

Dating *and the* Single Parent

RON L. DEAL



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Ron L. Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent*

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To single parents and your children

*May God's grace, strength, and wisdom be with you as
you navigate the many decision points ahead.*

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Through the years I've learned so much from the single parents I've counseled and worked beside in ministry. Thank you for your courageous vulnerability and willingness to share your lives, dreams, and struggles. I'm humbled by what you accomplish every single day on behalf of your kids. I'm especially grateful to the single parents who served in a focus group for this book. The time you took to respond to questions, read the manuscript, and share your insights will bless thousands of single parents and their children. I am truly grateful.

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FOREWORD

Like many single people, you probably long to share your life with someone. Perhaps your heart jumps and you get all tingly when a prospect comes along. But what of your parental heart? As a single parent or the dating partner of a single parent you intuitively know that dating is different because someone else is involved—the kids. Dating isn't just about the two of you, making dating and a potential marriage more complicated than ever. And because kids are involved and the stakes are higher this time around, I'm confident you want to make wise dating decisions.

As a parent, you may wonder how dating will affect your children. Are they ready? Are you ready? If you're dating someone with kids, you wonder what to expect and how to tell if you can make a blended family work. This book will answer those questions and more.

Forty-two percent of adults in the U.S. have a step relationship. At FamilyLife's Weekend to Remember marriage getaways, we've found that up to 30 percent of couples who attend are in blended families. But sadly, two-thirds of marriages where one or both partners bring children into the relationship end in divorce. In view of this need, FamilyLife has been delighted to welcome Ron Deal to our ministry. A licensed marriage and family therapist who has over two decades of experience working with blended

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families, Ron will reveal why relationships with kids in the mix are so much more complex. And he'll show you what you can do as you begin a relationship to navigate those difficulties and prepare for a successful marriage.

Ron shares that “coupleness” and “familyness” are not the same thing. As good as a dating relationship might feel, it's nothing without familyness, and ultimately familyness is what creates a legacy. This book will help you see beyond the tingly feelings to determine if a dating partner will help you form a healthy family.

If you're a single parent, Ron's going to ask you practical questions to see if you're emotionally and relationally ready to date. He will share with you conversations you need to have with your kids before you date and once the dating has started, and he will help you decide when and how to introduce kids to the person you may be more than just casually interested in.

If you're dating someone with kids, Ron will prepare you for the unique family dynamics that might otherwise blindside you after the honeymoon's over. He'll explain why you can't expect that marrying someone with kids will instantly give you the family you may have always wanted.

Ron will also discuss the yellow and red lights to watch out for in the relationship, and reveal the traps of online dating.

He has some hard truths to tell parents. For example, even though the person you're dating may feel like your life partner, your children may not be ready to share you with them. He will also encourage you to consider whether dating is beneficial for you and the kids right now, and tell you why and when it might be better to wait.

For over thirty-six years my wife, Barbara, and I have been working with families, equipping people with the skills they need for marriage. We know storms are inevitable. It's critical to determine whether the person you're dating is someone who's going to lay a firm foundation with you to withstand them. Ron can help

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you anticipate rough weather particular to blended families and give you wisdom on knowing if your dating partner will help you survive the turbulent storms that you *will* encounter. Ron will equip you with what you need to establish a solid foundation and build your house on The Rock of Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:24–27).

Proverbs says, “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance” (1:5). In this book you’ll find invaluable spiritual guidance from one of America’s leading blended family experts. Listen to Ron’s advice and become wise.

Dr. Dennis Rainey
President, FamilyLife
April 2012

PREFACE

PROMISE:

This book will tell you the hard truth about single-parent dating. Side effects may include greater discernment about the path to marriage, finding lasting love, creating family unity, and avoiding big mistakes for you and the kids. Please be advised: not all fantasies will become reality.

Get-rich-quick books promise a fast track to wealth beyond your dreams with little risk, little effort, and no time required. Dating books often promise the same. *Find lasting love in three easy steps—no risk required!* I refuse to do that to you. I respect you and care about your kids too much to tell you everything you want to hear and offer simplistic advice.

If you want to get rich, you need to apply wise investment practices and self-discipline over an extended period of time. If you want to date well with children in the picture and make a solid decision about getting married, you need to gain wisdom about the dating process, know the risks and challenges for both you and your children, and make careful decisions—over an extended period of time.

This book promises to tell you the truth about single-parent dating. In fact, some of you will find hard truths you don't want to hear—and you'll be irritated with me for saying them. Please know these hard truths are intended for your benefit and the well-being of your children. If family unity is the wealth you ultimately desire, read the entire book and be willing to receive the hard truths. Relational wealth will come about as a result.

For twenty years I have been working with stepfamilies as a therapist, conference speaker, and ministry leader. The most common comment I hear from married couples in blended families is, “We had no idea what we were getting into.”

After reading this book, that *won't* be you.

INTRODUCTION

STRIVING FOR LOVE

The Daily, an online and Apple iPad news service, reported that on March 19, 2011, Forrest Lunsway, age one hundred, and Rose Pollard, age ninety, qualified for a Guinness World Record as the oldest couple ever to marry. Rose's advice to dating couples: "Take your time and get to know one another. Get to know if you like all the things that person stands for. If they have the same values." I guess she meant that, because the couple dated for thirty years (no rush to marriage here!) and then married on Forrest's one-hundredth birthday at their local senior center in Orange County, California.¹

People the world over—no matter their age—believe in romantic love. For example, while more and more Americans say that marriage is becoming obsolete for society, a fewer number think marriage is obsolete for them.² Most people still want to get married. We believe in marriage, strive for it, long for it, and actively pursue it.³

We are created in the image of a loving God with the deepest desire to, like him, love and be loved. This includes, in general, having loving relationships with extended family and friends, and specifically includes the desire to mate with another in an exclusive pair-bond. God himself pointed out that the first thing

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in creation that wasn't good was that man was alone. Keep in mind that man wasn't completely "alone"; he had complete access to and oneness with God. But apparently that wasn't sufficient, given man's design. Adam needed something else. We, male and female, were made with the need to connect and be partnered with a member of the other gender.

