



# **Building Smart Stepfamilies & Preventing Serial Divorce: *What Churches Must Do***

Presented by:

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## **BUILDING SMART STEPFAMILIES**

### 1. Musical Homes (some statistics) –

- About 75% of divorced persons eventually remarry.
- 46% of all marriages today is a remarriage for one or both of the partners. 30% of all marriages form stepfamilies.
- Approximately 1300 new stepfamilies are formed every day in the U.S. and it's predicted that by 2010 there will be more stepfamilies in American than any other type of family.
- 1 out of 3 Americans is now a stepparent, stepchild, a stepsibling, or some other member of a stepfamily. It is predicted that 1 of 2 Americans will live in a stepfamily at some point.
- In 1990, 21% of all married-couple households with children under the age of 18 contained at least one stepchild ("residential stepfamilies").
- We can estimate another 5% of households that involve a single-parent with a cohabiting partner who functions in the stepparent role. In other words, if they were married, the above statistic would be 26%. NOTE: Other estimates from nationally representative samples suggest it may be as high as 30%. These numbers EXCLUDE households with children over 19 and part-time stepfamily homes.

2. Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies in the US, the Christian community keeps acting as if the two-parent-biological home is the only thing out there.

### **BARRIERS TO STEPFAMILY MINISTRY**

#### 1. We don't \_\_\_\_\_ the need.

- a. Lower percentage of stepfamilies within most congregations.

#### 2. Stepfamilies frequently are ***spiritually***\_\_\_\_\_.

- a. **Spiritual** \_\_\_\_\_ **and guilt** from divorce or past sin.

- b. If churched: **Socially shunned** following divorce or **spiritually** \_\_\_\_\_.

- c. If unchurched: **Strong feeling of**\_\_\_\_\_.

3. We don't \_\_\_\_\_ to perceive the need.
  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ struggles with the marriage & divorce issue.  
**Divorce is not the unforgivable sin!**
  - We have a message of redemption that stepfamilies need to hear.  
**It is time for the church to articulate that message of redemption.**
  
5. Few \_\_\_\_\_, authors, or Christian family experts who have experienced stepfamily life.

### **UNDERSTANDING STEPFAMILIES**

1. 3-D Jig-Saw Puzzle
  - “Blind” to what they are trying to create.
  - Mistakenly apply the first-family-mold to their home.
  - Leadership is ambiguous—“whose in charge here?”
2. Wilderness Wanderings – caught between a pursuing past and a sea of opposition.
3. Messages we must communicate:
  - *There is a Promised Land, but you must trust God's leading and endure the journey.* Dedication, commitment, and patience are key stepping stones.
  - Show them a model of what a *healthy Christian stepfamily looks like*. Your family is different & complex (not dysfunctional, not bad, not unholy—just different).
  - *We care.* Publicly the church needs to address the needs of stepfamilies to communicate care. And we need to establish programs, classes, support groups, etc. to equip them for healthier living.

