

THE **SMART** STEPFAMILY MARRIAGE



Keys to Success in
the Blended Family

**RON L. DEAL and
DAVID H. OLSON**



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To all couples willing to risk again:
Love like you have nothing to lose.

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Acknowledgments

From Ron:

Every researcher stands on the shoulders of other researchers; good research paves a path for more. The landmark research behind this book is built on countless marital and family researchers (too many to list, I'm afraid), but mostly it is born out of the work of my coauthor, David H. Olson. An innovative family systems theorist, an author, and a researcher, Dr. Olson's lifelong dedication to helping families has equipped therapists and educators to be better helpers, and it has taught millions of couples throughout the world how to have a better relationship. It has been my honor (and candidly, my awe) to work with him on this project.

I also owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Dr. Olson's team, past and present, at Life Innovations. Amy, Peter, Matt, Shar, et al.—it's been fun being part of the Couple Checkup Research Team.

To my family team—Nan, Braden, Connor, and Brennan—you know I couldn't do this without you. You are my inspiration and joy. I love you.

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And finally I'd like to acknowledge the thousands of remarried couples I have met over the last two decades through my live conference events, personal therapy, and Web page *SmartStepfamilies.com*: Thank you for sharing your stories and life journeys with me. But most of all, thank you for inspiring me to love more deeply. Despite your loss and pain, you find a way to fight for love. Well done.

From David:

Writing a book with another person can be challenging as you work to blend your ideas and writing styles. But working with Ron was a true pleasure, as he brings his years of experience with stepfamilies as well as a fluid and clear writing style. He also has an intellectual curiosity about research, which has helped crystallize our data analysis. He was a pleasure to collaborate with on this book.

I want to thank the team of professionals at Life Innovations who helped with the data analysis and critiquing of the book. They include Karen Olson (my partner and best critic), Amy Olson-Sigg (my daughter and an exceptional writer), Sharlene Fye (computer expert and master of data analysis), and Peter Larson (former president of Life Innovations, who knows how to integrate clinical and research ideas).

This book would not have been written without the data from the 50,000 couples who took PREPARE-MC (Marriage with Children), a premarital relationship profile that is designed to help couples get their stepfamilies off to a great start. The data from their lives informed us about the strengths and challenges that stepfamilies face. We have learned from their experiences and integrated their insights into this book. We thank them and wish them well.

Foreword

Congratulations! You are wisely seeking vital information concerning stepfamily marriage. Whether you are considering remarriage or have already remarried, this book will provide revelations derived from extensive research and profound insight. The results may surprise you. Some areas of remarriage are not too difficult, and yet there are many areas that are surprisingly challenging.

I was married to my college sweetheart for almost twenty-one years. He died tragically during the failed reentry of the space shuttle *Columbia* in February 2003. In an instant, I became a widow and a single mom.

Rick and I met in college and married after he completed pilot training in the Air Force. We both grew up in Amarillo, Texas. During our engagement, many showers and parties were given in our honor. We had dated five years before marrying, and it was a wonderful celebration.

Five years after Rick's death, I met the second love of my life, Bill Thompson. Our families were well acquainted with one another through church, and soon after his wife's death from cancer we began to date. Reactions were very mixed, unlike my experience with Rick. People were concerned about the very fast

pace of our relationship. We fell deeply in love within months. We shared common spiritual beliefs and held the same values in life. I must admit that I found it difficult to understand why everyone was not overjoyed for us, considering our past experiences of pain and loss.

When Bill and I became engaged and announced it to my two children, the response consisted of one bursting into tears and the other sighing very deeply. No hearty congratulations like the first time around. My mom was happy for me, yet very guarded in her congratulations.

Any remarriage begins with an adjustment and recognition that there has been a loss. Our hearts were full of joy, yet we have had to learn that others were struggling with a significant change. Our joy seemed to magnify the loss of others.

