

## Helping Stepfamilies Thrive

Persons in stepfamilies often struggle with the pain of past experiences, which may drive them to fearful distrust of themselves and others and ultimately of God. Whether their first marriages ended because of death or divorce, stepparents may feel haunted by their loss and/or guilty about their perceived failures. Children may be angry and confused by the turmoil of unanticipated and unwelcome change. While these families need to feel included and valued as much as any other family in the congregation and community, they will also likely need support for dealing with their unique challenges. Churches, concerned that stepfamily ministries might imply endorsement of divorce, may leave them to flounder on their own. Given the high numbers of divorces among second marriages, this amounts to tragic neglect.

Couples preparing for remarriage and eager to make a fresh start may overlook unresolved issues from their previous relationships. “Resources for Couples Preparing for Second Marriages” (under Marriage Preparation at [www.marriagelovepower.net](http://www.marriagelovepower.net)) describes workbooks such couples can use to assess their readiness for remarriage and to learn skills for effectively blending families. This document also describes resources for group experiences to help them move through this transition. As usual, the couple’s relationship provides the foundation for family life and needs both a positive start and a commitment to ongoing growth. *The Remarriage Checkup*, described below, might be particularly helpful in this regard.

Coming to terms with ex-husbands and ex-wives can be challenging, at best, and requires commitment to refrain from behaviors that will provoke hostility, especially if there are children involved. Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sheryl Jupe (Jann’s husband’s ex-wife) developed a list of “Ten Rules of Good Ex-Etiquette:” Own your own stuff instead of blaming; Stay calm when confronted or confronting; No badmouthing; Set clear boundaries; Don’t be spiteful; Don’t hold grudges; Use empathy when problem solving; Be honest and straightforward; Respect each other’s turf; Compromise whenever possible. If there are children involved, the following three rules become primary: Put the children first; Ask for help when you need it; Biological parents make the rules, while bonus parents uphold them. Meeting these standards requires good self-awareness and communication skills. Basic communication classes, such as Nonviolent Communication, can help divorced couples manage their relationships in a healthy way. If that is not possible, only clear boundaries will prevent ongoing destructive behaviors.

Churches can help stepfamilies thrive by recommending and providing resources and by organizing classes and support groups in which they can learn from the experts and from each other. Some community agencies may already offer such programs, or churches could work together to make them available. Parents may have unrealistic expectations about the amount of time it will take for the new family to learn to function smoothly. They may be thrown off balance by the inevitable conflicts that will arise. Discovering that they are neither alone nor unique in their struggles - and learning from others who have dealt with similar challenges - may empower them to embrace and deal effectively with their new reality. Learning how to protect their blossoming relationship from common pitfalls involved in step-parenting is essential. Stepparents may need help learning to honor the feelings of stepchildren and to give them space and time to adjust. The following resources, recommended by various United Methodists, address many issues stepfamilies have to face.

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## Resources for Helping Stepfamilies Thrive

### Reading List Support Group and Study Resources Organizations and Websites

Please also visit [www.marriagelovepower.net](http://www.marriagelovepower.net) and click on Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources, then Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition for “Divorce Care and Recovery;” Marriage Preparation for “Resources for Couples Preparing for Second Marriages;” and Parenting for “Empowering Parents;” or search for these by title or topic at [www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).

### Reading List

***Before You Remarry: A Guide to Successful Remarriage***, by H. Norman Wright (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1999). This workbook, for couples in which one or both have been previously married, promotes interaction on the major issues of marriage, including making sure they are ready to marry again. Couples discover how to use positive experiences from previous marriages and how to overcome the negative, along with how to handle common problems related to previous and new in-laws, blended families, financial concerns, and sexual issues. [C]

***Ex-Etiquette for Weddings: The Blended Families’ Guide to Tying the Knot***, by Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe (Chicago Review Press, 2007). This up-to-date wedding guide discusses issues faced by couples forming blended families and by couples with divorced parents: how and when to tell children about remarriage plans; how children from a previous marriage may participate in the new wedding; how to arrange a harmonious seating plan for divorced in-laws; how to graciously word the invitations when the parents of the bride or groom are divorced; who stands where in the wedding pictures and the receiving line; how not to play favorites when among siblings, half-siblings, and stepsiblings; and how to address who walks the bride down the aisle—her father or her stepfather? A complete resource guide listing web sites and books rounds out this helpful volume.

***Ex-Etiquette for Parents: Good Behavior After a Divorce or Separation***, by Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe (Chicago Review Press, 2004) The authors provide guidance for both biological parents and stepparents to help them work together to raise well-adjusted children by practicing healthy interaction and communication. In 2008, the authors expanded on one chapter of this book in another book entitled ***Ex-Etiquette for Holidays and Other Family Celebrations***.

