

"Preparing to Blend is one of the best ways to prepare for blended family success."

—DR. GARY CHAPMAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The 5 Love Languages*

RON L. DEAL

PREPARING
TO
BLEND



The Couple's Guide to
Becoming a **Smart** Stepfamily

PREPARING TO BLEND



The Couple's Guide to
Becoming a Smart Stepfamily

RON L. DEAL



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2021 by Ron L. Deal

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

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Deal, Ron L., author.

Title: Preparing to blend : the couple's guide to becoming a smart stepfamily /
Ron L. Deal.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker
Publishing Group, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021025321 | ISBN 9780764237935 (paper) | ISBN 9780764239694
(casebound) | ISBN 9781493433551 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Stepfamilies. | Marriage counseling. | Families.

Classification: LCC HQ759.92 .D38 2021 | DDC 306.874/7—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021025321>

Cover design by Eric Walljasper

Author represented by MacGregor Literary

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To those who have loved and lost
and are willing to try again.
May coupleness be your haven
and familyness be your crowning joy.*

Contents

Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15
1. Not Just a Couple: Growing Activities, Bonding, and Becoming a Family	19
2. Seeing Is Eye-Opening: Drawing Your Blended Family Map	29
3. Helpful Expectations	43
4. Planning Your Wedding	57
5. Co-Creating Familyness: Deciding What to Call Each Other	67
6. Parenting Together	81
7. Creating a Shared Grief Journey	103
8. Anticipating What Will Change	121
9. Merging Money and Your Family	139
10. Till Death Do Us Part	155
Notes	167

Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of a multi-book partnership with Bethany House Publishers (special thanks to Andy, Ellen, David, Steve, Holly, Deirdre, Eric, Julie, and Jim) and the guidance of my agent, Chip MacGregor. What fun it has been working with all of you to bring peace to couples and families.

Special thanks are also due to the leadership of FamilyLife®, our key donors for seeing the need for stepfamily education and support, and to my current FamilyLife Blended® team and bonus “adjuncts”: Lynn and Larry, Gayla, Nicole, Kevin, Ann, Julie, Debbie, Sabrina, Tim, Kim, and Shannon.

And to my bride, Nan. Since 1986, the roller coaster we’ve ridden together has been full of ups and downs, sweet intimate vistas, and bitter sorrowful valleys. And through all of it, your love and partnership has given me a safe place to grow, mature, research, and share with others. I cannot thank you enough or thank God enough for you.

Introduction

This email is typical of the ones I frequently get through my website SmartStepfamilies.com.

Hi Ron. A few years ago, I lost my wife of 34 years. We had two sons together and a wonderful family. Now there is a new love in my life. She lost her husband four years ago, has two children in their mid-twenties, and one grandchild. We're planning to get married but want to start this family off right. We're reading your books and listening to your podcast but think premarital counseling with someone who understands blended families well would be wise. Can you help us?

Yes, I can help them. And I can help *you*.

Many couples reading this are engaged and making wedding plans. (For the most part, I'm going to assume you're either engaged or are considering it. If you're not serious about engagement yet, you might read my book *Dating and the Single Parent*, then come back to this one.) This is an exciting time for you. But engagement is not just about planning a wedding; it's about planning for your marriage and blended family after the wedding. That's the focus of this book—to help you

Even though research confirms that premarital preparation strengthens relationships, most couples forming blended families don't seek it out.¹ Obviously, that's not you. *Good for you.*

continue the “family merger” you’ve already started and gain relational strength as you move toward the wedding. I’ve spent three decades working with families and developing resources specifically for blended families; it will be an honor to come alongside you as you prepare for the big day and what follows.

In case you’re wondering, this book is appropriate for couples with young children and those with adult children, for those with a full nest and those with an empty nest. It’s applicable if one or both of you are bringing biological children to the picture (and if you have a child together), and if death, divorce, or a dissolved relationship preceded your falling in love. Yes, stepfamilies come in many shapes and sizes—and I’ve tried to consider all while writing this book. Not every section will apply specifically to you, but most will.

In some ways this book is a continuation of the book I just mentioned, *Dating and the Single Parent*. If you read that book while dating, I’ll pick up where it left off. If you’re already engaged and didn’t read it, that’s okay. I’ll integrate a few of the relevant points in this book. Now, having said that, if you are interested in learning more about any of the following topics, you may want to pick up a copy of that book since these are not covered in this one:

- Wise dating practices that consider children’s emotional needs;
- Relational dynamics surrounding cohabitation before marriage;

- Questions about divorce and remarriage from a Christian perspective;
- How to know with confidence if forming a blended family is a good decision for you and the kids at this point in time.

