



the *marriage mentor* guide to

# The Smart Stepfamily

by Ron L. Deal



# drs. les and leslie

## about the marriage mentor guide series

We are so glad you're exploring this series! It says a great deal about how much you are invested in helping other couples.

For years we have been asked by newly certified Marriage Mentors: "What do we do with our mentoree couple when we meet with them?" Digging deeper we realized they were asking for help on how to use a specific resource (like a book or an assessment) within their mentoring sessions. That's why we've created this ever-growing series of guides specifically for mentor couples.

Each guide will help you determine if the resource is a good fit for your needs and, if so, how to use it most effectively.

We hear from Marriage Mentors and couples on a weekly basis who are looking for a resource on step families. And we always appreciate the question because we know exactly where to turn them: Ron Deal. Without a question, he is the most authoritative voice on the topic and he has a heart that is passionate for helping couples get smart about stepfamilies. That's why we are thrilled to have this Marriage Mentor Guide available to you. If you're ministering to step families, this resource is essential, must-read material.

As always, we welcome your feedback and questions at [info@marriage mentoring.com](mailto:info@marriage mentoring.com). And be sure to check back into the Marriage Mentoring Academy for new Mentor Guides. We have lots of them in development and we're eager to get them to you. By the way, if you don't see a guide for a resource you'd like to use, let us know that, too.

With every good wish and prayer,

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott

[marriage mentoring.com](http://marriage mentoring.com)

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# preliminaries

## **Why I wrote *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family***



When I wrote the first edition of this book (published in 2002) there were less than five resources available for blended families from a Christian perspective—and none of them addressed the complex nature of a stepfamily and the interaction of all its parts. There wasn't one comprehensive resource helping stepcouples make their home a place of redemption. As a family minister, conference speaker, and therapist who specialized in working with stepfamilies, I felt God's calling to do something. Over time the book became a small-group DVD series and now the Revised and Expanded edition has 50% more research and practical guidance addressing the complex nature of stepfamilies than the original.

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## **Should you use *The Smart Stepfamily* in your Mentoring?**

This book is the bestselling resource in its category (secular and Christian) since 2002 and has been used and referenced throughout the world. It applies to dating/engaged couples (who find that it prepares them for what's ahead), married stepcouples (who believe I have been peeking in their windows), stepparents (who desperately need guidance on their role), and children (who need their parent and stepparent to understand them). It has proven applicable across cultures and nations and is credited with igniting a movement of stepfamily ministries around the world. Finally, and most importantly, you should use it for children of divorce because healthy stepcouples can help break the generational cycle of divorce in just one generation: children of healthy stepcouples have a lower divorce rate, have healthier attitudes about the institution of marriage, and their marriages more reflect the health of the parent-stepparent marriage than the distress of their parent's marriage that ended in divorce (see references in the book). The mitigating factor for children of divorce is the healthy stepfamily. You might call it one of God's tools from his redemptive tool box. And just think, you are the conduit that is bringing this redemptive tool to their lives!

## **Can Non-Stepfamily Couples Mentor Stepcouples?**

Ideally stepcouples mentor stepcouples. But if a mature stepcouple cannot be found I do believe that first-marriage couples with a great deal of empathy skills can be effective mentors for stepcouples. They will need to “do their homework” and learn a lot about stepfamily living and should acknowledge with mentorees their limited life experience. However, despite limitations, it is my experience that stepcouples are grateful for the help no matter who it comes from.

## **Summary of *The Smart Stepfamily***

Whether you are meeting weekly or monthly, you can devote one session to one chapter. While no book can address all of the unique dynamics of every stepfamily (there are 67 different configurations), chapters address the most common and menacing aspects of stepfamily living and provide a map for the journey. Topics address:

1. The Normal Stepfamily Journey from Start to Finish (Egypt to the Promised Land)
2. Important Key Attitudes (Stepping Stones) that Build Strength for the Journey
3. Spiritual Shame and God’s Redemptive Power for the Stepfamily
4. Realistic Expectations and a Strategy for Combining the Family
5. Protecting and Strengthening the Marriage
6. Co-Parenting, Parenting, and Stepparenting Roles & Issues
7. Avoiding Common Pitfalls
8. Managing Blended Family Money
9. Overcoming Special Challenges
10. Promised Land Rewards that Make the Journey Worth It

## **Proposed Schedule for Using *The Smart Stepfamily***

In general I recommend that you discuss one chapter each week (or once per month) and that you progress through the chapters in order. However, if a couple has a specific issue that needs attention, skip to the appropriate chapter and start processing it in light of their situation. You can then go back and pick up where you left off. Because understanding stepfamily dynamics requires a significant shift in thinking, many couples value going through the material a second time; don’t hesitate to allow more time for them to chew on the concepts if needed.



## Tools to Use with The Smart Stepfamily

In addition to the book, you'll find *The Smart Stepfamily* DVD series and Study Guide to be a complementary resource (especially if one person would rather watch a video than read a book). You can have couples watch video sessions as they read (to supplement their learning) or make the video the primary resource and have them follow along in the book. The video series does not exactly match the book outline (there are 8 sessions), but the Study Guide makes clear which chapters of the book coincide with the video sessions.

## Additional Resources to Consider

If someone is eager to learn as much as they can, other books in *The Smart Stepfamily Resource Library* series can also be prescribed:

- *Life in a Blender* (Ron Deal) is an easy-to-read booklet for children ages 10+ addressing common emotions and dilemmas for children. Available only at [FamilyLife.com](http://FamilyLife.com).
- *Dating and the Single Parent* (Ron Deal) walks couples through dating, engagement, and preparation for becoming a stepfamily.
- *The Remarriage Checkup* (Ron Deal & David Olson) builds strength in stepcouple relationships and is based on the largest study of remarriage strengths ever conducted. Available with a 13-week small group Study Guide.
- *The Smart Stepmom* (Ron Deal & Laura Petherbridge) helps women understand their unique role as stepmother.
- *The Smart Stepdad* (Ron Deal) helps men climb Stepdad Mountain.

Find the above resources in bookstores, online, and at [FamilyLife.com](http://FamilyLife.com).

Finally, the online Couple Checkup inventory (powered by PREPARE/ENRICH) is a wonderful resource to help couples identify strengths and growth areas in their relationship. Whether dating, engaged, cohabiting, or married, couples receive a 10-page report (x-ray) that is tailored to the dynamics of their specific relationship. When shared with you the report helps you make decisions about the area of training needed most by each specific couple. Learn more at [SmartStepfamilies.com/view/couplecheckup](http://SmartStepfamilies.com/view/couplecheckup).

# session one: Through Wilderness Wanderings

## Chapter Snapshot

According to the Introduction, the purpose of this book is to give couples a clear picture of what a healthy, smart stepfamily is and does. Chapter one begins this process by describing normal stepfamily development. It utilizes a story the couple already knows, the story of the Israelites, the Egyptian bondage, and their journey to the Promised Land, to teach them about the typical experience of forming a stepfamily.

1. Leaving Egypt (singleness) is a dream come true for couples. Sometimes their children experience it very differently.
2. But fairly quickly it's common for couples to become discouraged when the challenges of stepfamily living become real.
3. The past is always present. Past hurts, insecurities, and attachments convert into fears and barriers to stepfamily development.
4. When feeling stuck, like the Israelites, couples often look back at Egypt. A full two-thirds divorce and go back permanently. But there is reward for those who don't quit and strive for the Promised Land.
5. A number of rewards that give hope for the journey are listed including breaking the generational cycle of divorce by giving children a healthy marriage model and strong stepfamily. This makes the journey well worth the effort.

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## Before the Session

In advance of your meeting with your mentorees for this session, we suggest doing two things:

### **Pray**

As you prepare for this first session, pray for your mentorees. Ask God to give them open hearts and minds. Pray for new insight and that your relationship with them would be healthy and helpful.

### **Prepare**

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter One of *The Smart Stepfamily* for them to read. They should also read the Preface and Introduction. Tell them some of the questions at the end of each chapter will be included in your conversations; ask them to wait to discuss them with you.

