

RON L. DEAL

“I highly recommend Ron Deal.”

Dr. Gary D. Chapman, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Five Love Languages*

THE SMART STEPDAD



Steps to Help
You Succeed

THE SMART STEPDAD



**Steps to Help
You Succeed**

RON L. DEAL



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2011 by Ron L. Deal

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

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

New paperback edition published 2019
ISBN 978-0-7642-3449-1

Printed in the United States of America

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

The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:
Deal, Ron L.

The smart stepdad : steps to help you succeed / Ron L. Deal.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: "Encouragement and practical advice for stepdads from a leading step-family expert. Includes parenting advice, chapters for wives to read, tips for relating to adult stepchildren, and discussion questions"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-0696-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Stepfathers. 2. Remarried people—Family relationships. I. Title.

HQ759.92.D39 2011

306.8747—dc22

2010041144

Unless otherwise identified, Scripture quotations are from Holy Bible, New International Version*. NIV*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.* Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations identified KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Cover design by Eric Walljasper

Author is represented by MacGregor Literary

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



DEDICATION

*To my dad—
mentor, teacher, and coach in what matters most—baayo.*

*To all the stepdads
who are striving to be a mentor, teacher, and coach to another man's child.*

*And to the heavenly Father—
thank you for adopting us as your sons and daughters
and teaching us the heart-softening power
of stubborn, determined love.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Being a dad and trying to write about being a good dad is quite a humbling endeavor. Thankfully my wife, Nan, and my boys have given me lots of grace. I am so grateful for your patience with my on-the-job training in being a father. I love you into eternity.

For this project I enlisted the help of a few good men. My stepdad focus group contributed an immeasurable amount of wisdom, practical insight, and challenging scenarios that helped me pull together a useful project. Guys, your guidance will bring blessings to families the world over. Thank you.

This book is yet another addition to the stepfamily resource library, all published by Bethany House Publishers. For years I heard complaints about how difficult it was to find practical, value-centered materials to help stepfamilies. Thanks to Bethany House, that just isn't true anymore. I'm especially grateful to Kyle, Brett, Tim, and Jim for your vision and dedication to get the word out. And to my editor, Ellen, thank you. Boy do you make me look good!

And finally, a special thank-you to my friend, fellow struggler in the faith, and literary agent, Chip MacGregor. You nursed me through this one, buddy. I can't thank you enough for the extra time and counsel you put into helping me write this book during a difficult season of my life and yours.

CONTENTS

Section I: Getting It Right

Introduction: Stepdad: Hero or Hostile Takeover? 13

1. Conquering Stepdad Mountain 19
2. Sex Stuff: Did You Marry a Wife (Sex Partner) or a Mother (Business Partner)? 35
3. Understanding Her Kids (Part 1): Loss 51
4. Understanding Her Kids (Part 2): Loyalty 63

Section II: Getting Smart: The Stepparenting Team

5. Mom Smart (Part 1): He Can't Do It Without You 85
6. Mom Smart (Part 2): Pitfalls and Good Intentions 103
7. Getting the Socks Picked Up: Parenting 101 119
8. Meet Your Ex-Husband-in-Law: Friend or Foe? 135
9. Your Kids: What Do They Need? 153
10. Hugging Your Stepdaughter, Stepsibling Attractions, and the Awkward Issues of Stepfamily Sexuality 169
11. Keeping Special Days Special: Holidays, Vacations, and Your Stepfamily 191
12. Romancing Your Wife 205

13. Adult Stepchildren	219
14. Should We Have an “Ours” Baby?	229
15. Heroes by Choice	237
Notes	241

Section I

Getting It Right

In the United States 50% of children will have a stepparent at some point in their lifetime;¹ 90% of children in stepfamilies live with their mom and stepdad.²

Stepchildren who have a good relationship with both their stepfather and their nonresident biological father have better outcomes than children who have good relationships with just their father.³

Introduction

Stepdad: Hero or Hostile Takeover?