Adam's same existential ache to be partnered with someone is felt by the unmarried today. It's what opens us to romance and pulls us toward the idea of a pair-bond relationship. And it's what gives us what I jokingly call marital amnesia, that is, the willingness to date again even after a painful divorce (LOL). People in the midst of a horrible divorce who vow "never again to be vulnerable to rejection" often find themselves a few years or even months later falling for another person. The possibility of love leads us to temporarily forget what it's like to be in pain, and forever invites us to look with optimism toward a future with love. The sense of aloneness *pulls* us toward love. But if the ache of loneliness pulls, the ache of pain *pushes*.

The pit of loss, whether stemming from a divorce, the death of a spouse, or the rejection of a boyfriend/girlfriend with whom you share a child, is dark and easily overwhelming—and no one wants to stay there long. In the pit, depression, sadness, guilt, devastation, rejection, and a sense of being lost abound. Needless to say, these are unwelcome infections, and if you are not careful, your medication of choice will be romance. Notice I didn't say "love," I said "romance." Romance and infatuation have an intoxicating effect that gives the appearance of fixing pain, and boy is it attractive. If there is one clear vulnerability in life, it is anything or any feeling that promises to lift you out of the pit of pain. This may be drugs or alcohol, pornography, religiosity, excessive work, anything that provides a rush of adrenaline, or a new relationship. The cocaine of attention seems to work wonders when all you know is the pit. But buyer beware: This drug has

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a short shelf life and can ultimately cause more destruction!

At some level, whether for God-given *pull* reasons or medicinal *push* ones, most single people are striving for love and shared romance with another person. Maybe you are just beginning to entertain the idea of dating and are hoping this book can help you navigate the terrain. Or maybe you have dated a few times, maybe even fell in love again, but found the experience confusing.⁴ (One person said, “It’s weird trying to figure out how to enter the dating world, and pretty depressing, to be honest. I feel like an awkward teenager all over again.”) Or perhaps you believe you’ve already found the love of your life and you’re wondering about your kids. In any case, this book will help.

Single-parent dating includes complicated questions:

- So far my kids and I have survived our loss—how will the transition to my dating complicate our survival?
- How do I know I’m ready or that my kids are ready for me to start dating?
- What if the person I date brings harm to my kids? How would I know if they are a sexual predator?
- How is dating or marriage going to affect my kids and my parenting?
- How do I introduce someone to my kids—and what if they don’t like each other?
- How will marriage and blended family living impact my kids—and how can I guarantee that I or they won’t be hurt again?

If You Are Dating a Single Parent

When reading sections of this book written specifically to single parents be sure to assess whether the person you are dating is giving proper consideration to the concepts. If not, invite them to read the book along with you. If they continue to ignore the wisdom shared, don’t assume your goodwill can make up for their short-sightedness.

The person dating a single parent has questions, too:

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- How do I date in a crowd (i.e., with kids in the picture)?
- How do I make a good first impression on the kids? What do I do if they don't like me or give me dirty looks?
- If I fall in love with their parent, what would my role be as a stepparent? Could I handle it?
- What's the ex-factor? How do I deal with their ex, and how much of a negative influence will they be?

These and many other questions will be addressed in this book. Considered together, these questions illuminate a crucial insight for both single parents and those dating them that we will return to again and again: When kids are involved, dating is not just about finding a mate but beginning a family.

THE CATCH: COMPETING ATTACHMENTS

In adoptive and biological families, couples come together before children enter the picture. When coupleness precedes familyness, as I like to say, the marriage serves as the source and foundation of the family unit. Here's why that's important: When marriage forms the foundation of the family, every other relationship in the family is an outgrowth of the marriage and systemically supports it and lives in harmony with it. When children are born to a couple, the resulting parent-child relationships don't intrinsically compete with the couple's marriage. They may vie for time and energy, but their very presence doesn't inherently compete with the marriage itself. Parent-child relationships naturally draw strength and security from the marriage and in turn feed and support the marriage. When the marriage precedes children, family attachments mutually strengthen and feed one another.

However, when a single parent moves toward a love relationship with someone who is not the child's parent, a competing attachment is formed. To the child, the parent's love and increasing

dedication to a new partner do not naturally strengthen the child's relationship with the parent, but compete with it. Likewise, stepparents often feel left out and perhaps jealous when their spouse spends time with their stepkids. Because familyness pre-dated couple-ness, relationships compete.

Here's another way to articulate the contrast. In first families, everyone is rooting for the couple's success, especially the kids. When Mom and Dad are happy, life is as it should be. When parents are at odds with each other, kids in biological families hope they'll resolve their issues and live at peace. But in blended families, children aren't as invested in the success of the couple as the couple is, and on occasion they are dead set against it. Relationships in biological families naturally synergize and support each other; new relationships in blended families naturally compete with the emotional attachments that preceded the new marriage.

That's why I always cringe when I hear a single parent say one reason they want to find a new partner is so their children will have a father or a mother.

While it's true that a stepfather, for example, can eventually fill some of the masculine gaps in a child's life, a mother's hope that a stepfather will fill the "daddy-hole" in a child's heart is misguided.