Take a few minutes to review the questions (listed below) that accompany this chapter. You may want to complete them as a couple yourselves to help you prepare, but remember, given the differences in stepfamily complexity, your situation may vary greatly from theirs, so don't assume you know where the conversation is going. The goal of your session is not necessarily to get through all of the discussion questions, but simply to focus on the one(s) that is most relevant to your mentorees. So plan to be flexible and let them do a bit of the driving of the agenda.

Discuss any stories from your own married life that might be helpful to have in your hip pocket for this session. For example, have you ever felt discouraged about how your stepfamily was progressing? How did you handle that season? Also, it's always helpful to empathize with your mentorees. Do your best to put yourself in their shoes and imagine what they are thinking and feeling as you begin this series together.

## During the Session

The following structure is merely a possible option. Feel free to make it your own by making changes. There are suggested questions below for *all* couples (premarital and married) and there are additional questions for *pre-stepfamily* couples<sup>1</sup>. The Parent-Child discussion questions are optional based on the age of children and the quality of adult-child relationships.

### Ice Breaker

If you haven't had time to get to know the couple yet, spend a few minutes hearing their story. Ask them how they met, how many children they have, and a little about their family structure including visitation schedules, ex-spouses, and all the adults in the various households. You also want to know a little about their time-line including dates of their first marriage, divorce or death of their spouse, when they started dating, wedding date, etc. (You might want to write this down so you can keep the details straight and add to it as you meet with the couple.) Remember, you'll have plenty of time to fill in the many details of this family story as you work through the book. For now you only need a quick sketch so you can begin to direct your questions and applications of the reading material.

### Check In with Mentorees

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Find out about their immediate week and be sensitive to any issues that may be on their minds. Also, ask them about their experience in reading Chapter One. Did they find it helpful? Why or why not? If this simple question generates meaningful discussion, linger a bit. Don't let your plans for the session get in the way.

## Parent-Child Discussion

Each chapter includes a discussion guide so parents can engage their children around some of the themes discussed. This is optional for parents and stepparents. Let the couple know that they can have these discussions with children before meeting with you or wait till after they have talked it through with you.

- Did you already talk with your child(ren)? How did it go? What did you learn?
- If you haven't already talked with them, which questions do you think would be useful? What would you like to learn?

### Questions:

1. Begin by briefly telling your child the story of God's rescue of the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh (their age will dictate how much detail you share). Then say, "Our family is kind of like that story. We are traveling together as a new family and some days it's difficult to know where we are going or how to get there. Other days we are doing well. But every day we have to trust God to lead us through the wilderness."
2. What part of this story can you relate to?
3. What joys (or rewards) have you already experienced?
4. What questions do you have for me about our family and our journey?

<sup>1</sup>Discussion questions taken from Deal, Ron, *The Smart Stepfamily* (revised edition), Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014. Used by permission.

### **Questions for All Couples**

The following questions are designed to spark meaningful discussion:

1. What aspects of your past did you hope marriage would “cure”?
2. Which of the following emotions have you felt in the past? Which still haunt you from time to time? Anger. Bitterness. Depression. Sadness. Longing. Hurt. Resentment. Guilt. Fear. Pain. Rejection.
3. In what ways have you experienced disillusionment in your steprelationships and at what point did you realize things weren’t working out like you expected? How have you adjusted your expectations?
4. In what ways was your remarriage another loss for your children? How can you be sensitive to that loss without being guilt-ridden (or easily manipulated because you feel guilty)?
5. Look again at the list of uncharted waters on page 33. Which of these represent areas of growth for you or your stepfamily? What areas do you consider to be the priority growth areas right now?
6. In what ways have you or your stepfamily members experienced God’s leading or his healing hand? Be sure to share with your stepfamily how you see him at work in your lives.
7. What Scriptures have been helpful or inspiring to you recently? If you haven’t been reading the Bible much lately, how can you begin to do so again?
8. Share a time with your spouse when you weren’t sure the work was worth the effort. If that time is now, what do you need to help you stay determined? If you trusted God to bring you through, what would you be doing differently than you are now to work in that direction?
9. Which, if any, of the Promised Land Payoffs have you experienced to some degree already?
  - High Quality Marital Relationships
  - A New Marital Heritage to Celebrate
  - A Healthy Family Means Healthier Kids
  - Cooperation Between Homes Results in Well Disciplined Children
  - Respect and Care Between Stepparents and Stepchildren
  - Multigenerational Blessings in Second-Half Stepfamilies
  - Experiencing Love, Extending Grace
  - Redemption of Your Family Story

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### **Case Study in Stepfamily Fears**

Read again the fears from the Thomas family on page 32, and then answer the following questions. Remember that when fears are left to govern your behavior, you will find yourself limited in your range of responses. An integrating stepfamily cannot afford to be controlled by fear.

1. Which fears of the biological and/or stepparent can you relate to and why?
2. What are you doing to prevent these fears from becoming a reality?
3. Think through your previous losses and painful family experiences (either family of origin or first marriage). How do your current fears connect with those experiences? How have they sensitized you to avoiding more pain in current relationships?
4. If you weren’t hamstrung by the past, how would you be different in the present?
5. Consider the fears mentioned by the children. Which might your children also feel?

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. In what ways do you feel intimidated and frightened after reading this chapter?
2. What challenges are you beginning to see that you had not thought about before?
3. Think of a stepfamily couple that you can interview. Ask them the following questions.
  - What do you wish you had known before you remarried?
  - What are your three greatest challenges?
  - How could you have better prepared yourselves for stepfamily living?
  - What painful emotions from the past did you not resolve prior to remarriage?
  - How long have you been traveling this journey?
  - What blessings have you experienced and at what price?

#### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Key Stepping Stones. It shares important attitudes and perspectives that empower blended families to cross the wilderness and move toward the Promised Land.

Ask them to read Chapter Two and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

#### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together. Get a read on whether they feel comfortable praying aloud with you. If not, pray for them. Ask God to watch over them and use the time you've spent in this session to minister to them.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text letting them know that you are praying for them. A little note can go a long way in letting them know you're in their corner.

# sessiontwo: Key Stepping Stones

## Chapter Snapshot

Crossing the Wilderness toward stepfamily identity and harmony is facilitated by adopting Christ-like attitudes and perspectives. Chapter Two reviews some key qualities and invites couples to begin walking in them with intentionality.

1. First, couples are reminded that they can trust that God is good in both our pasts and unknown futures, even if we don't understand the circumstances.
2. Living like Christ within your home creates positive impact in every aspect of stepfamily living.
3. Listening and Understanding are skills that foster much needed empathy within the stepfamily home. Since family members have journeyed different paths into the home and experience the family so differently, these skills are a must to bridge the natural gaps between people.
4. Perseverance brings a much needed determination to the process of becoming a family while Commitment keeps couples dedicated to each other, even when they can't see the future.
5. Patience is vital given that the average stepfamily needs between 5-7 years to integrate or merge their family cultures and Flexibility fosters the ability to adapt to what the family needs along the way.
6. And finally, Humor is the medicine that softens challenges and makes them bearable.

## Before the Session

### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. Ask God to give them open hearts and minds. Pray for new insight and that your relationship with them would be healthy and helpful.

### **Prepare**

After reading the chapter you might take some time to complete your own Travelogue with your family members. This could foster a boomerang blessing for you and it will help you anticipate how your mentorees might feel if/when they do the exercise.

Review the questions (on page 12) and complete them as a couple yourselves. As always, have an agenda for your session, but be flexible to adjust to the needs of your mentorees.

Discuss any stories from your own married life that might be helpful to have in your hip pocket for this session. For example, looking back at your journey, when was a time you could have used one of the stepping stones?

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Two for them to read.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

Ask the couple if they and/or their children have ever travelled outside the country? If yes, engage them in a mini-Travelogue. Ask where they went, what they remember most, and what lifestyle and cultural distinctions they noticed. If they have never travelled outside the country, ask them to recount stories they have heard from others who have.

The lifestyle and cultural distinctions become metaphors to help them anticipate the emotions and adjustments needed to merge two family cultures in a stepfamily.

### Check In with Mentorees

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing and what cultural issues they have already uncovered in their journey together. Ask about their immediate week and be sensitive to any issues that may be on their minds. Reflecting on the previous week, ask if and how they implemented principles learned in the previous chapter. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so. Reinforce and encourage growth effort.

Also, ask them about their experience in reading Chapter Two. In what way was it helpful? If this simple question generates meaningful discussion, linger a bit. Don't let your plans for the session get in the way.

