

BUILDING
LOVE
TOGETHER
IN BLENDED
FAMILIES



*The 5 Love Languages® and
Becoming Stepfamily Smart*

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The 5 Love Languages®*

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Building Love Together in Stepparenting

WHEN REFLECTING ON her journey as a stepmom one woman said, “I understand my stepkids’ love language, but they don’t understand mine, nor do they make any effort. I get the impression they think I don’t have any feelings, but I do.”

It’s not always this extreme, but there are seasons where most stepparents feel that they do most of the giving and get very little in return. 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.

A relationship plagued by love conflicts (loyalty issues) and a child’s lower motivation toward love and bonding are usually at

the roots of this. Get past those challenges and stepparents find many rewards (along with all the regular angst of parenting children that biological parents experience).

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.

LEAD WITH LOVE. LISTEN FOR LOVE.

In chapter 4, we saw how Jeremy and Cynthia figured out each other's love language. While on that journey, they also had to figure out how to build love with their stepchildren. Each brought children to the marriage. Jeremy had three kids, two boys and the oldest, a girl; Cynthia had two sons.

"I had been single for ten years before Cynthia came into our lives," Jeremy said. "Through her teen years my daughter, Chloe, had been the only woman in our home. If we bought towels or something, she picked the color because she was the woman of the house. When Cynthia came into the picture, she had her own

opinions of decorating the home, what foods we should eat, and lots of other things. As you can imagine, Chloe felt displaced. They really butted heads."

Cynthia chimed in. "It has been really hard for me to show her love when she is dis-

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tant all of the time, even now as an adult. Through the years she would get close to me a little, but then feel disloyal to her mother and move far away. That hot and cold response from her has made it hard to keep showing her love. So at this point, I try to show her love by loving her daughter, my granddaughter.”

Cynthia is leading with love and finding whatever avenue she can to express her love (in this case, through her granddaughter). It’s hard to move toward someone who continually moves away from you. But successful stepparents persistently lead with love. They are wise in how they do so, but they don’t give up. Your sacrifice precedes a child’s increasing motivation to love. When your efforts are reciprocated, by all means, enjoy every minute of it. But when they aren’t, ease off on the intensity of your efforts (we’ll say more about this later in the chapter), but keep looking for a way to express yourself.

It might help you to keep persevering if you step into your child’s shoes and consider why they might keep their distance. Chloe was the “princess” of the home before the new “queen” dethroned her. It’s hard for parents sometimes to understand just how important roles like this are to children. In her case, contributing to the home and providing leadership to her younger siblings held value for Chloe. She lost that when Cynthia entered the home. Not only did Chloe then have to compete with Cynthia for the time and energy of her father, she found herself wrestling to hold her value.

Shifts in birth order have similar effects on children. A child who is the oldest in one home is a lost middle child in the other. Or a fun-loving baby-of-the-family who gets lots of attention at her father’s house is nearly invisible with Mom and stepdad who have newborn twins. Changes like these affect a child’s self-esteem

and add more loss to an ongoing narrative of loss and unwanted transition. No wonder Chloe couldn't readily receive Cynthia into her heart. So what is Cynthia to do? Continue, with wisdom, to gently and persistently lead with love.

A second reason Chloe remained distant was a love-conflict. All things being equal, stepparents should assume that children will first and foremost remain loyal to their biological parents (whether living or deceased). Moving closer to Cynthia, on occasion, made Chloe feel guilty, as if she was abandoning her mother for a relationship with Cynthia. Protecting their parent and preventing conflict takes a lot of emotional energy for a child—and requires constant vigilance. This can be emotionally taxing for a child.

Though sometimes confused by it, Cynthia found a way to deal with Chloe's "hot and cold" responses. She continued to lead with loving actions, though she did so at a pace Chloe could receive (more on this later in the chapter). Sometimes it's helpful to speak directly to a child's fear. "Chloe, I want you to know that I really care for you and am glad you're in my life. And I'm honored to be playing a small role in your life. But please know, that I know, that your mother is very important to you—as she should be. I will never try to take her place. She is your mom and I will respect her as such." The goal in making a statement like this is to alleviate Chloe's fear that Cynthia is competing with her mother. If she can relax and not worry about that, she might let herself move toward Cynthia a little more.

Incidentally, we would also encourage Cynthia to communicate this same message directly to Chloe's mother. If her anxiety about Cynthia's role in Chloe's life decreases, she will relax towards Cynthia, which will in turn help Chloe relax even more.¹

Cynthia's husband, Jeremy, had his own journey with her

sons. Jeremy and his stepson David had a hard relationship. They had started out well enough, when David was only eight, but things went south when David became a teenager (this is not uncommon). They struggled for years. You may remember from a previous chapter that Jeremy's love language is Acts of Service and he assumed early in the marriage that this was, also, the best way to show love to his wife. He made the same incorrect assumption with his stepsons. "I tried to show David love by doing things for him. I'd fix his truck, clean up his dishes, and pick up his messes. But he would never show appreciation for any of it." At least that's what Jeremy initially thought.