Imagine beginning a new job. It's your first day and you show up fifteen minutes early because you can't curb your enthusiasm. You're excited about the new opportunity and the future it will provide your family, but upon arriving, you discover that your boss didn't prepare for you to show up—not just early, but at all. They hired you for a very important position, but no one has done anything to arrange for your employment. There's an empty office but no promised administrative assistant, no budget, and no name on the door (in fact, the name of the person who formerly held that position is still legible on the door—is this your office now, or still his?). Your department goals are unspecified and there's no one to explain your job description, nor do they provide guidance on how your job fits in with the company's mission. You can't even find the lunchroom! With the hope of gaining clarification of your role, you talk to your immediate supervisor and team members only to discover

that they have differing opinions as to your role, goals, and even whether you should have been hired. Some consider you a hero for the company, while others judge you a rascal who is moving in for a hostile takeover.

One co-worker is very excited to see you and confesses (while no one else is listening) that she lobbied heavily for you to be hired. She believes you have the skills and knowledge to play this role well—and can't wait for the rest of the team to get to know you.

On the other hand, your staff doesn't understand why they are expected to report to you, and they resent the changes happening around them. "I thought we still reported to our previous supervisor," one worker comments. "You have different expectations and an odd management style. To be honest, I'm not sure I like it—or you."

For Mom

I recommend that Mom read this book as well. In fact, I have added sidebars throughout that provide tips just for her—there are even two chapters in the middle that are specifically written for her (and you). So, Mom, if you sheepishly started reading wondering if you were allowed to peek, go right ahead. Keep reading!

By noon you're wondering if you've made a mistake by taking this job. And your previous enthusiasm has been crushed, pulverized into a mire of confusion.

As a stepdad, you have been "hired" for a very important job. And yet despite its significance, the work environment you have acquired is sometimes very confusing—and other times not. Being successful as the new person in this "company"

depends heavily on finding your fit, identifying your responsibilities and objectives, and buddying up with your allies.

This book will show you how.

HEROES BY CHOICE

I have a lot of respect for stepdads. If you ask me, you are heroes. You carry all the responsibilities and obligations of fatherhood, you provide for your family (and sometimes make up for what another

man fails to do for his children), and you serve as a leader and coach to children (whether young or old) who are not your own. And you do it all by choice. That's pretty awesome in my book, especially when some "staff" remain unappreciative and think you're launching a hostile takeover.

The judgments placed on stepdads vary tremendously depending on whom you ask. Your biological children, if you have them, will likely declare you a hero (unless they are jealous of the time you spend with their stepsiblings). Your stepchildren may think you're either the best thing since sliced bread or an "invader," and everything in between. And your wife, who "hired" you, obviously wants you there but may not always know how to work with you.

It can be confusing. That's why you must choose to be a hero. Reading this book is not just about pulling out the map (although that is what I'm trying to give you); it is also about choosing who you will be to the family God has given you. There is great honor in that. No matter what your work environment, choosing is your strength. That's exactly what Ritchie did.

Ritchie heard me on a radio broadcast and sent me an email describing his experience as a stepdad. I found his story both encouraging and compelling. Bottom line—he is a hero by choice.

His first marriage ended with great tragedy when his wife vanished with their three-year-old daughter. At the time Ritchie wrote to me he hadn't had any contact with his daughter in forty-three years. Can you imagine? Actually, I can, in a way. My middle son, Connor, died of an illness in 2009 at the age of twelve. I still count the days—the exact number of days—since I last talked to him. Even still, I struggle with the ambiguous nature of Ritchie's loss; to not know what has become of his daughter must be excruciating. The residue of pain for Ritchie became obvious when he shared how he refused to have any children with his second wife. He just couldn't stand the idea of loving and losing again. By the time he realized his folly, as he would call it, his wife developed cancer that robbed

her first of the ability to carry a child and then six years later, her life. He had lost again.

So he gave up, right? Not on your life. At the age of forty-two he met and married a woman (whose husband had died many years before) with four children. It was a five-for-one deal. “I had a tremendous decision to make,” he wrote. “Could I love the mother and the children equally? Would I love the mother and tolerate the children? That would only lead to big trouble. In my mind,” he continued, “the answer was obvious. It was either all or nothing.” Ritchie chose to take the risk of loving again. But without realizing it, he also made the choice to be a hero.