The great news is that it is not a permanent condition. My mom grew to absolutely love Bill before her untimely death in May 2009. My children have grown to love Bill very much also; yet they still remember, miss, and treasure memories of their dad. Ron Deal has been an inspiration and a godsend to our family with his insight into the mechanics of a stepfamily.

Remarriages are more complicated than first marriages. Children are already in the picture. Patterns for communication, attitudes toward work vs. leisure time, financial goals (including spending/saving), and spiritual beliefs are much more deep-seated.

This book is a must-read for any remarried couple. It includes the tools needed to create and maintain a wonderful remarriage. These pages identify areas you may or may not have considered important, but together with the online Couple Checkup you will learn all the strengths and weaknesses you possess individually and as a couple.

Having experienced cancer with both of my parents, and Bill with his first wife, we know that diagnostic tests are used to determine the best course of treatment. Similarly, the online Couple Checkup will guide you through the labyrinth of relationships inside a stepfamily marriage.

Foreword

I am excited for you because you will grow and learn so much from *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*. May you be mightily blessed and strengthened with all the tools this great book will provide for you, and may God bless your family!

Evelyn Husband Thompson,
Widow of Space Shuttle *Columbia* Commander Rick Husband
Now remarried to Bill Thompson

Preface

Discover Your Couple Positioning System (CPS)

Technology has made GPS or Global Positioning Systems accessible to nearly everyone around the world. A businessperson traveling in an unfamiliar city can use a GPS device in her rental car to find her destination. Explorers can use GPS guidance to determine where they are on the earth's surface and where they must go to find their hidden treasure.

What if you had a CPS—a Couple Positioning System—that helped you determine the strengths of your relationship (i.e., your “current location”) and helped you know where to look for hidden treasures? Congratulations, you’ve just picked it up.

This book provides a map for couples on the unique journey of remarriage. It reveals findings from the National Survey of Couples Creating Stepfamilies, the largest study of remarrying couples with children from previous relationships ever conducted. We examined the profiles of over 50,000 couples (over 100,000 people) to discover the qualities that best predict highly satisfying relationships and the roadblocks couples must overcome in order to beat the odds of divorce. Some of our findings will validate what you already know about successful relationships; others will surprise you. Reading this book will guide you into a more intimate marriage relationship.

The sister book to this one, *The Smart Stepfamily, Revised and Expanded* by Ron L. Deal, provides seven practical steps to becoming a healthy stepfamily. It takes a panoramic view of the blended family, exploring stepparenting, loss issues, marital challenges, co-parenting with ex-spouses, financial matters, and much more.

As a complement to that Amazon bestseller, this book lasers in on the dynamics of remarried and stepfamily couples in order to strengthen your marriage (together the two books provide comprehensive education to stepfamily couples who desire a lasting marriage and a strong family). Even though our study was of premarital couples about to form stepfamilies, the results have broad application to all remarried and stepfamily couples. Even before marriage the difference between high-quality relationships and low-quality ones is evident and predicts later marital success. Our national survey of couples was based on their responses to PREPARE-MC (Marriage with Children), a premarital relationship strengths inventory. Previous studies (with a related assessment called PREPARE) have found that the strengths and issues couples have before marriage are highly predictive of their relationship after the wedding. In fact, in three longitudinal studies where we followed couples for an extended period of time we found that their PREPARE scores before marriage predicted with 80 to 85 percent accuracy which couples would be happily married and which couples would be separated/divorced after three years. These studies demonstrate that what happens before marriage is highly predictive of success after becoming married. This research also validates our clinical experience, which tells us that many of the dynamics that eventually divide remarried couples—even after many years of marriage—began early in their relationship. Therefore, whether you are currently dating or looking to improve your marriage, the findings in this book are for you.

Further, when combined with a personalized assessment of the condition of your relationship (received after taking the online Couple Checkup), the secrets revealed in this book become even more illuminating. You will know when to feel confident in your relationship and what must improve to avoid disaster.

