlier I emphasized remaining connected and involved with your kids. This is a frustrating prescription for some dads because they are trying but find themselves blocked by their ex-wife, extended family members, or the kids themselves. Or perhaps you are currently disconnected from your kids because of your own choices and don’t know how to reconnect. In either case, realize that you are still important to your kids (even if it isn’t apparent), and that the father-child bond is not easily broken. All is not lost.

Try to reconnect at every opportunity. Many men just give up (the rejection is less intense), but that sends the wrong message to your children. Even if they don’t seem to reciprocate your efforts, you want them waking up in five years knowing that you pursued them continuously.

If you are disconnected as a result of your own choices, try to reconnect, but be very patient. Their hurt may cause them to be unresponsive at first.

Opening Shut Doors

If you’ve been disconnected, getting your kids to open up can be difficult sometimes. Try these tips:

- Listen first, ask questions, then begin talking about what's on your mind.
- Let them settle in to your house by doing something they enjoy first; then invite them to get a Coke or play a game.
- Be sure your home includes games, activities, etc., that they enjoy. Engage with them.
- Listening to music is a good way to open the heart.

Matt Crain, PhD, ConnectingFathers.com

If blocked by others, take advantage of any avenue, however small. For example, communicate messages through an extended family member or use technology to share your heart with your child. One father I know wrote letters to his kids that he knew they would never receive. He kept copies of the letters just in case life reopened the door to their relationship. After ten years of alienation, his children were old enough to pursue a relationship with him on their own. He shared the letters with them and they were able to catch up on his love and thoughts for them over the years. Plus, it proved that the lies their mother had told them were not representative of his heart. It was a tremendous blessing for this father and his kids.

Being a Nonresident Dad

Eighty percent of nonresident parents are men;[51] their children primarily live elsewhere. Your continued visitation, communication, and contact with nonresidential children is vital. It has a positive effect on your child's emotional and social well-being and helps reduce risky adolescent behavior.[52] In addition, your continued child support is critical to raising your child's standard of living, which in turn is directly related to many matters of child well-being.[53] Most of all, paying child support clearly communicates your continued commitment to your children separate and apart from your relationship with their mother.

Staying in Touch

Here are some tips from Matt Crain, PhD, ConnectingFathers.com, for staying in touch with your kids:

- Maintain communication routines. Write a letter/email on Monday morning, call Tuesday evening, send a text message on Thursday, and keep your appointed visitation. Be sure to remember birthdays and holidays with a card, phone call, or something appropriate. Young children will benefit from your recording a bedtime story and making it available on CD.
- Take pictures of the activities you and your child engage in (even routine chores around the house) and be sure they have a copy. This reminds them of your presence and engages the heart even when you can't be physically present.
- Get out of the house. Making the most of your time together often results from getting away from video games, your favorite TV chair, and their being able to "chill" in their bedroom. Walk around the block, explore the backyard, run errands together—whatever it takes.

One often overlooked complication of being a nonresidential father is how it impacts your wife, who becomes a nonresidential stepmother. Due to reduced time with stepkids, nonresidential stepmoms are less likely to take on a parental role and are less close with stepchildren than are residential stepmoms. This, of course, makes sense, because less time in the stepfamily Crockpot means less cooking time. It's just harder for her to find her place with your kids, which adds stress. This stress might then translate into tension with you when your kids come to visit, especially if you indulge their preferences or cater to their desires.

To avoid this pressure, lower your expectations regarding the level of closeness between your wife and kids. Let them work this out in their own time. In anticipation of their visits, talk with your wife about how the weekend will go, listen to her needs, and share yours. This will help to prevent unrealistic expectations from sabotaging your time together.

SURVIVING THE STEPFAMILY FOREST

Therapists and stepfamily educators John and Emily Visher used to joke that stepfamilies don't have a family tree, they have a family forest! As seedlings in the forest, your children can easily get lost among the towering trees and foliage. A little extra water and warm sunshine from you can do wonders.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

(Stepdads without children are encouraged to participate in this discussion, especially if having your own child is a future possibility.)

1. What challenges have you faced in balancing your roles as dad and stepdad?
2. What guilt feelings have you experienced regarding your children?
3. In what ways are you trying to stay physically connected and emotionally engaged with your kids?
4. How are you trying to fulfill these things?

- Strike a balance in your roles as father, husband, and stepdad.
- Communicate commitment to your kids while also making it clear that your marriage is a priority.
- Stay predictable in your availability and activities.
- Compartmentalize special time. From time to time, make opportunities for exclusive time with each of your children.
- Don’t buy the lie. Don’t be fooled into believing that cutting yourself out of your child’s life is to their advantage.

5. What are some strategies for being fair and consistent with rules for your kids?
6. How patient are you in allowing steprelationships to develop between your kids and your wife or stepchildren?
7. How can advocating for your kids be delicate with your wife?
8. If you are blocked from your kids or a nonresident father, review Matt Crain’s tips for Opening Shut Doors (p. 164) or Staying in Touch (p. 165). Which are helpful? What have you already found works for you?

Chapter 10

Hugging Your Stepdaughter, Stepsibling Attractions, and the Awkward Issues of Stepfamily Sexuality

It was weird. One minute she was my little princess and the next a young woman. All of a sudden I was uncomfortable with her sitting on my lap.

SEAN

Now eighteen, my stepdaughter is very pretty just like her mom. As she grew up I was amazed at how beautiful she became, but I never saw her as sexually attractive nor did I feel awkward hugging her. Actually, her mom and I worry about how attractive she is to other guys more than anything else.

BOB

As the resident father figure and masculine role model in your home, you have the incredible opportunity to demonstrate for your stepchildren biblical character, humility, and the power of living a Christian life. For example, you can teach your stepson how to stand up for godliness even when his friends don't. The way you treat your stepdaughter, protect her, reinforce her God-given worth, and even how you treat her mother contribute invaluably to her sense of self-esteem and femininity. Hugging your stepdaughter hugs her heart.

For Mom

Only 15 percent of mothers talked with their future husband before marriage about the tricky aspects of physical contact with stepdaughters.[54] It is an uncomfortable topic, but don't avoid it. Read this chapter and discuss how it applies to your family situation.

HUGGING YOUR STEPDAUGHTER

There's another side to this opportunity—a dark side if you will. And for many men, to talk about it is embarrassing. But to fall prey to it would be highly destructive and much worse.

Brent never found himself sexually attracted to his stepdaughter, but he felt self-conscience at times. He found himself cautious about the possibilities of what could happen and guarded against situations that would make his stepdaughter feel uncomfortable. So he paid attention to how he dressed. "Getting married meant I had to change my habit of walking around the house in my underwear or even going without a shirt. And I certainly asked her mom to make sure my stepdaughter dressed appropriately, as well."

Through the years, courageous people have sidelined me at a conference or emailed us at Successful Stepfamilies with desperate questions about sexuality within stepfamilies. Some were guys like Brent who were trying to prevent problems. Others were dealing with situations that had already crossed adult-child boundaries or with the awkward circumstances of stepsiblings who find themselves romantically attracted to one another (more on that later). But no matter the circumstance, they were all trying to correctly handle the situation. I admire that.

What I appreciate about Brent is his nerve to openly admit to the need for high integrity in his home. He could have downplayed the issue and shrugged it off, but he didn't. He courageously admitted that the situation required proactive planning and preventive action on his part. That's to be commended.

Passing Thoughts

But what if you are active in preventing inappropriate behaviors and you still find yourself struggling with unwanted thoughts? You don't have to be a pervert to experience an uncomfortable feeling when giving a hug to your stepdaughter when no one else is in the room, or to have passing sexual thoughts about her. The vast majority of stepdads will never cross the line into entertaining such

thoughts or acting on them,[55] but some will be greatly surprised by an incidental thought, curiosity, or wonderment. Then what do you do?

Sean admitted to some passing sexual attractions to his stepdaughter. I appreciated his honesty because it indicated a desire to keep his thoughts and behaviors in check. “I have found my stepdaughter to be very attractive and I do get uncomfortable hugging her. My worst nightmare is for her to catch me looking at her body or breasts, so I work hard to look her in the eyes. I have had a few fantasy thoughts about her, but not often, and I quickly dismiss them.” Sean is aware of his vulnerability and is striving to manage it appropriately. When a stepdad doesn’t manage such vulnerabilities, however, lives are ripped apart.

We’ve all heard news accounts of stepfathers who have been arrested for molesting their stepdaughters (such shocking headlines sell lots of broadcast time and newspapers, so we tend to hear about them). Thankfully in our culture there are laws and social pressures against such behaviors because they are so destructive to children (and marriages). A few years ago I was stunned by a phone interview I conducted at the request of a newspaper in Singapore. The interview went as most generally do, but the reporter kept asking me questions about sexuality and the incidence of stepfather molestation. I paused the interview and asked her why she was pressing me on that issue. According to her, the Malaysian culture turned a blind eye to stepfather-stepdaughter sexual touching and even encouraged it on some level. The problem was running rampant and she hoped to offer some perspective through our interview. I was more than willing to oblige her; I spoke in no uncertain terms how damaging such conduct would be to a child and how it sabotaged emotional safety within the home (even if culturally condoned). That interview reminded me to be thankful that we don’t have that abhorrent climate in most Western societies. But it still can happen in any given home.

Dating and Part-time Stepdads

A deepening bond with a stepdaughter diminishes sexual attractions; the more fatherly you become toward her, the less sexual confusion there is. That’s why dating or part-time stepdads must be on guard. Infrequent or limited time with a stepchild adds vulnerability.

Sean could have had that environment in his home, but he took a few steps to prevent it.

- “I have found my stepdaughter to be attractive.” Sean admitted to himself and another person his vulnerability. As embarrassing as it is, submitting himself to accountability takes some power out of this weakness; it sheds light on an otherwise dark secret, which makes acting on it less likely.
- “My worst nightmare . . .” Sean has owned how destructive his potential sin would be for his stepdaughter (and family). Men who fall prey to such temptations often minimize the potential impact of their behavior on others, which allows for a psychological justification of the risks involved. (“It’s not a big deal; no one will get hurt.”) Make no mistake, inappropriate behavior toward your stepdaughter will have a devastating impact on her emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, not to mention jeopardize your marriage and subject you to criminal proceedings. It is a nightmare you don’t want to become reality.
- “I work hard to look her in the eyes.” Like Job, Sean made a covenant with his eyes not to look at a woman—in this case his stepdaughter—lustfully (Job 31:1). This commitment has many applications, but one is to simply bounce your eyes in another direction within a couple seconds of noticing her body or developing sexuality.[56] It takes discipline, but this simple action can help reduce inappropriate thoughts immediately.
- “I quickly dismiss them.” Similar to bouncing his eyes in a different direction, Sean bounces inappropriate thoughts and images out of his head. Entertaining sexual thoughts about anyone other than your wife is the beginning of a long road that will not have a good end. You must guard your thoughts to guard your heart (Proverbs 4:23).

Withdrawing to a Safe Distance?

If you have a stepdaughter, the last section probably made you uneasy. Sorry. It wasn’t meant to scare you, just to serve as a yellow Caution sign beside the road. But I’d better balance the discussion now or you might be tempted to withdraw to a safe distance.

If there’s one predictable pattern in us men it is the tendency to withdraw when we aren’t sure of the relationship, when we experience conflict, or when we are fearful of being hurt or causing hurt. When stepdads appropriately withdraw from conveying sexual messages to a stepdaughter, they can inadvertently pull too far, removing their affirmations, as well. That, too, can bring harm if it communicates disaffection, rejection, or disinterest. It’s a real Catch-22. So what can you do?

First, realize that harm is in the extremes. Obviously you cross a boundary if you make romantic or sexual advances toward a stepdaughter, but you also deny her healthy affirmation if you withdraw so far that your affections and positive encouragement can't be reached. Seek a balance in your posture.

If you haven't already, seek your wife's input into how you can find the balance. If you're not sure how to bridge into that discussion, use this chapter as an objective catalyst to the conversation. (Mom, if you are reading this, don't be quick to judge him. Help him to be proactive in loving your daughter appropriately.) Together you can discuss the meaning of affection and how it is expressed in your home and extended families in general. Try to match your style to what your stepdaughter will be accustomed and open to.

Stepdad to Stepdad

"With my older stepdaughters I stick to side hugs and forehead-type kisses. My youngest (now eleven) has very little contact with her dad so I know my appropriate physical affection is important to her. I think I can navigate this with her as I did with my own daughter, who is now older and married. Physical affection is prickly as they mature, whether they are your biological child or not. I sense that I'm much more careful about displays of affection when I'm alone with one of the girls and a little more prone to show appropriate affection when Mom is in the room. Having my wife there seems to lower the awkwardness and perhaps the danger. It just seems safer."