This book assumes you are already headed toward the altar, but even then, preparing to form a blended family sometimes causes people to want to take a step back and explore the above topics. *Dating and the Single Parent* will help you do that.

Surround Yourself

In the early 1990s, when I first started working with stepfamilies, people would complain to me, “Ron, where are all the resources for blended families?” and they were right to do so. Practical resources for the general public were few and far between. But that’s not true anymore. To date I have published more than a dozen resources and served as author and consulting editor of a series of books (SMART STEPFAMILY SERIES) for stepmoms, stepdads, and dating and married couples on a variety of subjects (e.g., money management and stepparenting), as well as multiple video curriculum and hundreds of online articles and videos. In addition, I’m teaching virtual classes, working with organizations and experts that cumulatively have produced many additional resources, dozens of national radio broadcasts, my popular podcast *FamilyLife Blended*, and worldwide on-demand livestream training. You can and should surround yourself with this trusted, research-informed, on-demand content, all accessible at SmartStepfamilies.com. Absorb as much of it as you can and decide now to be a student of stepfamily living. The more you know, the smarter you are, and the healthier your family gets.

General books on marriage can be helpful to you as well. For example, this book is a sister book to *Preparing for Marriage*, which is primarily for couples without children, getting married for the first time. That book lays an important Christian foundation for the purpose of marriage, describes various roles we play within marriage, and discusses healthy and unhealthy expectations for marriage. (I will not take the time to address those subjects here since that book does.) Another complementary resource is my book *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, coauthored with Dr. David Olson. Based on the largest survey of couples creating stepfamilies ever conducted, it includes an online relationship profile that provides personalized feedback about your relationship as you learn communication and conflict resolution skills, and gain insights about your relational styles, expectations, personalities, leisure preferences, sexual expectations, desired spiritual connection, and parenting strategies. It is a comprehensive examination of marriage in a blended family that can be read before or after the wedding and will complement what you find here.

Practical and Proven

In addition to emails like the one beginning this introduction asking if I can help prepare a couple for marriage in a blended family, I have also received thousands of emails, podcast reviews, and social media messages from couples who have been married for twenty years or more, thanking me for helping them navigate their family journey. The principles discussed in this book are practical and proven. However, if there's one truth about life, it's that none of us get to control it; no one can give you a recipe that will allow you to make every relationship just the way you want it. But having said that, I do know a few things that will help. I invite you to read this book with an open heart and mind. But don't just read it. *Do it*. That brings me to the central engine of this book, Growing Activities. Do them and you will be forever changed.



1

NOT JUST A COUPLE

Growing Activities, Bonding, and Becoming a Family

When it comes to blended families, *coupleness* does not necessarily equal *familyness*.

Right now you're a couple. The focus of your romantic love, and likely most of your dating, has been on falling in love and building a vision for your life together. But becoming a blended family involves so much more than just the two of you.

This book centers around several key Growing Activities that are designed to help you take steps toward family bonding—not just talk about familyness, but actually move toward it. So no, you can't read the chapter discussion and skip the activity. If you want to get the most from this book, you need to do the Growing Activities and include the children when indicated. I'll say more about the design of the Activities in a moment, but first I want you to consider something.

Join one of my virtual pre-blended family education groups for engaged couples at SmartStepfamilies.com.

Even though this book is DIY (do-it-yourself) pre-stepfamily training, I recommend you include one other person. As someone who has spent thousands of hours counseling and coaching couples, my advice is that you walk through the pages of this book with a relationship mentor, coach, or pastor. The best athletes, managers, salespersons, and even therapists have someone watch and coach them as they learn their craft. Sitting with someone who can ask probing questions and comment on your couple and family relationship dynamics will multiply the insights you gain and the ways you apply the wisdom of this book. I highly recommend that you take the time to find someone to walk with you. At SmartStepfamilies.com you can join my virtual groups for engaged couples and find a list of recognized Smart Stepfamily Therapy Providers™ (professionals who have been through my therapy training) who offer coaching and therapy to couples. In addition, many local places of worship offer premarital counseling. And organizations like Prepare-Enrich.com and SYMBIS.com can point you to certified coaches who make use of their online relationship assessments (which I highly recommend; you'll even find some of my Smart Stepfamilies material integrated into their resources).^{*} Organizations like FamilyLife.com (I started the division called FamilyLife Blended®) and ForYourMarriage.org (Catholic Family Ministries) offer general marriage training, events, and small groups for couples, and FamilyLife.com/blended has a searchable map to help you find blended family ministries and

^{*}Prepare-Enrich has a parenting assessment that I find especially helpful to blended family couples.

events around the country. You can walk through this book on your own, but I recommend you don't. Find a trusted guide who can walk beside you.