Benefits of the Online Couple Checkup:

The seven letters in the word *checkup* can help you remember the advantages of taking the Checkup with your partner.

- C—Create positive change:** You can create positive changes in your relationship by establishing new habits that promote a more satisfying relationship. The Couple Checkup will help bring new ideas to your relationship.
- H—Healthy for your relationship:** Checkups promote and maintain health. Just like a physical or dental checkup provides information that can motivate behavior change, the Couple Checkup promotes healthier decisions and behavior in your relationship.
- E—Evaluate where you are now:** Identify your current relationship strengths and problems, and then make a plan for growing your relationship.
- C—Communicate more effectively:** The Checkup gives you the opportunity and structure for having productive discussions.
- K—Kick-start your relationship:** Completing the Checkup primes you to think and talk with your partner in helpful ways.
- U—Understand each other:** You will better know and understand your partner after taking the online Couple Checkup. You may be surprised to learn how your partner feels about many aspects of your relationship.
- P—Proactive versus reactive:** Too often couples wait for a crisis before they deal with a problematic situation. By being proactive, you will be better able to take control of your relationship and make it more satisfying for both of you.

What Exactly Is a Couple Checkup?

The Couple Checkup is an online assessment of twenty relationship areas that have been found to be significant for dating, engaged, and married couples. Based on the popular and highly successful PREPARE/ENRICH Program, the Couple Checkup is being

used throughout the world. The Couple Checkup is founded on over twenty-five years of research on couples using the PREPARE/ENRICH Program (used by over 3 million couples). Numerous studies have demonstrated the scientific rigor of the program for premarital and married couples and for couples from various ethnic backgrounds.

Is the Couple Checkup Relevant to Us?

The Couple Checkup is designed to be relevant for couples who are dating, engaged, or married. As you take the online Couple Checkup, it tailors itself specifically to your couple stage, your age, and the parenting circumstances of your relationship (biological children and/or stepchildren).

Based on your answers, the computer system will select relevant questions and scales for your relationship. Whether dating, engaged, or already married, your inventory is tailor-made to your specific type of relationship.

You do not have to take the online Couple Checkup to read and apply this book. But to discover the hidden treasures in your relationship, we highly recommend that you do. Look inside the back cover of this book for your online voucher code and get one free personal profile. This code also

provides significant savings off the retail price when your dating or married partner takes the Checkup as well. Both of you must take the profile to receive the comprehensive Couple Report identifying your strengths and growth areas.

Take the Online Couple Checkup

Get one free Individual Report at www.couplecheckup.com by using the voucher code provided inside the back cover of this book. This code also provides a significant discount on the purchase of the full Couple Checkup (when your partner also takes the profile) that compares you and your partner and provides a comprehensive Couple Checkup Report.

1

Checkup and Check-in

Is it wise to let your car go 100,000 miles before getting an oil change?

Would you tell your children to get a dental cleaning only once every twenty-five years?

Is a physical or cardiogram advisable only once in your lifetime?

The answer to all three questions is no. Regular checkups on your car and proactive care of your body are generally practiced activities. Yet dating and married couples rarely, if ever, do a checkup on their relationship even though a relationship checkup can help them experience a happier and more successful relationship. The sooner you identify issues unique to your relationship and find ways to resolve them, the easier it will be to create a stronger couple relationship. And the sooner you

discover your relationship strengths and build on them, the deeper and more intimate your relationship will be.

Don and Jennifer¹ missed a number of checkup points, and their relationship suffered because of it. When first married, their inability to effectively resolve conflict didn't seem like such a big deal. Don often ended up feeling responsible for the problem, while Jennifer didn't feel that she could find a way to help Don really understand her opinions and ideas. Instead of working on their problem-solving skills, they chose to avoid and deny the touchy subjects that led to conflict. Problems would temporarily go away, but what Don and Jennifer didn't know was that the accumulation of small, unresolved arguments was seeding resentment in their relationship. A checkup would have raised a warning flag, but they never took the time.