Next, to make sure that your well-intended actions or affections are not misinterpreted, apply this principle: Let your stepchildren set the pace for affection in the relationship. When you aren't sure if a child is ready for physical affection (and emotional, for that matter), take your cues from them. If a ten-year-old jumps in your lap during movie night, she is telling you what she is comfortable with. If, on the other hand, you go to kiss a seventeen-year-old on the cheek before bedtime and she shudders, take note. For whatever reason, she is not ready for that level of affection. Next time, try a side hug (not face-to-face), and see if that is received more comfortably.

I first wrote about this in my book *The Smart Stepfamily*. Jerry wrote to let me know it really helped in his situation. "Your advice about letting the child set the pace has been a tremendous help. I have two stepdaughters; their dad passed

away about eight years ago. At this point one is a senior in college and the other is a senior in high school. Our relationship has progressed to hugs and a periodic kiss on the cheek. There are also times when the senior in high school will snuggle up to me on the couch. Letting them take the lead has helped this not to be awkward for either of us."

Jerry's joy in being able to share his affections with his stepdaughters brings to light the point of this chapter. You have so much to offer your stepdaughter in the way of nurturance, affection, affirmation of her spirit as a woman of God . . . the list goes on and on. That's why Satan would much rather sabotage these positives by confusing the physical aspects of healthy expressions of love. He wants you to withdraw so he can keep you at an ineffective distance. Don't do it.

STEPSIBLING ROMANCE AND SEXUALITY

> Online Chat Question: "We aren't related. He is my stepdad's son and a little older than me, but I think that he is really REALLY hot. I want to know if it would technically be okay for me to sleep with him."
>
> Reply: "He's not your brother at all. Go for it."

I don't know about you, but I find the above forum dialogue very disturbing. The Internet is, of course, full of misguided advice; that much doesn't surprise me. But what did surprise me was how quickly I found myself reading this chat discussion (one search and one click) and how frequently I found a similar tone to other online conversations. Historically speaking, stepsibling romantic connections have been just as common as the stepfather-stepdaughter abuse cases we hear so much about. But with this kind of readily available encouragement, I fear the number of occurrences will rise significantly in the years ahead.

Craig talked to me at a conference. "I can't believe my daughter and her stepbrother, Josh, are telling us they have romantic feelings for one another. Even though Josh doesn't live with us, they have grown up knowing one another; my daughter was two and Josh was three when Carri and I married. How can this be? I guess they have already kissed at this point. What do we do?"

Brad and Gwen had been seriously dating for about a year when they discovered that her son and his daughter had a crush on each other. A friend told Gwen that the talk at school was that if Brad and Gwen got married, their children would be living in the same house—and they already liked each other.

Robert wrote to our ministry with a very heavy heart. “We are going through a storm and need some guidance. Marsha and I have been married for four years with four children and feel we have a healthy family situation. That’s why we cannot understand why this has happened. My son Ian (age seventeen) and Marsha’s daughter Monica (age fifteen) had sex last Sunday night. They have been like brother and sister throughout our marriage and now they have lost their virginity to each other. I’m just glad guilt took over and they confessed within a day. We have asked for help from our youth pastor and have talked with the kids about their decision, but we know this has changed our family forever. How could this have happened? We were proactive in teaching our children about healthy sexuality and God’s values. What do we do now?”

In a moment I want to deal with Robert’s questions of how this could happen and what they should do about it, but first let me calm your fears. Stories like these do not mean that boundaries will be crossed within your home. I said earlier that the incidence of stepsibling romantic attraction is just as common as stepfather-stepdaughter abuse, but that doesn’t mean either is common. It’s important to keep some perspective. Statistically, these circumstances are rare. There really isn’t solid research to pinpoint the rate of occurrence among all families, but I do believe it to be uncommon. However, this type of behavior is more likely to occur in stepfamilies than in biological families. (I’ll explain why in the next section.) Here’s the point: Don’t stick your head in the sand. Be aware of what could happen and take preventive measures to keep boundaries from being crossed.

“But why?” I can hear someone object. “Why try to prevent this? It’s not incest.” The first half of this chapter dealt with the matter of stepfather-stepchild sexual behavior, and that meets the definition of child abuse (if not incest). Laws around the globe in most societies declare it illegal. In addition, Scripture is very clear that it should not occur. The Holiness Code of Leviticus 18 makes it clear that people should “not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter. . . . That is wickedness” (v. 17). So, too, sexual relations between half-siblings is sin: “Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere” (Leviticus 18:9). But stepsibling sexuality is another matter. It is not mentioned in most laws that define incest, and not specifically detailed in Scripture as wrong behavior (or in most other major religions, for that matter). Perhaps it should fall under the general admonition to not have sex with “any close relative” (Leviticus 18:6). But then again, it isn’t specifically mentioned in the rest of that chapter, which seems to define what “close” means (and goes so far as to mention a mother’s sibling’s spouse).

There are still some matters that are not clearly black or white. We seek God's wisdom about them, try to use common sense, and do the best we can. There may not be legal or biblical laws to apply here, but common sense would dictate that this is something we should discourage and guard against.[57]

Have you ever heard the maxim about dating, "Once you've had sex, you can't go back to being just friends"? It conveys that once sex enters a relationship, it changes the nature of the relationship. Stepsibling sexuality would most certainly do that, so might a one-time kiss. The relationship would be forever changed, and so might the family. Even if the stepsiblings broke up, family members would be reinterpreting every message or interaction and tiptoeing around that part of the family narrative forever. And if one parent felt their son or daughter was victimized or manipulated in the process, it might divide the marriage and family with thick walls of resentment and protectiveness.

Needless to say, this is not something you want to see happen in your home. But what if it already has? Before dealing with that, let me outline why intra-stepfamily sexuality happens in the first place.

Understanding the Vulnerability

Being a stepfamily does not automatically manufacture sexual temptations, violations of trust, or benign stepsibling attractions. So why is this an issue in stepfamilies at a level unseen by biological families?

In *The Smart Stepfamily* I devoted an entire section to the dynamics surrounding sexuality in stepfamilies. Let me summarize those key points here.

- **No Natural Taboo.** Biological family members have a natural taboo against sexuality. It seems that shared DNA is a powerful deterrent to sexual attraction; this is one reason why incest is so rare. Ask someone if they ever have sexual fantasies about their parent or brother or sister and they'll say, "No way, that's gross!" That is the taboo barrier in action. Stepsiblings don't have shared DNA and therefore no natural taboo. This doesn't necessarily open the door to sexuality, but it does unlock it.
- **The Command for Closeness.** When two families come together there is an assumption that people will bond. The expectation and hope that stepsiblings will move emotionally toward one another with nonsexual displays of affection, warmth, and hugs can inadvertently encourage sexual curiosities that, if unmanaged, can draw kids across undefined sexual and psychological boundaries. The difficult teenage years of developing sexual

awareness lend themselves to natural curiosities that may be applied to stepsiblings.

- **A Sexually Charged Environment.** This occurs in stepfamilies for a number of reasons. First, during your courtship, your children observe your developing couple romance. Some children even coach their parents on how to act and talk, or even what perfume to wear on a date. This awakens their interest in romance and sexuality. In addition, your children are often witness to the increasing physical affection between you and your soon-to-be wife. By the way, they may not like your shared affection and may speak out against it; nevertheless, it is simultaneously adding to the sexual messages of their world.

  But the influence doesn't stop there. After your wedding, their lives are freckled with even more romantic gestures from their parent and now stepparent. When added to their own developing sexuality and dating interests, children are surrounded by romance and messages acknowledging sexuality.

Parental Affection

Parent-stepparent affection adds to a sexually charged environment. Early in a stepfamily kids are often annoyed by it, but they aren't afraid of becoming the target of unwanted affections from a stepparent, for example. Interestingly, compared to boys, teenage girls in new stepfamilies are most upset by parental affection. To reduce this strain on the children, avoid sexually suggestive conversations and exaggerated affections toward your wife; choose wisely the movies you watch as a family so as not to create awkward situations.

- **Developing Teenage Sexuality.** Adolescence is a tumultuous and confusing time for most of us. Our bodies and hormones change, which increases insecurities; we experience romantic feelings and relationships that are foreign to us; and we are trying to understand our sexuality and how to manage it from a spiritual perspective. Teens are sorting through all this and more while being inundated with confusing and misguided sexual messages through a variety of media outlets. If left on their own to cope, teens sometimes make choices in their confusion that are not healthy. Which is,

of course, why they need us as parents to discuss these issues with them and offer wise perspective and counsel.

- **Poor Boundaries, High Stress.** All of the above factors are unlikely, in and of themselves, to manufacture intra-stepfamily sexuality. In addition, stepfamily structure all by itself is not sufficient to produce increased risk of sexual behavior. But when these factors intersect with parents who are weak in setting psychological boundaries for themselves and others, new relationships with unclear boundaries and values, and a home with high levels of stress between family members (especially between the married couple), there is a negative synergy that exaggerates sexual vulnerabilities.[58] That's why your home needs boundaries that bring honor to God and to all the family members.

Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Attitudes

When you work with your wife to proactively communicate boundaries that encourage mutual respect, the risk of inappropriate sexuality diminishes significantly. Here are some practical suggestions. Talk with your wife about who is best positioned to speak with boys or girls, biological kids or stepkids in your home.

- Communicate God's value of all people and our need to respect physical personal boundaries. This healthy sexual attitude will apply not only to non-family members but stepfamily members, as well.
- Have house rules that honor personal privacy. Commonsense dress codes go a long way toward communicating your beliefs, values, and how to respect one another. Early-adolescent and adolescent girls, for example, should not walk around the house dressed for bed in their underwear and a long T-shirt, and teen boys should not walk to the bathroom in their boxers. It may be comfortable, but it invites the imagination.
- When setting dress codes, use the opportunity to teach about healthy sexuality and what arouses the opposite sex. For example, girls often underestimate how powerful visual stimulation is for boys (men). Tight or revealing clothes invite unwanted attention, even from stepbrothers.
- Insist that family members knock before entering bedrooms, and decide how persons will share the bathroom.
- Reviewing these boundaries is particularly important when part-time stepsiblings come for visitation or when a child moves to your home full

time. Children and teens who have known each other for years, but never lived together full time, need clear rules of conduct.

- Tune in to discomfort. If you perceive a child withdrawing or showing signs of stress, calmly approach the child to investigate the situation. Ask specifically if they are feeling uncomfortable with romantic or physical boundaries.
- Talk about sexual attractions in a matter-of-fact manner. Acknowledging, for example, that sexual attractions between stepsiblings can occur normalizes them for the child. This is not to give permission to them, but to teach a proper perspective. The alternative is to say nothing and leave the child to determine the meaning of a passing thought or attraction, or to give negative messages that needlessly shame children. ("How could you think something like that about her? That's disgusting.") Being open about this, on the other hand, reduces the power of the thoughts or attractions.

Instead, you might say something like the following. First shared in *The Smart Stepfamily,* this script has helped thousands of parents have frank conversations with their son or daughter. This example is written for boys. "You know, as we talk about sharing the bathroom with your stepsisters, it occurs to me that some kids in a stepfamily like ours sometimes have passing sexual thoughts about their stepsiblings. If that ever happens to you, it doesn't mean you are bad or a disappointment to God. There will be lots of times in life that you have sexual thoughts or feelings toward other people, but it would be inappropriate for you to act on them or keep thinking about the person in that way. So if it happens, ask God to help you to stop thinking about your stepsister in that way. And make sure you don't dishonor her by acting on the attraction or thoughts. If the thoughts keep happening and you get concerned about it, feel free to talk to me. I won't be angry. We'll find a way to handle it. Any questions?"

But What Do We Do Now?

"That's all well and great, Ron, but lines have already been crossed by kids in our home. What do we do now?"[59]

Matthew called asking for guidance. He had just been blindsided by his fourteen-year-old stepson, Blake, who had confessed to having romantic attractions to his stepsister, Matthew's seventeen-year-old daughter, Brianna. Thankfully, Matthew didn't panic or react angrily to Blake, who had taken a real risk in sharing his feelings. No physical boundaries had been crossed, but Brianna, who was aware of Blake's feelings, was very uncomfortable about it

and didn't want to find herself in the house alone with Blake. I talked with Matthew and coached him to calmly have a series of conversations with Blake. First he normalized that unwanted attractions sometimes occur in stepfamilies, but he emphasized that they should not be acted upon. Next they talked about managing sexual temptations in general and how not to entertain inappropriate thoughts. And finally, Matthew used the situation to ignite ongoing conversations with his stepson about biblical manhood.[60] The situation made family life very thorny for a season, but over time, trust was restored because Matthew and his wife did not look the other way.

