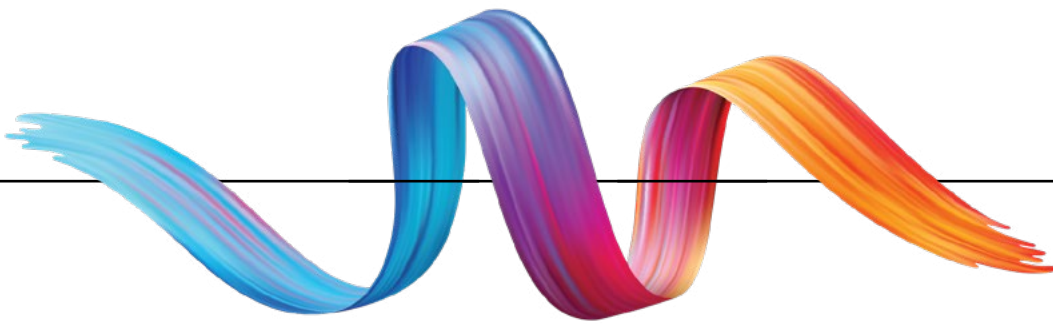


Preparing to Blend Leader's Guide

RON DEAL



Preparing to Blend Leader's Guide

RON DEAL

THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR: premarital preparation works. In general, the average couple sees a 30 percent increase in relationship quality¹ and premarital counseling lowers the annual odds of divorce by 31 percent.² That's good news. The bad news for blended family couples is while 44 percent of all couples report receiving some form of premarital education (usually by a religious organization),³ fewer than 25 percent of pre-blended family couples receive preparation for their upcoming blended family marriage or even talk with each other to anticipate stepfamily realities.⁴

That creates a significant premarital counseling gap for blended families—and means couples start their stepfamily journey without support and protection against re-divorce.

Let's close that gap.

The book *Preparing to Blend: The Couples Guide to Becoming a Smart Stepfamily* gives engaged couples and their children the guidance they need to give their blended family a running start—and, gives you, in effect, a comprehensive premarital preparation program designed specifically for the unique challenges of blended families that you can immediately begin using with couples. The Growing Activities in each chapter are practical, time-tested, and designed to not only prepare the family for their new life together, but actually move them further into family bonding.

Once you have your copy, encourage your engaged couples to pick up their copy and start reading (some will want to share a copy and others will want individual copies so they can highlight sections and write their personal reflections). The book will provide you with a general outline of your premarital counseling (more details below) and give couples the stepfamily education they need, plus Growing Activities designed to accelerate intentionality and family bonding. The website familylife.com/preparingto-blend gives you and couples free articles and resources to supplement this guide.

Visit familylife.com/preparingto-blend for supplemental tools and ideas for creative wedding planning.

KEY DIFFERENCES IN PREMARITAL PREPARATION WITH BLENDED FAMILY COUPLES

As chapter one of *Preparing to Blend* explains, *coupleness* does not necessarily equal *familyness*. Traditional premarital counseling is focused on the couple dyad, that is, on coupleness. But blended family living is about a couple embedded in a family journeying into *familyness*. Indeed, most blended family couples (what I also call *stepcouples*) marry because they've fallen in love, but they divorce because they don't know how to be a family. You can immediately see the problem. Premarital preparation that focuses only on the marital dyad inadvertently gives the couple a false sense of security and contributes to the unrealistic expectation that if the couple is strong, the family will be strong (see chapter 3 for more unrealistic expectations). That's just not true.

Effective pre-blended family counseling prepares adults *and children* for the many unique dynamics of stepfamily living that are known to cause family and marital difficulties. Stepouples and children need designed-for-blended-family preparation, not designed-for-first-marriage preparation.

WHAT'S NOT DIFFERENT ABOUT PRE-BLENDED FAMILY COUNSELING

If you've ever done premarital counseling with couples entering a first marriage, you know there is an idealism in them that you need to gently recalibrate. Love blinds all of us to some degree. In session it often sounds like one partner saying, "Yeah, I see what you're saying, but I just don't think that will apply to us."