"Adult stepchildren are difficult to get to know, and I've found it hard to learn their love language due to distance and everyone's schedules."

The findings from the 5LoveLanguages.com assessment gave Jeremy some key insights about David. He discovered that David's love language is Words of Affirmation. That turned on a light for him in two ways. First, instead of just doing nice things for David he began giving him compliments and speaking encouraging words to him. It was then he realized that David had noticed his efforts all along. "He might not say it to me, but he would brag to others on the things I did for him," Jeremy said. "When introducing me to his friends he would say things like 'This is my stepdad, Jeremy, and he fixes my truck for me.'"

What do you know? David did notice. And he appreciated it.

Cynthia jumped in. "David won't directly tell Jeremy he loves him. He's never said that. But he will say nice things about him. Realizing this has been huge for both of us."

Cynthia had a similar experience with both of Jeremy's sons, James and Andrew. Both boys' primary love language is Quality Time. James would seek out Cynthia at parties, even if his biological mother was there. "But he still won't say the words, 'I love you,'" she added. "For whatever reason, he just can't say it, but he will spend time with me and talk to me." Andrew couldn't tell her that he loved her either. "But he does spend a lot of time talking to me about stuff. He will ask my opinion about things and he, too, will sit by me and talk even when his mom and stepdad are in the room."

This reveals an important point for stepparents: in addition to leading with love, be sure to listen for love in the native language of each child. Notice that three of Cynthia and Jeremy's five children would never say the words "I love you" to their stepparent, but they all communicated love in their own way. You might be missing your stepchild's indirect expressions of love because you're only listening with your ears. Learn to listen with your eyes (notice their acts of service), your watch (when they spend quality time with you), arms (physical touch), or your hands (gifts), but mostly with your heart. Learn to appreciate what they can say—no matter how they say it. Loyalty concerns and sadness for missing family members may dictate that they not express their appreciation or love directly (out loud). Be wise enough to decipher the indirect message and take it to heart.

Leading with love and listening for love helps you find and establish your place in the home. But you also have to define your role and establish yourself as a trustworthy parent-figure.

THE FIVE P'S OF STEPPARENTING

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 long-range 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.

Secondly, you must partner around your roles in parenting and play to each other's strengths. Ron's wife, Nan, has taught school for nearly two decades. She has served as an administrator, full-time teacher, and on occasions has been a substitute teacher. For good reason she prefers not to be a substitute. I bet you can guess why. Do you remember having substitute teachers in school? Play day! Everyone knew subs felt out of place, didn't know the routine, and occasionally could be manipulated. However, the same students who would give a substitute a hard time respond with respect to the full-time class teacher. Why? Because she has a clearly defined role and relationship with the students, but a sub doesn't.

Biological parents have a clearly defined role and relationship with their children. On day one, stepparents have neither. They are substitute parents. And without the biological parent's support and backing, they may have a disruptive classroom experience. Which brings us to the subject of child behavior management.

People sometimes confuse discipline and punishment. Discipline is about training a child. It's about building their character and teaching them the ethics of life. Punishment is about correction and consequence. It is a negative form of discipline. Stepparents can on day one in the family slow-cooker offer discipline to a child, but should punish sparingly until a clear bond and trust is established.

When biological parents take the lead on handing down punishment to a child, they are playing to their strength and partnering with the stepparent by not putting them in a tough

situation. When they communicate to their children that the stepparent “is in charge while I’m gone,” they are giving the sub a chance to be successful. And when they gently insist that their teenager act respectful (“Don’t talk to my husband that way.”), they are giving the substitute parent a chance to be viewed as an authority in the home.

Stepparents partner with the biological parent when they consult with them before making rule changes or modifying family traditions. And they are playing to their strengths when they don’t expect too much of themselves. For example, assuming you can fill all the “gaps” in a child’s life may be well intentioned, but is unrealistic. One stepmom decided she would change the diet that her husband and boys were used to; they were going to “eat healthy” if it killed her. It almost killed her place in the family. Until your relationship status is set, work with your spouse and move slowly on making changes.

Over time, stepparents can clarify their relationship with stepchildren and gain tremendous influence and authority in their life. You may start out as a substitute teacher, but following the five P’s won’t leave you there. In most cases, as your relationship deepens with a child, so will your role in their life.

STEPPARENT MISSTEPS:

- Being overly harsh on stepkids or your spouse’s parenting. Be very careful how you offer criticism, even if you think it is constructive. Begin your observations with, “Because I care about Tim . . .”
- Demanding love and affection or terms of endearment (“Call me Mom.”)

- Viewing the time your spouse spends with their child as a threat to you. A balance of time and energy between you and your stepchildren helps move you into the family.

BIOLOGICAL PARENT MISSTEPS:

- Becoming paralyzed in your parenting. Due to guilt over the past, fear for your child's future, or sadness regarding what is happening in your home, some parents become paralyzed in setting boundaries or following through with discipline. Resist this temptation.
- Holding on to “veto” power. Don't hinder your spouse's influence or involvement in parenting just because these are “your kids.” Make space for the stepparent.
- Not trusting the stepparent's heart toward your child. You may not agree with every aspect of how the stepparent relates to your child, but guard against judging them as uncaring. That sets you against them and teaches your children not to respect them.