Appropriate parental response will be different given the specifics of every situation (e.g., ages of children involved, whether it is a one-sided attraction or if sex acts have occurred, etc.). Remember the story I told earlier about Robert's son Ian (seventeen) and Marsha's daughter Monica (fifteen) losing their virginity to each other? Because sexual lines had already been crossed (making the same behavior easier to replicate), Robert and Marsha would have to respond decisively and with clear boundaries. I shared with them the following guidelines for family restoration and prayed with them. More than a year later I checked in with them to find out what the outcome was; I'll share their response with you later.

Each Parent Should Take Primary Responsibility for Their Child. You will need to have many discussions with your children about what happened, how it happened, what they are feeling toward one another, and how you will manage the relationship in the future. Spend lots of time talking as a couple to make sure you have the same expectations for the children from this point forward, then communicate them to your child. You might share these expectations together, but it's usually best in high-stress situations to let each biological parent talk individually to their child. This will not be a one-time conversation. Sexuality has many emotional, psychological, spiritual, and familial consequences. You will be processing these consequences and life lessons for a long time.

What About Everyone Else? You will have to decide as a couple how to manage the rest of your family. Are there other siblings who are aware of the situation? How will you include them in future boundaries and rules of conduct? I believe the entire family should know at some point (decide carefully how many details to share), but at what point should they know? Discuss this carefully and don't move ahead until you agree as a couple what the course of action should be. Also consider whether you will tell extended family members. Why or why not? There is no universal answer to these questions; each will have to be based on your circumstances.

Decide Together What Consequences to Impose. Helping children learn from their decisions sometimes involves punishment. Decide together how you will respond to what has happened and follow through. Be sure, however, to balance your discipline with reinforcing statements of love and assurance. Overreacting in anger and shaming a child without messages of acceptance can drive them further into sin.

Make Sure Physical Boundaries Are Clear. If you haven't been proactive in establishing a dress code or rules to manage physical boundaries (e.g., "knock before entering someone's bedroom"), you must do so immediately. The emotional chaos and anxiety that will result from sexual lines being crossed will necessitate structure and clear boundaries for everyone. You may have to get even more specific with rules. For example, "John and Julie cannot be alone in the house together for a while; we'll have to coordinate schedules to make sure this is honored." Having said this, try to avoid going into complete control mode as parents, but provide insulation where you can.

Try to remove temptations. Remember, sex doesn't have a reverse gear, only forward. In other words, once kids have had sex, doing so again becomes a lot easier even if it was "accidental" in the first place.

The most awkward boundary to discuss is future physical affections. As family members, stepsiblings may share hugs, hold hands during family prayers, and say "I love you." Though they were once celebrated in the home, these common family affections will now be considered suspect. Children cannot go back to a time of innocence. They need to be able to express appropriate affection, yet doing so may be confusing. Again, biological parents will need to plan for many "check-in" conversations with their children to see how they are feeling about such matters over time. In addition, you'll have to ask yourself how you will know when your fears are exaggerating the circumstances. All of these issues will need to be discussed as a couple and sorted out over time.

And what about affections between other family members? In one family when two teens engaged in a solitary romantic/sexual touch, it dramatically affected the couple's marriage. Not wanting to encourage repeated behavior by the children, the wife became fearful of showing her husband affection both publically and privately. A temporary response such as this is understandable, but over time this has the potential for real harm in a marriage. Guard yourselves from becoming victims of your anxiety.

Have "What If?" Conversations. These are aimed at changing behavior in the future and helping children have a plan. The possible conversations are numerous. Getting the conversation started is your job; once started, the child will lead you where you need to go.

- “What if you two find yourselves at home alone? How will you handle it?”
- “What if you feel attracted to him/her again? What will you do?”
- “What if someone brings this up and you feel embarrassed? How will you act?”
- “What if you feel pressured by your stepbrother/sister?”

These types of questions help a child take responsibility and develop an action plan for the future. Some parents are tempted to tell a child what to do and how they will feel. In highly emotionally charged situations like this, doing so—especially with teenagers—usually backfires. Help them think it through with you and come up with their own strategies. Your job is to coach their thinking process toward maturity.

Engage in “What Have You Learned About Yourself?” Conversations. These conversations are aimed at helping the child grow through this experience. You wish it didn’t happen, but it did. Help them learn something about themselves.

- “What made you vulnerable to this situation?”
- “What were you thinking when you began undressing?”
- “In what ways did you rationalize or justify your behavior?”
- “You know that being stepsiblings makes this very complicated for our family. How did you dismiss that when you pursued the relationship?”
- “How will you manage your vulnerabilities in the future?”

Pursue Healing. Inappropriate sexual behavior will bring many negative consequences. Commit yourself to the God who offers healing, and seek it for your home. It’s probably wise to seek out a trusted counselor, pastor, or mentor to offer guidance as you pursue forgiveness and restored trust. The process may not be easy, but by all means don’t give up.

I promised you a report on Robert and Marsha’s situation. A year after their storm hit, they reflected on what was helpful to their healing.

> We have indeed weathered the storm. We held fast and have been restored as a family. We were so taken aback and felt so broken when it happened, but, wow, God really showed up. It is nice to look back and see how God comforted and directed us through the trial.
>
> At first Marsha and I thought our family would never be the same. But we never spoke of defeat, only victory. We instantly told

our children that they were forgiven and that we were extending to them the same grace we had been given. (God helped us say that because inside I wanted to knock some heads!)

We used your suggestions and developed some boundaries. At first when my daughter and stepson were in our home they had to retreat to their bedrooms when we went to ours. There was to be no interaction between them while we were in bed. Thankfully this was pretty easy because they saw their mistake and were uncomfortable being around one another. We also insisted that they never be home alone.

We asked the questions you suggested: What were you thinking? Did you think how these actions would affect those in our family? What have you learned through this experience? Both of them were open and very sorry. The conversations gave everyone insight into how this happened and how to prevent it from happening again. I asked them to write an apology letter to us and to each other. They included thoughts on how to repair their relationship into a brother-sister type relationship. They came up with some good boundaries on their own and a plan for how they could repair their broken trust with one another. Over time they have become relaxed and able to have fun watching movies or playing games as a family.

Looking back, I think the most important thing we did was show them grace and forgiveness right from the very beginning. We let them know we were hurt, but through it all we still loved them. Climbing this mountain of recovery has been difficult, but it has made us stronger as a family.

IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH US?

I really hate bringing up matters of sexuality when it comes to stepfamilies. Not that it makes me uncomfortable; I speak regularly on marital sexuality when conducting conferences around the country and have not hesitated to talk one-on-one with my three children about sexuality. What I dislike is how this subject makes people shrink in shame.

In previous years when I would speak to parent audiences about these sensitive issues, people would squirm in their seats and stare at the floor the entire time. And I understand why. Yes, the general topic of sexuality makes people

uncomfortable, but specific topics like stepfather sexual abuse and stepsibling romantic attractions are particularly distressing—in part, I think, because it implies that stepfamilies are somehow dirty or immoral. “If we weren’t a stepfamily this wouldn’t have happened in our home,” said one parent referring to the newly discovered stepsibling attractions going on in his home. “Is there something wrong with us that this could have happened?” Do you hear his shame?

Every family has vulnerabilities. The stepfamily has more sexual vulnerabilities than does the biological family, but that doesn’t invalidate the legitimacy of your home. The Evil One wants to stigmatize and make your family feel illegitimate so that he can erode your sense of moral rightness and togetherness. Sexual vulnerabilities lend themselves to these insecurities and the judgment that “something is wrong with us.” But don’t throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

I believe that as husband and father/stepfather, you have the obligation to protect your home. We protect those who live in our homes from worldly influences, from unhealthy practices, and from misguided decisions. We do so, for example, by discerning which media sources (books, videos, music, Internet) we will allow to influence our children or by encouraging our children to select different friends if the ones they have are leading them away from Christ. We also protect our homes by guarding our marriages and following God’s guidance on how we spend our money. And we protect our homes when we uphold sexual fidelity and battle the very notion that the family itself is wrong simply because it has unique sexual vulnerabilities. Don’t let the presence of temptation confuse you into thinking you lack God’s blessing. Without question, such temptations should be managed and prayed through, but don’t let the deceiver use them as ammunition to destroy your family solidarity. Stay the course; keep climbing.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. Talking about these sensitive subjects can be difficult. Renew your commitment to one another not to repeat information shared during your meeting with people outside the group. Be safe for one another.
2. Can you relate to any of the stepfather-stepdaughter situations presented in the chapter?
3. Even if you have never experienced this temptation, what can you learn from Sean’s strategies for sexual purity? Apply them to maintaining purity with

any woman.

- He admitted his vulnerability.
- He didn't minimize the potential destructive impact of improper actions.
- He made a "covenant with his eyes" not to look.
- He moved his eyes away from temptation.

4. How can you refrain from withdrawing in fear too far from a stepdaughter, and thereby communicating rejection to her?
5. Stepfather-stepdaughter romantic or sexual activity is clearly wrong, sinful, and inappropriate. What is your opinion of stepsibling romance?
6. Review the section Understanding the Vulnerability, beginning on page 178. Which of those dynamics are true in your home?
7. Discuss the Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Attitudes section. How can you apply these?
8. If stepsibling romance/sexuality has occurred in your family—and you feel safe enough to disclose it—discuss as a group the But What Do We Do Now? section. Remember to maintain confidences for one another. Pray about the situation together.
9. Sexual vulnerabilities make some people feel shameful about their stepfamily. Remind each other that the Lord has always used and blessed individuals and families that were less than ideal, even some that were sexually sinful (e.g., King David and his family). How can you remind yourself to stand firm in God's grace?

Chapter 11

Keeping Special Days Special: Holidays, Vacations, and Your Stepfamily

As with so many things, if Mom and you are in agreement, then you can just go for it. Even with an intact family there can be a lot of grumbling about vacation plans. Usually everyone enjoys the experience once it's underway.

Bob

If you ask me, Bob just nailed the essentials of climbing this portion of Stepdad Mountain. First, find unity—and thereby, strength—with your wife. Second, realize that all families have grumbling and complaining when it comes to vacations and other special days. And third, keep some perspective. When it's all said and done, usually family members enjoy the experience once it begins. Having said that, there are, of course, a few unique struggles faced by stepfamilies when planning special days, holidays, and family vacations; these factors deserve a little attention and planning:

- Feeling like an outsider. Getting a birthday card is nice, but when it comes with a dutiful attitude or when compared to what the biological dad or siblings get, it can feel like a slap in the face.
- Blender expectations. If you or your wife feels increased pressure to make the holiday ooze with family togetherness and affection, you may try throwing everyone into the blender. The increase in pressure may blow up in everyone's face, especially if strained steprelationships already exist.
- Ex-spouses. Everyone wants their time and plans to take precedence over the other household, so otherwise cordial negotiations with ex-spouses may escalate into war before holidays.

- Increased kid stress. All of the above ripple into the hearts of kids, who feel and reflect the tension in the household. Plus, increased loyalty battles that come from being caught in the middle may result in increased depressive symptoms or acting out, causing even more parental concerns.

WHY THE STRESS?

There are certain times in stepfamily life that naturally increase tension and bring to the surface issues that otherwise can be avoided; special family days are a good example. Why? Because such occasions carry high hopes and high expectations of family togetherness. Celebrating someone's birthday or gathering for Thanksgiving dinner is supposed to be a memory-making activity, one that honors the past and celebrates the present. This can be a recipe for disaster for some stepfamilies (but not all by any means), especially those who find themselves still in the early years of developing relationships and a family identity. Increased pressure during the special day to "cook the family" means the blender gets taken out of the cupboard, even if someone has to get creamed in the process.

For Mom

How does your desire for family harmony and peace increase your "blending" efforts during the holidays?

Andy, stepdad to Meredith and father to Jason, found himself getting creamed. His wife, Carly, and her ex-husband communicated pretty well about the holidays and vacations. When his stepdaughter was young they lived close enough to one another that Meredith would split holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving with her father. But when Andy, his wife, and their son, Jason, moved farther away, Meredith would spend Christmas week and about eight weeks in the summer with her dad. Andy and Meredith had a strained relationship, so the new arrangement seemed like a win-win to him; Meredith got a lot of time with her dad, and Andy got to relax and enjoy his wife and son. "I really loved the time that Meredith was with her dad—in fact, I relished it. It gave me time to connect with my wife and my son without jealousy, competition, or any emotional games."