Breaking through a couple's unrealistic expectations for how easy life will be after the wedding is part of good premarital training. Breaking through, however, creates an awkward dynamic at times when you are stretching the couple to open their eyes to reality, but they are trying to keep them shut. This open-close, push-and-pull dynamic is also true of pre-stepfamily couples. Further, their blindness extends beyond their coupleness to how children and the family will adjust as a unit after the wedding ("familyness"). Make it your goal to gently recalibrate their naive perspective; indeed, the Growing Activities built into *Preparing to Blend* are designed to do just this. Couples who "just can't seem to find time" to do the exercises may be struggling to let go of their preconceived fantasies. A good response if you sense this hesitation might be to skip over the issue of scheduling time and ponder out loud, "After reading the chapter but not doing the exercise, I'm wondering if you're fearful of what the Activity might reveal or suggest about your situation?"

WHY INCLUDE THE KIDS?

It is very important that children be included in pre-blended family preparation. Counselors who have only worked with couples in the past may feel a little uneasy about this. Some counselors will bring the children to their office while others will just work with the couple as they work through the Growing

Activities. Either way, be sure that children have a voice. For years I've believed that children who feel included in decisions related to forming a blended family and can speak into the process find embracing the new family easier than children who don't, and now there's evidence of that. Researchers examining the importance of involving children in blended family educational courses concluded, "When it comes to strengthening couples in stepfamilies, the involvement of children is clearly implicated and should not be underestimated."⁵ Here's why. The loss (actually, the *series* of losses) that children of every age experience leading up to a parent's marriage steals a sense of control and influence over their own lives. Anything you do to give them some voice in what's about to happen—and how it happens—restores some of that and may shift them from being a victim of their circumstances to a contributor to what is being built. Therefore, kids of all ages need some input into their future family; the Growing Activities help them do that in a tangible way.

By the way, involving children in the planning and production of the wedding is part of giving them a voice. Chapter 4 goes into detail about this in order to help you and the couple experience a pre-wedding journey and family-based ceremony that is full of meaning and fosters family identity.

Some Growing Activities are couple-centered, others family-centered. In the end, the Activities aim to create for couples three combinations of time together: biological parent-child time, couple time, and "family time" when the stepparent (and their children) are included. You can help them decide when to engage the children and when not to as you go through the book together. (Chapter 1 provides more thoughts about why including children is important and how to do so.)

You have the option of having some family Activity discussions in your presence. When children and adults are together in your presence, encourage them not to interrupt one another and to listen with the intent of responding in empathy. Model for them how to validate feelings so family members learn to listen with respect and make observations when someone responds anxiously. For example, if a child says they aren't excited about the wedding and their parent says something to try and change the child's posture like, "But I thought you liked my fiancé," you might make the observation, "Dad, your response tells me you are worried your daughter won't accept your wife. First, let me encourage you to listen to her without an agenda, but second, tell me more about your fear. Are you afraid they won't get along?" Making this observation in front of the other children is, of course, a judgment call on your part. The point is, help individuals identify their fears and hopes—and encourage them not to try to force emotional connection (which will usually backfire). (For more on this temptation, see chapter 3).

AN OVERVIEW OF PRE-BLENDED FAMILY PREPARATION

How the book *Preparing to Blend* is designed. The first time you use the book to work with a couple, read the introduction and first chapter to help you get oriented. Together they provide an overview of how the book is designed to be used. In addition, chapter 1 essentially gives you a primer on the

uniqueness of pre-stepfamily education and what you're trying to accomplish, that is, helping couples develop both *coupleness* and *familyness*. In sum, the program combines blended family education, couple exploration and reflection, guidance from you as a mentor or coach, and Growing Activities designed to move the couple and children forward in their journey to becoming family to one another.

Here's the general structure of sessions. In preparation for each meeting, you'll ask the couple to read a chapter and do the corresponding Growing Activity; the chapter gives them (and you) some important background information about the Activity (which can also be part of your discussion when you meet). They will read the chapter, do the Activity, discuss the Post-Activity Questions for Reflection, and then process all of this with you during your next meeting. Even if they have worked through the reflection questions themselves, have them discuss some of them again with you. You will naturally ask more questions and help them process their experience of the Growing Activity.

