

Women's Ministry

Good news! In order to minister to blended families, you don't have to create a whole new ministry. Just bring stepfamily awareness into your current women's ministry. Here are some practical ideas and resources to help.

① **CONTENT:** Discipleship curriculum that addresses general subjects like character development, for example, will apply to stepmoms and biological mothers in blended families just as they apply to all women. But when addressing subjects like mothering and being a godly wife, be sure to address unique challenges and opportunities relevant to those in stepfamilies. For example:

- ◆ How stepparenting is different from being a biological mother (see The Smart Stepmom section below)
- ◆ The need to connect with stepchildren before correcting them (bonding fuels leadership). Being a disciplinarian too soon can backfire on stepdads if asserted before bonding has occurred.
- ◆ How a stepmom's role is greatly impacted by the children's biological mother (living or deceased). If there is perceived conflict or competition between the stepmom and biological mom, for example, children will usually side with their mother and distance themselves from the stepmom. Being intentional to not be perceived as a threat is vital for stepmoms (see the No-Threat Message below).
- ◆ How a healthy blended family marriage is intertwined with the stepmom's relationship with her stepchildren. Her husband will struggle to entrust himself to her if he has issues with her relationship with his children.
- ◆ Why a stepmom needs support navigating her role. If her husband is co-parenting with his children's biological mother(s), help stepmoms to find their role in the parenting process. In some cases stepmoms can engage both her husband and the kids' mother, but in others, it's best she reserves her input for private conversations with her husband only.
- ◆ The need for biological mothers to feel important to their children even if a stepmom in the other home spends more time with the kids than they do.
- ◆ How biological moms who give their children "permission" to like, get along with, and/or love their stepmother, release their children from the fear of being disloyal to her. This frees their spirit, causes less internal anxiety (or depression), and leads to less conflict between homes (a significant factor in child well-being).

2 **EQUIP STEPMOMS** to face unique dynamics surrounding special days and events throughout the calendar year.

- ◇ **Mother's Day:** Help her prepare to be overlooked or even forgotten by her stepchildren—and give her permission not to attend church on that day if it's too painful (something many stepmoms do anyway). Plus, invite her to help her stepchildren connect with and honor their biological mother, living or deceased. She might even release any expectation that the children be shuffled between the two homes on this day.
- ◇ **Holiday Months and Special Days:** Because biological parents and children want to be together during the holidays and days that have special meaning (e.g., birthdays or cultural festivals), teach stepmoms to be mindful of the mom's needs. On Mother's Day she can celebrate her stepchildren's biological mother (to dispel fears of competition) and encourage them to do the same. If kids can't be with their mother on special days, step into their grief (another moment lost) and "hug their hurt".
- ◇ **Mother-Son Retreat or Event?** Some churches host events like this for parents. While the aim is to support families and celebrate children, these events may create awkward circumstances for stepparents and children. Coach a stepmom, for example, to talk with her husband about whether taking a stepson to such an event is a wise decision at this point in their relationship (a child may prefer his biological mother take him).

NO-THREAT MESSAGE:

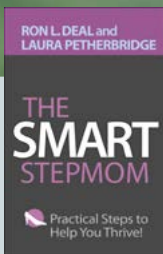
To help reduce anxiety and a sense of competition between a stepmom, her stepchildren, and their biological mother, it is very helpful if stepmoms will communicate

the No-Threat Message, and then live it out. The below message can be communicated by a stepmom to the biological mother (and her children) in-person, via text, email, or video call (we usually let stepmoms and their husbands determine which is best for their circumstances). In the same way, when a biological mother communicates a similar message to the stepmom, it eases the tension between homes and increases collaboration. Use the words that make sense to you, but the heart of each message is as follows.

Stepmom to biological mother: *"Hey, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today. I just want you to know, that I know, that you're mom to your kids and I'm not. I respect that—and I respect you as their mother. I will never get in the way of your relationship with them. Like a coach or mentor, I think of my role as someone who cares for your children and tries to be just one more adult who guides them into life. If you ever have any concerns, please feel free to communicate directly with me. I appreciate your time, have a good day."*

Stepmom to stepchildren: *"Hey kids, I just want you to hear me say that I think your relationship with your mom is very important. I'm not trying to be your mom or replace her, and I will never get in between you and your mom. I'm someone who loves your dad very much, and I also really care about you. I want to be like a teacher at school, or a coach, or maybe even an aunt to you. We'll figure this out together, but please know, I respect your mom and I appreciate your love for her. Okay, let me know if you have any questions."*

Biological mom to stepmom: *"Hey, I want you to know that I appreciate all you are doing for my kids. I want to work with you and [former husband's name] as best I can because I want a healthy climate for my kids. We'll get better at this as we go, I'm sure. Just know I'm thankful for you and praying for you."*



"Every stepmom who is smart will read this book."

— Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott

A SMART STEPMOM*:

- ① Doesn't pretend that a second marriage is the same as a first, and she doesn't expect everyone to be happy.
- ② Acknowledges that it's normal to love stepchildren differently than biological kids.
- ③ Discovers the things she can control and releases the things she can't.
- ④ Has educated herself about normal stepfamily development and uses that understanding to make sense of her current relationships and circumstances.
- ⑤ Takes the time to understand children who are coping with loss and loyalty conflicts. Her goal is to ease the grief whenever possible rather than create more chaos.
- ⑥ Recognizes that children often feel disloyal to the biological mom if they treat their stepmom kindly.
- ⑦ Doesn't step hastily into her husband's parenting role, even when her husband refuses to do so.
- ⑧ Respectfully discusses issues about the children privately with her husband.
- ⑨ Learns when and how to address conflict in her marriage and with her stepchildren and her extended stepfamily.
- ⑩ Is constantly growing and learning about wise stepparenting and parenting strategies.
- ⑪ Has a strong support system with other women who share her values.
- ⑫ Tries to be at peace with the biological mom and asks God to help her see things from the biological mom's viewpoint.
- ⑬ Does not try to become a replacement mother to children who already have one, nor does she insist that the children call her Mom.

- ①④ Recognizes that there are limits to her contribution to decision making regarding her stepchildren's lives (examples could include choice of physician, educational environment, or wedding planning, etc.).
- ①⑤ Knows that sometimes being a stepmother is going to be unfair and lonely.
- ①⑥ Acknowledges that she may not see the fruit of her sacrifices until the children become adults.
- ①⑦ Resists the negative label associated with being a stepmother and believes instead that her value is determined by the love of God.

* adapted from *The Smart Stepmom* by Ron L. Deal and Laura Petherbridge



Great Resources for Blended Families



Books & Videos | Podcast | Virtual & In-Person Events | Leader Training



FamilyLife.com/Blended



RON L. DEAL is author of the bestselling book and DVD series *The Smart Stepfamily*, author of *The Smart Stepdad*, *Dating and the Single Parent*, and coauthor of *The Smart Stepmom* and *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*. He serves as the director of FamilyLife Blended®.