That all changed before Meredith's junior year in high school. Carly wanted Meredith to get a summer job and live with them full time. Andy shared, "My

wife's decision to have her daughter with us for the WHOLE summer was devastating to me. The summer was my time of healing and recuperation following ten months of dealing with all the ugliness of my stepdaughter. In my humble view, she could easily have gotten a summer job with her dad, but Carly wanted her with us. It was a very brutal two years until she went away to college."

Plus, Andy got the news that Meredith was no longer going to be spending Christmas with her father. "What really hurt is that these decisions were made without my input."

This story highlights the powerlessness that stepdads sometimes feel. Even though Andy had a strong say in what happened with his son, he didn't have much influence at all in the arrangements made by his wife for his stepdaughter. This is frustrating without a doubt. I wish I could present an easy black-and-white solution that would fix all such circumstances—for example, "Moms should never make unilateral decisions" or "Stepdads should never resent a child who has little choice over their summer visitation schedule"—but such solutions rarely hold up under the scrutiny of life. Rather, the principle for parents to apply is to communicate a lot about the circumstances with which you are presented, and find a way to bring grace to the situation for each other and for the children.

But another fundamental dynamic revealed in this story pertains to the issue of emotional closeness and distance between insiders and outsiders in stepfamilies. A poorly developed stepdad-stepdaughter emotional attachment and a strained relationship led Andy to prefer that Meredith not be with them during holidays and the summer months. He felt relieved when she left and described his wife's decision to have her with them all summer as "devastating." I am willing to bet that her mother didn't use such words in her description of the situation. As insiders with their children, mothers have a much greater tolerance for their children; as an outsider, it is understandable that a stepdad won't. Andy's insider relationship with his biological son, Jason, made the contrast even more profound. Exclusively being with his wife and son at Christmas was to be free of jealousy, competition, and ugliness. And then there was Father's Day.

"For about ten years Father's Day was always a bad day for me when my stepdaughter was home. She would get me a card but it was more of a token to please her mother, not a genuine gift for me. When Meredith was younger she seemed very jealous and mean-spirited on Father's Day. She would barely talk to me. Honestly, I didn't want her around on Father's Day. Why should she ruin my day? I didn't care if she celebrated it or not, I just wanted to be with my son and wife for the day. But my wife suffered from a 'Brady Bunch' belief that we were all going to be together and happy for Father's Day, even though her daughter

was hostile at times. Of course, I was angry at my stepdaughter for this, but I was also angry at my wife for not protecting that day for me."

How to Cook a Stepfamily

- Blender mentality: when adults who innocently hope to facilitate relationship between stepfamily members place high expectation on children to feel love or affection for others. This pressure often results in more resistance to bonding, not less.
- Crockpot mentality: when adults acknowledge that different ingredients will combine at a unique pace and that it takes years for stepfamilies to develop a sense of family identity. Adults are intentional to encourage relationship building but relaxed about the timing. They also are not afraid to compartmentalize the family into subunits (e.g., mom and her children) for certain occasions.

For more read *The Smart Stepfamily*.

Did you hear it? Carly had a strong blender mentality that would kick in around the special days. She believed that forcing togetherness would push Andy and Meredith through jealousy toward love. It didn't. In fact, it made things worse. Adopting a Crockpot mentality in regard to special days, summer visitation, and holidays might have saved everyone a lot of grief. I can't predict what specific decisions Carly and Andy would have made, but applying a Crockpot perspective might have opened options to them such as alternating annual Christmas schedules with her ex and letting Meredith spend every Father's Day with her dad. The point is that special family days bring to the surface the tension around togetherness and family identity. Family members—biological parents in particular—become extra sensitive to the movement of family members toward or away from one another. They may fear movement away (e.g., letting Carly spend Father's Day with her dad) as a sign of family failure or disconnection. But it isn't necessarily. It simply acknowledges that some family members are closer to some than others, and it gives people freedom to honor their traditions.

TRADITION, TRADITION, TRADITION!

Traditions are important because they tell us who we are (i.e., provide a sense of identity), give us solid anchors on which we can depend, and give security to the future. When traditions clash between stepfamily insiders and outsiders, it shakes these foundations and generates insecurity. A statement like, “My family always serves Thanksgiving dinner late in the evening. I’m sorry if your kids have to leave before then—that’s just too bad,” is testimony to someone’s loyalty to their extended family and shows insecurity in giving up an anchor. “That’s just too bad” also reveals the insider/outsider nature of the stepfamily’s relationships.

Adult Stepfamilies

Older and adult stepchildren have a strong vested interest in preserving family traditions. It doesn’t feel like “going home” if they can’t count on certain traditions taking place. Make changes very slowly!

Let’s face it, we all like to keep some things constant in life. Even naturally flexible people tend to prefer predictability in family traditions. And when added to the numerous changes and adjustments required of stepfamily members, changing just one more thing—a tradition, no less—might result in an emotionally charged reaction from someone.

Try to have compassion for the person (maybe it’s you!) who has this reaction. Remind yourself that the tradition being challenged is important, and so is the meaning tied to it. Try to help family members retain important traditions. And when something must change for the greater good of the family, be patient and compassionate with the loss.

Here is, by the way, the good news about traditions. For the same reasons adjusting or losing traditions is stressful, building new ones is a tremendous opportunity for you to further your sense of family identity. Each repeated tradition, such as birthday celebrations, anniversaries, and holidays, helps to solidify your family story. The first time you go on a family vacation it is a new adventure (it may not even turn out well). But the fourth time you go on an annual vacation it is “something we do every year.” Feel the difference? Yes, you may have to endure a few rocky starts, but don’t give up on the process. Eventually the wet concrete will solidify and give you something firm to stand

on. So live and learn from your mistakes. Keep refining your negotiation skills. Apply compassion when needed. And keep going!

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR KEEPING SPECIAL DAYS SPECIAL

Now that you understand what's at stake, here are a few suggestions to help you and your family move in the right direction.

Celebrate the Reason for the Season

Whatever the holiday, special day, or event, try to stay focused on the celebration at hand. Negotiating details and wrestling with hurt feelings can easily distract you from the purpose for the day. Despite all the drama, bring your enthusiasm and joy to the celebration of the birthday, anniversary, or holiday—even if the arrangements are not as you would like. Bring a positive attitude, and a celebration just might break out.

Plan, Negotiate, and Plan Some More

Jack shared his stepdad insight to keeping special days special. "First, make sure you and your wife are fully united on the vision and plan. Then, build buy-in with the kids early," he said. "We start talking about plans and potential plans early in the year so that the kids will get the vision of where and what we are considering." Proactive planning is critical, especially when there are multiple homes, multiple parents, and lots of extended family to engage. Don't wait till the last minute. "If you do not get along with or communicate well with the exes, it is a hundred times harder," shared Danny, stepdad of four, "and the kids will without fail get caught in the middle." He went on to share that when you can't have cordial negotiations with an ex-spouse, you might have to stick strictly to the divorce decree. At least that provides an objective standard that everyone should adhere to.

There are a couple things you can do to help kids accept and contribute to the plans. First, give your verbal permission for them to enjoy the time they spend with other family members during the holidays. As we discussed in chapter 4, when you tell children and stepchildren alike that they are not being disloyal to you when they enjoy the people in their other home, it releases them from guilt and paradoxically moves them closer to you. Ultimately this creates a warmer climate when it comes time to implement your plans for the holiday or special day.

Next, when teenagers are in the mix, be sure to give them a chance to contribute to the plans. The older children are, the more input and influence they need to have in family planning. To encourage buy-in, let them have a voice.

One aspect of negotiating with the other home is choosing your battles carefully. Decide what your nonnegotiables are and then look for ways to compromise on issues that aren't. For example, you may have to open Christmas gifts a day or even a week before Christmas in order to get the time you'd like with the kids. Opening gifts together is a nonnegotiable; when you open them isn't.

Choosing your battles with an ex-spouse includes discerning whether a battle is worthy of being fought or dropped. If your ex-husband-in-law, for example, is normally pretty flexible about holiday schedules, but for some reason one year he is not, let it go. Likely some other dynamic is at play in his life and his stubbornness is a one-time behavior. If, however, he is adversarial and selfish when it comes to the children most of the time, you may need to take on a battle in order to establish a more reasonable arrangement. This may require the use of an attorney, the legal system, etc., and comes with great risk and cost, but in the end is probably worth it so you don't have to deal with the same issue next time.

Let me offer one final word about planning. In the early years of stepfamily life, the tentative nature of emotional attachments may mean it is wise to compartmentalize some holidays. You and your children, for example, may spend Thanksgiving with your family while your wife and her children spend it with hers. Of course, this doesn't feel good to those with a blender mentality, but it may be just what the doctor ordered. Attempting to blend every person and every tradition prematurely may create bad memories that have to be undone later. Spending a portion of the first few holidays apart may result in further family success later on.[61] Communicating this decision to extended family members may be awkward, so remember the old adage that "blood talks to blood." Your wife should talk to her extended family and you to yours; each of you should also be responsible to communicate this to your ex-spouses.

Avoid Comparisons

Getting caught up in comparing household traditions only exacerbates loyalties and resentment, as does comparing financial circumstances. Whining that the other home always goes on a holiday cruise while you can't afford to just makes kids feel guilty about enjoying the trip. In turn, they tend to resent you for making them hide their joy. Don't put kids in the middle of your financial differences. If necessary, feel free to set boundaries about how money is spent.

For example, grandparents might need to be informed of a price limit for birthday gifts so that children with different grandparents are treated equitably. Don't let some children live high off the hog while someone else eats from the trough. And finally, if the children are the ones comparing (and they will), encourage them to celebrate with others what they have. Talk with them about guarding their hearts from envy and demonstrate how to do so for them.

Father's Day

I once asked a group of stepfathers this question: Father's Day is just around the corner—how are you feeling in anticipation? I'll never forget Bob's answer. "I'm not really looking forward to it. I don't like the pressure it puts on my stepkids. I and they know I'm not their dad, but if they don't do anything for me, how are they supposed to feel? They're stuck either way."

Many writers, including Emerson Eggerichs in his book *Love and Respect,* have articulated well a man's need for respect and appreciation. We guys thrive on it. Even if our wives are confronting something in our character they don't appreciate, if they speak respectfully, we're more apt to listen and take it in. Even sex falls in this category if you ask me. We make lots of jokes about the physical pleasures of sex, but what sex gives us is so much deeper than that. It communicates value, our wives' desire for us and admiration of us. Among other things, it strokes that deep psychological cord within us for appreciation and respect.

Father's Day is a day of appreciation. It encourages all of us to express the value we place in our father. That's what makes it so awkward for both stepdads and stepkids. The confusion of your role, children's loyalty conflicts, and the family's journey to build family identity collide on Father's Day. Just how are they to honor you? How do they say thank-you without hurting Dad's feelings? If they give you an inch, will Mom get all excited and expect them to treat you with appreciation all the time? (The fear of this happening is enough for some kids to hold back their gratitude.)

How Churches Can Help

When churches and social groups acknowledge stepfathers around Father's Day, it helps to affirm their role in modern families and challenges the stereotype of the abusive stepfather. It also encourages stepchildren to value you. I encourage pastors to use this simple script

on Father's Day—pass it on.

"This morning is Father's Day, a time to honor the gift of our dads. If you are a father, a stepfather, an adoptive father, a foster dad, or a man who cares for or mentors children not his own, would you please stand so we can honor you this morning."

I appreciate Bob's comment above because his concern is more focused on the awkwardness of the day for the kids, not so much himself. I'm sure on some level he hoped for some recognition of all that he had done for his stepkids, but he focused instead on how stuck they might feel between him and their father. One possible course of action would be for him to simply be open with them. He might say something like, "Hey guys, I know Father's Day is coming up soon. If I were you, I'd be concerned about having to do something for me—and figuring out what is appropriate could be awkward—and yet giving your full honor to your dad. He certainly deserves it. You might even be worried a little if he will be hurt if you get me a card or something. Just know that I believe you should honor your dad. And whatever you do for me is cool with me."

This type of conversation helps take some air out of the balloon before it pops, but more important, it opens up the possibility of many more honest conversations about the kids being caught in the middle, divided loyalties, etc. When your family runs from these realities, everyone suffers. When you boldly engage them in these realities, you make it easier for the family to cope.

One final thought: It will get better. When asked that same question about anticipating Father's Day, one stepdad with six years under his belt said this: "In the past I had quite a lot of anxiety over not wanting to dishonor or take away from their relationship with their biological father. It has been an uncomfortable feeling, wanting affirmation for the role that I play but not wanting to force an emotional response out of the boys. Actually, I have not felt much stress about it this year. We are coming up on six years of marriage; I suspect that a familial bond has set in." Looks like he is nearing the top of Stepdad Mountain.

