Bob: If you are attempting to blend a family, Ron Deal says, “There is a surefire way for you to get things off to a bad start.”

Ron: I got a call one day. She was a mom with three children—she was divorced and has three kids. She was marrying a man who had never been married before, and he was an ex-Marine. He didn’t have any kids—didn’t know what parenting was all about or the hard work of parenting—how challenging it was. He was an ex-Marine. It is one month until the wedding, and this couple had just had a phone conversation. The Marine guy said to his fiancée, “Listen, honey, between now and the wedding, I want you to tell your kids—I want to make sure that they understand—when you and I get married, the Marines have landed.”

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, June 24th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. In this case, I’m not sure the Marines know what they are in for. They may find the enemy is a little stronger than they imagined. We’ll talk about blending a family today. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Tuesday edition. We have a mutual friend, who, about four years ago, lost her husband in a car wreck. Three years after her husband died, she met a widower—a father of two. The two of them met, fell in love, and got married. One of the things that she wisely did—because she lives in our community and because she knew that Ron Deal works here, at FamilyLife—as that she got in touch with us and she said, “Could we get some time with him?” [Laughter]

You know—

Dennis: Smart woman!

Bob: —there’s not much better that someone could do than to get some guidance from somebody who knows what they’re talking about if you’re heading into the challenges of blending a family because, no matter how committed you are to one another, the challenges are going to be more difficult than you anticipate them being.

Dennis: I have to say, Bob, that I’ve ministered in this area for a number of years. I grossly underestimated the challenges that blended families face in, really, achieving
oneness, as a couple. That’s why this ministry is so important and why I’m excited to announce to folks that we’re going to have our second annual Blended Family Summit in Washington, DC—right before I Still Do™—in October because we are passionate about equipping couples to do blended family ministry in and through the local church.

Bob: Yes. This is called Blended and Blessed. It’s led by Ron Deal, who gives leadership to FamilyLife Blended. There are going to be hundreds of folks gathering together at Immanuel Bible Church in Springfield, Virginia. It’s a Thursday night/Friday event—then, the next day, I Still Do at the Verizon Center.

We’ve got information about Blended and Blessed and I Still Do on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com. Go to the website; click in the upper left-hand corner where it says, “GO DEEPER.” The information you need is available there. Ron Deal is not only going to be giving leadership to the Blended and Blessed Family Summit, but he’ll also be speaking at the I Still Do one-day event for couples.

Ron sat down, not long ago, with a group of—I think there were 60/70 couples in blended families. He talked with them about the key elements for step-parenting because, when you get right down to it, step-parenting is one of the huge challenges in blending a marriage and a family. One of the principles that Ron shared with those couples is that, when it comes to trying to bring your step-children to embrace the blended family, you need to let them set the pace for how quickly that blending happens.

Here’s Part Two of a message from Ron Deal on “Successful Step-Parenting.”

[Recorded Message]

Ron: Let the child set the pace. This is a principle that trumps everything; right? Let me step back for a minute. “Let the child set the pace.” Every once in a while, somebody will run up to me and they’ll say: “Okay, we read that article you wrote about names and what terms you should use in your step-family, and what terms are good, and what terms are not good. Well, we kind of understand that, but let me tell you—Little Susie has called me ‘Daddy’—stepdad—“has called me ‘Daddy’ since before the wedding. I don’t know what to do with that. I’m so uncomfortable with that. I think I should tell her not to do that anymore.”

“Nooooo!” Let the child set the pace. If the kid is okay with it, keep going because that child is saying, “I have worked out, in my heart, my loyalty issues.” Let the kid do it, for crying out loud; and join them in that space. “You know, my kid kind of hugs me—my step-child hugs me—and I’m like not quite so comfortable with that.” Okay, well that’s your issue; but it’s okay that they’re doing that. As a matter of fact, I’m going to encourage you to push yourself and join them in that space. If they’re okay with it, you be okay with it. Now, you also let that be the barometer. So, if they’re okay with
knuckling or side hugs but they don’t want bear hugs, then you’ve got to listen to that too. “Let the child set the pace.”

Authority: “What if the kid throws to you all of the authority of any biological parent?” Take it! They’ve worked it out in their heart. Praise God for that little gift. But, if they are looking at you, saying: “Who are you?! Talk to the hand. You are not my mom! I don’t have to do what you say!” you’ve got to figure out how to deal with that through your spouse, who has authority when you don’t. You’ve just got to take them where they come. That will help you relax about what you don’t have.

