

BUILDING
LOVE
TOGETHER
IN BLENDED
FAMILIES



*The 5 Love Languages® and
Becoming Stepfamily Smart*

#1 New York Times bestselling author of The 5 Love Languages®

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Chapter 1: Blending Well, Loving Well

Without being too presumptuous, we think we know why you bought this book. You want a good blend. No, we're not talking about smoothies or coffee. You want your home to be a healthy place for everyone involved, a good blend of closeness, autonomy, and permanence, knowing you will be there for each other; a good blend of happiness and joy, trust and emotional safety; a good blend of parenting that offers limits, nurturance, and healthy boundaries that teach respect and decency to children so they can grow to be mature and responsible adults who contribute to the world and care for others. Simply put, you want to blend well and love well. A loving, blended family is why you got together (or are starting to date) and that's why you bought this book. Are we right—or pretty close?

A good blend is what Kate¹ wanted, too. Kate is the mother of three children and stepmother to two. She and her husband, Chris, had been married three years when she reached out for help. "We're making progress," she said, "but we keep falling into a hole." Her three kids, a boy sixteen, a girl thirteen, and a girl nine, lived with them full-time, while his two girls, ages seventeen and eight, kept a traditional every-other weekend visitation schedule with their mom. "My thirteen-year-old, Kayla, is a little sassy," Kate explained. "I try to keep her in line, but she grumbles and complains a lot. I've learned to work around it and make her follow through, but my husband feels disrespected and believes there shouldn't be any back talk and that we should punish her every time. This has been an issue for a while, and now it seems to come up at every turn, even when it's not about Kayla—if one of his kids gets out of line and I try to say something, he defends them, saying, 'Why would you get on mine when you won't get on yours?'" Sometimes stepfamily living is challenging because of multiple intertwined dynamics like this.

We believe the wise application of the five love languages and a good understanding of healthy stepfamilies can help you overcome these challenges. Kate's story reveals some common not-so-blended family dilemmas: a marriage that is being eroded by parental disunity; relatively benign disagreements that quickly feel like malignant betrayals of trust; biological parents who feel stuck in the middle; loyalty conflicts in children; and a death or divorce loss narrative that ever looms in the background, battling for command of new family relationships.

Chris feels disrespected and is likely worried things will get worse as his stepdaughter gets older. Kate feels frustrated and distraught, caught in the middle between two people she loves and cares for deeply. She has tried to find a win-win solution, but no matter what she does somebody seems unhappy and angry with her. Kayla is argumentative (an annoying behavior no parent wants to see in their child), but what really worries Kate is that the family conflict makes her daughter feel singled out, picked on, and rejected by her stepdad (which isn't good for her developing self-esteem). And both Kate and Chris end up unhappy with their marriage. In all, everyone tells the story of their family a little differently, but they agree they don't feel safe and loved. At this rate this will not result in a good blend.

But why is this happening? They love each other, right? Well, yes, they do . . . to varying degrees. You see, that is part of the problem. In blended families sometimes the definitions of love given by children and adults, and the motivation to deepen love, vary widely.

First, let's consider how different definitions of love complicate loving in a blended family. One way to define love is by examining what we call love associations, that is, the relational qualities or behaviors associated with love. A stepchild may love their stepparent, but that does not necessarily

translate into the same level of respect for their authority as it does with a biological parent. A stepparent may love all the children the same, but still find it awkward to hug their stepchild. A parent may love their new spouse, but not want to add the spouse's name to the life insurance already set up for their children. Stepsiblings may have a blast together and consider one another family, but not want stepsiblings in the annual Christmas family portrait made with Grandma. And step-grandparents, who love all the grandkids equally, may find themselves more willing to babysit if the biological grandchildren are there. You see, it is the associations of love that help give definition to it and determine how it expresses itself in families—and whether people feel loved.

The problems start when the definitions of love between adults and children collide, like Kate's frustration with her daughter for "not letting her stepdad into her heart," and with her husband for "pushing Kayla out of his."