### Parent-Child Discussion

This week the Travelogue exercise on pages 63–66 in *The Smart Stepfamily* will serve as the parent-child discussion guide.

- **Did you already do the Travelogue exercise? How did it go? What did you learn?**
- **If you haven't already, how might you go about doing so? Would it be appropriate for your children? Discuss the pros and cons of having everyone present for the travelogue discussion vs. only biological parents and children.**

### Questions for All Couples

1. What is one of your chief frustrations or complaints about your stepfamily right now?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), rate your personal level of spiritual integrity. How are you doing with trusting God with things that you will never understand in this life? What spiritual challenges stand in front of you and how are you addressing them?
3. Describe a time when you tried to force your will on God. What was the outcome?
4. Choose one of the Scripture passages on pages 54 and 55 and share how applying that verse will help your stepfamily's growth.
5. If you asked your children and your spouse whether they felt you were a good listener, what would they say? In what ways does defensiveness keep you from listening well?
6. Identify the person you have the most conflict with or the child to whom you are the least bonded. Share what you think it would be like to be that member of your stepfamily. Consider his or her losses, sense of belonging, fears, responsibilities, and hurts.
7. Read James 1:2–4. If the testing of our faith produces perseverance (which in turn helps us mature), how has the testing of your stepfamily helped you grow as an individual?
8. List three things you could do this week to express your dedication (commitment) to your spouse.
9. In what ways have you been impatient with the status of your stepfamily bonds? How have you tried to force or pressure people to love one another?
10. In what ways is your stepfamily different than a biological family? Share some of the flexible solutions you've already discovered that help.
11. Share a humorous occasion or story from your stepfamily's life. If you can't think of one immediately, try to step back from your circumstances in order to see the humorous side.

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **Feel free to begin having travelogue discussions as a couple and with your children. Keep in mind that before the wedding most children cannot adequately anticipate all they will feel. Be sure to ask them again later. How might you go about having travelogue discussions now?**
2. **Which of the stepping-stones characterize your relationships now?**

### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next section of the book. Part Two outlines the seven steps stepfamilies must take to build their home. Session Three addresses Smart Step One: STEP Up! It reminds couples of God's love for them despite their past.

Ask them to read Chapter Three and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together. Pray for them out loud (keep in mind you'll eventually encourage one or both of them to pray out loud with you). Ask God to watch over them and use the time you've spent in this session to minister to them.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees before you meet again. Send an encouraging email or text reminding them to begin living out the stepping stones.

# session three:

## Smart Step One: **STEP UP!**

### Chapter Snapshot

Spiritual shame over a past that cannot be changed (e.g., divorce), being remarried, or the feelings that sometimes go with being a stepfamily (e.g., not liking one's stepchildren) can plague stepcouples. If they feel embarrassed or second-class they may hide their divorce story from others, remain disconnected from God's people, and even sometimes hide from God. This chapter invites individuals to boldly embrace God's grace and redemptive work in their lives. The chapter:

1. Acknowledges that the church sometimes treats stepfamilies as second-class citizens.
2. Identifies the shame and unworthiness that stepcouples sometimes experience.
3. Reminds couples that God's people have always been "less than perfect" by reviewing the Family of Promise in the Old Testament.
4. Declares that stepfamilies, just like all families past or present, fall on the grace and redemptive work of God. Our acceptance and value is not based on our performance, but his work of grace.
5. Not being held down by shame, couples are then invited to STEP Up their walk with the Lord.

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### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. Ask God to give them insight into how shame may be plaguing their mind and walk with the Lord or a local body of believers. Pray for relief from the shame and a newfound confidence in how much God loves and accepts them.

#### **Prepare**

Take a few minutes to review the questions (listed below) that accompany this chapter. In preparation, you may want to complete them as a couple yourselves.

Sharing any self-doubt, personal shame, or feelings of judgment you have experienced may help the couple share their own feelings. Shame is a menacing emotion and needs to be identified and treated with the blood of Christ.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Three.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

Share an embarrassing moment. It could be a funny moment (at least it's funny now) or a rather awkward one. You should share one first, then invite the couple to share. This will set up a conversation about feeling embarrassed or judged at church because of their family situation.

### Check In with Mentorees

Reflecting on the previous week, ask if and how they implemented principles learned in the previous chapter. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so. Reinforce and encourage growth effort.

Ask mentorees what emotions this chapter stirred within them. In what way was the chapter helpful? If this simple question generates meaningful discussion, linger a bit. Don't let your plans for the session get in the way.

### Parent-Child Discussion

This chapter's parent-child discussion centers around an excerpt from the booklet *Life in a Blender* designed for children ages 10+. I recommend you encourage your mentoree to get a copy so they connect with their children and validate their experiences (available from [FamilyLife.com](http://FamilyLife.com)). An excerpt is available at the end of Chapter Three of *The Smart Stepfamily*.

- Did you already talk with your child(ren)? How did it go? What did you learn?
- If you haven't already talked with them, which questions do you think would be useful? What would you like to learn?

### Questions for All Couples

1. How does the survey of Old Testament families make you feel about your stepfamily?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the strongest), how strong is your relationship with Christ? How strong is your spouse's relationship with Christ?
3. To what degree have you been alienated from him in the past? What was happening at that time?

4. What messages have you received from the church that discouraged your walk?
5. In what ways do you feel unworthy of God's grace and forgiveness?
6. What parts of your life (such as self-reliance, pride, or selfish desires) do you hold on to? What is difficult to surrender?
7. What hurts have you had difficulty letting go of? Share about your journey toward forgiveness.
8. Realizing that the ground is level at the foot of the cross—that is, we're all in need of a redeemer—what do you need to do individually and as a couple to begin living in a right relationship with Christ?
9. Whether your relationship to Christ is just beginning or going strong, list three habits that would deepen your knowledge of God's Word and his will for your life.

### Assignment for Mentorees

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Two: STEP Down. This chapter tries to create realistic expectations regarding the stepfamily journey and describes typical stepfamily relationship integration (development) with the analogy "How do you cook a stepfamily?"

Ask them to read Chapter Four and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

### Close in Prayer

Conclude your session by praying together. Specifically pray that they will be relieved of any guilt or spiritual shame as they embrace God's grace for their life.

## After the Session

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text letting them know that you are praying for them. A little note can go a long way in letting them know you're in their corner.

# sessionfour:

## Smart Step Two: STEP Down

### Chapter Snapshot

All engaged couples have unrealistic expectations about life after the wedding; stepcouples are no different. When expectations are not met, disappointment and disillusionment set in and erode both the marriage and stepfamily.

1. What drives the hopes and unrealistic expectations for many is a desire to “blend” the family. But blending is not the goal. Blending itself is unrealistic.
2. Addressing the question, “How do you cook a stepfamily?”, the chapter reviews cooking styles that are unrealistic and detrimental to stepfamily development (e.g., blender, microwave, pressure cooker).
3. The best strategy for cooking a stepfamily is with a Crockpot. The tools for cooking are *time* and *low heat*.

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. Ask God to give them open hearts and minds. Specifically, pray that dating/engaged couples can recognize the depth of their optimism and idealism so they can begin to step down their expectations. And pray that married couples, once they connect the dots between their unmet hopes and disillusionment, will be able to forgive one another and find hope for the future.

#### **Prepare**

Take a few minutes to review the discussion questions for this chapter. In preparation, you may want to complete them as a couple yourselves. The goal of your session is not to get through all of these questions, but to spot the “blender mentality” at work in stories they have shared and guide them to ask, “What would a Crockpot mentality look like in that situation?”

It is extremely helpful for you to share stories from your own life that demonstrate the shift from “blender” (i.e., unrealistic) to “Crockpot” expectations and strategies. Have one or two such stories from your own life ready to share.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you’ll need to assign Chapter Four.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

Ask, "What do you like to cook in a Crockpot? What ingredients do you put in it? Do you physically stir, blend, beat, or forcibly mix the ingredients together? Why not? How long does it take to cook? Which ingredients take the longest to soften and share of themselves? What does it taste like if you try to eat it after only one hour?"

### Check In with Mentorees

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Ask about their immediate week and be sensitive to any issues that may be on their minds. Reflecting on the previous week, ask if and how they implemented principles learned in the previous chapter. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so. Reinforce and encourage growth effort.