Over a period of time, the conflicts in their relationship escalated, especially those over Don's children. Don was willing to avoid touchy issues when it pertained to him, but he wasn't willing to look away from issues that troubled his children. The more Jennifer and his children collided, the more he felt the need to defend them. Soon Jennifer's resentment of his children grew, and the small disagreements they could once overlook were larger than hope. Eventually the couple no longer felt close or connected. Their unresolved anger and hurt drove them apart, affecting their sex life and communication.

By contrast, Wes and Ann regularly engaged in activities that led them to evaluate the condition of their marriage. They attended marriage classes at least once a year and talked with other couples who wanted better marriages. Because Wes was on a retreat-planning committee at his church, he and Ann took the online Couple Checkup to become familiar with it. (They thought it might be helpful to others.) What they discovered is that each had growing concerns about an aspect of their marriage that the other didn't know about. Because the report provided them early detection, they were able to talk through the matters and move beyond them.

Early detection and prevention is one key to building stronger marriages. If couples would take an annual checkup and learn

about their strengths and small issues that are hidden below the surface, there would be fewer divorces because smaller issues would be eliminated; molehills would not become mountains. If uncovered problems turn out to be serious, they could go to marital therapy as early as possible rather than waiting till a crisis erupts.

This book and the online Couple Checkup could provide you early detection against potentially problematic issues. Just as important, it could also affirm the strengths and qualities that currently comprise your relationship and help you to build an even stronger marriage.

The Directional Flow of Your Relationship

Much like a river flowing over thousands of miles from its source to its final destination, marriage flows through the ever-changing passages of our lives. On the surface, a marriage may look relatively stable, but deeper examination reveals undercurrents that form the heart and soul of the relationship. The water volume of a river creates force as it flows, enabling it to cut a path or direction; likewise, the qualities of your marriage have the power to determine its course and the ease with which it flows.

The Mississippi River is the second-longest river in North America. Though it begins at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, watershed from thirty-one U.S. states and two Canadian provinces contributes to the river before it empties into the Gulf of Mexico, some 2,320 miles later. Your marriage will also change over time with the addition and launching of children, changes in family and work responsibilities, individual and relational crises that complicate life, and changes in your personal emotional maturity.

But these challenges can also cause your relationship to lose volume as they drain your time and energy levels. That's why replenishment is crucial to a happy partnership. This can come in a variety of ways, many of which are already present in your relationship—we call them strengths (we will help you identify

and build on these strengths); others will need to be developed over time. Dating, courtship, and a wedding are the “source” of a relationship. But how a marriage sustains itself throughout the ebb and flow of life is what deepens and strengthens the undercurrents of the relationship.

Checking In

Jean was trying to find a way to “check in” with her husband. She was feeling a bit distant from Tom, who had become extra involved with work. She began reading this book and taking the online Couple Checkup; she was not able to finish the Checkup before picking up her daughter from a piano lesson. When she got home, Tom was relaxing, watching television after a hectic day. She told Tom about the Checkup, but he did not seem very interested. She said, “Just try it and see what you think.” Reluctantly Tom took the Checkup and then Jean finished hers. Just a few minutes later they received an email notice that their Couple Report was ready to be printed.

Both were curious about the results and were pleasantly surprised by the fact that they had more strengths as a couple than they had expected. In addition, Tom noticed that Jean was not happy with their communication and both were unhappy about how they managed their finances. The report reminded them that they had grown up in very different families, and they saw how some of those differences still impact them today. Both chuckled when the report showed that Jean was more organized than Tom (they had already discovered that the hard way).

While Tom started out somewhat reluctant to take the Checkup, he found himself very involved in the discussion and was surprised by how much he learned. Jean also felt there were now many more things they could discuss in the future, and she felt more connected and hopeful after discussing their results.