Stepchildren often have a basic level of respect for stepparents (like they would toward a teacher at school). Problems arise, however, when the parent and/or stepparent demand more than that. Likewise, definitions of love are colliding when a biological parent gets angry at their spouse for not offering the same type of hug to the stepchildren as they do their own children, or when a stepparent withdraws love from stepchildren for not including stepsiblings in the annual Christmas portrait. This is also why the level of conflict in the first year of stepfamily living is a bit shocking to many newlyweds.

Before marriage they perceived their children as excited for the wedding and becoming a family, but after the honeymoon they experience kids who are dragging their feet. Sometimes it is true that the couple saw only what they wanted to see (approval from the children for them to marry), but other times the kids really were excited for the wedding. But that doesn't mean their definitions of "becoming a loving family" were the same as the adults. Once real life hits and everyone is living under the same roof, gaps in the definitions of love become apparent. Insiders and outsiders definitions of love also differ among biological family members (what we often refer to as "insiders") and stepfamily members ("outsiders"). Because Kate and Kayla have always been together, Kate understands when to take her daughter's sarcasm as disrespectful. She understands her daughter's moods and when something else is behind her sharp tone. These things are clear to insiders—and more importantly, they don't doubt whether they are loved during their worst moments. Chris, an outsider to all of this, is in a much more fragile place. He is learning to read his stepdaughter's emotional cues, but even when he can look past her outward behavior, he still sees it as disrespect—and with it, the fear that love between the two of them might not develop or mature. Further, if love between them is strained, he is aware that other relationships, like between stepsiblings, will likely be affected.

Clashing definitions of "love" spark hurt, anger, and protest in a family. Some of this is an attempt to push the "offending" person to love in a way more consistent with what the hurt person believes should be happening. But, predictably, this reaction usually backfires in a multitude of ways. (Later we'll show you better ways to respond.) It shames the "unloving" person and tells them they aren't good enough; it makes the hurt person look selfish and immature; it creates conflict and tension in the home; it expands the emotional distance between the persons directly involved. When other family members (like a biological parent) jump in to defend or protect their fellow "insider," additional relationships can become casualties as well.

Members of blended families can differ greatly in their motivation to love and love deeply. For example, in some stepfamilies only the couple has a need for a good blend while the children are fine if it never happens. This is predictably true the first year or so for stepfamilies with teenagers. It is often the case well beyond the first year with later-life stepfamilies (sometimes called adult stepfamilies) that are

born when the stepchildren are adults. Frequently, adult stepchildren don't have a need to bond with a stepparent, let alone love them. In fact, many adult stepchildren don't even identify themselves as part of a stepfamily or think of their parent's new spouse as their stepparent. We've had multiple conversations with adults whose parent has been remarried for years, and it never occurred to them to view their parent's spouse as anything other than "Dad's wife." This reality is discouraging to many stepparents who very much want to form a trusting mutual relationship with their stepchildren.

We'll should mention that this gap in motivation complicates parenting younger children tremendously. For example, one quality of good parents is they don't worry about winning their kids' approval. You see, chasing a child's approval puts you in a position of weakness. It makes you hesitate when you need to set a boundary. This dynamic puts stepparents at a distinct disadvantage, especially when it's clear the child is not nearly as motivated toward love as the stepparent.

Complicating all this is the underlying presence of loss in the family. Parents need the family to blend—and they need their children to need it to blend, too. Why? Because parents want to restore for their kids (no matter their age) what was lost to death, divorce, or a breakup. They want their children to be part of a loving family that will nurture and care for them well into the future. In addition, many parents don't want to feel guilty for exposing their children to a fractured family, even if it primarily wasn't their fault. What parents passionately and desperately want is for love to "win the day" in their stepfamily home. And not just surface love; they want a deep, abiding, trusting, leaning-on-each-other type of love.

Well, of course, they—and you—do. Love and loving is what heals our souls and gives us confidence, identity, passion, a sense of meaning, and the energy to charge into the world. Love is what reveals us, affirms us, values us, forgives us, and redeems us. It connects us to He who first loved us and empowers us to extend God's love to others. Love and loving result in a compassionate society that reaches across social, racial, economic, political, and national lines and unifies people. It builds bridges of mercy and grace that traverse territorial divides—whether political or familial—and connects the hearts of people. So, of course, this is what you want and need. Your children, however, just might not share in your need to the same degree.