Also, ask them about their experience in reading Chapter Four. It's common for couples to have differing opinions about how to Crockpot their family; ask if they have run into that since reading and beginning to apply the chapter.

### Parent-Child Discussion

**Instead of a list of questions, this chapter provides a family experience so parents can engage their children around some of the themes discussed. This is optional for parents and stepparents. The family can complete the activity before meeting with you or wait till after they have talked it through with you.**

**Activity: Ask all the children to help you in the kitchen with a project. Have a recipe ready for a Crockpot dish of your choice. Let everyone add one ingredient to the pot. As they do, talk about how your family is like this dish. Note to the children that you are not stirring or blending the ingredients by hand but are relying on the Crockpot to bring everything together slowly over time. Also, talk about how long it takes to cook foods in a Crockpot and that for every hour, your stepfamily may need a year. Allow people to ask questions. At the end of the cooking time, sit down together as a family and enjoy the meal. As you eat, wonder with the children what the food would have tasted like at the beginning of its cooking time. Pray together at the end of the meal, asking God to give your family patience as you "cook together."**

- Did you already do the family activity with your child(ren)? How did it go? What did you learn?
- If you haven't already, do you think it would be useful? What would you like to learn?

### Questions for All Couples

1. In what ways has this chapter been a discouragement to you? How has it given you hope?
2. When did you first realize that your expectations were not becoming reality?
3. In what ways have your expectations been met successfully? Celebrate your successes and share what is going well for your home.
4. Which of the following myths have you been guilty of believing? Identify each and express what you hoped would come about as a result.
  - Love will happen instantly between all family members.
  - We'll do it better this time around.
  - Everything will fall quickly into place.
  - Our children will feel as happy about the remarriage as we do.
  - Blending is the goal of this stepfamily.
5. Which of the following integration styles have you been guilty of? What have been the results? Give an example.
  - Blender
  - Food processor
  - Microwave
  - Pressure cooker
  - Tossed

6. How does the Crockpot cooking mentality go against your natural desires and assumptions for how a stepfamily should integrate?
7. In what way is it relieving to know that time is important to the integration process?
8. What “low heat” approaches have you utilized already (even if you didn’t realize it was important until now)?
9. What fears do you have that force you into a high-heat mode of response?
10. In what ways do you need to implement a low-heat mentality? What would you have to change about yourself?
11. How appropriate are mini-family activities for your stepfamily at this time? In what way might you implement this idea over the next month? Make a plan and share with your support group the outcome. Evaluate its effectiveness and decide whether to try it again.

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **How is this book opening your eyes to the challenges of stepfamily life? List your hopes for how your future stepfamily will be an exception to the rule.**
2. **Now list reasons why you believe your remarried family will successfully integrate.**
3. **How might these hopes and reasons create blinders for you?**
4. **As a couple, discuss the following expectations. A stepmother expressed them two years into her remarriage. How do you identify with her desires? How realistic do you believe them to be?**
  - **I thought my husband would appreciate how overwhelming and difficult it would be for me to care for his children.**
  - **I thought that raising his children would fill my need to be a mother.**
  - **I thought I would have more say in the children’s visitation schedules (e.g., when we watch them for their mother, when they spend the night at a friend’s house, etc.).**
  - **I expected to fit in, to be welcomed by his children, and to be treated well.**
  - **I expected to immediately take priority over all his other relationships, even his children.**

### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Three: Two-STEP. It discusses the critical role of the marriage in helping a stepfamily to cook and the importance of placing a high priority on the marriage within the home.

Ask them to read Chapter Five and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together. If you haven’t already, invite one or both of them to pray aloud with you. Then ask God to watch over them and use the time you’ve spent in this session to minister to them.

## **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# sessionfive:

## Smart Step Three: Two-STEP

### Chapter Snapshot

This chapter offers a sharp caution: It is easy for your marriage to get lost in the stepfamily forest, and without a strong marriage, your family will not integrate (i.e., outsiders will remain permanent outsiders).

Couples in stepfamilies need all of the marital training and skills that first marriages need, including communication and conflict resolution skills, healthy attitudes about sexuality, and a willingness to sacrifice. But it's the unique dynamics of stepfamily living that are so menacing to stepcouples. Key unique issues discussed in this chapter include:

1. Parent-child allegiance (loyalty) that sabotages the new marriage.
  2. Stepparents who pile guilt trips on their spouse at every turn.
  3. Comparing and ranking loves, which naturally pits the biological parent's affection for their kids against their spouse.
  4. Biological parents who are unwilling to risk upsetting their children for the sake of the marriage.
  5. The Ghost of Marriage Past, which fosters fear and a lack of trust in the marriage.
- 

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. If they are experiencing any distress in their family, this chapter usually gets to the heart of it. For example, a previously divorced person may have deep-seated fears about trusting their partner. These fears make prioritizing his or her children over the marriage a strong temptation. Pray that this kind of fear will come to the surface if it exists.

#### **Prepare**

Take a few minutes to review the discussion questions for this chapter. Discuss any stories from your own married life that might be helpful to share. Be as transparent as you possibly can. This makes it more likely they will also look deep within to their own concerns and be honest with them.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Five.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

How did you feel about your parent's marriage when you were growing up? For those whose biological parents remained married: How invested did they seem to be in their own marriage and how did that impact you? For those whose parents divorced and/or remarried: How did you feel about your parent's divorce? About their remarriage and your stepparent? For either: What did you experience that you *do* want your children to experience from your marriage?

### Check In with Mentorees

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Reflecting on the previous week, ask if and how they implemented principles learned in the previous chapter. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so. Reinforce and encourage growth effort.

Also, ask them about their experience in reading Chapter Five. In what way was it helpful? If this simple question generates meaningful discussion, linger a bit. Don't let your plans for the session get in the way.

### Parent-Child Discussion

**If divorced, discussing the topic of marriage with your children could be awkward (e.g., "if God values commitment, why did you guys divorce?") and bring up hard feelings (e.g., over how the divorce occurred or what life has been like for a parent since the divorce). Let me encourage you to not hide from the topic of marriage with your kids; it's too important to not have your guidance. However, give consideration and prayer to how you will address it with them.**

1. **What do you like about our marriage to each other? What is awkward or difficult for you about it?**
2. **Families, like marriages, have "love banks" too. Affirm together some ways your family makes positive deposits in one another's love accounts.**

### Questions for All Couples

1. Discuss your personal relationship with God and your ideas of what a faithful life would look like. In what ways do you need to grow spiritually?
2. How will your marriage be God-directed? What is your desire for spiritual intimacy?
3. What concerns do you have regarding your partner's commitment to Christ?
4. In what ways do you need to improve your understanding of God-esteem and your value in Christ? How could realizing this make a difference in your home?
5. In what ways is your marriage "like gravity, pulling all things to it" already? Celebrate that!
6. What fears do you have for your children, and how do you most naturally protect them?
7. What barriers exist because of someone's allegiance to his or her children? Work to establish trust in a unified direction and plan for handling difficult situations. Don't put each other in a corner.
8. Identify and name the ghosts in your marriage. Make a contract to help each other exorcise them from your relationship.
9. How would you act differently if you had never been hurt before?

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **How many years has it been since the ending of any prior significant relationships (whether to death or divorce)? Assuming you can keep your sexual passions in check, what are the benefits of slowing down your courtship?**
2. **To what degree have I/we achieved emotional divorce with a previous spouse(s) and healing from difficult emotions? (Rate yourself from 1 to 10.)**
3. **To what degree have I/we been able to renew self-esteem and accept my/our single identity? (Rate yourself from 1 to 10.)**
4. **Have I tried to reconnect with former lost relationships (children and/or extended family)? What has been the result?**
5. **How much did I need to be needed when we first began dating?**
6. **What scares you about committing again? What ghosts have you identified already?**
7. **Are you now or have you in the past tried the “independent togetherness” approach to dating? What wisdom did you see in the Ghost Busting Before the Wedding section?**

### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Four: STEP in Line. Parenting in stepfamilies is complicated given biological and stepparent roles. Divorced parents also have another household that is part of the parenting team. The next two chapters discuss these various roles and how multiple households can come together to raise children. Chapter Six addresses co-parenting between homes. If your mentorees do not have ex-spouses or another home feel free to skip to Chapter Seven.