She needs to understand that bringing a man into her children's

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Your Wisdom Shared on Facebook/ SmartStepfamilies

What do you wish you had known before getting remarried?

"I was prepared. I had read the books and intellectually understood the process. But living as a blended family is infinitely tougher than I thought it would be."—Lara S.

"I wish that I hadn't tried to replace my kids' dad with my husband. I thought that since their dad was literally an absentee father, their stepdad could become their 'real' dad with all the rights and privileges that come with being a biological father."—Marilyn E.

"Wish I would have known how hard it was going to be and could have prepared my heart for this hurt better."—Teresa S.

"I wish I would have known how hurtful stepkids can be and the damage they do on a guilt-ridden father. Read, get counseling, attend a great church, and take the online Couple Checkup BEFORE the 'I Do's!'"—Sophia H.

lives very well may destabilize (at least for a time) her children's world, not bring stability to it. At a minimum, it will decentralize them from receiving her full attention—a significant change for children who have already experienced great loss—and may make them feel in competition with their stepfather.

Recognizing this truth will better inform your striving for love. Embracing this truth as a single parent will lessen your expectations of instantly becoming a happy family, lower your stress about finding someone who will fill the parental gaps in your child's life, and hopefully help you to relax about finding a mate. Embracing this truth as someone dating a single parent will help you not feel rejected if the kids are slow to warm up to you; it's still difficult, but at least you know this response is common and not necessarily a personal rejection of you. Not recognizing this truth sets you up—whether you are the single parent or dating partner—to send me an email of confusion and frustration.

MY RECURRING EMAIL

Have you ever had a recurring nightmare? I get a recurring email. You can fill in the specifics, but the basic structure is the same. Melissa's email is a good example:

Kevin and I have been married almost two years. . . . We did not have any premarital preparation. . . . We decided to marry a few months after we met. I have three sons ages . . . and Kevin has two kids ages . . . I thought this would be easy because we felt right for each other—boy was I wrong. Absolutely dead wrong! We have struggled for two years. . . . We are so in love with each other, but we can't come to terms on matters of parenting and stepparenting, and the boys are jealous of my relationship with Kevin. I wish we would have waited a little longer to marry. Can you help us?

—Melissa

Now, here's what you need to know: Kevin and Melissa are good people. In fact, they are godly, upstanding, going-to-heaven people. They just didn't know what they didn't know. And they let the push of ache (trying to run from the pit of pain) and pull of love (the desire for attachment) dictate their dating and decisions about marriage instead of letting wisdom do that for them. In short, they fell prey to their own blinders. (Regrettably, I have to pause and share this irony of ironies—just now as I was writing this section, I actually got another version of this recurring email! Except this time it ended with “I just got served divorce papers.” Married just fourteen months and their blended family is over. My heart breaks for them. It doesn't have to end this way for you.)

WISDOM AND FOLLY

The first nine chapters of Proverbs in the Bible present a contrast between those who embrace the wisdom of God and those who reject it for foolishness. The two sides of this contrast are personalized as Wisdom and Folly, who call out to and try to entice passersby. The contrast is profound. Wisdom provides understanding and the knowledge of God; Folly provides simplemindedness and a lack of judgment. Wisdom provides victory, a shield of protection, and peace to the soul; Folly leaves one exposed to evil and filled with anxiety. Wisdom offers discretion to walk straight paths of blessing and rescues one from lustful and adulterous enticements; Folly leaves one to walk in dark ways and fall prey to the influence of lust. Wisdom extends life and brings prosperity as one wins the favor of both men and God; Folly offers a short and difficult, undisciplined life.

I beg you to heed the call of Wisdom regarding your relationships, your family decisions, and your parenting or you might as well start drafting your email to me now. Folly offers no discernment; it is only interested in pursuing the passions of the moment

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Kids Talk

“What was my dad thinking? He found this woman online and fell head over heels for her without even knowing her. He has ignored every piece of advice about dating he gave me when I was a teenager. I’m losing respect for him and I don’t trust her.”

and the quick fixes of infatuation and fantasy. Folly will crumble at the feet of blended family challenges because it refuses to take a hard look at reality; it will only bring about difficult paths for your life. Wisdom, on the other hand, considers life and love through the lens of eternity and bases decisions about dating and marriage not solely on coupleness alone, but on familiness, as well.

I implore you: Dedicate yourself to reading this entire book, taking its wisdom to heart. Because it is uncommon, Wisdom usually challenges. Likewise, this book will challenge your thinking, your emotions, your walk with the Lord, your parenting, and your pursuit of love. Take it to heart, discuss it with friends, and consider its insights. I certainly don’t know how this Wisdom will impact your life or future decisions; that is for you and God to work out. But I do believe, whatever it brings, it will be for the best.

REMARRIAGE ADVOCATE?

On one occasion while conducting a media interview, a host introduced me as an advocate for remarriage. After the interview when we had time to talk, I clarified what Wisdom has taught me about blended families. I’m not an advocate for remarriage, I shared. I am most definitely an advocate for first families because that is God’s design, and what he designs is always for our best. When biological families split, I continued, I advocate for reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation are very close to the heart of God, and when possible, reconciling and creating a God-honoring marriage always serves the couple and children’s best interests (I do recognize that reconciling and creating a mutually loving and serving relationship is not always possible). When couples find themselves in a blended family, I am an advocate for helping

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them to honor their marriage covenant and become a model of God's love and healing grace.

But to be honest, I told the host, I really don't know what to advocate for when it comes to single parents. On one hand, remarriage and blended family living can be a positive, redemptive force in the lives of children and adults. I've seen that happen time and time again and always celebrate God gracing the lives of children and parents through their stepfamily. But that's not always the case. To be candid, some blended families are a disaster—especially when the adults haven't done their homework on how to combine a family—and just expose children to more heartache.