The question, given varying definitions of love and motivations to love, is how do you accomplish a good blend? How does a blended family best pursue a loving home when there are varying definitions of what love should look like and varying motivations to make it happen? If you're blessed enough to have children who are also motivated toward deepening love, you'll find a good blend easier to achieve. If you're not, the degree of difficulty just went up considerably. Either way, forming a good blend begins by becoming stepfamily smart.

The relational structure of a blended family is different than a biological family so you have to get smart about stepfamily living.* For example, the fact that one parent has a bonded, biological relationship with their child(ren) that predates the couple's marriage is a significant difference. This has implications for parent, stepparent, and sibling roles in the home, and affects everything from how people grieve, to finances, to marital trust, to co-parenting with an ex-spouse. That's why I (Ron) like to say that blended family couples swim in a different ocean than first-marriage couples. The stepfamily ocean has a cooler water temperature (step-relationships tend to have less warmth). Most everyone in a stepfamily has experienced a significant loss that is always just under the surface. This ocean has more sharks (former spouses, co-parenting issues, and the stress of merging to name a few). And the water is less clear (stepfamily life is murky: roles are unclear, rituals and traditions hazy, and relationships lack definition).

To navigate this ocean well requires that you understand and follow a few blended family principles for loving well.

BLENDING FAMILY PRINCIPLES FOR LOVING WELL

Principle #1: Blended families are not born with a sense of “familyness”; your journey nurtures it.

Fundamentally, the journey of a blended family is the search for a shared identity. “Who are we to one another?” is the first question everyone is asking. Parents often try to answer it quickly. “There’s no ‘mine’ or ‘yours’ in this family. We’re family now. You’re all ‘my’ kids.” But what does that really mean? Is that true with adult children the way it might be with younger children? And does everyone embrace the “we” language or does that feel intrusive in some way? You have to journey to the “land of us” before you can say, “This is us.” The bonds of love have to be nurtured, agreed upon, and valued by all. On day one, blended families are not blended. They are a collection of insiders and outsiders in search of familyness. While pursuing this goal, being patient with the process is critical.

Principle #2: Patience is a virtue. While waiting, love generously.

Because motivations to love vary between adults and children, insiders and outsiders, it is important for family members to relax their expectations for the family. Assuming, as many people do, that children will love their stepsiblings and the stepparent just because the couple has fallen in love and decided to marry is a huge setup. Now, if that happens, sing your praises and keep marching on. But usually there’s at least a gap in the timing of when this happens and to what depth bonding takes place. Softening your expectations is not about giving up hope; it is about becoming realistic about the timing and pace of bonding within your home. Learning to be patient is important.

Because the average blended family needs between five and seven years to merge and form a shared family identity,² I (Ron) tell couples to create their family with a “slow cooker” approach, not a blender.³ Blenders have blades! Slow cookers blend ingredients quietly and over a longer period of time. Ingredients are left intact when first put into the pot (we call that moment a wedding) and are allowed to soften and begin to share of themselves in their own timing. This is a critical concept that can dramatically change the outcome of your family journey. When parents, as we alluded to previously, try to force love they violate the integrity of the ingredients. You may be trying to make stew, but smashing the carrots or potatoes isn’t helpful or even necessary when using a slow cooker. Ingredients will eventually share what they have to offer entirely on their own and they don’t need to be mangled in the process. The trick in the beginning is respecting the firm, sometimes-rigid exterior of ingredients (like carrots) while gently inviting them to soften and join with the others to make something everyone can enjoy. This low-level “heat” is in part what this book will help you do. Loving with wisdom softens the heart. But make no mistake about it, even when you get it right, it still takes many hours to cook something in a slow pot and it often takes years to blend a stepfamily.

So, while you’re waiting for ingredients to warm up and soften, then combine with other ingredients, remember to love generously. This doesn’t mean throwing yourself indiscriminately onto others or violating their space (we’ll talk about pacing with other ingredients in a later chapter). Nor does it mean to overextend yourself to those who are closed toward you. However, it does mean to be generous, persistent, steadfast, and sacrificial with your love, even toward those who aren’t generous in return. When waiting on someone else to warm up, most people withdraw to a safe place. But if you “go cold,” it’s unlikely the other person will become warm. Someone must always go first. Your motivation makes you the best candidate.