***How to Win as a Stepfamily***, by Emily Visher and John Visher (Routledge, 2013) The authors provide “sound and viable solutions that get positive results” for “...such issues as former spouses, new grandparents, and legal issues involving custody, visitation, adoption and financial arrangements.” (Amazon review)

***In Love Again and Making it Work: Successful Remarriage***, by Dick Dunn (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009). The author addresses issues related to divorce and remarriage

from a faith perspective and describes what must be done before the wedding and after, when either one or both have been married before, for a marriage to succeed. This update of an earlier work by the author includes a brief guide for individual learning and group discussion. [C]

***Making Peace in Your Stepfamily***, by Harold H. Bloomfield (Hyperion, 1993) “...innovative ways to defuse inevitable hostilities in blended families, cope with common fantasies of instant success, end power struggles, and encourage communication...exercises, visualizations--and a comprehensive bibliography and list of helpful organizations.” (Amazon review)

***Part-Time Parent: Learning to Live Without Full-Time Custody***, by Carolyn Pogue (Northstone, 1998) “..for non-custodial parents, ...stories of 20 men and women as they go through the initial separation, first birthdays and holidays without the kids, roller-coaster emotions, reflections, regrets, letting go and getting on with their lives.... Originally published as *The Weekend Parent*, this long out-of-print book is reintroduced at the request of family support groups everywhere.” (Amazon Review)

***Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Remarry***, by Dr. Les Parrott III and Dr. Leslie Parrott (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001). The authors address expectations of marriage; how to cultivate lasting love; the impact of attitudes toward life; appreciation and adjustment to gender differences; effective speaking and listening skills; how to resolve conflict creatively; and ways to deepen the spiritual aspects of a marriage relationship. In addition, they help couples assess their readiness to remarry and provide tools for blending families. See also *Workbook for Men* and *Workbook for Women*. [C]

***Stepfamily Realities: How to Overcome Difficulties and Have a Happy Family***, by Margaret Newman (New Harbinger Publications, 1994) The author identifies “the problems, concerns and conflicts in blending families and [provides] realistic suggestions [for] coping and living through these tough times [of adjustment]. (Amazon review)

***Strengthening Your Stepfamily***, by Elizabeth Einstein, M.A., and Linda Albert, Ph.D. (Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2006). The authors clearly outline the typical stages of adjustment for stepfamilies and offer practical approaches to help them move from unrealistic expectations to acceptance of and healthy adjustment to their new reality. Interspersed with the sixteen very readable chapters are eight Stepfamily Workshop sessions, making this book a highly effective tool for stepfamily support groups.

***Successful Second Marriages***, by Patricia Bubash, M.ED., (Morgan Hill, CA: Bookstand Publishing, 2008). The author shares stories of couples in second marriages, describing how they have built happy, healthy relationships, in spite of the statistical odds against second marriages.

***The Remarriage Checkup: Tools to Help Your Marriage Last a Lifetime***, by Ron Deal, MMFT, and David H. Olson, PhD (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2010). Designed to be used along with the online Couple Checkup, the sixteen chapters in this book explore each of the key qualities of happy remarriage relationships. Each book includes a voucher code for a free Individual Report or discount on a full Couple Checkup at [www.couplecheckup.com](http://www.couplecheckup.com). Click on

the tab “For Group Leaders,” then scroll down to “More Couple Checkup Resources for Groups” and click on the links to download free group leader guides.

***The Smart Step-Family: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family***, by Ron L. Deal (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002). The author provides guidance for recognizing the unique personality and place of each family member, dealing with the everyday challenges of step-parenting and stepchildren relationships, communicating effectively with ex-spouses, honoring families of origin while developing new traditions, and taking time to grow stepfamilies slowly instead of expecting instant results. He emphasizes the spiritual needs of stepfamilies and teaches how to help them rediscover a redemptive God who “loves, forgives, and provides strength and direction for the journey”(p. 51). Discussion questions at the end of each chapter could be used in small groups or by couples on their own to learn how to adjust expectations, deal with the common pitfalls of stepfamilies, and cope with unique situations, such as special-needs children.

***The Smart Stepmom***, by Ron Deal and Laura Petherbridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2009). The authors use their personal and professional skills and experiences to provide stepmothers with the information, attitudes, and skills to succeed in what is rapidly becoming the most common family form in the United States of America. The text provides clear analysis and helpful strategies for dealing with various pitfalls and challenges in ways that will help stepmoms not only survive, but thrive.

