

God's design for the family begins with marriage as the foundation for the home. Blended families are at a disadvantage when they begin because the couple isn't the foundation. Because parent-child relationships predate the new marriage and are bonded by blood, history, and family identity, the marital relationship is often a secondary relationship in the home instead of the foundational one. This has the potential for frustration and disappointment.

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life." – Proverbs 13:12

Hope is what brought you together. You had hope for a satisfying marriage and a healthy environment for your children (whether young or adult). You hoped for a loving home. But if you are like many couples, the unique challenges of stepfamily living have sometimes deferred your hope making your heart sick with disappointment, discouragement, and fear.

The key difference between couples who are overwhelmed by the unique family dynamics of blended families and those that rise above them is that they: 1) deeply trust in God to lead them through the unknown; and 2) they get smart about stepfamily living, that is, they learn how to manage it wisely.

FOUR WAYS TO BECOME STEPFAMILY SMART

Smart Step 1: Develop Crockpot Expectations

Stepcouples are often surprised to discover that their expectations for how quickly their family will harmonize were unrealistic.

- Love doesn't happen instantly.
- Being previously married doesn't necessarily equip you to be married to someone new.
- Experience as a parent doesn't adequately prepare you to be a stepparent.
- Children are sometimes slow to embrace a stepparent's authority and the new family as a whole.
- Falling in love with a person and getting married doesn't mean your children will love them, especially not as quickly as you'd like them to.
- And falling in love as a couple doesn't mean you know how to be a family.

One core task of becoming a healthy blended family is solidifying the new family's identity as a family unit, but unrealistic expectations like the ones above can sabotage that process. Learning how to "cook a stepfamily" with realistic expectations is important.

Wise blended family couples don't use a blender to "cook" their family; they use a Crockpot. They understand that relationships, trust, and love take time—lots of time—and they need to be gently nurtured, not demanded. Just like Crockpots need five to seven hours to cook ingredients and merge them together, the average stepfamily needs five to seven years to bond. Adjusting your expectations accordingly will soften your approach to family bonding.

For example, stepparents will pace with a child's level of openness to them instead of pushing themselves on the child, and a biological parent will not worry that his children are not calling the stepmother "Mom." Affections, and the terms that go with them, will develop in their own timing and won't be rushed or demanded. Trusting God with the overall cooking process and maintaining a Crockpot perspective helps stepcouples to be patient, relax about the progress your family is making, and enjoy what you have today.

Smart Step 2: Guard Your Marriage

Stepfamily couples swim in a different ocean than first-marriage couples. The water temperature can be a little cooler (trusting each other can be a challenge if you've been hurt in a previous relationship). There are, also, unique under-currents (most everyone in the family has experienced a loss that is always just under the surface), and there are more sharks (like loyalty conflicts and some ex-spouses!). All of these aspects of marriage in a blended family need attention.

And there's one more thing: Because the water is murky, swimming with and keeping track of your partner can be confusing, even when you have the best of intentions. One common example is when stepparents find themselves feeling like an outsider to their spouse and his or her children. Simultaneously, biological parents may feel caught between their new spouse and children, feeling divided and guilty over how they choose to spend their time and energy. Both can end up feeling isolated and distressed.

It might be helpful to know that this dynamic isn't new. In Genesis 16 and 21, we read how Abraham's complicated family experienced the same thing. On one occasion Sarah approached Abraham and insisted he cut his son Ishmael out of the will because he was born to Hagar. "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac" (21:10). Obviously she was threatened by her husband's relationship with Ishmael and so she tried to protect her son's interests. But the decision wasn't so easy for him. The Scripture goes on to say that "the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son." (21:11).

The "shark" to watch out for here is comparing loves and forcing someone to "choose." This is not an "either/or" situation (i.e., either it's them or me). Rather, approach it with a "both/and" mentality. You must give energy and attention to *both* your marriage *and* the children. Children need to learn that their biological parent has prioritized their new spouse and is committed to them "till death do you part." And children also need to be reassured that they haven't "lost" their parent.

Fear makes stepfamily members think there's not enough love to go around, but of course, we know that in Christ, there is more than enough love available. Don't allow yourself to fall into the competition trap. Rather, seek a balance in nurturing your marriage and pouring into children according to their needs. For example, one way to reassure children that they have not been replaced is to continue some of the traditions and touchpoints you developed prior to becoming a stepfamily, like going to the park on Saturday mornings, Friday night movie and pizza nights, or laying in bed at night and talking about the day. Stepparents make this reassurance to the children possible by graciously giving their spouse and stepchildren time to be together. Efforts like these to attend to children are then balanced by couple time (for example, date nights) and boundaries that support couple conversation or leisure time.

Smart Step 3: Become a Parenting Team

Parenting is often a high conflict issue for stepcouples. Because a stepparent's role is unclear, especially in the beginning, the biological parent and stepparent must work together to become a team, provide leadership in their home, and support their marriage.