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.

Pursue Tips:

- Take an interest in their interests and share your talents, skills, and interests. Find common ground.
- Share your desire to get along. “I really want to get to know you.”
- Be their biggest cheerleader in life. Applaud their efforts and show confidence in them.
- Be careful with comments like “My kids never acted like this” or, “Your daughter is very irresponsible.” Your spouse might become defensive and guarded.
- Make sure children know you’re not trying to replace their mom or dad. In fact, go out of your way to support their relationship with the parent in the other home or the memory of a deceased parent.
- A good way to enter their life is to keep up with their daily activities. Take them to soccer practice, ask them about their math test, and play with them.
- Match the child’s level of openness to you. If they are uncomfortable being with you one-on-one, orchestrate group activities so someone else is involved. Move toward one-on-one activities when you can.
- Be sensitive to a child’s experience of loss. Show compassion for their grief, allow them to talk about losses, and encourage ongoing connection to parents and extended family not in your home. Compassion is attractive.
- The average stepfamily needs five to seven years to integrate their family and bond relationships. Be patient with the process.

Of course, one of the best ways of pursuing a child is to know and speak their primary and secondary love language. Cynthia and Jeremy utilized the online profile (5lovelanguages.com). Some abbreviated profiles are included in chapter 2. In addition, we've provided a summary of principles to help you discover your child's love language at the end of this chapter.

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.

Noah's love language was Quality Time. He and his dad used to spend hours together hiking and fishing. But ever since the divorce, his dad rarely spends time with him. And when he does show up for visitation he is on his phone with work or his latest girlfriend. Now, when his dad says he's coming by, Noah would rather not see him. But neither can Noah spend lots of time with his stepdad, who is more than eager to speak his love language. Guilt, love conflicts, and hurt have soured Noah's receptivity to quality time.

It could be that Noah's mother is able to speak the language

of Quality Time to him while his stepfather can't, at least not yet. He should continue to pursue Noah, but may have to take the love language "path of least resistance" we discussed in chapter 3. 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.

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.

As if all this weren't complicated enough, you need to consider your biological child's feelings as you reach out to your stepkid. One stepdad asked, "How do you balance giving gifts to a stepchild in front of your own child, whose love language isn't Gifts, but still sees the other child receive something from me?" The answer is to continue loving each child as best he can. Not

everything has to be equal (in gift giving, for example) but it should be fairly equitable (meaning, generally similar). And he may offer an explanation to his child. “I could buy you a gift, too, but I also know what you really value is spending time with me. Let’s find some time this weekend, just the two of us.”

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.

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 re-group.” 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.

Eagerness trips up many well-intentioned stepparents.

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. 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.

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 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 no-

ticed 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 chapter 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.² 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.

YOUR TURN

How are you doing with the five principles of healthy stepparenting? Which are strengths right now and which need improvement?

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR CHILD'S LOVE LANGUAGE³

For both parents and stepparents there are a few developmental considerations to keep in mind when trying to discover your child's primary love language and preferred dialect. Speak all five love languages to children under the age of five, especially to infants who need lots of physical touch for healthy brain development. As your child grows you'll notice a pattern in how they express love to you and others. You'll also notice one language spoken by you communicates your love more deeply than the others and when spoken negatively results in more hurt. This awareness will help you pinpoint your child's primary love language.

One caution: don't discuss your search with kids in the preadolescent or teen years or it may tempt them to manipulate you. A Gifts child may beg you for the latest

smartphone or an Acts of Service child may “forget” to clean their room to take advantage of your willingness to serve. Maintaining proper boundaries and expecting your child to pull their own weight are acts of love, too.

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN: TIPS FOR FINDING YOUR CHILD'S PRIMARY LOVE LANGUAGE

Considered together the following indicators will help you identify a dominant pattern in your child. Consider them collectively.

Watch how your child speaks love to you. All kids want to give and receive hugs or gifts, for example, but what language do they repeatedly speak? Young children especially (ages five to ten) are likely to speak the language they desire most to receive. Do they compliment you or thank you for helping them with something (Words of Affirmation) or ask to spend time with you (Quality Time)? Do they repeatedly give hugs or sit in your lap (Physical Touch)? Watch and learn.

Observe how they express love to others. Expressions of love to teachers, grandparents, and extended family members also indicate a child's preferred love language.

Listen to what your child requests or complains about most often. “Mom, how did I do?” or “How do I look in this?” are bids for affirming words. Likewise, what a child complains about may fit their overall pattern. “Why are you always looking at your phone, Dad?” is a request for focused time.

Give your child a choice between two options. “Would you rather go shoot hoops together or get your mom a special gift?” “I have some extra time this evening. Would you rather we take Gracie to the dog park or I help you study?” Over time, the preferences to these kinds of questions can help you see a distinct pattern in your child. Remember, the pattern that emerges for each child with the biological parent or stepparent may vary. It’s okay if you are focusing your efforts on different love languages because the child’s receptivity is key to the message getting through.

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