Ritchie spent many years bonding with his stepchildren, adjusting his expectations, and adapting his role as they grew. Their journey together was filled with uncertainty and challenges. But he stuck with it. The kids grew up, got married, and started families of their own. “Today,” he wrote, “there are sixteen of us: four spouses, six grandkids, and a whole lot of happiness.” Being aware of the challenges many stepdads have, he concluded: “Is my success an exception? I think so. But I firmly believe that the result was set in motion when I decided that all these children would become mine in a way that nature could not have provided. I picked them. They did not arrive in a random fashion, subject to natural laws. I opened my heart to them and they ran in.”

Did you catch that? It was his decision to choose love that set in motion his success. I guarantee there were many days when he questioned his decision and wondered how they would survive. But he stuck with it—and reaped the rewards for doing so.

You, my friend, have chosen a noble task. An unappreciated, frustrating, confusing, and challenging noble task. A heroic task at that. Good for you. Let’s get on with it.

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

Each chapter in this book concludes with questions to help you apply the material to your own situation. They can be used individually, in discussion with your wife, or with a group of stepdads. I highly recommend you join other stepdads for the journey. There is strength in a band of brothers.

1. What is one thing you would like to understand or manage better as a result of this book?
2. What would it be like to be hired for a job you weren't sure how to manage? Ever felt that way in your home?
3. Share a time that you were confused about your role as a stepdad.
4. In what ways have some of your new "staff" resisted your leadership, new parenting style, or place in the family?
5. Name some stepdads in the Bible. How does knowing that others have gone before you bring encouragement?
6. Making the decision to love stepchildren and embrace your journey as a stepdad may not seem heroic, but the results can be heroic in someone's life. What do you find inspiring about that and intimidating about that?

Chapter 1

Conquering Stepdad Mountain

Whether or not they ever choose to carry on my family name, they will carry on my family legacy and heritage.

JOE, STEPDAD OF TWO TEENAGE BOYS

“How tall is it?” I ignorantly asked a Kenyan missionary.

“Mount Kilimanjaro is over 19,000 feet tall,” he smiled. “It’s big!”

No kidding, I thought. I could see the outline of the tallest mountain in Africa from my third-floor Nairobi apartment 130 miles away. “It might take a while to climb, huh?”

Boy, is that an understatement. On average it takes an expedition four to seven days to climb to the summit of Kilimanjaro. And why do people climb it? Because it’s there, right? Just conquering the challenge is one reason people take on this massive testimony to God’s creativity. And then there’s the view from the top. On a clear day you can see for hundreds of miles in a 360-degree panoramic view. Oh, yes, there’s plenty of reward for those who conquer the mountain. But it often doesn’t feel worth it until you reach the top.

For Mom

Without a doubt you have high hopes that your children and husband will bond and enjoy one another. Orchestrating opportunities for them to connect is helpful, but don't add too much pressure or become impatient. Learn to relax about the status of your family and trust them to work out a mutually agreeable relationship over time.

When reflecting on his role as a stepfather, David^{*} said, "I simply didn't have any idea how hard blending a family would be. I lacked any knowledge of how to deal with my stepkids." Conquering Stepdad Mountain might not be as rugged as climbing one of the world's tallest peaks, but it will probably take longer than you expect. And you're not just climbing because it's there. You're climbing because it matters. Yes, there is reward for you at the top, but there's also reward for your family and stepchildren. As

Joe implied in the opening quote, how you live, love, and/or lead your stepchildren (and biological children) will create a legacy and heritage that long outlives you. It's important that you climb well.

So how do you climb? In this chapter we'll talk through your climbing strategies and map out an overall plan for success. And in the process you'll hear from fellow stepdads. Beginning in this chapter, I'll share life-acquired wisdom from a number of stepdads who participated in a stepdad focus group for this book. You are bound to identify with some of their insights and get ideas from their best practices. The first step, they noted, is to begin with the end in mind.

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

In his highly referenced book on leadership *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey says, "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction."¹

^{*}Names have been changed throughout the book to protect the privacy of those quoted.

Where Are You Going?

Obviously you want to go *up* Stepdad Mountain. But what does that mean? What does a successful stepdad know and do? Essentially the goal of stepparenting is to join biological parents in their task of raising and maturing healthy, responsible, faith-focused children. Conquering the mountain is about establishing yourself as a teacher, mentor, and influence in their life. It's about finding your fit in relationship to your wife and the kids' biological father (even if he is deceased) so you can be part of the team that leads your family up the mountain of life. You're not climbing *over* children. You are trying to connect and bond with them so they'll want to join you as you journey through life together.

