

A GUIDE TO

BUILDING

LOVE

WITH THE

FIVE P'S OF

STEPPARENTING

Establish your place in your blended family

Introduction

Stepparenting is hard. You have all of the responsibilities of caring for a child, all of the obligations and expenses, but get far fewer rewards than biological parents—especially in the beginning when everyone is trying to figure out where to put you.

Biological parents don't always appreciate how hard this is, partly because even on their worst days their children forgive them and reconcile fairly easily. On most days, biological parents get a regular dose of "I love you Mom/Dad," or hugs, or smiles that communicate "I appreciate you and want you in my life." Moreover, most of this comes quickly and easily. Stepparents have to earn every reward they get.

One significant predictor of blended family satisfaction, for both adults and children, is whether the stepparent can find a workable role in the home. While each person contributes to the process, finding your place, defining your role, and establishing yourself as a trustworthy parent-figure are keys to building love.

In this eBook, discover how to define your role and establish yourself as a trustworthy parent-figure by implementing The Five P'S of Stepparenting.

① Partner with your spouse.

Partnering is about strengthening your coupleness so you can love and lead your children well together. You need to partner in two ways.

First, you need a strong marriage. A solid, reliable relationship is what fuels both partners' ability to do the work of parenting and in the case of the stepparent, empowers them to be part of the authority team. Parenting is hard work; it takes a lot out of us. And—have you noticed?—until children mature it's often a one-way street. We do all the giving and they do all the taking!

What spurs us to invest so much of ourselves in our children is, for many, a relationship with the Divine (who continuously pours love into our hearts), and a healthy marriage. Said another way, investing in each other ensures continued investment in your stepchildren.

To do this well, both of you need to shift your primary life allegiance to your spouse and fully commit yourself “till death do you part.” Permanence and dedication contribute to an emotionally safe environment for both adults and children.

Making this shift can be difficult for some parents. Before a first marriage “leaving” your father and mother to establish a new home is one thing, but “leaving” your children (that is, shifting your primary allegiance to your spouse) is another. But you must make the shift or everyone—you, your children, and your spouse—will walk on eggshells wondering what stressor might sever your marital bond.

A stepparent simply cannot find their footing in the home if the biological parent doesn't elevate their status in the eyes of the children. You must have a strong marriage.

Please hear us: this does not mean you neglect your kids! It simply means repositioning them in your heart so your longrange loyalty belongs to your spouse. Couples in first marriages raising their biological children don't neglect their kids either, but their marriage does serve as the foundation to the home—and yours should, too.

② Pursue

If you want to make a new friend you have to extend yourself in their direction—and you must do so in ways that make it more likely they will open themselves to you, and perhaps, pursue you back. Smart stepparents continually pursue the liking of their stepchildren. Be fun and warm. Smile at them. Spend time doing things they enjoy. If you aren't approachable, don't be surprised if they don't want to hang out.



Of course, one of the best ways of pursuing a child is to know and speak their primary and secondary love language. Utilize the online profile (5lovelanguages.com). If your stepchildren are adults, keep in mind your initial goal is being friendly, not necessarily openly “loving.” If we gave you the assignment of making friends with a new neighbor, you probably wouldn't introduce yourself and immediately give them a bear hug and kiss on the cheek (unless that is a common cultural greeting). Make friendliness your initial goal. That will likely be more palatable for them.

No matter a child's age, it could be that both of you are just now learning about the love languages. But it could also be that the biological parent knows their child's love language and the stepparent is just now exploring this.

The biological parent has much to share, but both of you should know that the upheavals of the past may have created traumatic experiences for a child that have altered or even soured their love language.

THE FIVE P'S OF STEPPARENTING



Start with the least intimate, least potentially intrusive dialects of each love language—Giving Gifts, Acts of Service, and Words of Affirmation—and move toward the most intimate—Quality Time and Physical Touch.

Both parent and stepparent are seeking to understand a child's primary love language so most of the time you can speak what communicates best, but you should utilize all five over time. Everyone needs love spoken in a variety of ways. Moreover, you don't want to speak just one exclusively. This is especially true of gifts; only giving gifts may cause them to see the world through materialistic eyes.

Now here's the catch for stepparents. Pursuing makes you vulnerable; it hands

power over to a child, especially one who is closed toward you. The least invested person in any relationship always has the most power. This is another reason to partner with your spouse who can shut down any manipulation.