Keep Something Old, Find Something New

Part of the balance of stepping into your wife and stepkids' traditions is letting them keep as much of their past as possible, while working with your wife to create something new that is unique to your family. Bringing some of your traditions to the table is helpful, but the goal is to insert something entirely new for everyone into the special day. Established traditions from both sides have a tendency to compete; new elements of the tradition are uniquely "us." For

example, Scott encouraged his wife and kids to celebrate their birthdays just as they always did before he came along. And in addition, at a family meeting they all decided to post the day's events on Facebook (something Scott knew a lot about). This added some excitement to the day and let Scott be the focal point for the added tradition. Each birthday reinforced the new family tradition and the new family.

Water and Ducks

Finally, take some good advice from ducks. They know how to let water glide off their backs—and do so with grace. There will be lots of frustrations, points of contention, and feelings of isolation that come with holidays, special days, and vacations. Whenever possible, let it slide.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. Can you relate to any of these experiences when it comes to the holidays or special days?

   - Feeling like an outsider
   - Blender expectations (increased pressure to come together)
   - Ex-spouses (otherwise cordial negotiations with ex-spouses escalate into battles during the holidays)
   - Increased kid stress

2. Review Andy and Meredith's story beginning on page 193. What aspects of their situation apply to you?
3. What traditions did you, your wife, and the kids have in common from the start? What traditions are you building together?
4. Review the list of Practical Strategies for Keeping Special Days Special. Which are strengths in your home and which need improvement?
   Celebrate the Reason for the Season
   Plan, Negotiate, and Plan Some More
   Avoid Comparisons
   Keep Something Old, Find Something New
   Water and Ducks

5. Is Father’s Day something you look forward to? What anxiety or tension seems to rise when this day rolls around?

Chapter 12

Romancing Your Wife

I love it when my wife smiles an “I’m so glad I married you” smile. I get such a rush!

Jason, stepdad to four

“We missed out on the ‘honeymoon period,’ including the bonding that occurs before children,” Josie shared. “I feel like I was robbed of being romanced and ‘wined and dined.’ On our wedding day we left the chapel for the reception and low and behold there were five of us in the car; my husband and I in the front seat, and my daughter and his two daughters in the back. Instant family. For some strange reason I didn’t see that coming. Silly me, I thought we’d actually be able to drive alone! The first few months of the marriage I had irregular breathing and heart palpitations due to anxiety. I was overwhelmed with the instant family and the lack of time together as husband and wife. My husband was hurt because he thought I wasn’t happy. I did think through the new family dynamic, but I didn’t anticipate it would affect me to the degree that it did. It was a sea of emotions that I didn’t see coming.”

Stepfamily stress can easily crush fairy-tale dreams of marriage and riding off into the sunset. Dana shares, “Every girl secretly dreams of a handsome prince who is consumed with undying love for her. I just knew mine would sweep me off my feet. He showed up all right. But he was carrying three children with an ex-wife following close behind. I’m sure he thinks my kids and ex are just as cumbersome.” When couples feel overrun and discouraged, romance suffers.

For Mom

What romantic fantasies did you have before marriage that have been challenged by stepfamily living? Read this chapter and talk with your

husband about how you might implement some of the tips for keeping romance alive in your marriage.

This is not to say that a stepfamily marriage will be void of romance and passion. As in all marriages, couples in stepfamilies must make an effort to keep the romance alive and growing beyond the initial chemistry that first brought them together. Sustaining love requires commitment and dedication. Intoxicating stares and passionate sex don't remain unless the couple works at it. I've long thought that the reason fairy tales end with the wedding is because the author didn't know how to write the rest of the love story. Accomplishing "happily ever after" is more difficult than a storybook implies. But it can be done.[62]

TIME FOR ROMANCE

During courtship, couples naturally find time to dance. After the wedding, couples can easily fall off the dance floor.

Have you ever noticed that a dating couple cherishes the time they have together? They anxiously await precious moments when they can enjoy each other's company. Couples instinctively know that building a connection with someone requires talking, listening, exploring, and enjoying each other. Dating is often purposeful, goal oriented, and fun. In contrast, marriage is often invaded by the demands of children and tasks. Add complacency to the mix and the relationship can become dull and aimless, resulting in partners who take each other for granted.

One mark of a healthy relationship is the ability to overcome marital lethargy by energizing the relationship with focused amounts of time. Feeding the relationship with enjoyable activities and nurturing time together provides fertile ground for the marriage to thrive. A weekly or bimonthly date night can be a relaxing way to spend time together. A periodic extended date such as a day trip to a neighboring town or a Saturday afternoon of leisure activity can revitalize your marriage. Twice a year get away from home and stay overnight in a hotel. This requires planning and a little money, but it provides a healthy atmosphere unlike anything you can create at home. And don't forget your wedding anniversary. Try to do something memorable every year to properly celebrate the special day.

Erin shared how she and her husband maintain connection. "We make a point to hold hands, hug, kiss, and just be close. For us, just knowing the other is near helps to relieve stress. We carve out time to spend together, making each other a

priority. Our friendship helps a lot; it's important to like each other, as well as love each other."

ACTIVATE YOUR FUN FACTOR

In a survey of over 50,000 stepfamily couples, Dr. David Olson and I uncovered a very important treasure for stepcouples that we dubbed the Fun Factor.[63] This study examined fifteen aspects of marriage (e.g., communication, sexuality, spirituality, relations with family and friends, etc.). We discovered that of all the factors, nearly 20 percent of what accounted for a highly intimate stepcouple relationship was shared leisure activity. In other words, a regular dose of fun is a huge contributing factor to marital health, stability, and satisfaction.

In one portion of the survey, couples who were thriving advised other couples to "take time to be together away from the kids" and "re-energize your marriage with enjoyable experiences." Our study discovered that the happiest couples respected each other's unique interests and hobbies, but also prioritized shared activities over individual ones. In contrast, couples with the weakest relationships were three times more likely to be dissatisfied with the amount of fun in their marriage.

Smart Dating

Make note of what you enjoy doing together. Drifting away from fun activities is somewhat natural after marriage. Discuss a few ways you plan to implement enjoyable activities once you are wed.

Further, when comparing the strengths of first marriages to those in stepcouple marriages, our research discovered that shared leisure time and fun is more significant for stepcouple success than for first-marriage success. The survey did not reveal why this is true, but one theory I have is that because stepfamily life is inherently more stressful than biological family living, stepcouples need something to ease the tension. The antidote to the stress factor just might be the fun factor. Be intentional, then, about engaging in activities that bring pleasure and enjoyment to your marriage.

Shared Fun

One key aspect of the Fun Factor is that leisure time be spent together. In other words, leisure time spent apart doesn't count. Craig is an avid golfer. He plays a round of golf every chance possible. He also watches golf on TV and purchases a new set of clubs every two years. His wife, Michelle, enjoys running and wood carving. Each spouse respects the other's preference and "covers the bases" at home so the other can enjoy their hobby. However, Craig and Michelle rarely do anything together. Their separate activities provide personal enjoyment and aid physical health, but a lack of shared leisure activity will negatively impact their marriage.

Adult Stepchildren

Finding time to be together is much easier when you have adult stepchildren. However, convenience can become complacency. Empty nest couples sometimes report that frequent time together is easily taken for granted. On occasion, go the extra mile when planning dates or activities to add a little spice to your time together.

Finding Time

At the beginning of their relationship, Craig (the golfer) and Michelle (the runner) did share fun times together such as dinner and a movie. But the pressures and the frenzy of family, work, church, kids' sporting events, and other responsibilities have squeezed out this crucial element. If they desire a healthy marriage, they would be wise to restore and recover what has been lost.

What activities did you and your wife enjoy together before you got married? It's possible that there were fewer kids around or that her visitation schedule conveniently carved out time for you to be together. Regardless of the reason, it's important to discuss with her ways you can proactively restore those opportunities. This might require adding a few dollars into the budget for activities or baby-sitting. If you are serious about creating a solid marriage, it's not a luxury but a necessity. And leisure time doesn't need to be expensive; it can be as simple as bowling or a trip to a coffee shop, zoo, or art gallery. Even a nearby park can provide a much needed sanctuary. The point is to spend time together, not necessarily to spend money.

KEEPING ROMANCE ALIVE

Adding fun and romance to your marriage is essentially about injecting the relationship with energy. This can be accomplished in a multitude of ways. Just think of things that make either of you smile.

P.D.A. (Public Displays of Affection)

Even biological children sometimes get "grossed out" when parents hug or kiss. Your stepchildren may experience additional negative feelings when they witness affection between you and their mother. Be sensitive to their feelings, but small doses of affection are okay.

Sexual and Non-Sexual Touch

Every marriage needs sexual passion, but playful affection without a sexual agenda is one way to add vigor to your relationship. Now hold on, guys, I know sexual connection is generally a high priority for us men, and you would like nothing better than for me to tell you how to bring more sex to your marriage. Ironically, that's just what I'm doing by telling you to initiate non-sexual touch more often. Let me explain.

The message communicated by non-sexual touch (e.g., warm hugs, holding hands while riding in the car, spooning in bed) is one of affirmation and value. You are telling your wife how much she means to you. That connects to her heart and strengthens her sense of security. The message of sexual touch when in balance with non-sexual touch is one of passion and pleasure. But if a woman receives only sexual touch from her husband, the message changes to a negative one. She associates affection with your sexual needs and your selfishness; she feels used in the process. Nothing will reduce a woman's sexual desire more than feeling that she only matters to the extent that she can fulfill your sexual needs.

"Our intimacy is deeper and our sex life more fulfilling because we are real, genuine, and honest with each other. We pray together, and that in itself is a great act of foreplay!"

That's why a healthy balance of sexual and non-sexual touch is so important. Each conveys its own positive message and makes way for the other. When you regularly engage her in non-sexual touch (instead of her having to force it upon you), it opens the door for other times of sexual passion.

For years I have been encouraging couples to engage in a thirty-second kiss challenge. The challenge is simple: Spend the next two weeks offering your spouse a thirty-second kiss every day. Why thirty seconds? Because most couples slip into a complacent pattern of engaging in either hello/good-bye kisses (lasting a millisecond), or kisses while engaged in sexual intimacy. They no longer kiss as a way to connect and stir passion (which sometimes includes sexual arousal but not always). A thirty-second kiss takes a little effort, but it can energize the connection and warmth for one another. By the way, don't tell your wife about this idea before you start. Just do it and see how she responds.

Bedroom Dancing

Now that I've said that, a healthy sexual relationship is also an important aspect of marriage. Of course, finding time and energy is sometimes an issue. For some couples, stepfamily living presents them with convenient opportunities to engage in sex; for others it presents constant barriers.

Opportunities:

- Occasionally not having any kids in the house gives couples time and opportunity to relax and focus on their lovemaking.
- Many stepcouples are past childbearing and don't have to deal with infants or small children who require a high degree of physical and nighttime care.

Barriers:

- Parenting stress adds to couple stress, which makes sexual connection more difficult.
- Having extra children on the weekends adds activity and increases fatigue, which can reduce sexual energy.

If alone time comes naturally for your stepfamily, take advantage of it and send up a thank-you to God. If it doesn't occur naturally, become proactive in carving out time for intimacy. Sex is not everything in a marriage, but it is vitally important in order to maintain closeness.

Cohabitation

At the root of many cohabiting relationships is fear. Couples choose the

halfway house of cohabitation in order to have the benefits of living together without the emotional and financial risks of marriage. The irony, of course, is that cohabitation itself has been shown to bring about the very things that couples fear: relationship distress and breakup.[64] I encourage couples to seek God's best for their relationship by not cohabiting. This will honor God's will for their life and help them keep an objective perspective about their relationship. Remember, love is blind and sex is a blindfold.

Finally, strive to enhance your sexual connection. Learn all you can about healthy sexuality, and recognize the differences between sex in a first marriage and remarriage. Most people think they know a lot about sex because they read an article in *Cosmo* or have seen a number of steamy movies. But in my experience, most couples are very unaware of sexual functioning, eroticism, and pleasuring techniques. To get informed, it is very important that you consult the right resource (there is a lot of junk literature regarding sexuality). I suggest you reference my book coauthored with David H. Olson titled *The Remarriage Checkup* and Doug Rosenau's book *A Celebration of Sex* for more on this topic.

Be Captivated With Her

In Proverbs 5, Solomon cautions his son to avoid the enticements of the adulteress, that is, any woman who would steal his interests or affections. "Her steps lead straight to the grave," he says (Proverbs 5:5). In contrast, Solomon concludes the chapter by encouraging his son to focus his affections on his wife.

