

Bridge Building: Strengthening Relationships with Stepchildren

Finding an effective stepparent role is a challenge.

By Ron L. Deal

Few things are more challenging than the role of Christian stepparent. In short, the stepparent joins the biological parent in raising his or her child, but does so initially without a clear role or bond with the child.

Consider the email I received from a biological father looking for help: “Jean is the stepmother to my 7-year-old son. In the past 10 weeks, a very intense relationship has developed between them. Once inseparable, Jean now wants nothing to do with him and has told him as much. This has strained our marriage, and she has talked about leaving. Our marriage is as perfect as one can get when my son is visiting his mother, but when he returns it is very uncomfortable for everyone. My wife does not understand why God is doing this to her, and she is questioning her faith.”

I can just imagine this stepmother explaining her situation. She likely feels confused about her role, displaced from her husband when her stepson is around, and helpless to change the situation. And she may be feeling guilty because she knows that God is expecting her to love this boy. It’s a difficult situation to be in.

Finding an effective stepparent role is indeed a challenge. Yet with healthy expectations and a specific strategy to build relationship, a satisfying bond can be nurtured.

Realistic expectations

Stepparents and biological parents alike frequently expect too much from the stepparent, especially early in the stepfamily’s development. Research confirms, for example, that stepparents and biological parents generally assume that the stepparent should be affectionate with stepchildren and attempting to assert authority (to establish their position as “parent”).

However, stepchildren report—even five years after the wedding—that they wish the stepparent would seek less physical affection and back away from asserting punishment. The challenge, then, for biological and stepparents alike is to lower their expectations and negotiate a relationship that is “mutually suitable” to both stepchild and stepparent. Keep these principles in mind:

1. Give yourself time to develop a workable relationship. Realize that love and caring takes time to develop, especially with pre-adolescent and adolescent children. Some research suggests that children under the age of five will bond with a stepparent within one to two years. However, older children—teenagers in particular—may take as many years as they are old when the remarriage takes place. In other

words, a ten-year-old may need ten years before they feel truly connected with you. Try to imagine your stepfamily in a crock-pot—it's slow cooking, so don't rush it. Besides, crock-pots do gradually bring all the ingredients together so trust that the low heat will eventually do its work. Here are some "low-heat" crock-pot cooking recommendations:

2. Children's loyalty to their biological parents may interfere with their acceptance of you. Children are often emotionally torn when they enjoy a stepparent. The fear that liking you somehow hurts their non-custodial, biological, parent is common. The ensuing guilt they experience may lead to disobedient behavior and a closed heart. In order to help stepchildren deal with this struggle:

- Allow children to keep their loyalties and encourage contact with biological parents.
- Never criticize their biological parent, as it will sabotage the child's opinion of you.
- Don't try to replace an uninvolved or deceased biological parent. Consider yourself an added parental figure in the child's life—be yourself.

3. The cardinal rule for stepparent-stepchild relationships is this: Let the children set their pace for their relationship with you. If your stepchildren are open and seem to want physical affection from you, don't leave them disappointed. If, however, they remain aloof and cautious, don't force yourself on them. Respect their boundaries, for it often represents their confusion over the new relationship and their loss from the past. As time brings you together, slowly increase your personal involvement and affections. Together you can forge a workable relationship that grows over time.

Recently a gentleman told me that it took 30 years before he could tell his stepfather he loved him. Undoubtedly, his stepfather struggled through those years for his stepson's acceptance. But despite his godly attitude and leadership, his stepson simply couldn't allow himself to return that love.

Eventually, however, love won out and was able to express appreciation to his stepfather for being involved in his life. Trust that doing the right things in the name of Christ will eventually bring you and your stepchildren together. In the meantime, try to enjoy the relationship you have now and build on what you have in common.

Relax and build relationship

"Relax" is an interesting word to hear when you feel like you're not making any progress. Yet, that's exactly what you need to do. Time and continued positive experiences will eventually bring you closer to your stepchildren, but you can't force their affections. So relax, accept the current level of relationship, and trust the Lord to increase your connection over time.

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Meet the Author: Ron L. Deal



Ron Deal is a marriage and family author, conference speaker, and therapist. He is founder and president of Smart Stepfamilies™ and director of FamilyLife Blended™, the ministry initiative of FamilyLife® to stepfamilies (for more visit www.RonDeal.org and www.FamilyLife.com).

Ron is author of *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* (and DVD series), *The Smart Stepdad, Dating and the Single Parent*, *The Smart Stepmom* (with Laura Petherbridge), and *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage: Keys to Success in the Blended Family* (with Dr. David Olson). A highly sought-after, recognized expert in marriage and blended families, Ron is a member of the Stepfamily Expert Council for the National Stepfamily Resource Center, and is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Licensed Professional Counselor with over 25 years experience in local church ministry and family ministry consulting. He is a featured expert on the video curriculum *Single and Parenting* (2011, Church Initiative) and his material is widely distributed by a variety of family education initiatives

Ron served as a member of the Couple Checkup Research Team (headed by Dr. David Olson, PREPARE-ENRICH) which conducted the two largest studies of marital strength ever accomplished. They surveyed over 100,000 marriages and remarriages (over 200,000 people) and examined the qualitative differences between highly satisfied marriages and low-quality marriages. The results of their groundbreaking research for couples are published in the books *The Couple Checkup* (Olson, Larson, & Olson-Sigg, 2008) and *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* (Deal & Olson, 2015), and are featured in Ron's newest seminar for dating, engaged, married, and remarried couples, the [Couple Checkup Conference](#).

Ron is a popular conference speaker and has appeared in dozens of national radio and TV broadcasts both in the U.S. and Canada. His daily 60-second radio feature, FamilyLife Blended, is heard by thousands each week around the country and online. He has appeared on Fox News, MSNBC, ABC's *Nightline*, WGN-News, *The Mike Huckabee Show*, *FamilyLife Today*, *Focus on the Family*, *HomeWord with Jim Burns*, *Celebration*, and *The 700 Club*, and his work has been referenced online (e.g., ABCNews.com, Today.com), in magazines (e.g., *Essence*), and in newspapers throughout the world (e.g., *USA Today*, *New York Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta*

Journal, and *Minnesota Star Tribune*). The May 2012 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* featured Ron's therapy work with a blended family couple in their popular feature column "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" Ron has written feature family articles addressing a variety of family matters for a variety of publications and online magazines including *Focus on the Family* magazine, *ParentLife*, *The Family Room*, *Gospel Today*, *Christianity Today*, and *HomeLife* magazine. On a regular basis Ron trains therapists, marriage educators, and ministry professionals at conferences around the country and has spoken at the National Stepfamily Conference, and the Utah and Arkansas Governors' conferences on the family.

Ron and his wife, Nan, have three boys. Their middle son, Connor, died unexpectedly in February 2009 at the age of 12. In his memory, the Deal's have partnered with Touch a Life Foundation to rescue and rehabilitate children in Ghana, West Africa, from trafficking. They would be honored if you would help them sing Connor's song. Visit [Connor's Song](#) to learn more about this ministry and to hear Connor sing.

In addition to FamilyLife sponsored events Ron is available to present his [Couple Checkup Conference](#) or [Building A Successful Stepfamily conference](#) in your church or community.