

Ministering to Students in Stepfamilies

TIP SHEET

Did you know?

- One-third of all students in the US will have a stepparent by age 18 (50% will at some point in their lifetime).*
- 100 million Americans have a step-relationship (i.e., stepparent, stepsibling, or stepchild) and 40% of families are blended families. Nontraditional is the new traditional family.
- On average, it takes more time for a child to adjust to a parent's remarriage than to the original parental divorce.
- We used to talk about the impact of parental divorce on children; now we are concerned with the impact of serial marital transitions: 29% of children have experienced two or more mother breakups...by age 15.

What is the Psychological and Social Impact of Serial Marital Transitions on Students?

- Lower economic status, lower academic performance, lower emotional well-being (e.g., depression); feel less connected to their parents; more behavioral problems (including aggressive and delinquent behavior); have sex at an earlier age and are more likely to have their first child out-of-wedlock (51%).
- Lower confidence in the institution of marriage (which is currently visible in the high rate of cohabitation and stay-over relationships); delay marriage, but don't delay having a child.
- Once they do marry, they divorce more quickly and at a higher rate.

What is the Spiritual Impact on Students of Multiple Parent Figures Moving In and Out of the Home?

- They find it more difficult to connect to the Biblical narrative of God as Father.
- More likely to distrust authority.
- Are systematically trained to have a postmodern worldview. Why? Because living between homes with multiple parent figures who over time model and "teach" a variety of worldviews invites kids to embrace all "truths".

Typical Stepfamily Struggles

- Parental roles are ambiguous which leaves stepparents and stepchildren confused about authority and how to relate to one another.
- The household lacks a family identity. This is eventually developed over time, but until then family members may feel fragmented.



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*Stepfamilies can be
a blessing to kids.*

*Watch our video The
Blended Family: Help
and Hope on YouTube:*

[Youtube.com/user/Family
LifeBlended](https://www.youtube.com/user/FamilyLifeBlended)

*The family in part is
designed by God to be
an incubator of faith for
children. By contrast,
unstable "musical
homes" incubate
postmodernism, a sense
of shame, and negative
attitudes about marriage.*

* Statistical references
available at

[smartstepfamilies.com/
view/statistics](http://smartstepfamilies.com/view/statistics)

- Kids, who have already experienced great loss, fear more loss. Students may feel alone and forgotten.
- Outsiders (new step-people) who are trying to become insiders (accepted family members) feel frustrated and defeated.
- Multiple stressors on married couples (e.g., parenting, ex-spouses, debt from the past) make strengthening their marriage a challenge.
- Unclear spiritual belief system.
- Colliding family rituals, traditions, values, and loyalties.

... all of this means stepfamilies have more potential underminers than any other type of family.

Where's the Hope?

The ideal family structure for children is a biological family. When that is no longer an option, the next best option is a strong, stable single-parent home or stepfamily home.

Research reveals that children who grow up in stable, loving stepfamily homes have more positive attitudes about the institution of marriage than other children of divorce, are more likely to marry, and have higher-quality marriages (like the one modeled for them in their stepfamily).

In other words, whether preceded by death or divorce, we can take back God's design for the home in just one generation provided the stepfamily home is healthy, loving, and effectively disciplining children. Healthy stepfamilies are generationally redemptive.

Stepfamily ministry—to children, students, and couples—is a must for the church today.

What Student Ministries Can Do?

- **Create Safety.** To help create a safe place for students to talk about their family, connect them to the Biblical narrative of complex families and redemption. Most of the families in the Bible are “nontraditional” families. The animosity toward Joseph by his half-brothers, for example, stems largely from the dynamics of a complex family (fueled by multiple marriages, favoritism, jealous and competing wives, and kids who felt pushed aside by their father). In addition, it could be argued that Jesus had a stepfather. Talk about these realities and draw parallels to the lives of students today in order to help them see that God has always loved and worked through those in “nontraditional” families—and always will.
- **Support the Parent and Stepparent.** Stepcouples (married couples in a blended family) desperately need guidance and support. Couples marry and form a stepfamily because they've fallen in love with a person, but they divorce because they don't know how to be a family. Your church needs to offer pre-stepfamily counseling to prepare the family—



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One of the ways we prevent divorce in the next generation is by preventing redivorce in this generation.