> May your fountain be blessed,
> and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
> A loving doe, a graceful deer—
> may her breasts satisfy you always,
> may you ever be intoxicated with her love. (Proverbs 5:18–19)

There is nothing a woman thirsts for more than feeling that her husband is captivated with her. When her entrance into the room causes you to freeze with a monumental smile as you gaze at her beauty, she knows you have eyes only for her. When you take the time to really listen to what she is saying—and reflect what you believe it to mean to her—she trusts that you cherish her worth in your life. And when you study her habits, preferences, or interests so you can join her

or cater to them, she glows with the security of knowing you are captivated by her.

Then the fountain of romance will flow freely between you.

Celebrate Your Wife

- Be accessible to her. Tell her where you are and how to reach you.
- Tell co-workers that you can be interrupted when she calls.
- Speak well of her in public and hold her close when an attractive woman enters the room.
- Repeat your wedding vows often.
- Compliment her regularly.
- Send flowers, write love notes/emails, and take care of small tasks so she doesn't have to.
- Attend a marriage conference together. Show her that you are willing to learn and deepen your intimacy.
- Say "I love you" before she does.
- Pray with her and for her while she listens.[65]

Meet Her Romantic Needs

In their book *Starting Your Marriage Right*, Dennis and Barbara Rainey share what they consider to be the top romantic needs of a woman. In a way, their list summarizes what has been presented so far, but it also adds a significant depth to what I've shared. The Raineys successfully cut through all the surface-level fluff of romance to what really matters. I'd like to share their thoughts with you here.[66]

A Woman Needs to Be Spiritually Ministered to by Her Man. In my mind, spiritually ministering to your wife includes two key aspects: serving love and protective leadership. The apostle John tells us that after loving his disciples for many years, Jesus showed them the full extent of his love: He removed his outer clothes, bowed a knee, and washed their dirty, stinky, nasty feet. This is serving love. The humility that is demonstrated by Jesus not only served the immediate need of the disciples (clean feet), but more importantly it communicated his love and commitment to them. This compelled them to love and appreciate him in

return. When you seek to serve your wife with everything you are—even if it means taking on great sacrifice—you solidify in her heart your dedication to her. And you invite her to reflect a similar dedication toward you.

Spiritually ministering to your wife also includes protective leadership. Looking out for the family requires us to be decisive at times; not for the selfish purpose of overpowering others to get our way, but in a protective way to guard against unhealthy influences that would harm our marriage or family. When your wife watches you stand up for what is right, just, and honorable, she will view you as a "soul protector" for both her and her children. To do so, of course, means knowing yourself what God's will is for your home. This means engaging your wife and yourself in Bible study and Christian activities that deepen your walk with the Lord.

A husband who is dedicated to these tasks is likely to have a wife who feels safe in his care, trusting of his heart, and willing to give up anything to keep him close to her side.

A Woman Needs a Man Who Will Share Intimate Conversation. Over the years of conducting marital and sex therapy with couples, I have heard this complaint from husbands again and again: "My wife has sex with me, but rarely does she make love to me." What these men are experiencing is a wife who engages in sex at the physical level but not at the emotional and spiritual level. One guy said, "Having sex with a sterile, disengaged warm body gets old very fast. I need to connect with her, not just her body."

Verbal intercourse to a woman is the equivalent of sexual intercourse to a man. It is the place of connection, affirmation of the relationship, and where she feels valued by you. If I asked your wife whether you actively engage her during conversations or if she is "having intercourse with a dry, disengaged lover," what would she say? Learn to prioritize intimate conversations. Men are really good at sharing facts, but strive to share your feelings, as well. Open the door to your thought life and heart. Giving her access to this will help her to feel connected and intimate with you.

A Woman Needs to Receive a Tender Touch and Hear Gentle Words. Earlier I talked about how non-sexual touch affirms a woman's sense of worth and value. Likewise, tender words and gentle responses (even when irritated with her) are a verbal "tender touch." Praise your wife for her actions and her character. Compliment her femininity, charm, appearance, faithfulness to God, hard work, and dedication to her (and your) children.

A Woman Needs to Be Pursued and Set Apart by Her Man. Dennis and Barbara say, "A wife wants a husband who will swoop her off her feet, carry her away to the castle, and say, 'Let's spend time together.' Focused attention is like

precious gold in a relationship."[67] For years Successful Stepfamilies has been run out of our home. A small ministry with very little revenue, we just couldn't afford office space large enough for both Nan and me and our resource inventory. Mostly we used our garage and basement to get the ministry started. What this meant practically was that I was never too far from work and often found myself checking messages or attending to details during evening hours. This made Nan feel unimportant because everything else seemed to get my attention, but not her or the kids. She was right.

I addressed this by setting firm boundaries with my time (no going in the home office after 6 p.m.) and refocusing my attention on her and our kids. Giving up my need to stay on top of work tasks was, in effect, a pursuit of my wife. So, too, is it when I turn down speaking invitations that would generate revenue for our family but take away from our family time and life balance.

You and I make hundreds of decisions every week that prioritize our wives or something else. Of course, not everything can be centered on her. But clearly you want her to know that you are continually pursuing her heart. I frequently joke that we men are hunters. We see something we want so we hunt it down and conquer it. Perhaps you, like me, did that when trying to win the heart of the woman who is now (or will become) your wife. Dating and courtship are the "hunt" for one woman's affections. But once you caught your limit, have you stopped hunting her? She hopes not.

WE'VE LOST THAT LOVIN' FEELING

What do you do if you've lost the romance? Entire books have been written on that subject, and there isn't space to include a comprehensive discussion here. But perhaps I can offer a summary of what must happen to restore the romance.

In Revelation 2, John is told to confront the church at Ephesus about forsaking their first love. A church that had once lived out their deep abiding love for Jesus, they had become distant and cold toward him. John writes, "Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:5). John's prescription for restoring spiritual love is also a good map for restoring romantic love in a marriage.

First, remember. If you and your wife have lost your romantic connection, remember that there was a time when you had a handle on this. What brought you to that point? How is it that you fell in love to begin with? Rediscover the reasons you pursued her and what attracted you to one another and see if you can't start again.

John's admonition to remember how far you have fallen could also be interpreted as urging them to realize how distant they have become. Sometimes romance suffers because we men are not in tune with the emotional distance between us and our wives. We can be so consumed with our careers and aspirations that we drift many miles from our wives without even realizing it. That's one reason I am such a believer in the online Couple Checkup inventory that is designed to affirm couples' strengths and point out weaknesses (*www.CoupleCheckup.com*). If there is distance in your marriage, it will show you just how far apart you are and what needs to change. My book *The Remarriage Checkup,* coauthored with David H. Olson, includes a free individual Couple Checkup voucher so that you and your wife can save on the cost of the inventory. The book then guides you through a process of building on your relationship strengths while overcoming your deficits.

John's second step is to repent. Literally meaning to feel remorse or regret over one's actions to the point of making a 180-degree turn in the other direction, repentance is the point of change. To say you regret the lost romance in your marriage is nothing without a change of heart and action. This leads to John's third step in the prescription: Do the things you did at first.

In what ways did you serve your wife at one time that you no longer do? What actions and attitude used to characterize you that don't any longer? Begin again to do these things—even if it doesn't make sense to do so. For example, if you and your wife have drifted so far that your thoughtfulness is received by her with suspicion, keep being thoughtful. You will be tempted to give up in defeat. "What's the use?" you might say to yourself, "she doesn't give me any credit for it anyway." This thinking most definitely brings defeat. Don't give up and don't quit doing what you did at first. Now is a good time to be stubborn—lovingly stubborn.

As Christians we believe that Christ will always take us back, no matter how far we've moved away from him. Grace takes us back. If you and your wife are struggling, I wish I could guarantee you the same result. I can't. But do everything within your power to bring healing to your marriage. Seek wise counsel; surround yourself with friends and family who believe in your future together; and humble yourself before the Lord. Restoration is worth it.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. How has the dynamic of “instant family” challenged your couple time and romance?
2. Consider this quote: “Dating is often purposeful, goal oriented, and fun. In contrast, marriage is often invaded by the demands of children and tasks.” How can you remain intentional about nurturing your couple relationship?

3 Share your current Fun Factor couple activities.

4. What insights did you obtain from the section about a woman’s need for balance in sexual and non-sexual touch?
5. What challenges do you have to finding time alone?
6. If you are cohabiting, assuming you see the wisdom of re-establishing sexual purity and living in separate residences, how can you go about making that a reality?
7. Review and discuss the top romantic needs of women as stated by Dennis and Barbara Rainey.

- A woman needs to be spiritually ministered to by her man (this includes serving love and protective leadership).
- A woman needs a man who will share intimate conversation (verbal intercourse to a woman is the equivalent of sexual intercourse to a man. It is the place of connection, affirmation of the relationship, and where she feels valued by you).
- A woman needs to receive a tender touch and hear gentle words (this affirms a woman’s sense of worth and value).
- A woman needs to be pursued and set apart by her man (focused attention is like precious gold in a relationship).

8. If your marriage is drifting, what can you do to remember, repent, and restore the things you once did in order to recapture your first love?

Chapter 13

Adult Stepchildren

An adult son said to his father after a Christmas gathering, “You spent more time getting to know her children and grandchildren than with our side of the family. Are you ready to love her children just as much as you love us?”

Climbing Stepdad Mountain is a lot easier when you aren’t traveling with minor-aged children, but don’t be too quick to assume it’s easy. There are a number of unique dynamics to adult stepfamilies that can add challenges.

This chapter targets adult stepfamilies that initially formed after the children were adults (over the age of eighteen). It is certainly true that stepfamilies formed with minor-aged children will have unique challenges after the children become adults; however, I am limiting the discussion here to the unique transitional issues associated with adult stepfamilies.

Warning and Word of Caution: If you saw this chapter title in the table of contents and started reading here, I strongly advise that you begin with chapter 1. Most of the key principles addressed throughout this book apply to adult stepfamilies, too. The specific complaints from adult stepchildren are somewhat different from those of younger children (e.g., inheritance issues); however, the essential feelings, fears, and concerns are very similar.

The principle of patience, for example, is important for adult stepfamilies. It’s possible you may need even more patience than younger stepfamilies since “cooking time” is dependent upon how much time you spend with the stepchildren. Some adult stepfamilies are spread out across great distances, which makes it even more difficult to build relationships. In addition, the matters of loss and loyalty (chapters 3 and 4) are just as salient for adult stepchildren as they are for younger children. Other principles, such as those addressing parenting, may not apply to your situation. But in general I encourage you to consider the entire book valuable information for your family.

If your wife was widowed, you may be tempted to dismiss principles that seem to apply to divorced families. Again, most principles have application to you and your adult stepfamily. Those of you who skipped several chapters in this book and zeroed in on this subject will likely walk away feeling that pieces or solutions are missing. That's because many of the dynamics of adult stepfamilies are addressed in other chapters. Be sure to go back and read those.

BECOMING AN ADULT STEPCHILD

Barrett met Gabrielle through an online dating service. Both divorced empty-nesters with active careers, Barrett had three adult children and Gabrielle two. Gabrielle had a complicated divorce and an ex-husband who often put guilt trips on their children. Accordingly, Gabrielle's relationship with her kids was strained. When she started dating Barrett, her children pulled back even further. Then, just two weeks before the wedding, her oldest son, age twenty-nine, announced that he wasn't coming. Gabrielle was crushed and Barrett felt horrible for her.

Common Reactions and Feelings

Why would a child make such a decision? He must have been put up to it by the ex-husband, right? Perhaps, but maybe not. Here are a few of the common reasons why adult stepchildren struggle with a parent's later-in-life remarriage. Please note that these reactions may apply to your children as well as your stepchildren.

Loss and the Fear of More Loss. After losing one parent to death, or the family to divorce, children at any age fear losing what remains. Some adult stepchildren fear abandonment or isolation from their parent. When the children must share their mom with you, it means a loss of her time and energy. This is especially true if the stepdad has children or grandchildren who also occupy the mom's time. This fear is often expressed as anger or resistance in developing a relationship with you.

Smart Dating

Time is your friend. A rapid dating-to-engagement period increases the likelihood of resistance and negative feelings from adult

children. You may be ready, but remember, a wedding will send emotional ripples throughout the generations. Go slow.

Adult children appreciate being informed about a regular dating partner. Don't keep them in the dark as your relationship progresses. This breeds suspicion and a lack of confidence in your decision to marry.