And in case you're wondering, making time for premarital preparation with a trusted guide is extremely valuable for couples in general. Numerous studies show that it really works. One study found that premarital preparation can reduce the risk of divorce by 30 percent.¹ Another meta-analysis of multiple studies found that overall, couples showed 79 percent improvement in all marital outcomes compared to couples who did not receive premarital education.² Taking the time to invest in your coupleness clearly matters.

Now, here's the catch: There are tons of pastors and marriage mentors or coaches, but not many have taken the time to become familiar with the unique dynamics of stepfamilies. Since you need to learn how to be a strong couple and a strong family, you need premarital preparation designed specifically for blended families. Go to the wrong coach, and you could end up getting misguided advice. My work trains and equips them for working with blended families, but many are still unfamiliar with it. So I've written this guide as a tool that can inform both you and them. Walking with them through each chapter, doing the Activities, and having the discussion will educate both of you and enhance your application of the material.

To the Pastor, Coach, or Mentor:

Use this book as your premarital counseling program and help close the gap in premarital education for blended family couples. A free downloadable guide is available along with suggestions for conducting blended family weddings. Go to FamilyLife.com/preparingtoblend.

Why Growing Activities?

If you want to make a new friend or deepen a romantic relationship, you must engage one another in a way that transforms the relationship. You can't just talk about having a better relationship; you have to do things *together* that make the relationship better and raise your emotional quotient.

The Growing Activities in this book are designed to move your step-relationships forward. Each chapter explains what the corresponding Growing Activity is meant to accomplish and why it is important to your family. Instructions for doing the activity are then outlined, and follow-up questions will help you process what you learned, identify insights gained from the Activity, and determine what steps your family might take next. Processing these questions with your mentor or pastor is wise as well.

Becoming family to one another—which is fundamentally what every blended family is hoping to accomplish—is an emotional process that requires active engagement by all parties. You can't just wish stepchildren, for example, into accepting, respecting, or loving a stepparent. They must develop mutual trust and affection through actual interaction. Growing Activities are intended to either move you in that direction or reveal what is standing in the way.

If you read *Dating and the Single Parent*, you may recognize a couple of the Activities. Even if you have done the Activities before, go through them again. Life and relationships are like a flowing river. You are further downstream than you were the first time you had the conversation, so go ahead and enter the stream again. You may find the outcome is different for a variety of reasons. Trust the process and jump in.

Include the children. It is critical that you include the children in Growing Activities when indicated. 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 aren't, and 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."³ 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. And being a contributor makes it more likely they'll follow through with their part of the plan, because the message they receive from being included is that they are valued and important. Therefore, kids of all ages need some input into their future family; the Growing Activities help them do that in a tangible way.

By contrast, when children aren't involved in the planning, can't relate to the style of your wedding ceremony, or feel the ceremony dishonors their original family, they may experience your wedding as empty and meaningless.⁴ To help you design a pre-wedding journey and family-based ceremony that is full of meaning and fosters family identity, chapter 4 goes into great detail about what is helpful to children of every age. By the way, if you are currently planning your wedding (e.g., the date and the details of the ceremony itself), you may want to skip to that chapter sooner rather than later so you can plan with wisdom. And share that chapter with your pastor, who likely also needs a little education about designing a blended family ceremony.

Giving children a voice in decisions that are affecting their lives and the family is important, but the most important reason

you must include the children in Activities is that they need relational reassurance from their biological parent that they haven't been forgotten. Children are highly invested in maintaining relationship with their biological parent(s). When their mom or dad falls in love and gives their time and energy to another adult, it is natural for them to feel pushed aside, insignificant, and vulnerable. You need to move toward your children so you can move toward your new spouse. Therefore, it's wise from time to time when engaged in the family-centered Growing Activities for the future stepparent to step back and, for example, let the biological parent take the lead on the Activity or even have exclusive time with their kids to complete the Activity. You'll have to decide when to include the future stepparent and when not to, but occasionally compartmentalizing relationships in this way paradoxically helps children include the stepparent; when they are reassured of their parent's continued love and presence, children feel less relationally threatened by the stepparent (and perhaps new stepsiblings) and are more likely to open their hearts to them.

Some Growing Activities are couple-centered, others family-centered. In the end, the Activities aim to create for you three combinations of time together: biological parent-child time, couple time, and "family time" when the stepparent (and their children) are included. Even after the wedding, strive to keep this balance of time throughout your first few years. It feeds each person and helps prevent relationships from competing.