You see, that’s one of the things—that is one of the little graces I want to give you, as step-parents, today. [Deep sigh] Relax about what you don’t yet have. Does it mean you stop wishing for it? No. Does it mean that your heart isn’t sad over what you don’t have? No, you will be sad. But does it mean you’ve failed? No. Does it mean it’s all over? No. Does it mean you pull back? Does it mean just give up? No! Take what you have today and build on it. Keep moving into the future. Relax about what you don’t have; enjoy what you do. Wise step-parents let the kids set the pace.

Number Two: “Focus, initially, on building relationships and gaining respect—earning respect—with the kids.” Again, what we’re saying is there’s a difference between authority and leadership in any person’s life. We all get this. When you walk into work, you probably have a boss—somebody who has a position over you and that carries some authority—and you do what they say. Positional authority is different from relational authority. Relational authority is when you’ve gained a relational equity with the child that is respectful, and worthy, and embraced, and heartfelt. Now, they obey you for completely different reasons—because they care for you and they feel cared for by you. They trust you. It’s a very different thing.

It’s like the difference between people. We can do this spiritually; right? There are lots of people going to church—for whom God has a position—they live in fear of His commands; they live in fear of His judgment. They follow the rules purely because they’re rules. How long does that last them?—usually until something comes along, in life, that makes it not worth following the rules anymore. But there are other people, who go to church every Sunday, who have a relationship with their Lord and Savior. It’s that relationship that motivates them to follow. It’s a completely different motivation!

So, on Day One, you step-parents come in; and you’re a babysitter; right? You’re the teacher on the first day of school. You’re the coach on the soccer field or the football field. You’re giving commands, and you give orders, and you set parameters, and the kids may follow that; but they may not be happy about it! They may not follow those rules. They may question: “Alright, wait a minute! What space are we in here?” It’s like a coach on the football field has every right to tell the kids what to do; but, if you walk off that field and you’re in a totally different venue in life, and that coach walks up to your kid and starts yelling, and screaming, and telling them what to do, you wouldn’t stand for it and neither would your kid.
We all know there’s space for certain types of authorities in life. We’re going to respect that, as a step-parent. We’re going to acknowledge that the relationship is growing—the attachment is deepening over time. On Day One, you cannot be the same kind of a parent as a biological parent can. In the book, *The Smart StepDad*, I tell the story about a guy I call “Marine Man.”

Many, many years ago now, I got a call. I was living in Jonesboro, Arkansas. I was working for a church. The phone rang. Here’s this couple in Atlanta, Georgia. They’re mentors—marriage mentors—in their church. They had just received a phone call from a couple that they were mentoring. This was a pre-marital couple. She was a mom with three children. She was divorced and has three kids—a teenager and the youngest one was, I think, ten years old. She was marrying a man who had never been married before. He was an ex-Marine. He didn’t know what parenting was all about or the hard work of parenting—how challenging it was. He was an ex-Marine.

It is one month until the wedding, and this couple had just had a phone conversation. The Marine guy said to his fiancée, “Listen, honey, between now and the wedding, I want you to tell your kids—I want to make sure that they understand—when you and I get married, the Marines have landed.” [Laughter] A bit anxious about that phone call, she called her marriage mentors. They hung up with her, and they called me. They lay out that scenario for me and they said, “Now, what do we say?” I laid out for them everything we’ve been talking about and some stuff we’re getting ready to talk about.

He’s claiming relational authority when he hasn’t earned it—he doesn’t have it. It’s going to backfire on him; at least, it does in 99 percent of the cases. So, you’ve got to coach him away from that and coach him to respect the limits of his role and let bio-mom be first violin. Almost two years went by—we do this workshop. In the middle of the workshop, I tell that story because I want to make the illustration: “Hey, don’t let people do this. This is a big, big, big trap. It will sabotage their parenting, which immediately sabotages their marriage and the family.”