The point I'm making is that from the standpoint of a child's well-being, raising children in a single-parent home is a good option and can be just as redemptive as a healthy blended family. So when it comes to single parents, I advocate first for empowered single parents who are equipped to go the distance with their kids if necessary, and then for smart dating and careful discernment about marriage when love comes along.

Balancing your desire for love with the kids' need for stability and emotional safety is tough. You'll need as much wisdom and maturity as you can get to walk this line well. My hope is that this book will be a trusted friend along the way.

I promise to be honest with you in this book. Online match-making services will not be honest with you. They want to sell you on a convenient love. I want to sell you on a wisdom that will guide and protect each step of your family journey (and, ironically, will make the odds of you finding a satisfying love more likely). I believe this wisdom will serve you well as you make decisions about singleness, dating, and stepfamily marriage. Your decisions about such matters will have emotional, psychological, and spiritual impact for generations to come and should not be taken lightly. Invite God into the journey, make him Lord of your personal needs and your parenting, and let him lead. Every

decision brings challenges. But if the Lord is in the decision, the challenges can be overcome.

Discussion Questions

1. What societal trends and attitudes about marriage are you aware of? How have those influenced your friends' or your opinions about dating and marriage?
2. Rate your sense of "aloneness" on a scale of 1 to 10. In what ways is it pulling you toward dating and/or marriage?
3. Rate any ache of pain in your life (1 to 10). How does it push you toward dating and/or marriage? Be sure to write down the major hurts that make up your pit of pain and loss.
4. If you are dating a single parent, what concerns do you have about your relationship with the children? Your potential role as a stepparent? Before reading this chapter, how much had you thought about the impact of "familyness" on "coupleness"?
5. As it relates to your dating, what concerns for your children haunt you the most?
6. This chapter states, "Relationships in biological families naturally synergize and support each other; new relationships in blended families naturally compete with the emotional attachments that preceded the new marriage." In what way is this a new idea for you? How does it impact your thinking about dating? How does it inform your fantasies of building an instantly harmonious family?
7. What Wisdom have you seen in how other people date, and what Folly have you witnessed?
8. React and discuss this statement: "From the standpoint of a child's well-being, raising children in a single-parent home is a good option and can be just as redemptive as a healthy blended family."

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Section One

Getting Past Butterflies and Warm Fuzzies



Have you ever noticed how easy it is to romanticize the process of dating? First you meet someone and sparks fly, fireworks blaze the sky, and unexplainable chemistry draws you together. Butterflies fill your stomach and warm fuzzies your heart—and before you know it, you're in love.

Okay, let's get past that right now, shall we?

Initial chemistry may be what draws you together, but you better add some substance quick. The introduction suggested that because coupleness does not equal familiness, couples should avoid getting so enthralled with a dating partner that they fail to keep in mind the complexity of becoming a family. I encourage you to keep this essential concept in the forefront of your mind at all times, even while taking initial steps to meet someone. To that end, the next few chapters will help you explore your emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational readiness for dating and at the same time will keep an eye on the kids and the impact dating has on them. Let's begin by getting a sense of the purpose and overall process of dating for both you and the kids.

Chapter 1

Dating in a Crowd: Dating With Purpose

Our whole family is dating this guy.

Rachel, 22 years old

Sometimes kids say it best. When asked what she wishes her mom would do differently while dating, Rachel—a smart young graduate student—replied, “I wish she would recognize her own impulsivity and emotional roller coaster. She does and says things without recognizing that to some extent our whole family is dating this guy. This year I came home four times from college and he was in town every single time. After I went back to campus each time, Mom said, ‘I never get to see you!’ Yes, well, that’s because you were with your boy. I just wish they would hurry up and get married so they would be a bit less interesting to one another.”

Dating in a crowd is tough. The kids are engaged, at least on some level, even when you don’t think they are. Choosing to be with one party generally means the other party is left waiting.

And everyone has strong emotions and opinions about who is

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involved and what the outcome is—in other words, the whole family is dating. *Table for twenty!*

For the two people directly involved, dating is hard enough; add the kids, ex-spouses, extended family, and friends, and you better have a plan and purpose in your dating or you'll likely waste a lot of time and wander from romance to romance with a lot of heartbreak along the way. The most consistent mistakes I see in people who have repeated failed dating (and later, marriage) relationships are these: they don't have a purpose in dating; they lack an intentional process to their dating; they don't have an appreciation for the complexity of dating in a crowd; they don't take their children's needs and feelings into consideration enough; and they don't realize that the growing connections between children and future stepparents or stepsiblings established during dating may shift toward distance and conflict after the wedding (it's this last truth that really catches people by surprise—I'll say more about this later).

As we begin our journey together, I'd like to recommend a purpose for your dating and present an overall process to dating that will help you know when you're on target for a good start. Many of the specifics of this process will be discussed in more depth throughout the remainder of the book, but I do want you to get a sense of what to expect, from pre-dating preparation, to making a decision for marriage, to anticipating the hot/cold responses of children.

PURPOSE IN DATING

Does your dating have purpose? *What do you mean, Ron? Isn't the purpose of dating to find the right person—my soul mate?* No, it isn't. Let me explain.

I always question when I hear someone say they are looking for their soul mate, because for most people, finding someone

has nothing to do with their soul or eternity. A 2001 study of dating attitudes of twenty-year-olds found that an overwhelming majority (94 percent) of never-married singles agree that “when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost.” But only 42 percent believe “it is important to find a spouse who shares your religion.”¹ Are you kidding me? How can they remotely qualify as a soul mate and not share your core beliefs and guiding spiritual convictions? (I guess to them, a soul mate has little to do with spirituality.) Remember, single parents, this person is going to have an eternal influence on your kids. Isn’t finding someone with your same spiritual beliefs of the utmost importance?