Keep in mind that the Activities are both assessment and intervention. *Assessment* in the sense that what the couple learns and experiences (e.g., in talking with their children) gives them and you a better understanding of where the family is emotionally, and *intervention*, in the sense that it nudges people down the road toward the reality that is coming. (Or, in some cases, slows down a couple's wedding plans—a sometimes necessary outcome.) Listen to what children reveal, for example, and let that inform how you proceed with the couple and what you ask them to pay attention to as you move through the book.

Now, regarding the order of the Growing Activities: There is a method to my madness. The Activities—and the insights they bring—build on one another, so it is generally best if you follow the chapter order. For example, the Family Map that is created in chapter 2 is something you can refer to throughout your conversations; let your dialogue about the map and what it reveals build over time. Chapters you may explore out of order include “Planning Your Wedding” (chapter 4) and “Merging Money and Your Family” (chapter 9), which can be done at any point based on the couple's wedding date.

If you try to discuss every reflection question, some post-Activity discussions could take longer than the time you have allowed. Use your judgment to decide if you need to schedule additional time. If you hit a nerve or uncover something important, don't just move on to the next chapter; slow down and focus on the issue at hand. Keep in mind that few couples have had significant conversations about parenting and stepparenting, finances, co-parenting, trust issues, grieving as a family, or what they expect in terms of family bonding. There is a lot to uncover, so don't be surprised if couples need time to digest what is rising to the surface.

If couples can't find enough time for the Activities and discussion, suggest they spread out their discussion through the week. The more they put into Activities and discussions, the more they will get out of it.

Skill-building. When you can, work in some of the couple skill-building training that you normally do in premarital counseling. For example, when discussing expectations (chapter 3) or parenting strategies (chapter 6) teach listening skills and conflict-resolution skills if disagreements arise. Learning to utilize these skills when discussing blended family realities is extra beneficial.

Inventories. A premarital inventory is always recommended as it helps you target dyadic aspects

of the couple's relationship that need attention. I recommend using the Parenting version of Prepare-Enrich because it lends itself to a discussion of the parenting issues that so easily sabotage stepcouples (see chapter 6). SYMBIS is also a viable premarital assessment worth considering.

Structuring your time. Of course, you may want to supplement this book (premarital program) with other material or sessions, but as is, this book is designed to give you 10 or more sessions with the couple (and perhaps their children for a few sessions). Here are some general thoughts to guide your time:

- You could meet weekly, but it will be difficult for some individuals/couples to give proper time to each Activity given the demands of their jobs and children's schedules. You might consider meeting every other week, so they have two weeks to read and work through the Growing Activities.
- If you don't have that much time (20 weeks for 10 sessions) before the wedding and you can't work through the entire book, meet more frequently and give preference to the introduction and first six chapters (6 sessions). Couples can learn many things about having a good marriage from a multitude of resources, but this may be the only opportunity they have to learn about becoming a blended family, and these chapters are critical to the beginning of their journey. Also, you can complete the remaining chapters/Activities after their wedding. (The risk is that some couples lose their motivation to stay with the program once the wedding is over.)
- Get a jump on the material. Before the first session, have your couple 1) read the introduction and chapter 1; and perhaps 2) complete any online relationship profile you prefer (e.g., Prepare-Enrich, parenting version).
- Your first session will be spent getting to know one another, developing rapport, hearing about their journey to this point, making sure they understand the importance of the Growing Activities, and deciding if they need to jump into the chapter on wedding planning (chapter 4). (Detailed session outlines are below.) You can then ask them to read chapter 2 and do their first Growing Activity before your next meeting so you can process it together. From that point forward each week you will assign the next chapter/Activity.

Additional helps. Supplemental resources you can suggest to couples that will also help you in your understanding of stepfamily living:

- The Smart Stepfamily Series™ of books—available wherever books are sold, these titles are specifically designed for blended families and those who serve them. More than a dozen titles are listed just inside the *Preparing to Blend* book. To supplement the content your couples will be reading, I specifically suggest you become familiar with *The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning* (to enhance your discussion of chapter 9) and *Building Love Together in Blended Families* (because of its strategies for family bonding).
- [The FamilyLife Blended® podcast](#)—available wherever podcasts are found, this podcast takes a deep dive into many specific aspects of stepfamily living (e.g., co-parenting, the experience of children, alienation, coping with stress) and has episodes for pre-blended family couples.
- FamilyLife Blended® website—includes articles, on-demand courses, live and livestream events, and a searchable map to help couples find a ministry near them: familylife.com/blended.