A comprehensive discussion of parent and stepparent roles is beyond the scope of this lesson, but here are a few tips to point you in the right direction.

Wise Biological Parents:

- Proactively support the stepparent's role with their children. Like passing power to a babysitter, they communicate to their children the expectation that they respect the stepparent and obey them.
- Make space for the stepparent to contribute to parenting matters, decisions, and discipline.
- Take the primary role of disciplinarian with their own children, especially in the beginning. Parents and stepparents should negotiate rules *together* behind closed doors and seek unity in leading the family. The biological parent should then communicate the rules to the children with the stepparent standing in support. A passive or paralyzed biological parent, who won't take the lead with their children, undercuts the stepparent and their unity as a couple.

Wise Stepparents:

- Let the children set the pace for their relationship with you. Remember that it takes longer on average for children to adjust to a parent's marriage than it does to a parental divorce. Don't push children toward affection they are uncomfortable with or force terms of endearment. Allow children time and space to work through these issues and meet them where they are.
- Negotiate the household rules with the biological parent and support those rules. Initially take a secondary role in applying punishment, choosing to focus on relationship building with each child.
- Constantly look for opportunities to bond with stepchildren while maintaining a long-term Crockpot perspective on the quality of their relationship. Seek to put on "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," while granting forgiveness when necessary just "as the Lord has forgiven you" (Colossians 3:12-13).

Finally, both wise biological parents and stepparents understand that not all parenting conflicts are the result of being a stepfamily. Parents in first marriages disagree on parenting matters and have seasons where one or the other must take the lead with a given child. Instead of assigning blame to a given parenting challenge, ask the more productive question: How can we come together in this and lead from a position of unity? Answering that will help you resolve the parenting dilemma and support your marriage, as well.

Smart Step 4: Manage Common Pitfalls

In addition to the internal dynamics mentioned above, stepfamilies experience many external stressors that threaten family harmony. These include (but aren't limited to):

- Co-parenting and managing visitation schedules between homes
- Money and estate matters
- Issues of loss and grief in both children and adults
- Combining holiday and special day traditions
- Negotiating boundaries with ex-spouses, grandparents and extended family members

Dealing with these stressors is tough enough, but more critically, they place stress on your marital relationship. Therefore, you must work hard to come together in managing them. Your marriage is "*the* tie that binds." Becoming isolated by these stressors is the equivalent of unplugging your family Crockpot—nothing cooks and no one comes together—so don't underestimate the importance of finding unity in how you handle them.

REWARDS IN THE JOURNEY

Stepfamily living certainly has its challenges. But it also has these rewards:

- A committed marital relationship: Research confirms that couples in stepfamilies can create high-quality marital relationships.
 - A new marital heritage for children: Instead of arguments filled with yelling and personal agendas, children witness a new model for marriage with a husband and wife who continually seek to sacrifice for the other out of love. This diminishes the children's risk of divorce as adults and breaks the generational cycle of divorce.
 - A healthy family means emotionally and spiritually healthier kids: A loving, well-functioning stepfamily over time can negate many of the detrimental psychological impacts of divorce on children.
 - Respect and care between stepparents and stepchildren: Over time, stepparents and stepchildren can develop a tremendous bond with one another. The timing of this developing relationship varies, but most will get there.
- Experiencing love and extending grace: Despite hurt and pain, stepfamily members often risk loving again and discover in the process that they receive love and experience healing grace.
- Redemption of your family story: Your family story, even the part that is forever embedded in the past, is not over. God is redeeming your story through His grace and is changing the trajectory of it. And when you walk with Him in faith, your story, even the worst parts of it, is caught up into what He is doing to redeem all things to Him.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

There are more chapters to your family story yet to be written, some in this generation and some in the generations to come. Ultimately, the stresses and strain of a blended family—or any family—are just a distraction from that which truly matters: acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God (see Micah 6:8). Getting smart about your family will help you avoid these distractions, lead your children with wisdom, and walk in faith with God. And as you do this, you can watch in awe how your Heavenly Father authors a legacy of redemption for your home.

For additional resources on this lesson see MarriageHelp.org/Blended.

QUESTIONS/PROJECTS:

Answer questions 1-5 by yourself first, then share them with your spouse before group time. Some of these questions will be discussed during your group time.

1. What were some of your unrealistic expectations as you entered this family? How did they impact your behavior and choices?
2. What is one “Crockpot” change you would like to try?
3. How does your marriage sometimes get lost in the complexities of parenting the children?
4. Identify one tip for the biological parent that you think could be helpful for your family. Identify one tip for the stepparent.
5. What is one pitfall that adds stress to your marriage and/or family? What is needed to manage it better?
6. **Action Item:** Commit to learning all you can about stepfamily living. Don’t blindly work harder and harder. Work smarter...together. Decide now how you will continue learning: perhaps a book you will read, a conference you will attend, or a small group you will start.