### **Support Group and Study Resources for Helping Stepfamilies Thrive**

(See also books with discussion guides on the Reading List above)

***Active Parenting for Stepfamilies Program Kit***, by Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D., and Elizabeth Einstein, MA, LMFT. This video-based discussion program provides parents and stepparents with the skills needed to guide children through a family transition and to establish a solid framework for a successful stepfamily. Kit contains DVD sessions, a Leader’s Guide, Parent’s Guide, and promotional materials. You will need a copy of the Parent’s Guide for each couple or individual. Available in either 3-session or 6-session formats at [www.ActiveParenting.com](http://www.ActiveParenting.com) or [www.stepfamilyliving.com](http://www.stepfamilyliving.com). You can also order relevant video libraries and other books, including *A Heart Full of Love* (for ages 5-9) and *The Step-Tween Survival Guide*, and sign up for training workshops or webinars.

***Developing a Successful Stepfamily Ministry***, by Dick Dunn (Seagrove Beach, Florida: Singles and Stepfamily Ministries, 1995). This workbook, designed to help churches start and carry out an effective ministry providing practical support for blended families, includes a cassette tape and a copy of Dick Dunn’s book, *Willing to Try Again: Steps Toward Blending a Family*. The manual leads a planning team of stepfamily couples step by step through a six-session process for developing a stepfamily ministry. Available at [www.marriagesavers.org](http://www.marriagesavers.org), click on Store.

***Family Ministries Desk Reference: Holistic Responses to Contemporary Challenges***, by Patricia D. Fosarelli (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). The author addresses a number of common challenges experienced by families (addition of new members, loss, single parenting, blending families, caring for aging parents, parenting adolescents, moving, substance

abuse, depression). After clarifying physical and emotional aspects of each challenge, the author proposes specific individual and congregational responses and relevant resources for effective ministries in each situation. (See Chapter 3, “Loss of a Family Member through Death or Divorce” and Chapter 4, “Single Parents/Stepfamilies”)

### **Organizations and Websites for Helping Stepfamilies Thrive**

**Bonus Families** ([www.bonusfamilies.com](http://www.bonusfamilies.com)), founded by Jann Blackstone-Ford, a divorce and stepfamily mediator, and Sharyl Jupe, Jann’s husband’s ex-wife, focuses on helping all the parent figures, both bio and bonus, to work together to raise healthy, well-adjusted kids after their parents split up. Bonus Families® believes that parents have a moral obligation to put their own interests aside for the sake of their children--or their partner's children. The authors have written several books (see above), and Jann writes for a newspaper advice column titled “Ex-Etiquette,” frequently referring back to their “Ten Rules of Good Ex-Etiquette.”

**Smart Stepfamilies**, [www.smartstepfamilies.com](http://www.smartstepfamilies.com), founded by Ron Deal, LMFT. This organization provides resources to help stepfamilies move toward healthy living and to equip churches to minister to their unique needs. Visit this website for articles, a free e-newsletter, online webinars, videos, book reviews, curriculum materials (*Remarriage Success*, *The Smart Stepfamily*), couple checkup, and conference information.

**Stepfamily Living**, [www.stepfamilyliving.com](http://www.stepfamilyliving.com), founded by Elizabeth Einstein. In addition to her book *Strengthening Stepfamilies*, described above, the author offers a set of four CDs or audio-cassettes (“Preparing for Remarriage,” “The Stepfamily Journey,” “The Couple's Spiritual Challenge,” and “Guiding Grandparents in the Stepfamily”); four booklets (“Preparing for Remarriage,” “Pitfalls and Possibilities,” “Dealing with Discipline,” and “Encouragement and Enrichment”); and other resources. You will also find information about her workshops and coaching practice.

**The National Stepfamily Resource Center**, 2315 Centennial Mall South, Suite 212, Lincoln, NE, 68508, 800-735-0329, [www.stepfam.org](http://www.stepfam.org). This national non-profit organization offers resources and valuable information for step-families. Offerings include a free “Online Stepparenting Tool Kit.”

[www.successfulstepfamily.com](http://www.successfulstepfamily.com) Visit this website to download a free document, “Bonding with Your Stepchild: How to Create a Peaceful Stepfamily by Creating Peace With Your Stepchild...Now!” by Mark Thompson. Faithbased and written out of his own experiences, this document outlines three strategic steps: Retreat (stop trying so hard); Release (give it over to God and pray for your stepchildren), and Relax (ease into a relationship by carefully finding nonthreatening ways to connect). You can also purchase his ebook, “Building a Positive, Peaceful, and Successful Stepfamily”

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