Ask them to read Chapter Six and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session six:

## Smart Step Four: STEP in Line (Part 1)

### Chapter Snapshot

Most stepfamilies share parenting responsibilities with at least one biological parent in another home. (If you don't, feel free to skip to Session Seven.) The process of shared parenting is commonly referred to as co-parenting. The more cooperative and functional your co-parenting, the less stress experienced by children—and, the less stress felt in your marriage. This also contributes to an easier “cooking” experience for the entire family. The chapter discusses:

1. Indicators of healthy co-parenting.
2. What it feels like to be a child living between two countries.
3. How loyalty impacts parenting and the behavior of children.
4. Guidelines for effective co-parenting.
5. The different types of co-parenting relationships and how to build a stronger one.
6. Coping with being alienated from your children by the other home.

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. The level of stress and anxiety for couples around this topic is directly related to the current level of cooperation in their co-parent relationship. If they are generally respectful, you will find the conversation light and optimistic. But, if co-parenting is filled with anger and strife, this may be a hard and discouraging discussion because of how powerless they feel.

Ask God to give them an open heart to what is within their power to improve and to give you insights that will point them in the right direction.

#### **Prepare**

Take a few minutes to review the discussion questions for this chapter. In preparation, you may want to complete them as a couple yourselves, but remember, the answers to your situation may vary greatly from theirs. It all depends on how cooperative things are between homes.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Six.

### During the Session

#### **Ice Breaker**

Have you ever travelled internationally? (If not, have you ever heard someone else who has talk about their experiences?) What did you notice about the cultural differences? Language differences? How did you feel being in unfamiliar circumstances? Did you ever feel vulnerable or powerless? What did it feel like to get home?

### **Check In with Mentorees**

Reflecting on the previous week, ask if and how they implemented principles learned in the previous chapter. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so.

Your conversation this week will focus on the long-term pattern of interaction between homes, but you might start off by asking them about their last exchange with their co-parent(s).

### **⚡ Parent-Child Discussion**

**Note: Asking kids of any age about between-home and co-parenting matters is delicate; when the subject is brought up kids naturally feel caught in the middle. To help lower their fears, set up the conversation by telling them: 1) they don't have to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable; and 2) start by owning your mistakes as a co-parent and make the conversation about their feelings concerning you, not the other parent.**

- 1. What are some things you really enjoy about our home? What do you wish were a little different in terms of our visitation arrangements or how your mom/dad and I get along?**
- 2. Say, "I know from time to time you feel caught in the middle between your mom/dad and I. What is going on when you feel that way?"**
- 3. We all feel our anxiety somewhere in our bodies. For example, when I am anxious about something I feel it in my stomach/headache/lower back/bowels. Where do you feel yours?**

**NOTE: There is an additional exercise entitled *Burdens My Children Face* at the end of *The Smart Stepfamily*. Feel free to add that to your discussion if you'd like.**

### **Questions for All Couples**

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your co-parental relationship on your ability to contain anger and conflict in order to cooperate and compromise on issues regarding the children's welfare.
2. List two or three things you might do to improve this rating.
3. Consider whether your children have your permission to care for others in their two homes. If not, what needs to change within you in order to grant that permission?
4. What fears do you have about losing touch with your teenagers? If they wanted to live in the other home, how would you react?
5. Review the Healthy Co-Parenting checklist on pages 133–135 and rate your co-parenting relationship on each. Overall, how would you rate your situation? What needs to improve most?
6. Review the Guidelines for Co-Parents on pages 145–148 and create a checklist of items you need to develop or work toward. Affirm yourself and your ex for the things you are currently doing well.
7. Review the list of Things Kids Wish They Could Say to Their Divorced Parents on page 147. Which would your children say to you?
8. On a scale of 1–10, how well are you able to compartmentalize old marital issues from current co-parental ones? What triggers are you most susceptible to?
9. Share some of the forgiveness issues you have had to face or are currently struggling to release.
10. Which scripts might be helpful to you in the future? Why?
11. Alienated Parenting: If you are experiencing alienation you already know it. Your heart is burdened. You need a clear plan of action. Discuss who you need to consult or what books you need to read in order to develop this plan.

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **Openly discuss your present co-parent relationships. How cooperative have you been in the past with your ex? What issues are problematic? How well are you able to contain your anger and responses with your children's other parent?**
2. **With whom do you need to step in line prior to your remarriage?**
3. **What are your hopes regarding how quickly your children will accept their new stepparent? What do you think is reality in this?**
4. **How did you contribute to the breakup or divorce of your last relationship?**
5. **To what degree have you emotionally resolved the ending of your first marriage?**
6. **To what degree have you resolved what happened to your future spouse in his or her previous relationship?**
7. **The presence of moderate to severe anger and/or guilt is a good indication that you have not emotionally de-coupled from your former love relationship. How de-coupled are you and your ex-spouse?**
8. **Alienated Parenting: If you are the potential stepparent and the person you are dating is already facing a situation of alienated parenting or a Fiery Foe ex-spouse situation, you must weigh the burden it will bring to your life and to your children should you marry them. Do not minimize this situation as you consider a future together.**

#### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Four: STEP in Line (Part 2). It addresses the extremely important matter of parenting and stepparenting as a team within your home.

Ask them to read Chapter Seven and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

#### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session seven:

## Smart Step Four: **STEP** in Line (Part 2)

### Chapter Snapshot

Stepparenting is a two-person task. Biological parents and stepparents must work out roles that complement one another and play to each other's strengths; just as in two-biological-parent homes, parents and stepparents must be unified in goals and work together as a team. However, the role of stepparents varies greatly from that of a biological parent; both of you must understand this and work in harmony or you'll find yourself having lots of conflict. This chapter discusses:

1. The parental unity rules—a system that will help you become a better parenting team.
2. How the biological parent can set up the stepparent to be successful.
3. The qualities of wise stepparents.
4. A prescription for parent and stepparent roles.
5. Stepparent tips for fostering emotional bonding and gaining authority with stepchildren.
6. Help for those who are struggling and need to “back up”.

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. Ask God to give them open hearts and minds. Pray for new insight and that your relationship with them would be healthy and helpful.

#### **Prepare**

Take a few minutes to review the discussion questions for this chapter. In preparation, you may want to complete them as a couple yourselves. The goal of your session is not to get through all of these questions, but simply to focus on the one that was most meaningful to your mentorees. So prepare yourselves to let them steer the conversation a little.

Discuss any stories from your own married life that might be helpful to have in your hip pocket for this session. Do your best to put yourself in their shoes and imagine what they are thinking and feeling.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Seven.

### During the Session

#### **Ice Breaker**

1. How were you and your siblings parented as a child? [Most people tend to parent either the same or the opposite of how they were parented.]
2. During your first marriage, would you say you parented very much the same as you do now or differently? Explain. [Listen for differences. Sometimes the change is a result of the stepparent's presence. What you want to know is what kind of parent is the biological parent capable of being.]

### **Check In with Mentorees**

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Reflecting on the previous week ask about any changes they implemented based on principles learned in the previous chapters. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so.

To transition to this session's discussion, ask them to share a typical parenting scenario that may have occurred in the recent week. Also, ask them about their experience in reading Chapter Seven. In what way was it helpful? If this simple question generates meaningful discussion, linger a bit. Don't let your plans for the session get in the way.

### **⚡ Parent-Child Discussion**

- 1. For older children: On a scale of 1-10, how much do you think I trust your stepparent? Give me an example of what makes you think that?**
- 2. Knowing I'll be okay with any answer you provide, how much do you trust your stepparent on a scale of 1-10?**
- 3. What rules have changed for you since becoming a stepfamily? Which ones have been the most difficult to adjust to? What is still confusing for you?**
- 4. What aspects of your stepparent's role have been the most difficult for you to accept?**
- 5. If you were to pick, which of the following terms best describes the role you think your stepparent should have?  
1) "Baby-sitter" 2) Uncle/Aunt 3) Parent**
- 6. Currently, what role are they trying to play? What role do you think I want them to play?**
- 7. How are different children (e.g., "mine," "theirs," or a mutual child) parented differently in our home?**

### **Questions for All Couples**

1. Stepparents, what are your most common frustrations? Now share the rewards you've experienced so far.
2. Review the Parental Unity Rules on pages 173–175. Which ones are you managing well right now and which could use improvement? Brainstorm ways you can improve.
3. Biological parents: In what circumstances have you become paralyzed as a parent in the past?
4. Review the four keys to Champion the Stepparents Role on pages 175–178. Which are you managing well?
5. Look again at the chart on Evolving Parent and Stepparent Roles (page 187). How well are you working together as a couple? What role is most suitable for the stepparent at this point in your integration?
6. What is the stepparent currently doing to build a relationship with each child?
7. In what way does the biological parent need to be more supportive of the stepparent or more involved with the children?
8. Review the Summary Points to Remember on pages 192–193. Commend yourself for what you are currently doing well and challenge yourself with areas that need improvement.