Principle #3: A committed, loving marriage is the first and last motivator of stepfamily integration, so strengthen your marriage.

Of course, you want a loving marriage. And one that lasts. Research by Dr. David Olson and me (Ron) reveals that there are unique aspects of forming a strong blended family marriage. In our book *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* we report that, like all couples, stepcouples must manage the internal aspects of marriage related to things like communication, finances, and resolving conflict. However, what often blindsides couples are the external “sharks” that surround them in the stepfamily ocean. Parenting dilemmas, a difficult ex-spouse, and not knowing how to balance loyalties to children and the new marriage can take bites out of the couple’s solidarity.

And while these dynamics are stressful in and of themselves, they add to the fear of another relationship failure or loss. And fear, ironically, makes failure more likely. The insidious truth about fear, our research confirmed, is that if I am concerned that you’re not committed to me and/or my children I will become guarded, self-protective, distrustful, and reactive. And when I’m protecting me from you there cannot be an “us.”

Considered together, we believe couples in stepfamilies have more internal and external stressors on their relationship than most couples. Learning to love each other well includes learning to speak your spouse’s love language and getting smart about swimming in the stepfamily ocean. A loving marriage obviously does a lot for you. Beyond that, it also has a huge impact on the motivation of your family members to love one another. Just as the love of a highly motivated person bids the love of someone initially cold to warm up, your loving marriage encourages the members of your family to eventually love one another. Think about it. They wouldn’t be family at all if you didn’t fall in love as a couple in the first place. And without a committed, happy, ongoing relationship, children and extended family lose their motivation to be family to one another. Your coupleness is the first and last motivator for their familyness.

A number of studies show that the relational ties between stepfamily members correlate with the couple’s relationship. Even after many years as a blended family, if a couple divorces, step- siblings tend to lose contact with one another and far fewer adult stepchildren think it their obligation to care for an aging stepparent like they would a biological parent.⁴ The permanence of your marriage is what keeps them at a minimum, motivated for a basic connection and at a maximum, defining one another as family.

By the way, we believe, based on a review of the research on cohabitation, that married couples make the strongest statement of permanence to their children and extended family. Cohabitation cannot match this. Why should children and extended family find room in their heart to love and appreciate a stepparent or embrace an adult stepsibling if their parent has left the door open to leaving the one relationship that has brought everyone together?

Couples and family members need clear definition of the future in order to find their motivation for familyness. Your relationship is what makes that happen.

Principle #4: Parents in blended families have to be a team and play to their individual strengths.

Parenting in the stepfamily ocean has inherent challenges so it requires synchronized swimming by parents. In most stepfamilies this includes two groups: the parent and stepparent within your home and the co-parents in separate homes. Essentially, all the parental players need to see themselves as a team—and consider each other teammates. Each has to accept the involvement of the other, even if they didn’t want them there in the first place, and on behalf of the children find ways of working together. Finding

grace in your heart for all the members of the parenting team can be very difficult for some. The advantages for children are numerous, including having a more stable environment, not being caught in between-home battles, and having predictable boundaries, just to name a few.

Playing to your individual strengths in part means recognizing that an insider biological parent can set boundaries with potency in a way an outsider stepparent can't. On the other hand, sometimes a stepparent, because they have been emotionally removed from everything that has happened in a child's life, can ask probing questions and comfort a child in a way a biological parent cannot. Every parenting role has pros and cons. The trick is being aware of these strengths in your other teammates and releasing control in order to let them play roles you cannot.

Principle #5: Loss complicates bonding and building love, so grieve well.