Family dynamics and your level of relationship with the children will influence your place among the leadership team. With each step wisdom is needed to determine your role. For example, a stepdad of adult stepchildren in their thirties and forties living many miles away, who has been married only a year, will not have nearly as much influence or responsibility as a stepdad of children under the age of five who live with him full time. Much more will be said about the process of stepparenting in later chapters, but for now recognize that conquering the mountain is not entirely up to you. Sometimes the incline of circumstances is straight up and your climbing pace is very slow. Other times the incline has flattened and your progress is quick and effortless. A wise stepdad will constantly assess the family dynamics around him and work with his wife to determine his role, but a foolish stepdad will stubbornly attempt to climb at a pace different from those around him.

One stepdad-to-be had high aspirations for his role. He thought it was his

Adult Stepchildren

All stepdads start as a friend, not a father, to a child. With adult stepchildren, continually seek to define yourself as a friend to them. Depending on time, family dynamics, your interests and theirs, someday you might be considered a mentor.

job to drop on the scene and take charge. You see, he was an ex-marine, and the only model he knew was one of power and control. A couple of months before the wedding he told his fiancée, “Be sure to tell your kids that once we get married, the marines have landed!” His goal was to take over, and his strategy was to demand that his stepchildren catapult him to the top of the mountain (a hostile takeover). One problem: His stepchildren, and his wife, refused to be walked on. Not surprisingly, the first few years of this stepdad’s climb were filled with conflict. He learned that one can demand a leadership position, but it doesn’t mean anyone will follow or respect you. Again, a wise stepdad seeks to gain trust and respect from his family so he can work *with* them, not *against* them. Thankfully, marine man learned how to reassess his situation. I’ll share more about what happened to him in a few moments, but first, here is another key to knowing where you are going.

Know What You Feel. We guys aren’t always good at knowing how we feel, unless it’s anger. But whether we are aware of our emotions or not, they drive how we act and even what our goals are. Richard, stepfather of two and father of two, felt isolated. “I was now living with what felt like two strangers. I just didn’t feel comfortable in my own home. It was a feeling I never anticipated, but it was very real.” In an attempt to overcome his isolation, Richard, like many men, showered his stepkids with gifts, which hurt the feelings of his biological children.

For Mom

When your husband shares his confusing emotions, strive not to become defensive. One trap to avoid is responding negatively to his confusion, shutting him down, and making it less likely that he will risk sharing his feelings with you again.

Darrell, stepdad of two, often felt confused about his role, caught between a rock and a hard place. “My wife has my back to a point; I’ve learned where the point is and I don’t cross it. However, I do get confused sometimes because when I back off, she tells me I didn’t back her up. But when I

get involved and mix it up, I say the wrong things. Many times I've felt it's a no-win situation."

Part of knowing where you are going is knowing how you feel. Feeling isolated, confused, frustrated, and jealous (the list goes on) can change your end goal if you're not careful. Instead of using wisdom to determine your role, frustration or desperation determines it for you. Rarely is that a good thing. Be honest with yourself, your situation, and how you feel about it. A Smart Stepdad will identify and manage his emotions and set goals based on wisdom. (The cumulative advice in this book will supply much wisdom.)

Where Are You Now?

A good climber knows where he is and where he's been. You have to properly assess your situation. Let's discuss the vulnerabilities of being at the base, at the top, or somewhere in the middle, and a few best practices for each location.

At the Base of the Mountain. You're dating a woman with kids (and perhaps you have your own, too) and looking up at what stands before you. Please know that there's a deceptive mirage from where you stand—the mountain doesn't look as high or steep as it actually is. In part the mirage is caused by the fog of love, the warm fuzzies of your romance that hide the top of the mountain. And in part it's caused by not being on the face of the mountain yet. Only after the wedding will you begin to climb and see the actual size of the mountain—until then, you're just guessing. That's why the number one disillusionment for adults in stepfamilies is how long it takes to "climb the mountain." To your credit, you are reading this climbing guide at a good point—before the climb or early on. Use this book to determine realistic goals, including the pace at which you begin, what gear you should take with you, and what to expect from yourself and others. Doing so makes the climb much more pleasant.