They said, “Okay.” So, I went back to my booth and had an exhibit. Some people were gathered around, talking and looking at different resources and things. This woman kind of peers over the back—she goes like this—I go over to her and she says: “I was just in your workshop. I just want to say, ‘Thank you. That was very helpful. That story you told about Marine man—that was us.” I looked at her and I said, “What happened?!” I’ll tell you what she said in just a minute. [Laughter]

Okay, so a prescription for parenting and step-parenting roles—we’ve got, over here on the left, up and down the left side, the degree of the authority to discipline—which really comes back to that idea of parental status: “How much authority do you have? How much attachment do you have?”
Biological parents are up here. They have high parental authority. The neat thing about bio-parents is that, because of the attachment, you always have and you always will. It always stays up in a high place. Again, like I said, you have to work hard to let go of your attachment. So you’re first violin on Day One; but, when it comes to the kids and how they receive your authority, and the relationship, and the nature of that—to them, it’s kind of like you’re still the only parent in the house; alright?—for most of the kids.

By the way, if you have 25- and 30-year-olds, they still have the same process of attaching to the step-parent. They’re not looking to them as an authority figure in their life because they’re adults themselves; but they are looking at this person: “Is this somebody I can trust?”

Step-parents, on Day One, you’re down here, like a coach or a camp counselor. When the kids look up at their bio-parent and go—like for affirmation, “Do I have to pick up the dishes?” and the bio-parent goes, “Yes,”—you know, all you have to do is give them that affirmation and you’ve boosted the step-parent’s status in the home and the step-parent can get it done because you’ve passed power to them. You understand that there’s a process behind this thing.

Now, everybody wants to know, “How much time does it take?” I have no clue! Let the kids set the pace. I can’t figure that out—I can’t predict that. I can tell you that children, under the age of five, can bond more quickly than older children. Children between the ages of 10 and 15 seem to be the ones that have the most difficult time bonding with a step-parent. They’re highly loyal—highly loyal—to their family members—to their biological family members. They feel guilty if they love you as the step-mom because they’re not sure how mom’s going to feel about that. All of those things—kind of in combination—just make it a challenging time. It’s not you—it’s them. It is what it is. So, the age of the children makes a difference.

Number Two, previous family experiences: “What if these kids have had a step-dad before you and he was a jerk?” I hate to say it, but you pay for the sins of somebody who preceded you.

Number Three—non-custodial parent / ex-spouses are a big factor; right? If bio-dad is in the other house, saying: “Don’t you listen to that man! He’s not your dad; I am.” I hate to say it, but that works because kids are loyal to that bio-dad. That attachment is strong. They’re not going to risk that—risk disappointing him. I mean, they may love you—you may be the neatest thing since sliced bread—but Dad is dad. It just creates this wedge and it works.

If you’re that step-parent, you need a support group. You need to have a lot of honest conversations with your spouse. You need to really talk through the limits of your role because you’ll have more limits because of that dynamic. And, by the way, if you’re the bio-parent in that scenario—married to that step-parent—I hope you are giving your step-dad / husband, in that case, a big old hug and kiss on a regular basis. Just say:
“I’m sorry! Thank you so much for loving my kids. I love you for that.” So, the non-custodial parent relationship is a factor.

The child’s temperament and personality—some kids are more outgoing. Some kids are less outgoing. Some kids are just adventurers and life’s a party—“The more people the merrier!” They embrace new people in their lives. Other kids may be introverted—may be within themselves / may be withdrawn for whatever reason—and they just don’t need you.

And let me give you one last picture to help you think about different parenting. There are different parenting styles. You guys have seen this before—this is nothing new. Over on the left, you have “warmth.” Another way we talk about that is nurturance, affection, and love. This is: “I love you, kid. You’re awesome! I’m in your corner.” We’re either high in that or we’re low—where there’s very little affection and very little affirmation given to children. We don’t want to be there.

Across the top is “In Charge.” We don’t control our kids, but we do try to be in charge of our kids—the same way God parents us; alright? So, if you take high in-charge—meaning expectations, boundaries, consequences when boundaries are broken—that’s what “In Charge” is—and you combine that with “Warmth”—“I’m your biggest fan / I’m behind you”—you get what we call authoritative parenting.

That’s the way God parents us: “Ron, I love you like crazy. I’d go to the ends of the earth. I’ll do anything for you. As a matter of fact, I’ll die on a cross for you. That’s how far I’ll go for you. But if you cross these lines, I’m going to let you live with the consequences. I’m going to let you feel that because I want your heart coming back to Me.” That’s how God parents. Every research study ever done on parenting—ever—says authoritative parenting is the best way to go.