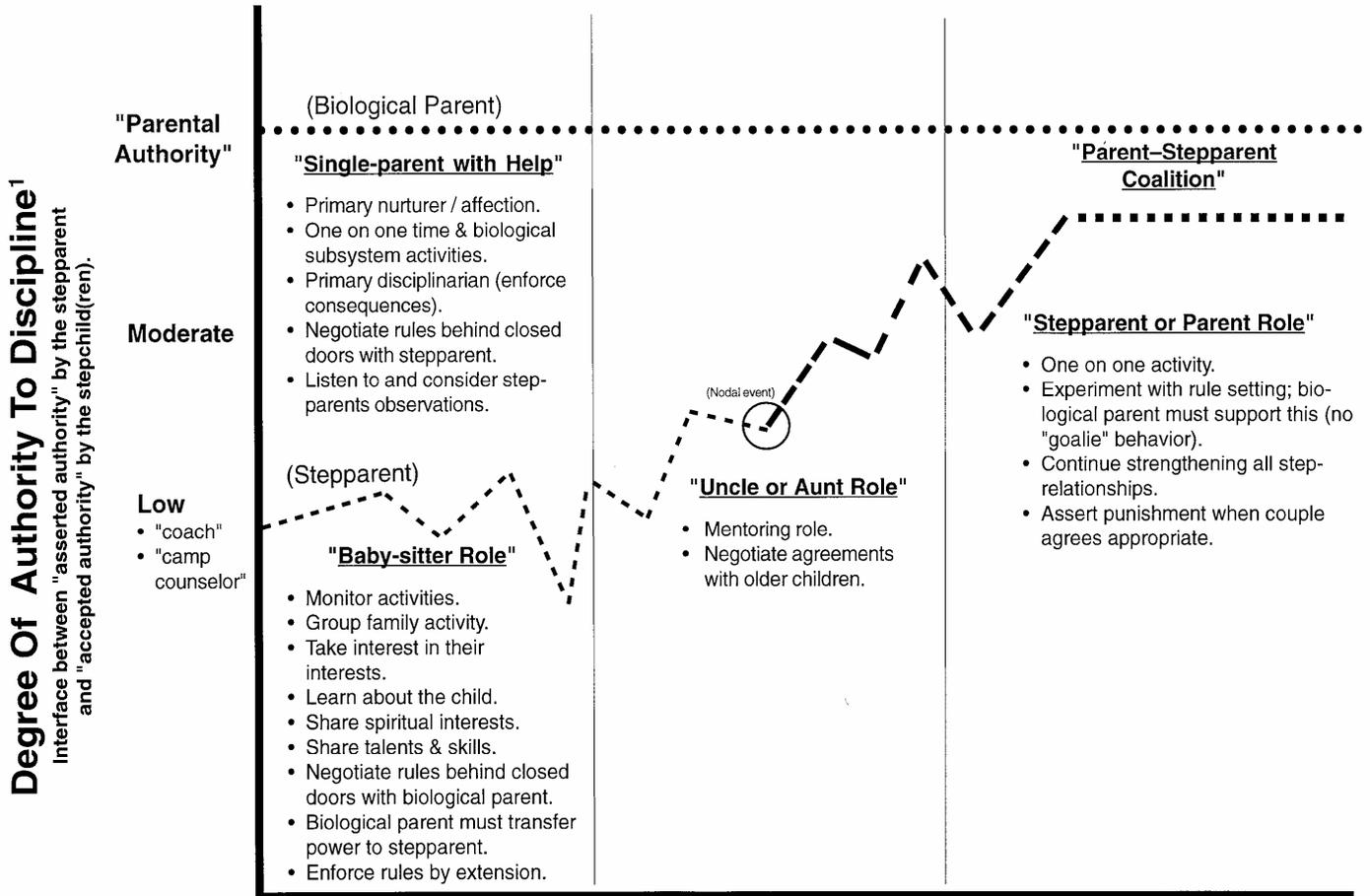
## THE SMART STEPFAMILY: STEPFAMILIES 101

1. **Through Wilderness Wanderings:**
  
2. **Key Stepping Stones:**
  
3. **Smart Step One: STEP \_\_\_\_\_:**
  
4. **Smart Step Two: STEP \_\_\_\_\_:**
  
5. **Smart Step Three: \_\_\_\_\_-STEP:**

**Healthy Stepcouple Relationships: Key Findings** (n = 50,575 couples, 2004)

  - a) **“Marriage is marriage.”** Happy remarried couples have many of the same strengths as first-marriage couples.
  - b) **“Spiritual convictions provide to be predictive of happiness and satisfaction prior to marriage.”** When we looked at what best discriminated between happy and unhappy couples we found that 3 of the top 10 items predicting relationship quality related to spirituality (including the number 1 predictor).
  - c) We also found that **couples naturally anticipate stepfamily dynamics** as a potential problem for their marriage, they just don’t know what to do about them.
  
6. **Smart Step Four: STEP \_\_\_\_\_ (part 1):**
  
7. **Smart Step Four: STEP \_\_\_\_\_ (part 2):**
  
8. **Smart Step Five: \_\_\_\_\_ STEP**
  
9. **Smart Step Six: STEP \_\_\_\_\_ (overcoming special challenges):**
  
10. **Smart Step Seven: STEP \_\_\_\_\_ (into the Promised Land):**

# A Prescription for Evolving Parent & Stepparent Roles



Length of time required to increase parental authority will vary according to age of child, previous family experiences, relationship with noncustodial parents, child's temperament/personality, parenting style variations, and child's overall stepfamily satisfaction level.