- My personal website, SmartStepfamilies.com, offers articles, videos, and my speaking schedule, including virtual classes and online, on-demand courses through the Stepfamily Network.
- The Smart Stepfamily Small-Group Video Series—this 8-session curriculum and Participant's Guide is the most watched series in the country and is perfect for groups or individual couples wanting to learn more about stepfamily living. Available for FREE through RightNow Media at familylife.com/the-smart-stepfamily.
- Community Small Groups—I have long recommended that pre-stepfamily couples attend educational small groups for married blended family couples. Sitting and listening to couples talk about the realities of their home opens the eyes of engaged couples.
- After completing *Preparing to Blend*, a great next step for stepcouples is my book *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* (with Dr. David Olson). It is a practical resource to strengthen stepcouple relationships and will complement *Preparing to Blend*. A free PDF study guide is available for groups (email blended@familylife.com to request).

Additional Training for You. If you would like additional training specifically in pre-stepfamily counseling, consider these resources:

- Preparing to Blend 2.0—a three-hour video course by Ron Deal for professional counselors available through the American Association of Christian Counselors' (AACC.net) Light University.
- Preparing to Blend: Effective Pre-Stepfamily Counseling—video training for premarital counselors, pastors, and lay mentors available through Shop.FamilyLife.com; look for the All-Access Digital Pass of the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, 2021.
- Smart Stepfamily Therapy Provider™ Training—I offer licensed therapists virtual 12-hour continuing education in stepfamily therapy for Christian clients. Those who complete the training can then be added to an international referral list of Christian-based recognized providers (<http://smartstepfamilies.com/smart-help/therapy-providers>). Non-licensed professionals (e.g., pastors, family life educators) are welcome to attend (but will not be added to the list of providers).

Sample Session Outline

Preparing to Blend provides most of the relevant content (e.g., understanding stepfamily dynamics) and questions that you will need to engage the couple in discussion. Again, even if couples have already discussed the Post-Activity Questions for Reflection, you can revisit them, adding your own thoughts and follow-up questions. In addition, this guide provides counselor tips and suggestions for how to use your session time. Consider the following outline a guide for your time. Feel free to adjust topics and sessions based on your therapeutic judgment.

Each session outline below includes these key elements:

- Counselor Tip—equipping ideas and observations for you.
- Session Main Objective—what you’re trying to accomplish in this session.
- How to Spend Your Time—suggestions (options) for how to use your time.
- Assign—this is what the couple/family will do in preparation for their next session.

SESSION 1: NOT JUST A COUPLE: GROWING ACTIVITIES, BONDING, AND BECOMING A FAMILY

Counselor Tip: Pre-session assignment—Have couples read the introduction and chapter 1 before they meet with you for the first time.

Session Main Objective

1. Get to know them, hear their story. Pay attention to the backstory, that is, what happened that brought them to this point in their lives.
2. Share an overview of the sessions and get a firm commitment from them to meet with you for 10 sessions (or whatever is negotiated).

How to Spend Your Time

1. Get to know one another, develop rapport, and explore the backstory that brought them and their children to this moment.
2. Make sure they understand the importance of the Growing Activities.
3. Based on their wedding date, decide if they need to jump ahead to the chapter on wedding planning (chapter 4).
4. Review and discuss any points in chapter 1 they found interesting or had questions about. Specifically, ask how they felt about the notion that couplehood does not necessarily equal family-ness and the implications for their premarital preparation.

Assign

1. Read chapter 2 and do their Blended Family Map online ([Blending.Love](https://www.blendinglove.com)). They should talk

through the Post-Activity Questions for Reflection and be prepared to process all of this with you during your next meeting.

2. Invite them to begin listening to the FamilyLife Blended podcast. They can scroll through dozens of topics to find those of interest to their situation.