Early Climb Best Practices

1. If still dating, slow down. A quick or sudden courtship slows your progression up the mountain later on. Children and extended family often resent their mom's (or dad's) decision to marry quickly, beginning the family journey with animosity. Not a good way to start. The problem, though, is how adults and children define "quick." What seems too soon for children is often not soon enough for adults. Here's a good rule of thumb from my friends and stepfamily educators Jeff and Judi Parziale: When you are ready to marry, the kids are about a year behind you.² So slow the pace of your dating. Spend lots of time studying the mountain and planning your climbing strategy. It will save a lot of headaches later on.
2. Pace with the kids. Pursue the kids, but moderate your attempts to bond based on how open or closed they are. John commented, "The primary thing that has helped me was a lesson I learned from your book *The Smart Stepfamily*: Allow the stepchild to set the pace of your relationship. So far, that has been super advice that allows me to enjoy a healthy and fun relationship with my stepchildren."
3. Be a Smart Stepdad before becoming a good father. I know that sounds strange, but a stepdad can actually become a good father too quickly. James Bray, a stepfamily researcher whose seminal studies on stepfamilies are among the most referenced, discovered that within the first couple years, stepdads who assume an active, engaging fatherly role with stepchildren often found that it backfired on the entire family. Even when stepdads had their wives' encouragement, well-intentioned stepdads who tried to declare rules and expectations for the home and took initiative to offer children guidance and direction—all with the expectation of building intimacy with their stepchildren—sometimes found that it caused conflict in the home. This "Good Father Syndrome," as Bray called it, often left mothers and stepfathers baffled and hurt.³ Relax. Go with the flow, don't try to be an instant hero. Becoming a good stepfather is a matter of time.
4. Pursue kids with common sense. Find common ground on which to interact. Pray for them, listen (hold your tongue in the beginning), and give them the benefit of the doubt. "We tried to do many family functions together," said Richard. "I did not force myself on the kids (ages thirteen and ten) but always included them and tried to get involved in what they enjoyed. One was in band, the other soccer; I went to all the concerts and games. At first I gave hugs to all the kids but it was a bit uncomfortable. I backed off until they were more open to that."
5. Be patient. A stepfamily is no place for an impatient person. Being pushy and angry only fosters conflict and resentment, usually toward you. In the beginning, Darrell was hard-nosed and threatening. "I had the mentality that it's my house and my rules—either live by it or get out," he confessed. "That not only put a strain on my marriage but it made my stepson feel expendable." By lowering his expectations and becoming more patient, Darrell was able to keep his family together.

Somewhere in the Middle. If you are somewhere in the middle of your climb, you are likely a little tired and may have become discouraged. Perhaps it would be helpful, like Joe, to look back to see how far you've come. "Becoming a stepdad is a process," he wrote. "At first my stepchildren were just 'part of the package.' But being involved in their lives—investing my time, effort, and energy in their success—has developed a bond of love. I can't pray for, root for, support, encourage, cry about, and provide for someone without having love grow as a result. My wife and I will be married five years this November, and I've been doing some reflecting on my relationship with the boys. Looking back I can see how it has changed. It has evolved into their not just being her sons—they are now my sons."

Notice Joe's climb. At first they were "part of the package." (Sounds a little uncaring, I know, but Joe is just being honest.) But over time, he and his stepsons ventured to a new level in their relationship that is very personal. Likewise, if you are in the middle of your climb, notice how far you've come and give yourself and your family credit for the progress achieved (even if it doesn't feel very far). And trust that continued effort will take you even further. Some sections of the climb may focus more on one person in your family or another. Other sections will include everyone and show more progress. The point is to *keep climbing*.

It's also important to be willing to make adjustments when needed. One of the strengths of mature stepdads (and for that matter, healthy stepfamilies) is flexibility. The ability to adapt to the mountain's demands and change your course when necessary is a vital skill. Our well-intentioned marine friend started with an unrealistic goal in mind, but thankfully he was willing to flexibly adjust his expectations. After a couple years of family conflict, anger, and hurt feelings he realized that his "I'm going to make you respect me whether you like me or not" style was sabotaging his chances of a productive climb. He also realized he couldn't carry his stepchildren to the top of the mountain; he had to find a way to earn

their respect (not demand it), and thereby invite them to join him in the climb. But at this point, how could he do that? His abrasive manner had already lost their respect and his chances of being part of the leadership team.