No, apparently what the average person looking for a soul mate is really saying is, “I’m looking for the person who is easy for me to love; someone who will fulfill my needs and who knows just how to love me.” Sounds pretty selfish, doesn’t it? Soul-mate shopping is nothing more than consumerism applied to dating. The mentality is to date as many people as you can—or as one writer said it, test drive people to see which you like best—and stop when you find the one that meets your expectations and needs.²

The problem with this attitude is fourfold. First, it assumes the test driver contributes nothing to the quality of the developing relationship, which, of course, you do. Second, the consumer’s criteria for their purchase is completely selfish. Even if you find someone who seems to make you happy, they won’t be able to sustain it forever. This usually isn’t obvious until marriage, which is when most people begin to think, *Maybe you weren’t my soul mate after all—I must have made a mistake*. Third, it mistakenly places too much emphasis on your happiness as a couple and not enough on the role the stepparent will have as a parent. And fourth, the consumer attitude toward dating assumes that God has purposed marriage to make us happy. He has, but not in the way most expect.

A Match Made in Heaven: God's Purpose in Relationships, Marriage, and Family

Our God loves us beyond anything we can imagine, and he will go to great lengths to pursue us and foster a deep relationship with us. He will even go to a cross to rescue us from the slavery of our sin. But God doesn't stop his pursuit of us after our initial rescue. Through discipling us to be more like Jesus, he deepens our walk with him. I believe that family life is God's best tool for discipling us. From the cradle to the grave, he is growing us up in maturity, faith, and knowledge—and he is using relationships to train us.

When we're children, God uses our family to teach us important lessons about obedience, submission, and respect for authority. Learning these lessons makes it more likely that we'll gain respect for God's authority. In parenting, God teaches us about nurture, providing for those you love, and how far you will go to rescue one of your own. We also learn about free will (he lets us create life and struggle with the reality of not being able to control it!) and humility (praying for your kids will drive you to your knees!). In friendships, God teaches us about loyalty and living in community. In being single, God teaches us about trusting him with our aloneness and not turning marriage into an idol. God uses marriage to teach us about commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, and selfless love. In the physical, emotional, and spiritual depth of sex, God teaches us about surrender, vulnerability, and oneness. In crisis, God reminds us of kingdom priorities and the limits of materialism, and he recalibrates our faith and trust toward him. And in facing death, God invites us to live in light of what is eternal. In all of these life experiences and relationships, God invites us to walk with him: "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

In all of this, God is purposing to make us holy and healthy and eternally happy. He knows what is best for us, and each

relationship and season of family life invites us to trust him and know him more deeply. And therein lies the rub. Making us eternally happy usually doesn't satisfy our selfishness today; instead, it requires us to grow up a lot emotionally—which is painful. Ask yourself if you are open to what God is teaching you about him in your singleness. Are you pursuing him as much as he is pursuing you? Is your singleness helping you to see him more clearly and trust him more deeply, or are you instead telling him what he should be doing for you? Are you open to maturing in this season of life, or do you assume that you need marriage to be fulfilled?

Knowing Yourself

Take time to reflect on the questions in this section. Knowing what motivates you in dating is very important.

And what about dating? When you meet someone, is whether they make you happy or holy the standard by which you choose to engage them? Do you lose sight of the Lord when you fix your sights on a man or woman, or can you keep your eye on your eternal love while exploring an earthly love? In what way is your purpose in dating blocking God's purpose for you in dating?

With God's goals in mind, I suggest that the purpose of dating for single parents is threefold:

- to discern if together you and this other person can walk humbly with God with a common heart, faith, value system, and approach to life;
- to discern if you can love the person sacrificially without reservation,³ and trust that they will do the same for you;
- to discern if the children involved in your union would be graced by your common commitment to the Lord and combined families.

If your purposes for dating don't pass this smell test, slow down or stop altogether. You may be naturally attracted to someone and enjoy time together, but if after a brief dating period you

are just wandering aimlessly, it's probably time to stop playing around. If dating reveals at any point that your life trajectories (faith walk, parenting, family situations, values, etc.) are divergent, back away. This is not a game. Is it okay to date on occasion purely for recreational purposes? Yes, as long as you don't let children get emotionally wrapped up in the dating partner (more about this in a later chapter) and the other person is aware of your intentions and the limits of the relationship. But dating is not a goal in and of itself. Instead, think of dating as the process you go through to become married. That helps to keep the ultimate purpose in mind.

THE PROCESS OF DATING

Having a spiritually determined purpose in dating will help to set your attitude in the right direction. It also helps to have a sense of the process or stages of dating. Thinking through the overall process helps you to know where you are in the journey and what tasks lie ahead. It also helps you gauge the depth of a developing relationship and whether it will hold water.

In general, single parent dating will move through the following stages: It starts, if you are the single parent, by preparing yourself and the kids for dating; if you are single without children, it starts by assessing your openness to dating someone with kids and welcoming them into your life. From there, the stages consist of forming an initial couple relationship; initial dating partner and child relationships; serious dating and deepening couple and dating partner-child bonds; making decisions about marriage; and preparing for a wedding and blended family living.

Dating Process FAQs

From a stage perspective, the dating process is straightforward and clear. But questions about managing the process

abound. The following are some frequently asked questions with answers that give perspective to the journey.