SESSION 2: SEEING IS EYE-OPENING: DRAWING YOUR BLENDED FAMILY MAP

Session Main Objective: Share and discuss the Map Activity. Make observations and explore their story and nature (temperature) of relationships.

How to Spend Your Time

1. Review the first two questions in the Post-Activity Questions for Reflection section. This will alert you to any topics that need attention.
2. If time, explore Post-Activity Questions 5–7.
3. Explore their emotional triangles. This might be very important. The point is to probe and “wonder out loud” in order to help them make sense of responses from children.
 - Hint: Ask the couple about the feedback they got from talking with their children. Did they hear any hesitation from their children? What fear did that awaken in the parent?
 - Now, turn the discussion to the triangles in the family involving children with concerns. If there aren’t any obvious concerns, explore the concept of triangles in general.

Counselor Tip: Ask dyadic and triadic questions as you look at the Map together. Here’s an example: Point to one of the children on the Map and ask the future stepparent, “If I asked [child’s name] to describe how their relationship with their parent [your fiancé] has changed since you came into their life, what would they say? Other possible questions:

1. To biological parent: “What do you think your child’s expectation is of you regarding [name of fiancé]?”
2. To biological parent: “What would your child say if you asked them, ‘I don’t expect you to love them [future stepparent] like you love me or dad/mom, but do you sometimes think I expect that?’”
3. To couple: “What is your former spouse’s expectation regarding the future stepparent’s role in the children’s lives?”

Assign

1. Read chapter 3, do the Growing Activity, and discuss the Couple Conversation (p. 50).
2. The Parent-Child Conversation (p. 53) goes along with the Optional Family Crockpot Exercise. Some counselors will invite the children and the couple to process this in session 3 together. Decide now whether the couple and children need to do the Family Crockpot Exercise so they

are ready for the conversation.

3. Have the couple reserve the “Follow-up Couple Conversation” for your next session so you can review the list of yellow and red lights with them.

SESSION 3: HELPFUL EXPECTATIONS

Session Main Objective: Explore any unrealistic expectations that have come to the surface and discern whether any yellow or red lights exist and need attention.

How to Spend Your Time

1. This session content will depend on what you planned during the last meeting (i.e., are you having the Parent-Child Conversation?).
2. If kids are joining the session: At first, engage the children and get them talking about school and some of their interests. Connect with each child and the family as a unit before saying, “So, tell me about your Family Crockpot project.” Other questions might include:
 - What did you learn about your family from the exercise?
 - If you were any ingredient, what would it be and why? (Let everyone share.)
 - Some ingredients cook and combine with other ingredients faster than others in a Crockpot. How is the “cooking” going for you? And who is having difficulty “combining”?
 - Ask other questions in the Parent-Child Conversation section, p. 53.
3. If you do meet with the family, try to get a few minutes alone with the couple at the end to check in with them about the group conversation you just had and explore the yellow and red lights (Follow-up Couple Conversation).

Counselor Tip

1. The “family session” is equally useful with young children and adult children.
2. Watch the body language and positioning of adults and children if you see them together. Who is comfortable or uncomfortable with the family discussion? Who seems to be cooking very slowly? Share your observations with the couple when the kids are not with you to check and see if you are reading this correctly, which will spark dialogue about what they might do in response.

Assign: Read chapter 4 and complete the Activity.

SESSION 4: PLANNING YOUR WEDDING

Session Main Objective: Check in with the couple about their plans for the wedding, specifically, their thoughts about the elements of the wedding discussed in the chapter and how they want their children to be included.

Counselor Tip

1. Before the session, go to familylife.com/preparingtoblend and look for additional creative ideas for blended family weddings that you can share with the couple.
2. The Activity of this chapter may influence how and when a couple gets married. Make sure the couple communicates this and other wedding plans (and insights) with the pastor or officiant doing their wedding.