I caught up with this marine's wife a few years into their journey and asked for an update. After years of conflict and hostility, she said that her husband looked back down the mountain and saw how ineffective he had been. "He came to me and apologized," she said. "And then he did something amazing. He went to my kids and apologized. He explained that with good intentions he had set out to teach them many life lessons, but had come to learn (from reading one of your books) that he had taken the wrong approach. He then asked them to forgive him and give him another chance. And they did." As it turned out, this woman and her husband had a lot of healing and rebuilding to do. In effect, they stopped climbing and just sat on the side of the mountain for close to a year while he and her kids started over. After a season, they started to climb again. All of that was possible because this marine was willing to reassess his situation, humble himself, and climb smarter. I applaud him.

Best Practices: Bonding With Stepkids

- **Stepsons:** Share your life experiences when you were their age, how you dealt with them, and how they affected you. Sometimes be willing to just listen instead of offering solutions. Go on hikes or go camping or fishing to get out of the house and create some memories together.
- **Stepdaughters:** Listen to them, especially if teenagers, and try not to fix things. Ask about their friends and make sure they know their friends are welcome in your home; have them invite friends for dinner or spend the night on occasion. Regarding affection—find a fit that is comfortable for her. Tim shared, "Early on I started playing a game with Madison where she and I would throw a squishy ball at each other when least expected." Bennett noted, "Once she was receptive, I gave her hugs and told her I was proud of her."
- **Both:** Listen for their heart. "For me the key is to learn where they hurt and then speak into that when the time is right to encourage and build them up." (Gil)

Nearing the Top. Some of you have been climbing for many years and are nearing the top. You have been reading the previous sections thinking to yourself, *Been there, done that*. And with many cuts, scrapes, and a few battle scars you have begun to experience the many rewards of stepfamily living. You have also gained much perspective about how far up the climb really is, and you've learned along the way that out of the next ten thousand steps, the most important one is the next one. You've also learned that my three-step prescription for stepfamily success pays off in the end: persevere, get educated about stepfamily dynamics, and surround yourself with other families on a similar climb.

A recent testimony to that three-step prescription came from a mother named Joy. She and her husband, Dan, had attended one of my conferences many years previously (“get educated”), participated in a study group for stepfamily couples at her church (“surround yourself with other families”), and stuck together through some challenging times (“persevere”). Joy wrote a poem of gratitude after hearing her nineteen-year-old son call Dan (his stepdad) something she never thought she'd hear him say. I share her poem with you here so you, too, can be encouraged in your climb up Stepdad Mountain.

“Stepdad”
 music to my ears
 an unexpected joy.
 My boy called him Stepdad
 He lost his Dad
 He lost his father
 My husband was never meant
 to replace his Daddy.
 He called him Stepdad
 music to my ears.
 Years ago
 a casual bystander said
 “Don't refer to him as a stepson

just call him your son.”
But he’s not his father
and he has a son.
He called him Stepdad
music to my ears.
Others need to open
their eyes and ears.
Stepdad and Stepmom
Stepson and Stepdaughter
are not bad words.
These titles answer many questions
that don’t need to be asked.
A wise man, The Real Deal,
a man with a heart for stepfamilies
told us on several occasions
“Stepfamilies are not even blended families.
They are like a Crockpot, not a blender,
full of individual vegetables
thrown together
and to get what you want takes time,
cooked over very low heat.”
I think we’re done.
It’s time to say Grace.

Joy Lara Wilson
married to Dan
mom to Emily and Andy, stepmom to Josh

No matter what part of Stepdad Mountain you stand on today, be encouraged. There is reward at the top of the climb—and enough grace along the way to make it all worth it.

Steps in the Right Direction

Here are more best practices of Smart Stepdads, young and old, new and veteran. Consider how you might implement them into your climb.