But before diving into the FAQs, let me speak about a perspective to avoid. Society has created many unspoken benchmarks for dating couples. They are meant to help individuals gauge the dating process, but most of them are ambiguous, simplistic, and shallow. Don't let these questions guide your thinking about your dating relationship: *Is this person good-looking and do I get points just for standing beside them? Are they wealthy or*

do they at least have the potential to become wealthy? Do they hang out with the right people? Are they sexually experienced (because I don't want to be with a novice)? Have we had sex yet and how good of a lover are they? Why don't we stay over at one another's place on occasion to test the waters a little? Are we ready to live together?

These are the clear standards by which *Cosmo*, Facebook, and Hollywood judge dating relationships, but let me be clear: They are pathetic pathways to commitment, horrible benchmarks to gauge relational quality and stability, and often lead to relational self-sabotage. Don't adopt them or be taken in by their salacious promises.

Now, back to the FAQs and their answers, which are rooted in wisdom and will help you manage each stage of dating. Hold them close and remember that *when kids predate a new couple, marriage is a package deal. If you can't marry the package, or aren't ready to embrace all that comes with the package, don't marry the person.*

When the Kid Is an Adult

Empty-nest couples are often very surprised to learn that later-life blended families with adult stepchildren have just as many adjustment issues as do families with children still at home. The specific issues vary, but don't naively assume everyone will be open to a new love in your life.

Q: If We're in Love, Why Should We Wait to Get Married?

A: Don't rush dating and don't rush a decision to marry. Time is your friend. Slow the pace of your dating and fill it with purposeful

conversation so you can explore how well your life trajectories might merge. Avoid being driven by surface-level infatuation, and instead look deep into the mirror to examine the person you are and the person they are.

Time will help you to see whether you and the other person are a fit not just on the surface, but to the core. Time will make known transparency or hiding, authenticity or façade, integrity or falsehood. Time will reveal what you don't like about each other and whether you can problem-solve through it (couples who break up even once during dating are four times more likely to have relationship difficulties than couples who don't⁴). And time will reveal whether your extended families can merge or if cohesiveness is unlikely; if both of you are parents, whether your

Timing Issues

In general, men are open to dating more quickly after a death or divorce than are women, and both are ready to date before their kids want them to.

parenting styles can complement or compete; and whether each parent is strong enough to lead their children through the transition to a new family. Don't rush past the children and their need for reliable, consistent nurturing from you. And let the pace of your coupleness be influenced by—not controlled by—the leanings, longings, anxieties, and openness of the children.

Don't dismiss time; she is trying to help you. Listen to her.

Q: How Do I Proceed Without Feeling Overwhelmed?

A: If you are feeling overwhelmed at this point, you may be trying to comprehend and master every stage even before you get there. Instead of trying to get your hands around all of them at once, try to focus on the stage you are in and trust God to help you manage it well. Only then do you have to deal with the next stage—and God will be there, too. It's a little like trusting God with life.

Do you know how God gives directions? If you were to ask me how to get from my house to the local Walmart, I would give you

step-by-step instructions. For example, I might say drive southwest in front of my house on London Court toward Liberty. Turn left at the stop sign. Then, curve through our neighborhood until you come to Continental Parkway; turn left. Continue east two-tenths of a mile till turning left onto Coulter Road. Walmart will be half a mile on your left. But that's not how God gives directions.

In his book *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby says that God doesn't give us directions that way; he only gives us the next set of instructions and then waits for us to obey. He might, for example, say, "Drive southwest on London Court," and then stop talking. We, of course, then anxiously ask, "And then what, God?" He responds, "Don't worry about that, just drive that direction on London Court." "Yeah, but God, I need to know what follows that so I can get prepared." "I'm not interested in you bring prepared." He smiles. "I'm interested in you trusting me to know the way; I'll give you more when it's best." I don't know about you, but God's direction-giving style really frustrates me! My need to know—and be in control—is too high for this to be comfortable. But that's exactly why God does it that way; he wants to deepen my trust, not my knowing.

To keep from being overwhelmed by the dating stages, give yourself permission to not know how to master the next step. Trust God to lead you through when you get there. In the meantime, trust him with the stage you're in now.

Q: Given the Magnitude of This Process, Should I Do Myself and My Kids a Favor and Wait Till the Kids Are Gone Before Dating?

A: I don't know how old your kids are, but honestly, it's worth considering. Essentially, what dating and marriage creates is a competition of emotional attachment and priorities between you, your children, and your partner/spouse. When it's just you and the kids, the attachments are clear and your priority is parenting.

Ron L. Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent*

When you begin to date, you gradually shift your time, attention, and priority to the new love; at marriage you make the ultimate shift to “forsake all others till death do you part.” Of course, this doesn’t mean you abandon or neglect your children after marriage, but it does mean that your decisions are more firmly rooted in your companion than in your children. No wonder kids feel left out and in competition with their parent’s new love. This also helps us understand why many children who at one point were in favor of their parent dating, and might have even encouraged them to marry, later begin protesting a parent’s marriage.

Whether you have kids or not, please know that dating and marriage when kids are present is a gain for you but initially a loss for the kids (until family bonding takes place—which can take years—and then becomes a gain for the kids, too). There’s no way around this truth. Single parents ask me all the time, “Can I find a new love and not make my kids feel displaced?” I respond, “Unless your children are very small and your ex-spouse is cooperative and open to you remarrying, probably not.”

Melanie wrote to me, “I seriously dated a man for a while, and my children did not like him or his children at all. While I didn’t allow my children to break up the relationship, I did spend much time asking them specifically what their concerns were and addressed them. I feel it’s critical to pay attention to a child’s response.” Jackie said, “If the child has outbursts because of a new partner, it should be talked through to find out if it’s just jealousy or something worse. A parent may have to take a step back from dating and let their child know that they are not being replaced.” Melanie is applying a great deal of wisdom. A child’s jealousy is the result of the traumatic losses they have already experienced (e.g., death of a parent or divorce, and all the changes since). They don’t want any more loss—and when you shift your energy toward someone else, it is another loss.