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

- 1. In what way have you been assuming the children will be the same (or better) with the stepparent after the wedding?**
- 2. How does it frighten you to read that emotional shifts after the wedding can complicate the stepparent-stepchildren relationship?**
- 3. How can you protect yourself from getting drawn into the out-of-step unwise stepparent's ineffective behaviors?**
- 4. Look again at the chart on Evolving Parent and Stepparent Roles (page 187). What principles do you agree or disagree with? Discuss how you might implement the "baby-sitter" role even now.**
- 5. Share your expectations for your role as parent/stepparent and the other's role. Begin developing a plan for what role each of you will play with each child. Be aware that you will likely need to adjust your plan after marriage.**
- 6. Discuss what a radical road trip would look like before you marry? Is that possible?**
- 7. What should you do if you are off-track already with the dating partner/future stepparent's role? See the section "But We're Already Stuck" on page 193 and discuss how it pertains to you.**

### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Four: STEP in Line (Part 3). It discusses unique and challenging parenting roles in stepfamilies.

Ask them to read Chapter Eight and wait to discuss the couple questions with you. NOTE: this week there are no parent-child discussion questions, but couples are welcome to engage their children with questions of their own.

### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session eight:

## Smart Step Four: **STEP** in Line (Part 3)

### Chapter Snapshot

The “67 Varieties” of blended families results in many unique parenting dynamics and roles. This chapter describes some of the key issues and roles and provides guidance for the parent-stepparent team. Topics address:

1. Adult stepchildren
2. Part-time parenting and stepparenting
3. Birth order changes and children
4. Stepparenting adolescents
5. Parenting the mutual child
6. Sibling relationships
7. Adopting stepchildren
8. Legal matters in stepparenting

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees and the circumstances around these unique parenting issues. By now you are probably well aware of their struggles in these areas so ask God to give you and them a keen insight into what is the next best step for their family.

#### **Prepare**

Review the chapter in detail, especially if the unique issues don't pertain to your family situation. Review the discussion questions and try to anticipate their questions or concerns. Keep in mind that not all the subtopics, and therefore, discussion questions, will pertain to them, so you'll have ask which ones they read. As always, choose some personal stories that might be helpful to share.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Eight.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

Which of the subtopics of this chapter immediately jumped out at you as relevant to your life...and why?

### Check In with Mentorees

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Reflecting on the previous week ask about any changes they implemented based on principles learned in the previous chapters. Take a few minutes to process how they lived differently and what they observed by doing so.

To transition to this session's discussion, ask about their experience in reading Chapter Eight. What encouraged them and what discouraged them?

### Parent-Child Discussion

**Unlike previous chapters there are no discussion questions for parents and children in Chapter Eight. There are two main reasons: 1) the previous chapter already got parents and children talking about parenting matters; and 2) this chapter is aimed specifically at the adults. However, if the chapter ignites questions the couple would like to discuss with their children, encourage them to do so.**

### Questions for All Couples

1. Adult Stepchildren: What insights did this section give you about the emotional responses from the adult stepkids? How might you have responded differently had you been aware of this early on?
2. Part-Time Parenting and Stepparenting: In what ways is your perspective about the part-time schedule different and the same from your spouse's? To what degree do differences in perspective make you fearful of isolation in your relationship?
3. Birth order changes: What changes have your children experienced? What loss has it brought to them? What challenges have they responded well to?
4. Stepparenting Adolescents: Because teens have many choices available to them that parents cannot control, parenting can be troubling and anxiety producing. Talk through this section. What emotions did it illicit in you and why?
5. Parenting the Mutual Child: What changed in you and in your family when you brought home your mutual child? What harmonies have you discovered and what hazards are you experiencing now?
6. Sibling Relationships and Parenting: Review the Parenting Siblings section and discuss any applications you think may be helpful in your home.
7. Adopting Stepchildren: Discuss this statement and its implications for your family: "Both parent and stepparent should think of adoption of a stepchild as the capstone to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, not the path to one."
8. Legal Matters in Stepparenting: What steps have you already taken to provide the stepparent(s) permission to provide over site of the children? Which forms provided at [SmartStepfamilies.com/view/permission-forms](https://www.smartstepfamilies.com/view/permission-forms) pertain to you?

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **Adult Stepchildren:** Discuss together how might you “lower the price tag of acceptance” for the adult children while you are dating or engaged.
2. **Part-Time Parenting and Stepparenting:** During dating both biological parent and future stepparent typically enjoy the part-time schedule because it allows them compartmentalized time to date one another or be with the kids. Marriage brings a new task: learning to balance couple time and family time. Discuss how you might handle this transition when the time comes and interview one stepcouple you know who has already walked down that road.
3. **Birth order changes:** How might their role, expectations, and position in the family change once you merge families? What can you do to mitigate the change?
4. **Stepparenting Adolescents:** Teens need to feel heard. Engage your teens to hear their excitement and concerns about your relationship. Try to empower them to share their feelings and find a way to be influenced by something they say.
5. **Parenting the Mutual Child:** Express clearly your desire for or against having more children. Many couples skirt this issue as if it really isn’t important—it is. Find agreement about your future together or consult a counselor to help you work through this matter.
6. **Sibling Relationships and Parenting:** What trends are you seeing currently in the kids regarding future stepsiblings? What has worked to help foster common interests and friendship between them? What has not worked so far?
7. **Adopting Stepchildren:** Before reading this section, what hopes or expectations did you have about the stepparenting ultimately adopting biological children? How have those hopes been modified after reading this section?
8. **Legal Matters in Stepparenting:** Begin discussing estate planning and how you will combine your finances after the wedding. Most people underestimate the implications of these legal conversations for their family—start having your conversations in advance of marriage.

#### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Five: Side STEP (Part 1). It reviews pitfalls (not already discussed in the book) that are common to blended families.

Ask them to read Chapter Nine and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

#### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session nine:

## Smart Step Five: Side STEP (Part 1)

### Chapter Snapshot

A great many pitfalls threaten the stepfamily's journey to the Promised Land. In addition to the ones already discussed throughout the book, this chapter outlines a few more including:

1. Unrecognized loss and unexpressed grief – stepfamilies are born out of loss. Further, loss and the grief that accompanies it does not end after the wedding; for both adults and children, grieving must continue. This section addresses how.
2. Being driven by menacing emotions – leftover negative emotions from the past can become thorns in a new stepfamily's side if not recognized and brought before the throne of God.
3. Combining holiday and family traditions – insider/outsider dynamics are brought to the surface when traditions we hold dear are changed or forgotten in the new stepfamily. This section helps couples navigate the labyrinth that comes with these special occasions.

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### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

This chapter addresses deeply embedded emotions and, therefore, needs to be covered in prayer. Ask God to allow the deep, sometimes hidden emotions to gently rise to the surface where you can “hug” them. In addition, ask God to help you coach their partner to also “hug” the sad or hurt emotions experienced in your meeting (for compassion from one's partner is one way difficult emotions become less intense over time). And finally, pray that you will not be afraid or intimidated by their sadness or pain and that you won't run from it or try to “fix it” with simplistic Christian platitudes. Rather, sit in their pain with them and show them how to take their angst to the Lord.

#### **Prepare**

Review the discussion questions for this chapter and answer them yourself. If you find yourself backing away from your own pain, recognize that you won't be able to help them sit in theirs if you can't sit in yours.

Choose stories from your own married life that might be helpful to share. In fact, beginning this session by sharing a saddening story from your own life gives permission to mentorees to do the same.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Nine.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

Share a holiday or special day (e.g., birthday) tradition from your childhood that was/is very meaningful to you.