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including the children—for marriage and stepfamily small groups to support couples after the wedding. Marriage mentoring is another practical idea.

Because these strategies strengthen the entire home, they may be the most important thing you can do for a student. NOTE: traditional marriage and parent ministries do not address the unique dynamics of blended families; they are helpful, but far from adequate. You need educational material specifically designed for stepfamilies. Visit familylife.com/blended for resources and training.

- **Beware the Church Attendance and Distance Cascade.** There is a negative cascading effect in many youth programs. When students in single parent homes and stepfamilies feel disconnected from the youth group they lose motivation to engage/attend events; this in turn discourages their parents from attending church as well.
Students feel disconnected for two main reasons: 1) not being able to attend classes or events on a regular basis due to their visitation schedule to their other home; 2) sequential Bible class curriculum can lead kids to feel lost and peripheral to the group discussion. To overcome this inertia, make a special effort to communicate with students between attended events, help them find social connections within your group even when they aren't in attendance, and move away from sequential class curriculum (or at least find ways of bringing kids up to speed so they don't feel lost). And make a special effort to reach out to students who will be part of your program only in the summer while spending time with a noncustodial parent.
- **Connect to Both Homes.** When only one of a student's homes is connected to your church reach out to the other parent and stepparent (with permission). Find ways of communicating with them (e.g., about travel plans to an event) and serving them. This has the added benefit of helping you to understand your student better; you can't know a student until you know the family (or families) they live in.
- **Holidays & Special Days.** These can be a stressful time for children. Moving between hostile parents during the holidays or planning two high school graduation parties (one at each home) can be difficult for kids. Don't assume that times of celebration are stress-free. In addition, take advantage of these days to support stepfamilies. For example, encourage students to honor their mother and stepmother at Mother's Day. They can decide the appropriate way to do so, but your admonition communicates the need for respect from children to their caregivers. In addition, a public word of honor from you about stepparents at such times helps everyone gain appreciation for the role stepparents play in the lives of kids.
- **Understand Legal Issues.** Younger students may have one household drop them off at youth activities and another pick them up. Is that allowed in the visitation agreement? Does each household know



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this will happen? You don't want to inadvertently facilitate a violation of the agreement. And since stepparents do not have legal custody of stepchildren (unless they have legally adopted them) do not give stepparents the option to sign medical consent forms—they cannot grant permission for medical treatment unless given permission by both biological parents. Some simple permission documents to address matters like these are available for free download at smartstepfamilies.com/view/permission-forms.

- **Open a Dialogue.** Talking with students about their home life can be very helpful. They often need a neutral person to be a sounding board for their questions and frustrations. The easy to read booklet *Life in a Blender: Living in a Stepfamily* (available only from shop.FamilyLife.com) is intended to help parents and students engage in conversation about their home, but it can be used by youth leaders as well.
- **Learn About Stepfamily Living.** You don't have to be an expert, but the more you learn about blended families the better mentor, coach, and advisor you will be to both students and their parents. Take some time in the next three months to read a book (we suggest *The Smart Stepfamily* by Ron L. Deal) or watch a video on stepfamily living. For articles and resources visit familylife.com/blended.
- **Attend The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry.** This national conference for children, student, and adult ministry leaders and volunteers provides equipping and training regarding stepfamily ministry. Sponsored by FamilyLife Blended™.

Remember, stepfamilies done poorly just add to the chaos and confusion of student's lives. However, stepfamilies done well are redemptive.

great resources for blended families



Visit FamilyLife.com/blended for free articles, resources, and conference information.



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You don't have to be an expert, but the more you learn about blended families the better mentor, coach, and advisor you will be to both students and their parents.



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™.