Ron L. Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent*

This is less of a concern for very young children (preschool age) because they aren't as aware of life before and after the new stepparent. They are also more open to new people in their lives. Children between the ages of ten and fifteen seem, on the other hand, to have the most difficulty making space for a stepparent, stepsiblings, and all the transition that comes with them.⁵ Waiting to date till the children are grown and on their own avoids the competition of attachment at a developmentally significant time of the children's lives—and it's worth considering. It allows you to focus on raising your children and preparing them for adulthood; it allows them to deal with what is already on their plate without more emotionally draining transitions being added on.

Now, I realize that remaining single in order to focus on raising your children is a challenging thought, and not many will be drawn to it. I'm just suggesting it's worth prayerful consideration. Marriage is a blessing to the part of your heart that longs for partnership. However, remaining single is a blessing to the parental part of your heart and carries a blessing for your children, as well.

One more thought before leaving this subject. If you wait till the kids are launched from your home, please do not assume that an empty-nest blended family will be adjustment free. Every step-family, no matter what the age of the children, has significant transitions to manage. For example, stepparents of adult step-children don't struggle because they're trying to figure out how to discipline the children; they struggle because they still feel like outsiders to the family's history, traditions, and rituals. And the

I Chose to Wait

"I chose to wait it out. I had two very angry children who were acting out after the divorce. People told me for years I was wasting my life—that if I brought a man into their lives, it would help them not act out so much. I turned fifty this year. I raised them for fourteen years on my own. They are adults now; the youngest of my four is twenty. Now I can think about dating. I am trusting God to bring a man into my life if that is his will."

Ron L. Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent*

Take the Couple Checkup

The Couple Checkup is an online assessment of twenty relationship areas significant for dating, engaged, and married couples. Based on over thirty years of research, the Checkup is a highly respected relationship tool used by marriage experts around the world. Get one free Individual Report at www.smartstepfamilies.com by using the voucher code provided inside the back cover of this book. This code also provides a 50 percent discount if you upgrade to the full couple report (available after you have completed your free Individual Profile).

stepchildren, even as adults, worry about how incorporating the new stepparent into their lives will impact their relationship with the other biological parent, etc. (To learn more, read *The Smart Stepmom* and *The Smart Stepdad*, in which I address adult stepfamilies and their adjustment issues.) The upside, though, is that these transitions don't occur during the important developmental years of a child's life and are, therefore, less negatively impactful. Because the transition to becoming a new family occurs when everyone is more mature, stepfamily adjustment does seem to be easier for most families. That adds one more reason to consider waiting till the kids are gone.

Q: Does It Matter How Long You Date Before Marriage?

A: No, and yes. Just as I used to tell people not to date for two years after their divorce

or death of their spouse, I used to tell couples they should date for at least two years before deciding to marry. That was before Dr. David Olson and I conducted the largest study of single parents getting ready to marry their partners. We studied the profiles of over 50,000 couples and published our practical findings in the book *The Remarriage Checkup*. By the way, you can take the Couple Checkup, a similar profile to the one we used in our research, and assess your relationship. It's a great way to get an objective perspective on the health of your relationship, which helps you make more informed decisions about the future.

In our study, we discovered what predicts great remarriage relationships (defined as a marriage in which either spouse or both

have been previously married) and we learned that the length of time a couple dates does not predict couple relationship quality. That is, couples who dated a few months were just as likely to have a high- or low-quality relationship as couples who dated a few years. In other words, it's possible to have a high-quality dating relationship in just a few months. But that doesn't mean it's wise to rapidly get married.

As I have already stated, when children are involved, a marriage between the two of you is not just between the two of you. How long you date matters significantly to kids and greatly impacts your future blended family. Let me remind you of the central point of this book: Coupleness does not equal family-ness. You might have a quality couple relationship within six months, but that doesn't mean your family will do well or that your marriage can't be pulled apart by conflicts over the children, ex-spouses, or an ex-mother-in-law. Learning to steer and balance a tandem (two-person) bicycle is tough, but it's not as challenging as bringing the Queen Mary into port. They are two different processes.

In the next chapter I'll explain in more detail what this family dynamic is all about, but for now hear this: Even if you are ready to get engaged or marry, it may not be wise to do so until the family is ready. Someone who asks "How long should we date?" is usually already thinking about marriage, and they are hoping they can get permission to jump in. That's why you have to remember that time is your friend—not only for your relationship, but for the needs of the kids. Children need much more time than couples, and you only shoot yourself in the foot if you ignore their timing.

If You Don't Have Kids

If you don't have children, it can be difficult to give appropriate consideration to the openness and readiness of the children of the person you're dating. It may feel like the children are holding your relationship hostage. Instead, put on compassion for what your presence is requiring of them, and be patient with their timing.

Ron L. Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent*

Ron, are you saying that kids get to determine when the couple marries? Not at all. But it's wise to be influenced by their degree of openness; only a fool will ignore how significant their feelings really are to becoming a blended family.

When a Parent Is Deceased

Quick dating (less than one year) and a quick remarriage (less than two years after death) can be perceived by children as a low-value statement regarding the parent who has died. This feels offensive and casts a negative shadow on the new relationship.