One more thought: In times of stress (whether caused by life events or the transition to a blended family), it is helpful for biological parents to increase parent-child alone time and decrease family time (while still maintaining couple time to continue nurturing the marriage in the midst of family stress).⁵ This can feel to stepparents like they are being excluded, but long-term it has the opposite effect. When children feel safe

with their biological parent, they are more open to the step-parent, not less.

Building memories and a common language. Another advantage of the Growing Activities is that they build memories that the family can refer to after the wedding. For example, drawing your digital Blended Family Map (chapter 2) and helping to plan the wedding (chapter 4) create fun memories that stand on their own and represent the process of becoming a family. Positive memories serve a bonding function, and they give everyone a common language that they can utilize as they move through time. “Do you remember when we made that family map? I’ll never forget realizing how hard it must be for Ashleigh to spend time with me when she can’t be with her biological parent.” Observations like this become points of mutual understanding that move individuals along the path of becoming family to one another.

Full steam ahead? By the way, if you experience significant resistance from children during the Growing Activities, you need to, at a minimum, spend more time and energy working through the barriers, and at a maximum, consider slowing your roll toward marriage. Children shouldn’t get to dictate if and when you marry, but unwise is the couple who ignores the pushback or distress evident in a child(ren). Moving forward despite that is equivalent to shooting yourself in the foot. Instead, slow down. Talk through what you’re seeing and what it tells you about the child. Consult with your mentor or coach (or small group), and together decide how you will move forward.

If, on the other hand, your Growing Activities experience affirms your wedding plans, full steam ahead.

Getting Started

I suggest that each of you read a chapter and discuss the concepts and the Growing Activity as outlined. Some couples will

want two copies of this book in order to highlight what speaks to them most; others will share a copy. If you have a mentor or coach, you can discuss the chapter with them before and after doing the Activity (this makes a good structure for pre-stepfamily counseling). Feel free to modify the Activity for your family based on the ages of your kids, how well people are getting along, visitation schedules, and how much time you have. Make it your own. And if any Activity feels too risky, for whatever reason, feel free to skip it, but be sure to talk with each other and your coach about your concerns. What feels risky about it? What are you afraid will happen? These questions can be quite revealing.

After each Activity, share what you observed, what you think it means, and the implications for your journey forward. Each Activity is both an intervention—meaning it is designed to advance your family bonding process—and an assessment device—meaning it provides a feedback loop of information you didn't have before the Activity. Be sure to incorporate that information into how you move forward. For example, celebrate when you feel confirmation about the attitude of children or the family journey in general, and slow down to process information that suggests someone is struggling more than you realized.

Finally, let me make a comment about the order of the Growing Activities. There is a method to my madness. Activities—and the insights they bring—build on one another, so it's best if you go in order. The exceptions to that are “Planning Your Wedding” (chapter 4) and “Merging Money and Your Family” (chapter 9), which can be done at any point.

Co-Creating Your New Family

Unless you met as strangers on the TV program *Married at First Sight*, you have probably spent hundreds if not thousands

of hours investing in your coupleness. And if you had a few dating growing pains, keep in mind there were only two of you. You now endeavor to merge the lives of multiple children, sometimes from multiple homes, with perhaps a couple dozen extended family members for the rest of your lives. Let's just do the math, shall we? Biological families are often comprised of two parents and four grandparents. That means there are six primary parent figures directly responsible for childrearing and nurturing children through their lives—all of whom have a direct biological tie to a child who very much wants them in their world. Blended families often have between three and seven parents and stepparents, across three or more households, plus eight or more sets of grandparents, totaling nine to twenty-one parent figures. Now, keep in mind that many of these people don't like each other—which, of course, makes parenting far more complicated and difficult—and that on day one, children have strong preferences that some parent figures remain in their world while they would be fine with or without others. If you have invested hundreds or thousands of hours in building your coupleness, don't you think you need to be just as intentional *with children* to co-create your familyness? Let's get started.

TRY THIS

As you launch into this book, I encourage you to start a one-minute daily habit that will connect you and your spouse.

My one-year devotional *Daily Encouragement for the Smart Stepfamily* (with Dianne Neal Matthews) offers simple, practical thoughts to guide your journey to becoming family. Reading each day's thought literally takes less than a minute but can ignite important discussions as you strengthen your marriage and co-create your relationships and vision for parenting. And

here's the bonus benefit: Reading that book on a regular basis, even as you work through *Preparing to Blend*, will establish a value-centered relationship habit that will stay with your relationship throughout the years. Now, *that's* a habit worth beginning.