How to Spend Your Time

1. Get a report from the couple on their Family Meeting.
 - What is their overall read on the children's desire to help plan and/or be part of the wedding?
 - What ideas are they wanting to incorporate into their wedding?
 - How are they giving attention to these messages during the ceremony: Our "us" matters; your past matters; your expanding family matters; and you matter?
 - What do they need to communicate to the wedding officiant or planner?
2. In spite of their conversation and planning with children, prepare couples for strong emotions in children, grandparents, and extended family members when the wedding day arrives. Even though others show approval for the wedding ahead of time, the actual day brings a collision of sadness and joy for some—not everyone, but it's fairly common. Tell couples to be prepared for unforeseen emotion and to recognize it for what it is.
3. If you are officiating their wedding, you can use some of your session to discuss the details of the wedding ceremony.

Assign: Read chapter 5 and complete the Activity. They will need to plan ample time to have at least one conversation as a family.

SESSION 5: CO-CREATING FAMILYNESS: DECIDING WHAT TO CALL EACH OTHER

Session Main Objective: Co-creating a shared family identity helps to bring clarity to the ambiguity of step-relationships. Hopefully, this chapter facilitates couples and children having conversations that help them figure out who they are to one another and the boundaries around how they will get along.

Counselor Tip: Only about 30 percent of children will ever use the term "Mom" or "Dad" for their stepparent. Making that the goal is a mistake. The goal is to build a mutually agreeable relationship. Be sure to emphasize that it's not the label that matters; it is building mutual respect and care that matters.

How to Spend Your Time

1. Ask what the couple's overall takeaway was from the conversation. Were they able to arrive at some agreed-upon labels and an understanding of when they will use them?
2. Ask them to share the specific details of the conversation with you and how each person responded. You might use their Blended Family Map to point to each person and discuss the triangle considerations influencing their input to family labels. What factors are at play for each person?
3. Review the "no-threat" message mentioned in the Activity discussion. Spend time emphasizing how important this message—and the attitude—is in building a cooperative environment between homes.
4. A stepparent can also communicate this message directly to the same-sex biological parent through a text message, email, phone call, or face-to-face (let them decide which is appropriate). A future stepmom, for example, might say to the biological mom, "I just want you to know that I know you're the mom. I will always respect you as the mother of your children and will never try to get between you and your kids. I'm just hoping to be like a coach or youth pastor who tries to bless your kids and care well for them. I will speak well of you in front of your children and will always honor you as their mother. I appreciate you letting me share this with you. Have a nice day." (You and the couple can learn more about the "no-threat" message in the books *The Smart Stepmom: Practical Steps to Help You Thrive* by Ron L. Deal and Laura Petherbridge and *The Smart Stepdad: Steps to Help You Succeed* by Ron L. Deal.)
5. If time allows, talk about the Additional Thoughts About Terms section. For example, has the couple experienced any changes in terms after children come home from the other parent's home? Has the other home specifically told the kids not to use certain terms? Give perspective about why this happens and talk about any thoughts or concerns they may have about related matters.
6. Call attention to the Post-Activity Questions for Reflection. Have them check in with the kids about the terms they are beginning to use as soon as they can.
7. Ask if there are any other extended family members they need to have a similar conversation with. For example, grandparents and aunts/uncles need to know how to refer to the children and what they will be called.
8. Emphasize to couples after this Activity to have clarifying conversations like this whenever ambiguous situations arise within their family.

Assign: Read chapter 6 and complete the Activity. Suggest the couple get started on the Activity quickly. It may take more time than usual; in fact, some couples need a series of conversations to complete it.

SESSION 6: PARENTING TOGETHER

Session Main Objective: The chapter deals with many aspects of parenting (e.g., the role of the biological parent and co-parenting). You are trying to move them closer to a mutually agreed-upon philosophy of parenting.

Counselor Tip: Before you meet with the couple, decide which subtopics you will spend your time discussing. Your previous sessions have likely informed you where the hot spots are. Begin with those.

How to Spend Your Time

1. Start by asking them to report on their Activity dialogue. What progress did they make? What still remains to be discussed? Did they get stuck on any topics? Help them continue their discussion in your session.
2. Ask them about the co-parenting guidelines mentioned in the section Study good co-parenting across households. Ask which are strengths or difficulties for them.
3. Review the five keys to good parenting in blended families. What insights did they gain from the section?
4. If time allows, review other key points in the chapter.

Assign: Read chapter 7 and complete the Activity.