Time With Stepchildren

## **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR MINISTERING TO STEPFAMILIES**

- 1. *Communicate messages of hope and determination***
- 2. *Keep an outreach mentality***
- 3. *Upon their first visit***
- 4. *Sensitize your Bible class teachers to stepfamily complexities***
- 5. *Youth Ministries***
- 6. *Support Groups / Bible Classes for Stepfamilies***
- 7. *Discuss stepparenting and remarriage pressures when doing general marriage and family enrichment.***
- 8. *Pre-remarriage counseling is vital.***  
You must prepare them for what lies ahead.
- 9. *Host a stepfamily seminar, sponsor a stepfamily retreat, or offer a short-course for stepfamily adults – but do something!***
- 10. *Pastoral Counseling Suggestions***

## PRE-STEPCOUPLE COUNSELING

**Ron L. Deal, M.MFT.**  
 Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist  
 Licensed Professional Counselor

The following represents a basic plan of action for the premarital counseling process. Specific session content should be tailored to each couple once the assessment phase is complete.

### General Interventions:

1. Foster Deliberation. Slow the couple down! If possible, require a 6 month waiting period before the wedding.
2. Identify and Label Unrealistic Expectations.
  - Normalize the stepfamily journey.
  - Provide realistic expectations of the integration process.
3. Identify unhealthy emotional triangles and work to resolve them.
4. Identify the “Ghosts of Marriage Past” that influence assumptions and behavioral interpretations of one another.
5. Sprinkle the sessions with couple assignments (e.g, readings, interviews with older couples, etc.) that you have found helpful with all couples.

**Pre-Counseling Assessment:** PREPARE-MC inventory through Life Innovations ([www.lifeinnovations.com](http://www.lifeinnovations.com)).

**Wedding Ritual:** Discuss the Family Medallion as a ritual of connection and affirmation in the wedding ceremony ([www.familymedallion.com](http://www.familymedallion.com)).

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### Session 1: Couple

1. Contract with the couple for a pre-determined number of sessions.
2. Conduct a genogram to explore their families of origin and first-family relationship history.
  - Take special note of the manner of their divorce/family death experiences and the amount of time that has passed.
3. Homework: Assign the Dynamic Relationship History as homework.

### Session 2: Couple

1. Further explore the expanded system of relationships (e.g., ex-spouse relations; visitation schedules; co-parenting boundaries and patterns; relations with ex-in-laws, etc.)
2. Begin to anticipate the changes to the single-parent home(s) once the transition to marriage begins.
3. Homework: Assign the couple to begin reading *The Smart Stepfamily* and continue reading throughout premarital counseling.

### **Session 3: Couple**

1. Explore the PREPARE-MC inventory results.
2. Determine growth areas to be addressed in later sessions.
3. Educate the couple on common emotional and relational shifts that tend to follow the wedding.
4. Coach the future stepparent on ways to bond with stepchildren.
5. Homework: 1) List their hurts, pain, and bitter feelings that remain from previous relationships. 2) Watch the PREP video tapes. 3) Ask future stepparent to begin slowly working on connecting points with stepchildren.

### **Session 4: Biological Children Subsystems**

1. Meet with each parents children in a separate session.
2. Checker-board technique to assess how the children perceive current boundaries, power, and family functioning.
3. Explore their current feelings about the remarriage, fears, hurts from the past, and general level of acceptance of their parent's decision to marry.
4. Explore loyalty issues as it related to their bio parents and accepting the new stepparent.
5. Determine whether it is necessary to meet with ex-spouses based on child's responses.

### **Session 5: (Optional, but recommended) Ex-Spouse Individual Session**

1. Affirm the importance of their place in the children's lives. Affirm your desire that they new stepfamily not reduce their contact with the children.
2. Discuss their fears related to the new marriage.
3. Share the importance of them giving the children permission to respect the new stepparent ("release loyalty binds").
4. Consider an additional ex-spouse—bio child session to allow the ex-spouse to "release loyalty binds" and affirm their ongoing relationship.

### **Session 6: Couple**

1. Teach Speaker-Listener skills (continued to use throughout the counseling process to help them solidify use of the skills).
2. Address parent—stepparent roles and develop the "team" concept of parenting.
3. Negotiate "household rules" and general parenting strategies.

### **Session 7: Bio Parent—Children Session(s):**

1. This may require more than one session if each adult has children.
2. Make overt that it is common for children to fear losing their parent to the stepparent and stepsiblings. Discuss ways to express this openly when it happens and make plans to keep certain key "touchpoints" alive.
3. The bio parent must express an expectation that the children respect the stepparent "as they would any other authority figure." Discuss the implications.
4. Discuss an appropriate name for the stepparent.
5. Discuss the possibility of changes in family rituals, household rules, and discipline.