Stepfamilies are born out of losses that must be grieved over time. But since not everyone has experienced the same loss, family members need to learn to grieve together. The loss experienced by Kate and her three children, for example, could have been very different than the loss experienced by Chris and his two daughters. Or maybe they were similar (e.g., divorce), but varied widely in terms of emotional impact (a high-conflict divorce versus an amicable one). Whichever the case, loss and its accompanying grief journey are ongoing. A new marriage does not put a halt to sadness or hurt, and it certainly doesn't stop the recalibrations that loss brings. For example, children who before their parents' divorce thought that life was safe and predictable are recalibrated by loss into an awareness that bad things can and do happen. This in turn can complicate bonding with new family members. Children who watched their mom and dad fall out of love are no longer certain that love will last—or that the new family will last.

Given that grief is a powerful undercurrent in the stepfamily ocean, always just below the surface of daily interactions, both parents and stepparents should look for ways to share their grief journeys openly. For parents, recognizing sadness ("you're missing your mom today, huh") and entering a child's grief at holidays, special days, and milestone moments ("I know celebrating Christmas is hard without your mother") is important for the child's well-being and the process of family bonding. Grief must not be denied. Sharing the journey together is what makes grief tolerable.

Principle #6: Don't walk away too soon.

If part of your blended family isn't loving or safe, do what can be done. In the meantime, don't toss away or minimize the good you do have. Lean in to what is working, to what feels safe, and appreciate it. It might not feel like much, but don't allow struggles to cancel out joys.

We have observed that most step-couples that divorce do so long before they ever experienced any of the rewards of their journey. They just quit too soon. You may not like something—or many somethings—in your family right now, but don't give up on all of it. The divorce rate for blended family couples is between 10 to 25 percent higher than first marriages.⁵ But it doesn't have to be. We are convinced that smart stepfamilies who learn to speak love well can thrive in their journey and experience marital oneness and child well-being and break the generational cycle of divorce for future generations. When the going gets tough in your home, hold on to this hope. Keep learning and growing. Sacrifice a little more and love more deeply. Perseverance pays off.

Principle #7: Learning to love well comes by putting away guilt and knowing the source of love.

Stepfamilies and guilt seem to go hand in hand. It could be guilt based on actions, such as adultery, effectively ending a marriage and causing emotional wounds in children, or the passive guilt a partner feels because they were left by an ex (they didn't make the decision to leave, but feel they could

have prevented it somehow). Spiritual shame or guilt over a past you can't change can be debilitating to some, especially if they are met with social judgment by their religious community. Not being able to take communion, or not being able to serve in the children's ministry due to being divorced, send repeated messages to people that they are tainted or unworthy. The person might then assume that God also holds them at arm's length.

Feeling spiritually dirty or second-class has a powerful depressing effect on one's psychological, physical, and relational well-being. A young man approached me (Ron) after church one day to ask what to me was a gut-wrenching question. He explained that his parents' marriage was the result of an affair that had ended each of their first marriages. He first wondered if their marriage was legitimate in the eyes of the church. Then he asked if he, being the fruit of that marriage, was acceptable in God's eyes. My heart sank for him. I assured him that indeed he was accepted by God and that God didn't view him as contaminated or of no value. I then shared with him that the love of God isn't based on our ability to earn it; it is freely offered. And more to the point, when disobedience is part of someone's past (his parents), I told him that with repentance God is quick to forgive.

Knowing that God sets you free, frees you to pass along His love and forgiveness to others in your home. Loving well comes by knowing the source of love.

Living and loving well in a blended family is a long, often challenging journey. Eventually, however, if you stick with it, you step into your destination. You want a good blend—the principles we just shared are a great first step. Next, let's look at the five love languages—and how to apply them to your blended family.

Chapter 1: Blending Well, Loving Well

1. Not her real name. Throughout the book names and details of real people have been changed to protect individual and family privacy.
2. Patricia Papernow, *Becoming a Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families* (New York: Gardner Press, 1993), 387.
3. Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*, revised and expanded ed. (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014), 93–98.
4. See Emily E. Wiemers et al., "Stepfamily Structure and Transfers between Generations in U.S. Families," paper presented at the 2015 annual meeting of the Population Association of America, San Diego, CA, July 2018, http://public.econ.duke.edu/~vjh3/working_papers/StepkinTransfers.pdf.
5. For a full discussion of the blended family divorce rate see Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, revised and expanded ed. (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014), 101–102.

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