Also, because your time horizon is different from that of adult children, you may think a long engagement is a waste of time. However, try to balance your desire to move ahead with the children's need to adjust to a changing family identity.

If you and/or your wife are the recipient of anger, resistance, or guilt trips from adult children, remember that these responses are probably rooted in fear. Acknowledging those fears and *ministering* to them can help to ease the tension.

Betrayal. For some children a remarriage feels like a betrayal of the other biological parent. This is true in divorce as well as death, in particular if the children see their dad struggling with health issues or loneliness. They may have the viewpoint, "Sure, Mom, your life with a new husband has turned out great, while Dad has lost everything." Children are especially likely to have this attitude if their dad is suffering because of choices made by your wife. If your stepchildren feel that they or their dad have been abandoned, encourage your wife to hear their pain, apologize for the role she may have played in the divorce, and seek reconciliation. While you cannot fix these problems, you can encourage her to restore a relationship with her children.

When Dad Is Deceased

If the biological dad is deceased, maintaining a strong family identity by preserving the family name, keepsakes, assets, and mementos is a great way to strengthen the adult stepfamily. Most likely the kids have experienced a disruption of life's continuity; therefore, any choice by the mom or stepdad that jeopardizes the original family structure or values may be viewed as betrayal.

Jealousy and Rejection. Jealousy is the fear of being replaced. Close cousins to jealousy are resentment and competition. Some adult children feel replaced by a stepdad. That causes them to compete with you. And let's be honest; you *are* taking their mother's attention, time, and energy, and they want it back. Your initial response to this may be, "My stepdaughter is an adult; she needs to move on and be happy for us." However, criticizing a child's feelings won't build a bridge. Instead, put yourself in the child's shoes and empathize with their pain.

A Smart Stepdad would say something like, "Susan, I know you and your mom are close; it must be hard to watch me step into the picture. I know it can never be exactly the same as before we got married, but I want you to know that I want the two of you to continue to do special things together. As a matter of fact, I noticed in the paper that a local art gallery is having a Monet display next month. I know you love art and so does your mom. Why don't the two of you go?"

As a stepdad this communicates four things:

1. I recognize your pain.
2. I admit that things are different, but I hope to work toward a solution that benefits everyone.
3. I am actively seeking ways that you and your mom can stay connected.
4. I am not insecure or competing for your mom's time and affection.

For Mom

The fears associated with betrayal and family loss run deep. If you haven't recognized these issues in your children until now, make a plan to respond to them. One idea is to spend time with your biological family by yourself whenever possible. Spending time alone with a child or grandchildren might be all it will take to help everyone see that you are not disappearing from their lives. Reassure your husband that you need this separate time with your kids to help your marriage find support for the future. Ask him to graciously give you these occasions.

Concern Over Family Finances. Adult stepchildren are often concerned about family finances, in particular when their biological father has died. And well they should be; concerns over family inheritance and assets are legitimate. A Smart Stepdad knows how to resist the temptation to minimize these concerns

or label them as greed. Adult children have the right to know how your marriage is going to impact a college fund, inheritance, and significant family keepsakes. Be proactive in addressing these matters.

Be sure to revisit your financial arrangements in order to address both your long-term provision for each other and the adult children's financial concerns. In his book *Money and Marriage God's Way,* Howard Dayton of Compass Finances God's Way suggests that couples proactively reexamine financial plans before marriage. It is advisable for you to consult an attorney and financial planner who are well-versed in remarriage and stepfamily finances. For example, you may need to change the beneficiaries of your life insurance policies or change the ownership of car titles or deeds to a home or other property. New wills should also be drafted to reflect your changing circumstances.

As a general rule I do not recommend prenuptial agreements as they may plant seeds of distrust in a couple's relationship. However, a good alternative is what my friend and financial advisor Greg Pettys calls a Shared Covenant.[68] This written agreement is designed for couples whose marriage will form a stepfamily, and it clarifies emotionally charged issues for the couple and their children. You can provide details, for example, of how you and the children will be provided for should their mother die and you remarry. Proactively addressing these matters and communicating a provision to the children can help to ease fears often associated with money and inheritance. When possible, allow stepchildren to contribute to wording of legal documents so they feel some influence over the process. Fears increase when decisions are made in secret.

It's All in a Name

Initiate a conversation to discuss what terms or names you will use to refer to one another. Find something mutually comfortable.

- Don't insist they use terms of endearment for you (e.g., "Dad"), but if both of you are comfortable with it, that's fine.
- Discuss how you will introduce each other in public (e.g., "This is my wife's son, Mark" or "This is my stepfather-in-law.").
- Discuss what names you will encourage grandchildren to use. Young stepgrand-children may use uncomplicated terms of endearment since they bond more quickly. But if "Grandpa"

feels awkward to the adult stepchild (grandchild's parent), find a variation that suits everyone (e.g., "Papa Joe").

The above emotions and reactions will determine the temperature of your family Crockpot. Understanding and acknowledging the circumstances is the first step to learning how to respond appropriately. Here are a few suggestions.

SMART STEPS FOR STEPDADS OF ADULT STEPCHILDREN

1. **Discuss with your wife any negative emotional reactions exhibited by her children.** When a child expresses betrayal, anger, or alarm over your relationship, encourage your wife to speak to the child alone and say something like, "Your anger yesterday tells me how much you love me and about the concern you have for our family. I appreciate that very much. I, too, love you very much. I can only imagine how my new marriage is causing you confusion. I expect that you are worried how this will affect our relationship; could we get together again to discuss that? I'd like to hear more of what you're feeling."
2. **Listen to negative feelings and reactions with humility and openness.** The worst mistake a mom or a stepdad can make is to imply that the child has no right to feel a certain way. An adult stepchild should not be allowed to insult, berate, or abuse you. Those responses are unacceptable and your wife needs to step in and confront the rudeness. But if the child is expressing negative emotions, the best response is to listen non-defensively. Express humble compassion and validate the difficulty of this transition.

For Mom: Preparing for a Wedding

Engage in "feed-forward" conversations to help children anticipate changes for your family after a wedding. These conversations also let you know their feelings. For example:

- Before an engagement ask your kids: "It's one thing for me to be dating; how do you think you'd feel if I became engaged?" "What would that mean to our family?"

- Before a wedding: “This is going to change a lot in our family’s life. I expect that you are concerned that I’ll have less time for you and the grandkids. We also need to talk about your inheritance. What are you thinking about these matters?” “What do you hope will never change in our relationship or family?”

Keep this type of conversation active over time. Adjusting to significant life change requires an ongoing dialogue between family members.

3. **Communicate the No-Threat Message (from chapter 8) to your adult stepchildren as well as your ex-husband-in-law.** Say, “You only have one father and I am not him. Please know that I understand I could never replace your dad, nor will I try. I also realize that you may feel confused about my place in your life, and I can appreciate that. I hope that we can be friends; I’m willing to do all I can to make that happen.”
4. **Extend the hand of friendship whenever possible.** Remember, you are a parent in name only. Take interest in their lives; learn about their professions, children, and hobbies; engage in recreational activities; and try to be supportive of their personal goals and family.[69]
5. **Connect through the grandchildren.** Engaging with your stepgrandchildren, who often bond quickly with stepgrandparents, can stir warm feelings for the entire family.
6. **Prepare for holidays, celebrations, and family traditions.** Dialogue about transitions: “I realize Thanksgiving may feel different this year since my family is joining us. I apologize if this takes time away from your family. Would you like to plan some special time with your mom?”
7. **Work toward clearing the air.** If there have been hurtful words or hurt feelings on either side, attempt to build a bridge of forgiveness and humility.
8. **Be patient with adult stepsibling relationships.** Your children and her children may find middle ground upon which to be friendly with one another, but it may take a while. Give them opportunities to connect, but don’t attempt to force a bond.[70]
9. **Offer compliments and affirmation to your adult stepchildren.** Words of encouragement and kindness can go a long way toward building relationships.

10. Don't feel guilty if adult children treat you like "the father they never had." Trust that they are capable of knowing what they need from you.

When Dad Is Deceased

Celebrate his memory. The paradox is that while you keep his memory alive, it lowers the family's resistance to you and increases respect for you.

- From time to time, ask about their father and listen to the stories.
- Offer the family time to grieve together (e.g., an annual visit to the grave; ongoing conversations about life before and after his death).
- Anticipate occasions that resurrect grief (e.g., Father's Day, his birthday) and find ways of openly acknowledging their hurt.

For further reading on this topic, I suggest *When Your Parent Remarries Late in Life: Making Peace With Your Adult Stepfamily* by Terri P. Smith with James M. Harper. While this book is written for the adult stepchild, it gives later-life couples perspective on what their children are experiencing and how to manage the marital transition. You can also share it with your adult stepchildren. This may stimulate much-needed conversation about the family transition.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. In what ways did you assume (and hope) that being an adult stepfamily would be easier than having young children?
2. How is physical distance from your stepchildren or life circumstances a help or hindrance to your growing relationships?
3. Review the common emotions and reactions of adult stepchildren. Which do your stepchildren seem to be experiencing?
   Loss and fear of more loss
   Betrayal

Jealousy and rejection
Concern over family finances

4. Have you negotiated names or terms for how you will refer to one another in public and private? If not, how might you orchestrate this conversation?
5. Review the Smart Steps for Stepdads of Adult Stepchildren beginning on page 225. Discuss and apply those that are appropriate to your situation.
6. What other insights occurred to you while reading the chapter?

Chapter 14

Should We Have an “Ours” Baby?

My wife says it’s normal for a woman to want to have a baby with her husband. I’m not so sure I want more children; she already has three and I have one.
That’s enough for me.

BRIAN

Whether you’ve already had an ours baby or are considering it, you may be wondering how adding a baby to a stepfamily impacts the family dynamic. The results of social research to date on this subject are mixed; the answer is that we really don’t know. In deciding whether to climb this face of Stepdad Mountain, I suggest you carefully consider the terrain as you pray for wisdom, and then make your decision.

CONSIDER THE TERRAIN

Here is some of what we do know about how the birth of an ours baby impacts a stepfamily.

An Ours Baby and Your Stepfamily

You may have heard the theory that an ours baby creates a *concrete baby effect* that helps “cement” stepfamily relationships.[71] Sounds promising, doesn’t it? The hope is that having a child gives everyone someone with whom they can equally relate. As one child said after his new half-brother was born, “At last, someone who is related to everyone.” The only problem with the theory is that there is little research to support the idea.[72] Stepfamilies experience a wide variety of emotional and relational changes after an ours baby is born. Some are encouraging and some aren’t.

The ours child has a greater chance of bringing a positive impact to the home when these factors are present before he or she is born:

- Relationships within the stepfamily home are generally stable and positive before the pregnancy.
- Children already have a positive relationship with their biological parent and stepparent.[73]
- Stepchildren live with the stepparent (and biological parent) full time (or the majority of the time).
- Children are young in age.[74]

When these dynamics are in place, half-siblings may consider the mutual child a full sibling, which can bring a great sense of joy to everyone. By contrast, adult half-siblings have widely varying relationships with an ours baby. Some are close and have frequent contact, while others are distant and neutral about the new child. Infrequent contact with the stepfamily, a lack of involvement, and the differences in age-related interests are common reasons for the emotional disconnection between a stepchild and the ours baby.[75]

If the relationships within the stepfamily home are generally divided between insiders (biologically related persons) and outsiders (steprelationships), a mutual child can bring further division. Biological children who already feel slighted may feel jealous of the time and attention a new child receives, thereby causing resentment toward a half-sibling.

Smart Dating

Having a child before a wedding is unwise for many reasons. First, sexual impurity dishonors God and loudly communicates wrong moral behavior to other children. Second, having a child out of wedlock facilitates an artificial commitment that often fails later. Third, sex before marriage can blind couples to weaknesses in their relationship. It fools them into believing they have a stronger relationship than they actually do. Honoring God's boundary that sex be reserved for marriage guards you from these dangers.

Another factor to consider is the pressure that can be experienced by the mutual child. Being related to everyone puts this child in the center of the

family's experience. This *hub* position, as it has been referred to by researchers, cuts both ways.[76] On the one hand, it is a privileged position that gains more attention than the other children (especially part-time children). This affords the child more influence and control in the home. On the other hand, this child may feel a constant pressure to create bonds between family members and ensure that everyone gets along.

If you decide to have a mutual child, it's wise to refrain from communicating high expectations. This includes telling your biological children, the stepchildren, and the mutual child that he or she will "bring everyone together." If that happens naturally, then rejoice. If it doesn't happen, you don't want any of the children to feel they have failed the family.