SESSION 7: CREATING A SHARED GRIEF JOURNEY

Session Main Objective: Assess the individual grief journey of each individual in the family (children and adults) and help them grieve forward *together*, that is, learn how to talk about the past and carry important people/relationships with them in the present.

Counselor Tip: If you feel good about your connection with the children, you might include them in the debrief with the adults (in part to help the adults see how to engage kids around matters of grief) or meet with them separately from the adults to explore their grief journey in depth.

How to Spend Your Time

1. Ask the couple to report on their family grief conversations. What did they learn? What was expressed by the children?
2. In general, what insights did the chapter give the couple regarding grief's ongoing impact on individuals and blended family bonding? For example, when do they find themselves running away from grief or its impact on their family (see p. 104)?
 - You may have already talked about their original "earthquake," but what are the current "aftershocks" they still experience?
 - How did the initial earthquake impact the identity of children?
 - How do you "grieve out loud" in front of the kids at this point?
 - In what ways do you connect faith and life, that is, talk about spiritual things as they relate to pain and suffering?
 - How well do the parent and stepparent listen, affirm, and validate the emotions of chil-

dren? (You might review the principles of emotional coaching, p. 111.)

- When do you (or could you) step into a child's grief at strategic moments (p. 115)? Hint: the upcoming wedding is one such moment. Help couples be prepared to process the bitter emotions children may feel as well as the sweet.
3. Based on your understanding of the family, review other specific discussion questions that you believe are relevant.

Assign: Read chapter 8 and complete the Activity.

SESSION 8: ANTICIPATING WHAT WILL CHANGE

Session Main Objective: Help couples lead their family through more change, some of it unwanted. There will be many good, positive changes that bring life to children and adults because of their union, but it is the unwanted change that resurrects sadness over the unwanted changes of the past. You are helping couples not to be blindsided by this and to know what to do to aid children as they adjust.

Counselor Tip

1. This chapter makes couples aware of the common emotional and logistical shifts that occur after the wedding when the family begins living together. It is the logistics of life that often bring emotional insecurities to the surface. Talking through and anticipating simple, everyday changes helps take some of the sting and mystery out of the change and might instill a habit of intentionality to how the family will adapt over time.
2. Even though the chapter clearly describes changes as a potential “seismic shift,” many engaged couples will minimize what they anticipate happening in their situation. Don't be surprised if, when they report on their family discussion, they are overly optimistic about the kids' responses or what they believe they will face. In that case, in order to help them empathize more with their children, you might review the metaphor beginning on page 121 about adding six inches of water to someone who is already up to their eyeballs. Then return to imagining how children might experience small changes compared to the adults' experience.
3. By the way, it's not your responsibility to “make them get it,” but don't be blinded by their optimism, either.

How to Spend Your Time

1. What change, in your opinion, might be the most difficult? Spend time talking through any unclear situations related to the categories in the chapter (e.g., daily routines, holidays, primary residence, etc.).
2. What do your kids seem to indicate could be the most difficult?
3. Be sure to pause and reflect on how many new changes the children are being asked to adapt to (the Post-Activity Question for Reflection).

4. Reinforce: During times of change, it is very important that biological parents stay emotionally available to their children and, if applicable, visitation schedules remain consistent. What are you doing to plan for this?
5. Continue to connect for the couple relationship “dots” that keep coming up. For example, how grief observations you made while exploring their Family Map could be resurrected by additional unwanted change following the wedding.

Assign: Read chapter 9 and complete the Activity. You might alert them that this Activity will potentially take a lot of time. If they are short on time, ask them to at least talk through the first seven questions in the Activity. They can get to the rest as time allows (or in their session with you).

SESSION 9: MERGING MONEY AND YOUR FAMILY

Session Main Objective: Help your couple “finance togetherness,” that is, use money and financial plans to foster trust in their relationship and communicate care for each other’s children.