1. Trust God to lead. Probably the one universal negative experience of stepdads is the feeling of uncertainty. If you find yourself wondering what to do and how to go about it, you're in good company. From a spiritual standpoint, uncertainty is an invitation to faith. God always uses our "I don't know what to do's" to invite us to trust him more—and we should. Don't anguish because you don't know what to do. Ask God to show you. Don't panic in your uncertainty and give up on your family. Seek a word from the Spirit. Don't assume you are alone. Find comfort and direction in his Word. Then you can climb Stepdad Mountain one step at a time.
2. Know your place. A Smart Stepdad understands that there is an inherent dilemma to his task: How can you be Dad when you're not dad? Obviously, you can't. Even if the biological dad is deceased, you will never replace him, so don't try. Playing "who's your daddy" only causes stress in your home. And stress in a stepfamily thickens blood, pitting you against your stepchildren and often your wife. I'll talk more about this in chapter 4.
3. Understand the limits of your role. It's not your responsibility to undo the past. Years of poor parenting from your wife or her ex-husband, the negative consequences of divorce, or the pain children experience when a father dies is not yours to resolve. Come alongside children in these situations and try to offer a positive influence over time, but don't try to be the white knight in shining armor. Just love them.
4. Move in with tact. Don't be a bull in a china shop. Respect children's loyalties (more in chapter 4). "I became a stepfather when my stepdaughter was eight. Her father was very involved in her life and a good dad. There just wasn't room for me in her heart; therefore, we had a very strained relationship. We were never able to build anything. Now that she is a grown woman, I sense she is becoming a little less competitive . . . but I think the best way to describe our relationship even now is 'uneasy toleration.'" Anthony's climb was and is steep. Thank goodness he respected this reality or things might have become worse.

5. Round off your rough edges. In my book *The Remarriage Checkup*, coauthored with David H. Olson, we reported that the number one predictor of strong marriages in stepfamilies was the absence of rough personality characteristics in the couple. According to our research, being stubborn, critical, controlling, moody, jealous, and having a temper predicted with over 92 percent accuracy whether couples were healthy and strong or fragile and unhappy.⁴ I've long said that the same applies to relationships with stepchildren. If your personality is naturally angry, critical, aggressive, controlling, or stubborn, don't expect them to warm up to you—and don't expect your wife to entrust her children to you. To make any progress you must change this part of yourself.

"I blew my stack due to disrespect from a teenage stepson. . . . He deserved it and my wife backed me up, but I later realized what a risk I took by losing my cool."

GIL, FATHER TO FOUR, STEPDAD TO THREE⁵

6. Partner with your wife. She needs to believe that you are committed to and care about her, her children, and their past experiences before you will receive her trust. Therefore, do a lot of listening before injecting your opinion; demonstrate an authentic appreciation for all she has done to provide for her children before trying to make suggestions. When you do make suggestions, especially early in your climb, be sure to reveal your heart's intentions first. Consider the contrast between harshly saying, "Your son is a lazy boy. When are you going to make him get up in the morning and get to school on time?" and saying, "I have come to really care about David. I'm hoping to offer some guidance to him and better prepare him for life. I've noticed he's struggling to manage his time and responsibilities with school. Can we talk about how we might encourage more responsibility in him?"
7. Until you have earned their respect, let your wife handle punishment with her children. This topic deserves much more

explanation so I'll devote a lot of time to this matter in chapter 5. For now, let me make the point that leadership and the ability to offer punishment that shapes character are a function of emotional attachment with a child. As our marine friend discovered, ruling with an iron hand without a foundational relationship sabotages your level of respect and subverts what you are trying to teach. Many stepdads mistakenly assume that not taking the lead is a sign of weakness. Actually, it is an indication of strategic wisdom and strength. So while taking the time to build a solid relationship and gradually moving into discipline, trust your wife to continue being the primary parent to her kids.

For Mom

You are the emotional center of your home; everyone connects to you and through you. Share with your husband the stress you feel to be "all things to all people."

"I learned that it was best to let my wife discipline her children. It never did work very well when I did it."

BENNETT, STEPDAD TO THREE

"Discipline with your stepkids is fragile ground. Without a lot of earned trust, it's best to button your lip and share your thoughts respectfully and privately with their mother. Then she can share the issue with them while you are present."