*“Everyone needs love spoken
in a variety of ways.”*

In addition, don't let your pursuit turn you into a pushover. You can still say “No” and risk disappointing the child; in fact if you don't they may never respect you. Rather, walk the line of deepening your friendship and trust in one another while remaining the adult in charge.

③ Pace

A child's "pace" should inform a stepparent's pursuit of their heart. Gauge a child's level of openness to you and match it. Throughout this book we've offered a number of cautions to stepparents about not demanding love or pushing themselves onto a stepchild. But the principle of pace trumps all of that. If a child has thrown herself wide open to you, disregard the general precautions and go for it! However, matching their level of openness also means backing off if they are closed or uncertain of how to receive you. Sometimes it's not personal at all;



their visitation schedule or life situation can determine how much time you are together. You have to make the most of what they give you and the opportunities you have and trust that time will multiply the impact.



④ Patience

Blended family complexity means patience is a must. “My stepson and I can find a good rhythm together in giving and receiving love—until he goes to his mom’s house for a few days. After that, he’s different with me for a while and we have to regroup.” This is a common experience for stepparents. Patience in that season is a must. You can also be patient with yourself. “In the beginning I felt so overwhelmed. I had to step back and take a breather every once in a while, and then I felt like I could give again without feeling resentful that my stepkids weren’t speaking my love language.”

This form of self-care is wise, but be sure to explain to your spouse what you’re doing so they don’t resent you pulling back a little.

Ironically, eagerness trips up many well-intentioned stepparents. It sets you up to give without limits and expect it to be appreciated. Many “wicked stepmothers” are really just overly eager caregivers who are trying to make everything right for a child who has been through many painful experiences. Repairing the child’s life and

being desperate for the child’s love and acceptance make many stepmoms appear to be overbearing and emotionally fragile.

There are many moving parts in a stepfamily and the depth of a child’s heart has many layers—most of which you don’t control as a stepparent. Cut yourself a break and perhaps lower your expectations of how quickly you can bond and how thoroughly you can intervene in their life.

Blended family complexity means patience is a must.

This will help you not tie your success or failure as a stepparent to how open they are to you and may give you some thick skin to endure tough moments. In the end, patience will move you through times of uncertainty and take some of the pressure off the loyalty conflicts of children.

5 Persistence

The ups and downs of stepparenting can be discouraging. And for many, the temptation is to emotionally withdraw to sulk or punish, to get angry, to retreat into your own children, or to just give up. Well, we'd rather you be stubborn. Stubbornly persistent, that is, in gently pursuing (while pacing with) the child.

You can't be a bull in a china closet. Just be determined to keep pressing forward. No, you don't have to constantly set yourself up for disappointment with a child who is completely closed to you. But

neither should you give up and walk away. If their door is completely shut, knock occasionally. And if nothing else, stand outside and when you can speak to them through the door, all the while continuing to live your life on your side of the door. Sometimes the door is open to you, but you have to persist for a very different reason. In total, John and Kerri had three kids in their blended family. His youngest is a Physical Touch child. "Always in someone's lap," Kerri commented. Her son and his older daughter both respond best to Quality Time. "Without it," John



THE FIVE P'S OF STEPPARENTING

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said, “my daughter will become a funky, moody teenager. We’ve learned to stay on top of that or things get bad.” The problem is, John’s kids spend most of their time at their mother’s house where they receive very little Touch or Time from their mom or stepdad.

“At their house, kids are expected to occupy themselves and if they ask for some attention, in effect, they are told to ‘go away,’” John lamented. “If anything, they are told what they are doing wrong and that’s about it. We sort of have to make up for that with extra cuddle time and conversation when they come to our house on Friday nights. We have to make the most of our time with them.”

Kerri’s stepchildren were hesitant to receive love from her when they weren’t getting it from their biological mom. But Kerri doesn’t mind persisting for their sake. She knows loving them well ministers to their soul. “When you love your kids well, it makes it easier for them to carry that love with them to the other home. We can’t make their mom love them better, but we can fill them up before we send them over there.”

“And here’s the biggest surprise,” said

John. “We’ve even noticed this has changed my ex-wife’s attitude toward co-parenting with us. We used to have a toxic relationship with her. It was ugly. But we made a decision a year ago that regardless of what came at us we were going to love her however we could. And the easiest way to do that is to love my kids well so when they leave here their cup is full. And what we’ve noticed is that when they come back it doesn’t take as long for them to acclimate to our home, but it’s even made a difference with their mom. She feels our respect and kindness through the kids and it’s making a difference in how she responds to us. She called me recently—usually she is angry about something—but she didn’t complain about anything or criticize us; she just wanted to coordinate our calendars. I couldn’t believe how considerate she was,” he said. “This is happening more and more and is a big change for us. Even more importantly, it helps my kids out a lot because they don’t get caught in the anger and crossfire.”