### **Session 8: Couple Session**

1. Protecting your marriage: “Better Marriage Workout”
2. Make calculated sacrifices to help the children adjust after the wedding (e.g., the stepparent gives a blessing to the bio parent’s special time with children).
3. Discuss the use of the Family Medallion in the upcoming wedding.

### **Session 9: Stepfamily Session**

1. Discuss life immediately after the wedding and honeymoon.
2. Examine how life may change (e.g., daily routines, introducing one another in public, etc.)
3. Teach Family Meetings as a tool for problem solving and regular connection.
4. Agree on a ritual to mark the beginning of the family (e.g., purchase a new dining room table and chairs).
5. Homework: Follow-through with the ritual.

### **Sessions 10+: Couple**

1. Sessions to address growth areas of their relationship as identified by the inventory and assessment sessions.
2. Possible topics include: sexuality, spiritual in marriage, budgeting & money management, dealing with extended family, etc.

### **Schedule 6 month and 12 month follow-up sessions (after the wedding).**

### **Optional Sessions:**

- Ex-spouses to negotiate co-parenting cooperation.
- Extended family sessions.
- Sessions with a minister to discuss spiritual implications of remarriage.

## Common Relational Changes in Stepfamilies After the Wedding<sup>1</sup>

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Author, *The Smart Stepfamily*

Person(s)	Spiritual, Psychological, Legal, & Practical Shifts That Occur After Remarriage
<b>Stepparents</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase in spiritual and parental responsibility for stepchildren. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before marriage: “hands-off”, cordial, get-to-know the kids posture.</li> <li>• After marriage: judging of child and parenting style of spouse; attempt to fill the gaps by taking on agendas for the child; assume spiritual roles (e.g. “head” of the home); assumes they will be given equal say in family decisions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Assumes spouse will “put them first” before the children.</li> </ol>
<b>Biological Parents</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Senses stepparent’s increased agenda for the children and is irritated/resists their judgement or increased activity.</li> <li>2. May hand off too much responsibility to the stepparent.</li> <li>3. May alter attitudes toward an ex-spouse’s access to children since “we’re a whole family now.”</li> </ol>
<b>Stepchildren</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fear loss of biological parent. May result in an oppositional/resentful attitude toward the stepparent.</li> <li>2. Perceive stepparent as exerting authority and may resent their attempts for power or to join the family.</li> <li>3. Now feel that enjoying time with the stepparent is betraying the non-custodial biological parent.</li> </ol>
<b>Ex-Spouse</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. May grow increasingly fearful of losing children to stepparent and/or more depressed about their own life circumstances.</li> <li>2. May become more negative toward the stepparent and/or ex-spouse; may increase the loyalty pulls on the children which, when carried to the other home, may result in conflict.</li> </ol>

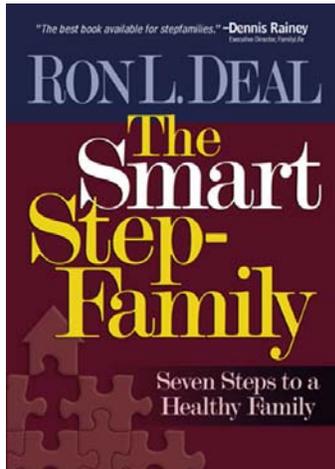
<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Scott Browning, “Why Didn’t Our Two Years of Dating Make the Remarriage Easier?” in *Stepfamilies*, Summer, 2000, p. 6

# Successful Stepfamilies

Christian Resources for Church & Home

## *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to Stepfamily Success*

by Ron L. Deal



**"The best book available for stepfamilies..."** --Dennis Rainey, Executive Director, FamilyLife

- Perfect for **stepfamily adults and single-parents** considering remarriage.
- **Discussion questions** for remarried and pre-remarried couples.
- **Useful to therapists and ministers** who are counseling stepfamilies.



## **Smart Steps / Growing in Wisdom Curriculum**

by Francesca Adler-Bader, Christian supplement by Ron L. Deal

Designed for a class/workshop or support group, this adaptable six-week program (two-hours per session) uses didactic teaching, small group discussion, video clips, Power Point, and family homework (all included) to train stepfamilies in healthy living.

Includes sessions and activities for children!