For example, teenage and adult children often scowl at a parent's marriage when it follows a short courtship. One man, even fifteen years into his remarriage, found himself repeatedly trying to convince his two adult daughters that he really loved his new wife. Less than one year after his first wife died of cancer, the couple had met and married within six weeks. His daughters decided as soon as the wedding was announced that there was

no way their father loved this woman. "How could he?" they insisted. "Mom has only been gone a little while and he doesn't even know this new person. He's deceived." From that time forward, they closed themselves and would not accept the marriage or their stepmother. Time matters.

Q: If We Decide to Marry, Will Faithfully Following These Stages Guarantee Us a Successful Blended Family?

A: Of course not. There are no guarantees in life. None of us can anticipate what life will bring our way or what will be required of us when we get there. That's why we need commitment.

Discerning your fit for partnership and becoming a family is the task of dating. Commitment in marriage is what helps you live out this discerning belief and turn it into reality. People often think if they didn't choose well, they can't be happily married.

I'm not so sure. ~~Don't get me wrong—choosing well matters,~~

but so does the commitment made by each person once they decide to marry. How else do the arranged marriages of many cultures around the world last? Commitment glues the couple together and gives God a chance to really go to work on their selfishness, mistaken expectations, pride, and immature views of intimacy.

Here's God's master plan for us: He asks us to vow to love, honor, and cherish, and then he uses life to teach us what we committed ourselves to. And that's when God grows us up—as we learn how to live out our vows. Commitment is important because it gives us the chance to make mistakes while learning what God wants us to learn. Said another way, commitment is important because of what we do after we make the commitment; the power is not so much in making the decision, but in the actions we take to uphold the decision and the lessons learned along the way. No one, no matter how well they dated, knows what marriage will require of them. In 1986 when I married Nan, I had no earthly idea what parts of me would have to change in order to love her and live with her—and neither did she. God is continually growing us up, teaching us how to love one another, and molding us into the image of Christ so we can in turn deepen our love for one another. It's a marvelous, wondrous—and painful—process! And only those who are willing to die to self and submit themselves to the disciplining process of marriage receive its rewards.

By the way, this is why cohabitation doesn't work. I'll say much more about this in chapter 7, but it's important to say now that cohabitation is not commitment, neither does it tell

Dating Too Long

Couples who date five years or longer are significantly more likely to have lower-quality relationships. We theorize that couples who can't pull the trigger on marriage after five years of dating have some barriers they cannot overcome, including significant levels of fear (see chapter 4). They get stuck and just can't move forward (and probably shouldn't).

you whether your relationship would work if you made a commitment. I once coached a single parent who had been dating a man for three years. He was ready to get married, but she just couldn't pull the trigger. When I asked if she wanted a guarantee that the marriage would last before becoming engaged, she said, "Absolutely. That's why we're living together instead; I want to know if this will work."

With much compassion for her fear I replied, "But cohabitation isn't marriage—and until you make a full commitment to each other, you'll never know what you'd be willing to do for one another. Right now you're just dipping your toe in the deep end of the pool; you can feel the temperature, but you'll never know if you can swim until you throw your whole self in." There are no guarantees in life or relationships—there is always risk. Either choose risk or don't; when the time comes, choose commitment or don't. But don't sit on the side of the pool with one foot in the water telling everyone you're swimming.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Consumer daters want guarantees. "I won't purchase this marriage until I know my partner will love me as only my true soul mate can and is everything I want them to be—and will last 100,000 miles or fifty years, whichever comes first." How absurd. Instead of being a consumer who selfishly purposes in dating to find the one person you believe will serve your needs, purpose instead:

- to make sure *you* are being the right person for God; and
- to follow Christ, and while you do, look around for another Christ-follower who shares your heart, interests, life objectives, background, parenting style, and vision for family.

Once you find them, walk in faith together.

Ron L. Deal, *Dating and the Single Parent*

Discussion Questions

1. People with repeated failed relationships often make the following mistakes. Which are you or the person you are dating guilty of?
 - They don't have a purpose in dating.
 - They lack an intentional process to their dating.
 - They don't have an appreciation for the complexity of dating in a crowd.
 - They don't take the children's needs and feelings into consideration enough.
 - They don't realize that the growing connections between the children and future stepparents or stepsiblings established during dating may shift toward distance and conflict after the wedding.
2. What does a consumer attitude in dating look like? What should you look for to identify that attitude in yourself or someone else?
3. God is always using the circumstances of our lives to grow us up. Digest these questions:
 - Are you open to what God is teaching you about him in your singleness?
 - Are you pursuing him as much as he is pursuing you?
 - Is your singleness helping you to see him more clearly and trust him more deeply, or are you instead telling him what he should be doing for you?
 - Are you open to maturing in this season of life, or do you assume that you need marriage to be fulfilled?
4. I proposed three purposes for dating in this chapter. Discuss each and what it would look like to live out each in a dating relationship.

- Discern if, together, you and this other person can walk humbly with God with a common heart, faith, value system, and approach to life.
 - Discern if you can love the person sacrificially without reservation, and trust that they will do the same for you.
 - Discern if the children involved in your union would be graced by your common commitment to the Lord and combined families.
5. If you are dating a single parent, how would you know if they were not giving enough consideration to the needs of their children as it relates to dating you?
 6. Society has many ambiguous, simplistic, and shallow benchmarks for gauging the status of dating relationships. How have these or others influenced your dating in the past: Is this person good-looking and do I get points just for standing beside them? Are they wealthy or do they at least have the potential to become wealthy? Do they hang out with the right people? Are they sexually experienced (because I don't want to be with a novice)? Have we had sex yet and how good of a lover are they? Why don't we stay over at one another's place on occasion to test the waters a little? Am I ready to move in with them, and what happens when we live together?
 7. Review the Dating Process FAQs beginning on page 34. Discuss the implications for you and the kids.