Jean and Tom used our 3-step Couple Positioning System to help them learn and grow from their Couple Report. As you read

this book, you too can use this process to help apply what you will learn in each chapter.

1. Where are you NOW? (Identify and Discuss Your Results) First, you and your partner should read through this book, perhaps one chapter at a time. Then review your individual and couple results from the Checkup Report that coincides with the chapter you have just read. In addition to the general advice given in this book, reviewing your report will give you specific information and ideas about how each chapter applies to your marriage.

Keep in mind that with all individual scores, one of you may be more satisfied with that aspect of your marriage than the other. Talk about your own perspective and listen to your partner's. (Don't try to read each other's minds about why you are or are not satisfied with a given dimension of your relationship.)

2. Where would you like to be? (Discuss Issues) Next, you and your partner will discuss how satisfied you are with each aspect of your relationship. You will be given the opportunity to applaud your strengths and improve less-than-satisfying aspects.

3. How do you get there? (Develop Your Action Plan) While discussions are helpful, there comes a point when you need to take action to grow and increase your relationship satisfaction. Based on your discussions, you will want to live out some of your ideas and decisions by putting them into practice. Also, this is a great way to practice new skills.

Enjoy the Process of Building a Healthier Relationship!

Now it's time for you to work through your first check-in process. Remember, it's up to you to apply the principles of this book and learn from your personal Couple Checkup Report. Together they might affirm what's healthy in your relationship or point out a matter that needs your attention, but they can't make you grow. Only you can do that. Will the process be risky? Perhaps. But that risk can bring great reward!

Couple Positioning System (CPS)

■ WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

(Identify and Discuss Your Results)

Beginning with the next chapter, you will review and discuss your individual and couple results. For now, discuss the following questions as you begin your journey to enhance your relationship. Consider each privately to yourself. Then listen to your partner's perspective, being sure you fully understand before offering your own.

- All couples have periods of time when they are proactively looking after their marriage (like Wes and Ann earlier in this chapter) and times when they get blindsided by stress or difficulties (like Don and Jennifer earlier in this chapter). In the last six months would you say you've been more proactive or reactive? Share your thoughts with your partner (and remember to take time to listen and give validity to your partner's ideas as well).
- Early detection of cancer and dental cavities makes perfect sense to most people. What, in your opinion, keeps couples from taking the time for early detection of marital strain?
- Review the Benefits of the Couple Checkup section on page 19. Share which of these you are most looking forward to and why. Take turns sharing and listening.
- If you haven't taken the online Couple Checkup yet, what logistical reasons have held you back (e.g., not enough free time, computer issues)? What relationship matters have prohibited you from taking it (e.g., concerned about what the report might say, anger in the marriage)?
- What are you most curious to learn from the Couple Checkup Report?

■ WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE? (Discuss Issues)

a. Identify Issues

- What do you find uncomfortable about talking through this Couple Positioning System process?

- What aspects of your life sometimes get in the way of nurturing your relationship?
 - What stumbling blocks need to be removed?
- b. Resolve Issues
- Discuss how the above issues might be managed while you begin reading this book and exploring your relationship.

■ **HOW DO YOU GET THERE?** (Develop Your Action Plan)

- a. If you have not taken the online Couple Checkup yet, commit to a time and place to complete the inventory.
- b. If you have taken the Checkup, agree to a game plan:
- Decide how and when you will read the book. Will you share the book or read together? Some couples enjoy reading each chapter independently and highlighting what they find interesting or helpful. Choose different colors so you can look back to see what each of you found most important.
 - Decide on a weekly or bimonthly meeting time and place where you will work through the Couple Positioning System process for each chapter. Be sure to pace yourself and not try to swallow the entire book at once. We strongly encourage you to join other couples for a group study of the book. Church and community groups may want to use our Small Group Discussion Guide available online through *FamilyLife.com* and *CoupleCheckup.com*.