### Check In with Mentorees

As usual, take time at the beginning to reflect on changes they have made as a result of your conversations. Process what they are doing differently and what they feel good about.

As you begin this session's discussion, acknowledge that this chapter often brings up difficult emotions for people (especially partners who have experienced the death of a spouse, divorce, or a significant break-up). Gently suggest to them that sharing the hard things with others like yourself and learning to comfort one another is important for your marriage. This in turn helps you to offer similar comfort to your children and stepchildren. Then share a personal story from your own life and demonstrate sharing hard things.

### Parent-Child Discussion

- 1. Kids in stepfamilies often experience what I call "the big 5" emotions: loss, sadness, fear, guilt, and confusion. Which of those have you experienced and when?**
- 2. I tried to write down some of the losses I think you may have experienced in life so far. Would you mind looking at the list? How did I do?**
- 3. Would you mind if I shared with you one of the losses I've experience in life? [After sharing] Now would you mind telling me about one of yours?**
- 4. What new traditions has our family developed that you really enjoy? Which ones could you live without? Which old ones do you miss?**

### Questions for All Couples

1. When could you begin having family meetings? Try it for a few weeks and decide if it works for you. Share your experiences with your support group.
2. For each person in your home, make a list of the losses he or she has likely experienced. How does this list help you to understand each person's behavior?
3. What losses has this chapter made you aware of that you hadn't considered before?
4. Do a case study in stepfamily loss, fear, and anger. Review the comments made by the Thomas family in chapter 1 (page 32).
  - How are their losses evident in their current fears?
  - List the fears for each person. Discuss the possible similarities in your home.
  - Notice how fear and anger are expressed, especially by John, Susan, and Frank.
5. Review the Practical Strategies for Coping With Unrecognized Loss and Unexpressed Grief on page 242. Which strategies are you already doing, and which could be improved?
6. Identify and list some of your menacing emotions. What are you doing to lay them at the throne of God?
7. What traditions have you yet to sort out? What successes have you had? Share some of your creative solutions.
8. Stepparents—what rituals of connection have you developed thus far with your stepchildren?

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **The time to begin formal family meetings is after the wedding. However, you can implement some informal meetings during the engagement. How might you use the time to decide on rules, relationships, and what the kids will call their stepparent after the wedding?**
2. **Has this current relationship grown during a time of intense grief? Did you wait two to three years before deepening this relationship? If not, slow down your dating and give yourself time to grieve former losses.**
3. **Share how you would feel if your dating partner were to admit to feelings of fondness for his or her previous mate.**
4. **What are your desires for more children?**

### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Five: Side STEP (Part 2). It addresses the pitfall of money management in remarriage and blended families.

Ask them to read Chapter Ten and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session ten:

## Smart Step Five: Side **STEP** (Part 2)

### Chapter Snapshot

Money issues and decisions are frequently reported to be a matter of conflict for couples. But it's not just money itself that causes difficulty, in my opinion. What lies behind decisions of spending, estate planning, and saving for retirement are conflicts between values, issues of power and control, and fear. This chapter examines those issues while also giving consideration to:

1. Daily money management principles for stepfamilies – this section addresses whether couples should have separate accounts or one joint account and how they can share financial management.
2. Estate planning – there are a multitude of questions that couples must consider when combining assets. This section reviews many of them including managing pensions, stocks, businesses, retirement benefits, and creating a shared covenant agreement.

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray for your mentorees. Ask God to give them soft hearts that are open to His principles of money management; that is, that He is the owner of everything and that we are stewards of what He has given us.

#### **Prepare**

Unless you are a financial advisor, the content of this chapter may require that you read it through a couple of times. Don't feel the pressure to understand all of the financial concepts, just their basic goals. Then, take a few minutes to review the discussion questions for this chapter. You may want the contact information for a trusted financial advisor on hand in case the couple wants to begin their financial planning process.

Discuss any stories from your own married life that might be helpful to have in your hip pocket for this session.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you'll need to assign Chapter Ten.

### During the Session

#### **Ice Breaker**

To help couples discover their “money-ghosts of marriage past” ask them to describe the degree of financial decision-making harmony they had with their first spouse (or if not previously married, their spending/saving habits as a single person).

#### **Check In with Mentorees**

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Ask about changes made and what they are learning from them.

To transition to this session's discussion ask about their immediate week and any recent discussions about money.

## Parent-Child Discussion

1. **With teens or young adults:** From your perspective, what seems to have changed over time regarding how money is managed in our family?
2. **With teens or young adults:** Do you feel that things are fair in our home regarding how money is spent? What could be different from your standpoint?
3. **With teens or young adults:** What would you like to learn about money management? Can we share with you our values and why we make the decisions we do?
4. **With adult children:** What items would you like to keep in the family line (e.g., deceased mother's dishes or keepsakes)? What questions do you have about inheritance, assets, etc.? (This is also an opportunity to inform the children of your financial arrangements should you die.)

## Questions for All Couples

1. The topic of money often stirs deep feelings within persons who have experienced unwanted loss and family transition. What emotions were stirred within you as you read this chapter?
2. Share any fears (money ghosts) you have identified related to money and one story that illustrates where the fear came from.
3. Which, if any, of your preferences or assumptions about money management were challenged by this chapter? What do you need more time to consider?
4. What has been your system of money management so far? Share whatever changes you believe necessary at this point in time.
5. Unity in your system of money management is vital. What elements of money management do you already agree on? What's your plan to address the ones you don't agree on (e.g., take a Christian stewardship course or hire a financial consultant)?
6. Share your thoughts about the Shared Covenant Agreement strategy.
7. If you do not have an estate plan, what is your first step to creating one?

## Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples

1. Schedule a time to discuss your ideas about money management in the new family. Start by trying to develop a tentative plan as you work through the Decisions, Decisions questions (pages 260).
2. It is strongly advised that couples work with a financial planner to create their estate plan before the wedding. What steps need to be taken for you to do so?
3. In the meantime, start by working through a series of questions on money management for dating couples. Find them here: [SmartStepfamilies.com/view/money-questions](https://SmartStepfamilies.com/view/money-questions).

## Assignment for Mentorees

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Six: STEP Through. This chapter discusses special challenges in the Christian stepfamily home and gives strategies for managing their impact.

Ask them to read Chapter Eleven and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

## Close in Prayer

Conclude your session by praying together.

## After the Session

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session eleven:

## Smart Step Six: **STEP** Through

### Chapter Snapshot

The journey for stepfamilies to the Promised Land can be long or relatively short, but one thing is certain: the journey will bring challenges. This chapter discusses special challenges in the Christian stepfamily home and gives strategies for managing their impact. Special challenges include:

1. Managing sexuality – healthy boundaries between stepfathers and stepdaughters, and between stepsiblings is a must. This section discusses why temptation occurs and how parents should be proactive to discourage inappropriate behavior.
2. Spiritual formation in stepfamily children – God has designed the family to be the first and most important influence on a child’s spiritual development. The complications of having multiple parental influences and moving between homes can confuse children and blur spiritual values. This section helps parents with the all important task of instilling faith in their kids.

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

As you prepare for this session, pray over your session and your mentorees. For some couples the topics in this session may not carry great concern, but for others they represent deep areas of vulnerability and anxiety. For example, a parent may be very concerned about the spiritual influence of their child’s other home. These matters deserve focused attention and prayer.

#### **Prepare**

Take a few minutes to review the discussion questions for this chapter. The questions about stepfamily sexuality are often easily dismissed by parents who don’t want to think that could ever be a temptation in their home. Don’t let them off the hook so easily; try to give fair consideration to the discussion.

Work through all the discussion questions yourselves and discuss any stories from your marriage or family that might help illustrate some of the principles in the chapter.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you’ll need to assign Chapter Eleven.

And since you’re nearing the end of the series, begin praying through what you think is best for the mentoree couple. Do you feel they need further mentoring? Ask what they are thinking at this point. Could you do another series together? The last session gives more guidance on the options for you to consider.

## During the Session

### Ice Breaker

How did your family of origin (the family you grew up in) play a role in the development of your faith? Ideally, what role should the family play in discipling children to the Lord? How does the experience of family help both adults and children become more like Jesus over time?