Counselor Tip

1. I believe we have a moral obligation to help couples talk about the role of money and financial provision of their children before they marry. This is a subject that couples and premarital counselors alike tend to assume will “just work out.” That’s not true in first marriages, and it certainly isn’t true with the added complexity of blended family dynamics. You can supplement the content of this book with training in budgeting and money management; just don’t skip over the unique aspects of blended families too quickly.
2. If the subject of money brings up strong emotions in either partner, it is often a signal that there are below-the-surface issues that need addressing. Perhaps a past breakup left the person financially vulnerable and now, understandably, they are highly sensitive to how money is handled. When you see strong emotions, chase the pain underneath. The couple (and you) need to understand what is driving the emotion. Work to resolve that first; then deal with money matters.

How to Spend Your Time

1. How did your discussion go? What were you able to achieve?
2. What below-the-surface issues did this chapter surface in you? Listen and chase the pain to help reveal what needs attention.
3. If the couple needs help getting started, begin by helping them take stock (p. 144) of their financial realities: assets, debts, arrangements if they die, etc. (Some couples have never fully articulated this to each other, for many reasons, but they need to start if they are going to develop trust.) Then, review the first seven questions of the Activity (beginning on page 151).
4. Are there logistical questions (“practicalities of money management,” p. 152) that they need to talk through?

Assign: Read chapter 10 and come prepared to wrap up your time or renegotiate for more sessions.

SESSION 10: TILL DEATH DO US PART

Session Main Objective: To wrap up your time together, help them solidify their plans for the future, and celebrate the wedding to come. In some cases, the couple may want to continue meeting with you. Talk through that with them and decide how you will spend your time. This is also a good time to schedule six-month and one-year check-in sessions.

Counselor Tip: Celebrate the intentional work the couple has put into their preparation. Affirm their commitment to strengthening their “usness” over time and encourage them to continue learning about stepfamily living. If your community has a small group for stepcouples, you might encourage them to plug in.

How to Spend Your Time

1. The pandemic parallels made in the chapter and the discussion of turning points capture the big picture of the stepfamily journey. They also provide hope for the journey. Reflect on those during the session and see if the couple had any insights from the chapter (especially “Navigating the New Normal” and “Reopening and Six Feet Away”, pp. 160–161).
2. Emphasize the importance of their marital commitment (Till Death Do Us Part, p. 164).
3. Reflect on “God’s little joke on us” (p. 165). What has premarital counseling taught them will be required of them?
4. Close by encouraging the couple to:
 - Find community with other blended family couples. A small group or sharing an occasional meal with another couple can be very helpful.
 - Keep learning about stepfamily living. There are multiple books, virtual courses, and podcasts offered through [FamilyLife Blended](#)® and [SmartStepfamilies](#)™.





Having published nine books on stepfamily living, Ron Deal is one of the most widely read and referenced authors on blended families in the country. He is President of Smart Stepfamilies™ and directs FamilyLife Blended®, the international blended family ministry of FamilyLife®. He is a bestselling author, conference speaker, podcaster, and family therapist who specializes in marriage enrichment and stepfamily education. He has been married to Nan since 1986 and is the father of three boys. Visit FamilyLife.com/blended for resources, Ron's podcast, and ministry training events, and visit SmartStepfamilies.com for Ron's speaking schedule and virtual events. Bring Ron to your community to encourage blended family couples.

ENDNOTES

- 1 J. S. Carroll and W. J. Doherty, "Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research," *Family Relations*, 52 (2003): 105–118.
- 2 S. M. Stanley, P. R. Amato, C. A. Johnson, and H. J. Markman, "Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey," *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 1 (2006): 117–26.
- 3 Stanley, et. al, "Premarital education," 117-126.
- 4 Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (1989). Preparing for remarriage: Anticipating the issues, seeking solutions. *Family Relations*, 38, 28-33. Even further, very few couples even talk with each other about becoming a stepfamily. Ganong & Coleman also found that fewer than half read a self-help book (or magazine article) about remarriage or stepparenting, about half discussed parenting, less than 25% discussed finances, and no other topic was discussed by more than 15% of the couples.
- 5 Brian Higginbotham, Linda Skogrand, and Eliza Torres, "Stepfamily Education: Perceived Benefits for Children," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 51 (2010): 36–49.



Find creative ideas for blended family weddings, podcasts, videos, live events, and more at familylife.com/preparingtoblend



Make your family a Smart Stepfamily at
FamilyLife.com/blended and SmartStepfamilies.com