An Ours Baby and Your Marriage

Did you know that when first-marriage couples have a baby it reduces their risk of divorce? A child strengthens the couple's commitment to one another. As one woman said, "I don't consider leaving my marriage because there's more at stake now." But there's a downside to having a child as well. Couples in first marriages experience a sharp decline in marital satisfaction during the child-rearing years. It seems the business of raising a child can take away some of the joys of marriage. Guess what? These two dynamics are also true for stepcouples who have an ours baby.[77]

The issue of whether to have more children should be discussed before you get married. Dating couples should not take for granted that their partner will have the same opinion as they do. If one of you wants another child and the other doesn't, will you continue dating? Will you get married? If both of you do want another child, how will you handle your differing emotional responses? If you don't have biological children, for example, you will have "first-time joy" when your child sits up, crawls, walks, talks, etc., but your wife may not (a common change in parents who have been through all the firsts with older children). How will you celebrate what you have in common instead of worrying about what you don't?

An Ours Baby and Parenting

> There's nothing like the unconditional, unreserved love of a child. The first time your son or daughter calls you Daddy, your heart just melts.

Having your own child can be extremely fulfilling (this seems especially true for stepdads who do not already have a biological or adopted child). In chapter 4, I provided an explanation of parent-child attachments. This mutually beneficial relationship offers an automatic love, grace, respect, and approval between parent and child. Specifically, it is an attachment where you are an *insider*—always. That experience may be vastly different from your stepdad experience.

Not all stepdads will experience a stark contrast in parental fulfillment if they have their own child. But when an ours baby arrives, many stepdads do discover a vast difference in affection between the stepchildren and a biological child. This presents a trap to avoid. The ease of being Dad versus the challenge of being Stepdad can trigger a temptation to emotionally withdraw or create distance from the stepchildren.[78] This reaction communicates a message of rejection to the stepchildren, plus it can hurt your wife, and it lays the groundwork for resentment between half-siblings. Resist the temptation to pull away from stepchildren when a biological child is born. It's not abnormal to love your own child more than you do the stepchildren, but each child has the right to be treated equitably without favoritism.

By the way, there is another side to this dynamic. Some stepdads discover that having a child strengthens their affections and compassion for their stepchildren. After their own child is born, stepparents who had strained, distant relationships with stepchildren sometimes feel more secure and have more tolerance for stepchildren.[79] Another benefit to the family is when a stepdad recognizes that all children—even his own—act poorly at times. This can eliminate a judgmental attitude toward his wife and her kids. There's nothing like a good dose of reality to soften a stepdad's heart.

PREPARING FOR AN OURS BABY

If you are planning to have an ours baby, here are some suggestions to consider.

1. Expect ripples throughout your multiple-home stepfamily system. For example, a biological father who has been uninvolved in his children's lives, or disinterested in your family, may suddenly reemerge after you have a baby. Expecting change will help you cope when surprises arise.
2. Have lengthy conversations with all the children and extended family about how life will change after the baby is born. For example, anticipate how your family schedule will change (practical life change) when the baby is

born, plus how stepkids may feel envious that the new half-sibling doesn't spend time in another home (emotional change).
3. Try to keep half-siblings' lifestyle, visitation schedule, and parental contact relatively unchanged after the baby arrives.
4. Trust your intuition. If you anticipate harsh or negative reactions about a new baby from stepchildren (or your biological children), plan carefully how to prepare them. Don't just hope for the best.
5. Celebrate. When the children are excited about the new arrival, buy them "I'm the big brother" (or sister) shirts and encourage a family party.
6. To encourage the bonding between half-siblings, it's best to orchestrate frequent contact between the children.
7. Raise all of the children with similar values. When half-siblings perceive inequalities in rules, expectations, the availability of money, or affection, they can become jealous and angry.
8. Refrain from being defensive or easily offended when stepchildren voice frustration or concern over how the new baby has affected them. If the relationship with your stepkids is strained, you will be tempted to assume every comment has to do with being a stepfamily. Note that older full-siblings in biological families commonly voice such concerns, as well. Sibling rivalry is normal. Not every expression is stepfamily rejection.

When Dad Is Deceased

Contact the deceased father's extended family (his parents and siblings), and give them permission to be involved in the life of your child. Their involvement, for example, as "grandparents" in birthdays, holidays, child care, etc., bridges the insider/outsider gap in your home and blesses all the children with lots of love. Possessiveness divides, permission connects.

Marriage Adjustment

1. Expect that the addition of a child will result in less time for each other. While it may take a few months before you find time alone, be intentional to carve out time for romance and friendship again soon.
2. If this is your first child, remember that your wife has been here before. Don't hold this against her, as it's normal for her to feel less excited about

the “firsts.” You may respond the same way with your own second child!

Parenting Adjustment

Every season of parenting requires couples to discuss their expectations and how they will share parenting responsibilities. It’s possible that if your children and stepchildren are older, you may not have discussed how you will raise and care for an infant. Proactively talk through these matters as husband and wife.

For Mom

If you have another child, remember to equally invest yourself in all of your children. Staying connected with older kids may mean leaving your husband to care for the baby for a few hours while getting some one-on-one time with the others.

SO, WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

It’s obvious that I can’t tell you whether you should or should not have an ours baby. It’s tremendously complicated and there isn’t a solid way to predict the outcome or the impact on everyone involved. However, one thing is vitally important: Examine your motives and your expectations, and be certain that having a child is not part of an unrealistic fantasy or an effort to control and/or create family harmony. It is unfair to burden an infant with that role.

Spend a season of time praying with your wife. Make this important decision based on love, the desire to raise a child, and the Lord’s leading.

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

For Group Discussion

1. List your stepchildren and key extended family members (e.g., your mother, your wife’s family, etc.). What are (were) your assumptions about how each of them will (would) respond to another child?
2. An ours baby has a better chance of being a positive influence on a stepfamily when these are true. Which are true for your family?

- Relationships within the stepfamily home are generally stable and positive before the pregnancy.
- Children already have a positive relationship with their biological parent and stepparent.
- Stepchildren live with the stepparent (and biological parent) full time (or the majority of the time). Residential half-siblings tend to bond more deeply with the new sibling.
- Children are young in age. Younger half-siblings adjust more easily than adolescent or adult half-siblings.

3. Have you ever known someone who was an ours baby and raised in the *hub* position? What was their experience?
4. What are the dynamics at play in your marriage around having a baby? What are the push/pulls (pushes toward or things that pull you away from it)?
5. Might you be susceptible to the temptation to emotionally pull away from your stepchildren once you have an ours baby? How can you guard your heart from doing so?
6. If you already have or anticipate having a child together, review the list of tips for Preparing for an Ours Baby beginning on page 233. Which can you apply to your situation?

Chapter 15

Heroes by Choice

Being a stepfather to four stepsons is a lot of work, but I only get one chance to build a man. I'd rather get it right on the first pass and not leave a lot of remodeling for someone else to deal with later. I want to get it as right as I can.

Gerald, stepdad to four boys

Stepparents often get a bad rap. The "wicked stepmother" and the "abusing stepfather" are stereotypes that just won't go away. But here's why you can let those harsh judgments roll off your back. They always come from people who are looking up from the bottom of the mountain. Once you, your family, and onlookers get to the top and look back down, the perspective is different. Very different.

Brad Paisley and Kelley Lovelace (a stepdad himself) wrote the song "He Didn't Have to Be" from the perspective of a child who had journeyed with his stepdad to the top of Stepdad Mountain. Looking back over the edge at the great distance they had traveled together and the challenges they had overcome, what we hear echoing over the mountaintops is the heart of a stepchild filled with gratitude. Before his stepdad came on the scene, the child proclaims, something was missing. But then they became a family. No stereotypes or harsh judgment, just appreciation for the blessing of a stepdad who didn't have to choose love but did. Someday, he concludes, "I hope I'm at least half the dad that he didn't have to be."[80]

Do you suppose Jesus had the same feeling about his stepdad?

I've long thought it a great injustice that Mary has received so much honor and attention throughout history for being the mother of the Savior while Joseph is hardly ever mentioned. We do know much more about her, so it is understandable. But what about the dad who didn't have to be? What if Joseph didn't?

But he did. He chose to love, care for, and claim the child he didn't father. And clearly he had a choice—he almost walked away. But at the Spirit's leading, he stayed. And the God of the Universe, who chose to give up heaven in all of its glory, power, and privilege in exchange for a cross, the Savior who chose to sacrifice himself for the sake of hope . . . was himself chosen by a humble stepdad.

Not many have sung the praises of Joseph through the ages, but I'm sure we can all agree, he is a hero.

May God bless you for climbing Stepdad Mountain. May God bless you for being a hero by choice.

H E R O E S B Y C H O I C E

For Group Discussion

1. Imagine the day when your stepchild(ren) sing similar words of appreciation over you. What will that day feel like?
2. What reminders do you need to help you press toward the top of Stepdad Mountain when the challenges are great and the rewards few?
3. Had you ever thought of Joseph as Jesus' stepfather? Discuss what that might have been like for him.
4. What inspiration can you draw from Joseph and his choice to love and be used by God?
5. No matter where you are now—at the bottom of Stepdad Mountain, in the middle, or nearing the top—look back over your climb. What challenges have been overcome already? What remain?
6. As a result of reading this book, what perspectives about your climb have changed for you? What wisdom would you pass along to another stepdad if given the opportunity?

NOTES

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55 Clearly, a man who sexually touches a stepchild is being abusive. This must be reported to the authorities and he must seek treatment. A man who has repetitive sexual thoughts about a child—even if he has not acted on them—should seek psychological treatment as well.

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62 My thanks to author and friend Laura Petherbridge, who contributed to an early version of this chapter.

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80 “He Didn’t Have to Be” written by Kelley Lovelace and Brad Paisley. © 1999 EMI April Music Inc., Love Ranch Music, and Sea Gayle Music. All Rights Controlled and Administered by EMI April Music Inc. (ASCAP). All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Quoted from *He Didn’t Have to Be*, 2001, Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 6.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RON L. DEAL is the founder of Successful Stepfamilies, which empowers stepfamilies toward healthy living and equips churches to minister to their unique needs. He is author of *The Smart Stepfamily* and coauthor with Laura Petherbridge of *The Smart Stepmom* and with David H. Olson of *The Remarriage Checkup*. Ron is a licensed marriage and family therapist and licensed professional counselor who frequently appears in the national media, including *Focus on the Family, HomeWord,* and *FamilyLife Today.* He is a popular conference speaker and his video series *The Smart Stepfamily* DVD is used in communities, churches, and homes throughout the world. Ron is a member of the Stepfamily Expert Council for the National Stepfamily Resource Center. Ron and his wife, Nan, and their sons live in Amarillo, Texas.

For more about Ron and his ministry, visit *SuccessfulStepfamilies.com*.

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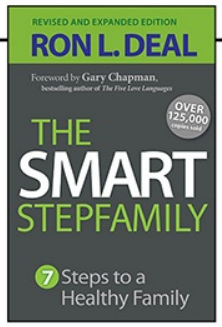
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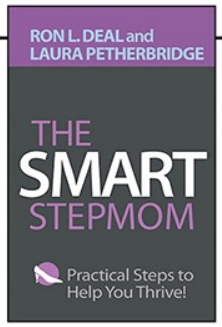
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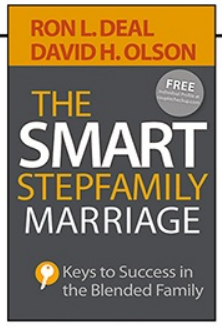
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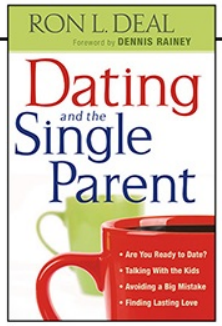
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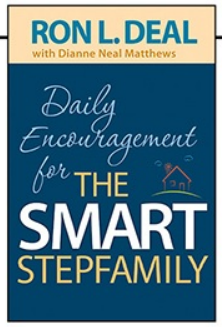
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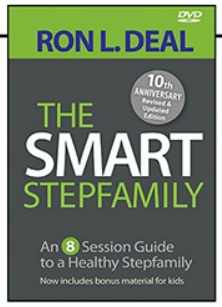
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Ron L. Deal is one of the most widely read and viewed experts on blended families in the country. He is founder of Smart Stepfamilies™, director of FamilyLife Blended® for FamilyLife®, the author of numerous books on stepfamily living including the bestselling *The Smart Stepfamily*, and consulting editor for the Smart Stepfamily Series of books. Ron is a licensed marriage and family therapist and popular speaker. He and his wife, Nan, have three sons and live in Little Rock, Arkansas. Find resources at SmartStepfamilies.com.

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