### Check In with Mentorees

Be sure to ask your mentorees how they are doing. Ask about changes made and what they are learning from them.

To transition to this session's discussion ask about their experience in reading Chapter Eleven. In what way was it helpful?

### Parent-Child Discussion

1. **For biological parent and child: Has there ever been a situation that made you feel embarrassed or physically uncomfortable?**
2. **What privacy rules would you like for us to establish?**
3. **If you haven't previously, have a frank, matter-of-fact conversation with your kids about sexuality within your home (and sexual temptations in general). Review the script on page 284–285 and modify it to fit your family situation.**
4. **Spiritual formation: Has there ever been a time that you were confused about the differences in values between us as parents and stepparents? Between homes? I realize that puts you in an awkward spot—trying to figure out what you believe and trying to be respectful of us as well. What's that like for you?**

### Questions for All Couples

1. What boundaries do you have in place to deter unhealthy sexual attractions? Which ones might you need to add?
2. What aspects of healthy sexuality have you discussed with your children?
3. How much time have you dedicated to reading the Bible and learning its wisdom for your home? Pray together now and ask God to make his love come alive in your lives.
4. What fears do you have regarding your children's faith formation?
5. What strategies for faith training did this chapter suggest that you are not doing well?
6. How well does your walk match your talk?
7. How are the spiritual values of your child's two homes different? What are you doing to inoculate them against non-Christian messages?

### **Additional Questions for Pre-Stepfamily Couples**

1. **Discuss the potential impact of sexuality on your family and boundaries you will adopt.**
2. **Prior to remarriage I believe it is very important for couples to seriously consider scriptural guidelines for remarriage. I strongly encourage you to arrange a meeting with your minister to discuss this matter.**
3. **Discuss your expectations for the stepparent regarding spiritual training.**
4. **Begin now to make prayer and informal, spontaneous discussions about God's role in your life a regular family practice. Develop your game plan for spiritual formation for yourselves and your children.**

### **Assignment for Mentorees**

Before concluding your session together, talk briefly with your mentorees about the next session: Smart Step Seven: STEP Over. Together with the Final Thoughts, this chapter gives the perspective of one family who made it to the Promised Land. It encourages couples to trust God and stay the course, for there are rewards ahead.

Ask them to read Chapter Twelve and Final Thoughts and wait to discuss the couple questions with you (they can do the parent-child discussion questions before your next meeting if they want to).

### **Close in Prayer**

Conclude your session by praying together.

### **After the Session**

Be sure to pray for your mentorees between now and the time you meet again. You may also want to send them a brief email or text to let them know that you are praying for them. Also, remind them of one or two important applications from your discussion for their marriage and/or family.

# session twelve:

## Smart Step Seven: **STEP** Over

### Chapter Snapshot

Throughout the Scriptures God inspires and encourages us with stories of reward and blessing to faithfully continue walking the road in front of us. That is my objective with Chapter Twelve. The Sea of Opposition for some blended families is shallow and easily traversed, but for most it is deep and difficult. Encouragement to press on is important. Use the story in Chapter Twelve and the Final Thoughts to foster resolve in couples and encourage them in their journey.

### Before the Session

#### **Pray**

Pray that your mentorees will feel inspired by the Spangler story. Also, ask God to give you and the couple wisdom about the next step for their family. Might they join or begin a small group for stepcouples? Do they need to continue mentoring with you and if so, what book should you study next? Could you read the bonus material found at [SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn](https://SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn) together and mentor them through the application of that material? If this is the end of your time together, ask God to help your final session be a celebration of all that has transpired.

#### **Prepare**

After reading the brief chapter, take time to consider your own personal family journey. Where are you in the process and how can that perspective be helpful to your mentorees? Review the discussion questions and plan your discussion of “next steps”.

Before you meet with your mentorees for this session, you’ll need to assign Chapter Twelve and Final Thoughts.

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### During the Session

#### **Ice Breaker**

Ask your mentorees if they have any experience with grafting plants into hybrids. If they (or you) don’t have any working knowledge of this, search for an online video that demonstrates how it’s done. Start your time together watching that video and making observations. For example, you might point out the trauma of the cutting process, the intentionality behind the grafting process, and the time it takes for the two parts to become one.

#### **Check In with Mentorees**

Be sure to ask your mentorees how their immediate week has gone and check in with them about any ongoing concerns you have been discussing. Ask about changes made and what they are learning from them.

Then, ask them what their key take-away has been in reading Chapter Twelve.

## Parent-Child Discussion

1. **For younger children:** Invite your child to select from their dolls, play characters, or Lego characters a piece that represents everyone in your family. Ask them to make up a story about the characters and place them close or far from one another based on how things really are in your family. Have fun with the made-up story, but make some observations about where they place the characters. Feel free to ask things like, “I noticed you and daddy are pretty far from each other. What does that mean?” You might learn a lot about your child’s perspective of the family.
2. **For older children:** If you were writing a story about the life of our family, who would the main characters be and what would be their challenges?
3. **What chapters in our family story are yet to be written? What do you think comes next—and what title would you give to the chapter?**

### Questions for All Couples

1. Which aspect of the Spangler story do you most identify with? Why?
2. In what ways is your life not exactly what you planned? In what ways is your life blessed, in spite of your plan?
3. What has God taught you about surrendering to his will through your family experiences?
4. Cheryl Spangler had to wait a very long time before she saw and heard her stepson acknowledge her true place in his life. If you haven’t reached that point yet, what reminders do you need to keep going toward the Promised Land? How can you help each other keep this perspective on tough days?
5. Painfully beautiful is a poetic way of pointing out that both “beauty” and “ashes” often exist side-by-side. Further, we must learn to live in the tension between them and trust God with it. Talk about this aspect of your journey.
6. What are your attitudes and feelings about those who seek counseling? How would you know if seeking outside help was a good idea?

Remind couples that for further encouragement they can read the bonus Promised Land stories at [SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn](https://SmartStepfamilies.com/view/learn) and share their story at [SmartStepfamilies.com/go/PromisedLand](https://SmartStepfamilies.com/go/PromisedLand).

### Assignment for Mentorees

Before concluding your session, talk about where you plan to go from here. Is this the final session or will you meet again? If so, when? If this is your final session discuss meeting in six months for a re-connect and check-up.

Stepcouples have many educational needs so remind them of the additional resources listed on page 6 of this guide. They may want to begin reading them on their own, or even better, study the material with a small group of stepfamily couples. A group provides three key ingredients to stepcouple success: fellowship, mutual support, and stepfamily answers to stepfamily questions.

### Close in Prayer

Conclude your session by praying together. Ask God to richly bless your mentorees. Thank God for the time you’ve had together in this series and the opportunity to get to know one another.

## After the Session

Send a note to your mentorees letting them know how grateful you are for being able to walk along side them for this season of their relationship. Invite them to keep in touch and assure them that they will continue to be in your prayers.

# Where to Go from Here

**We hope you've found this Marriage Mentor's Guide to The Smart Stepfamily helpful. As you consider your next steps, here are a few thoughts:**

- Prayerfully think through what's best for the mentoree couple you've been meeting with for this series. Ask them about their desires. Do you feel they need further mentoring? Would it be good to do another series with them? If so, explore the possibilities at [www.MarriageMentoring.com](http://www.MarriageMentoring.com). If not now, consider reconnecting with them for a simple "check in" a few months from now.
- Let us know what we can do to better serve you. We'd love your feedback on this Guide. And we'd love to know what else we can do to improve your mentoring experiences. You can contact us at [info@marriagementoring.com](mailto:info@marriagementoring.com).
- Are you ready to take on another mentoree couple? Connect with the appropriate person at your church to let them know of your desires in this area.
- Consider starting a small group for couples. One of the most effective ways to use your mentoring skills is within the context of a small group. You can use a resource to structure your time and we have several couple's small group options for you (for example, *Love Talk*, *Your Time Starved Marriage*, *I Love You More*, and so on).
- Recruit another couple to become a mentor couple. Let them know about your experience and invite them to consider becoming a certified Marriage Mentor couple like yourselves.

For remarried or stepfamily couples there are additional resources that may be helpful. Some are listed in this guide on page 6. You can find others at [www.MarriageMentoring.com](http://www.MarriageMentoring.com).