Did you catch that? No matter their age, loving your kids well fills their cup and helps them cope with life in the other home—and might just help change the attitude of your co-parent toward you.



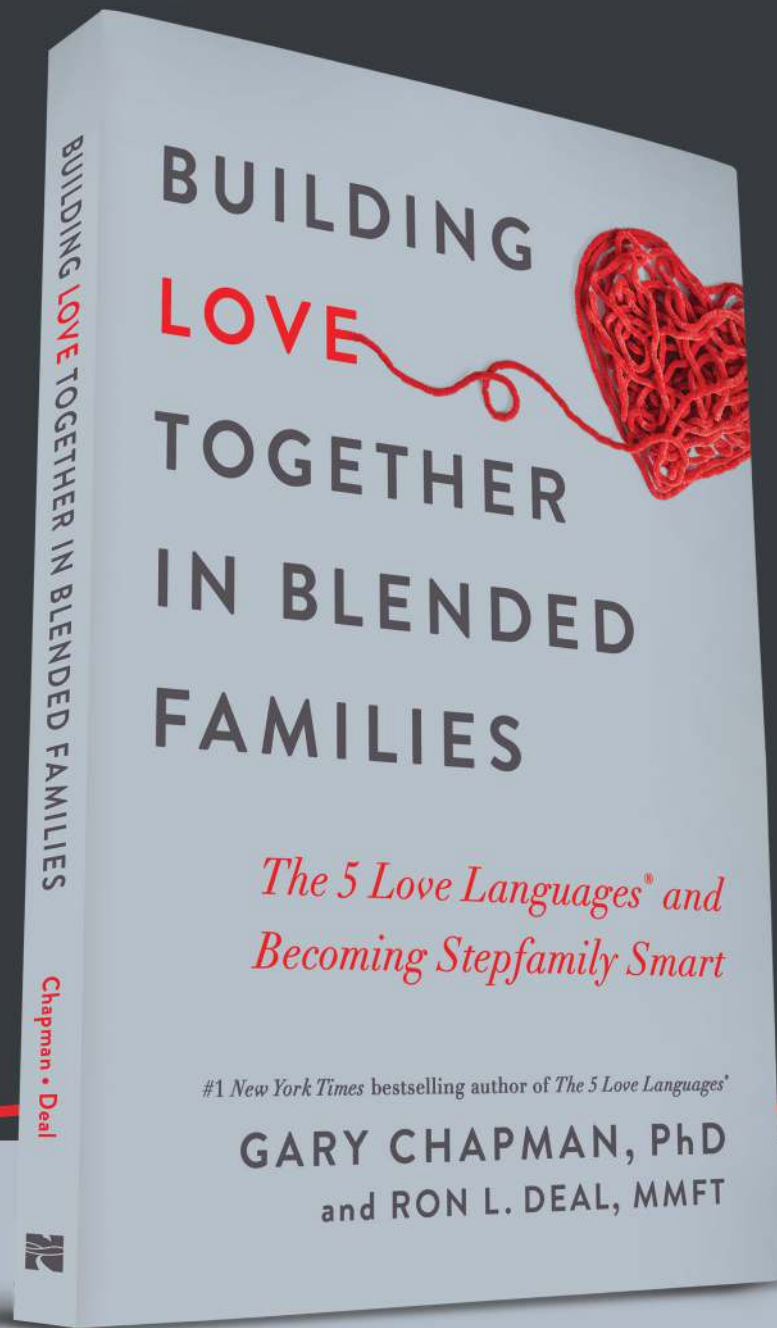
The bonus “P”

There's one more “P” you might consider. Prayer. As parent and stepparent you need to constantly bathe the process of parenting in prayer. The principles we've given you provide a basic road map, but you need God's wisdom to know when to zig or zag, when to keep going, and when to back up and start again.

Prayer will keep you humble and listening. Praying together will keep your hearts connected and unified.

If after reading this eBook you realize mistakes have been made, regroup as a couple. Talk about what you've learned and decide how to proceed. Apologies may need to be made. You may need to recalibrate your roles, expectations, and efforts going forward. You may need to strive to heal specific relationships—maybe even the entire family. Prayerfully develop your plan together and be patient with yourselves as you step into the future.





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