GIL, FATHER TO FOUR, STEPDAD TO THREE

8. Be patient with your wife, especially when her past creates emotional baggage that you can't change. Danny shared that his wife's first marriage left a lot of emotional scars on her that he thought he could change. "I didn't have a clue how hard it would be for her to overcome them," he said. "We have been together for nine years and I'm still dealing with her insecurities. It's part of who she is, so I just deal with it and go on." At first, Danny thought he could "love it out of her," but in time he came to see that ultimately this was her mountain to climb. He could choose to love her as best he could, but in the end,

she would have to deal with the emotional residue from her first marriage.

9. Be equitable in parenting. Wayne observed, “I’ve always felt that my wife has supported my authority with her kids as long as it was fair and equal to what I’d use to punish my kids.” If you ever want to turn your wife into an angry mother bear protecting her cubs, just show favoritism to your kids and treat hers unfairly. Believe me, you’ll awaken the bear.
10. Unless proven otherwise, assume your stepchildren would pick their dad over you. In chapter 4 we’ll discuss a child’s loyalty in detail. For now, recognize that a huge step toward gaining your stepchildren’s respect comes from respecting their relationship with their father (even if deceased) and not positioning yourself in competition with him. Doing so just pushes them further away from you and closer to their dad. Tim, a dad of two and stepdad to two, understands this well. “I have always tried to keep in mind what I want my child to hear from my ex or her new husband about me. I then apply the Golden Rule to my stepkids’ dad. If, on the other hand, I put the kids in the position of having to choose between me and their dad, I always assume they would choose him. (This is especially difficult at times when I want to selfishly ‘one up’ him to make myself look better.) This also means that when my wife and stepkids are badmouthing him, I have to keep from being drawn into the discussion. They will turn on me in a heartbeat.”
11. Remain engaged. Through the years I’ve worked with many disengaged stepdads and their families. The reasons for their drift varied: one man had a “these aren’t my kids” attitude; another had an extremely introverted personality and he simply didn’t know how to engage people in general, let alone his stepchildren. Still others found themselves paralyzed by the guilt of not being around their biological children. “How can I really enjoy my stepkids when I feel like I’m shorting my kids of my time?” one man said. “In some bizarre way I think I’m making it up to my kids when I deny myself time with my stepchildren.” Still other stepdads find that once

they've disengaged, which may have initially been part of surviving the confusion of their role, they can't find their way back.

"My children moved out of state when their mother remarried. I feel so much guilt for not getting to see them much and am aware that they feel betrayed since my stepchildren get to see me more. But what can I do?"

JOHN, DAD TO TWO, STEPDAD TO THREE

If you have been disengaged, you can't stay that way; you hold an important role in your stepkids' lives. When you married their mother, God positioned you as a role model, friend, teacher, and mentor. The specifics of how intimate your role will become cannot be predicted, but you have a responsibility to make the most of the opportunities you are given. You can be a blessing to your stepchildren, but not if you don't engage. To the best of your ability, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). And remember, if you want to have influence with someone, you must be moving toward them emotionally and them toward you. If one of those isn't happening, forget about having influence or authority.

12. Don't go it alone. A Smart Stepdad will also surround himself with a band of brothers. Joe, a stepfather of two, encourages stepdads to be involved in a fellowship with other men where you are open and honest about your life. "You cannot do this alone," he says. "You desperately need other men to walk with you on this journey. Without my band of brothers I never would have come this far. If there are men in your life that have 'meddling' rights, then you can stay on the right path with the right attitude."

HEROES BY CHOICE

For Group Discussion

1. Before marriage, what was your attitude and expectations about how long it would take to “blend” your family?
2. What has gone according to your expectations? What has not?
3. Where are you on Stepdad Mountain—at the base, near the top, or somewhere in the middle? How do you know?
4. What are you learning about the pace of the climb and how long it takes? How will you handle the times that you get impatient with the process?
5. Review the Early Climb Best Practices on page 24. Which speak to your situation and how might they apply?
6. When frustrated with the middle part of their journey, many stepdads stop pursuing their stepchildren. They distance themselves and stop trying to emotionally bond. How might doing this affect their mom? Your marriage? Your stepchildren? You?
7. How does the poem on pages 27–28 written by Joy Lara Wilson inspire you to keep going?
8. Review the Steps in the Right Direction beginning on page 28. Which are most salient for you at this point?