If you get over there on the permissive end of things, you’re not really in charge—you let the kids set the rules—you don’t set the rules. You’re high on love! You’re making them feel great; right?—no boundaries. Lower left, you get authoritarian parenting. That’s where: “I’m the boss! I’m the military Marine!” Oh, wait. I owe you a story. [Laughter] I haven’t forgotten. On the lower right is neglectful—where you’re not giving your kids anything, anywhere, anytime.

So maybe the step-parent says, “Okay, why are they not making their beds in the morning?” “Oh, come on. They’re not that bad.” “Well, you know, I’m just thinking we need to help them.” “Listen, just lighten up a little bit and everything will be okay!” Do you see what happens? They move further, and further, and further away from—number one—good parenting and—number two—each other. We not only have a parenting problem—we’ve got a marriage problem. So how do you avoid that trap? Well, bio-parents, you’ve got to be first violin.
On Day One, step-parents, they’re—it feels like—permissive. Now, those of you that are step-parents, who are also biological parents—you’ve got your own kids—that feels really weird to you. What we’re acknowledging is that on Day One, the attachment doesn’t really allow you to do that. You really have to focus on the warmth factor. You’re trying to build connection and relationship because that’s what gains respect and authority over time.

Now, what happens if you’re polarized in two different corners or you started at the wrong place—like Marine man—and you think, “Now what do we do?” So, I asked her, “What happened?!” She said: “Well, he came in like a Marine. He bossed the kids around, and he was harsh and unyielding. I so wanted to support him, as my husband, but I couldn’t support how he was going about it—the process. I found myself defending my kids.” I nod: “I get that.”

“Then he got mad at me and said that I was choosing them over him.” She said, “That went on for about a year-and-a-half. Then, he came to me one day and said: ‘You know what? All that stuff that we heard at the beginning—what our mentors told us—I finally figured out I didn’t listen to any of that, and I should have. I’m sorry.’” She said, “‘Yes,’ but it was kind of hard for me to trust him.” I said, “Oh, yes! You’re not going to trust him right away.” I said, “I imagine him and the kids start trying to kind of heal.”

She said: “Yes. We talked about it, and he had to really backtrack.” She said, “That’s when it dawned on me”—listen to this incredible observation—“I was too busy being a reactionary mom to him rather than being the mom.” She said: “I had to pick it up. I had to step it up with my kids. I had to begin to raise the bar of expectation and standards with them.”

Sometimes, you find yourself in need of some repair. It is okay to kind of pull back and find humility and say: “I blew it! Here’s my part. I own that. Let’s regroup and try to start over again.”

I am a strong, strong believer that there are incredible—incredible rewards for blended families who go the distance—who do it well. I will say it a thousand times! I believe, with all of my heart, that step-families done well are redemptive. They’re redemptive—not only of this generation but of the next generation. We take back the hearts and lives of this family and our children because then we give them a home where they grow up—and they’re loved—and they have better ideals about marriage and family when they grow up. We have research behind that now. We can actually say we’ve proven that that’s the case. It’s redemptive. It’s a work of God. Step-families done poorly just add to the chaos, and the heartbreak, and the sadness in people’s lives. It is worth the investment to do it well!

[Studio]
**Bob:** Well, we have been listening to Part Two of a message from Ron Deal, speaking about step-parenting—one of the big challenges that blended families face. It’s good to hear Ron’s wisdom on this subject.

He’s going to be giving leadership to the Blended and Blessed Summit. It’s the second annual summit, happening in Washington, DC, October 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} at Immanuel Bible Church in Springfield, Virginia. Ron is going to be speaking at the *I Still Do*\textsuperscript{®} one-day marriage event in Washington, DC, on Saturday, October 4\textsuperscript{th}. We want to encourage folks, who are involved in blended family ministry to come to the summit. Those, who are in blended families—come spend the day with us at *I Still Do* and hear how to go the distance in a marriage relationship.

**Dennis:** Yes, if you haven’t signed up yet, come join us. It is going to be entertaining. You’re going to have a good time. While you’re having a good time, you’re going to sit and soak in some great teaching and equipping on how to have a better marriage and be successful in life’s most important commitment.

**Bob:** Of course, before we get to Washington, DC, we’ve got *I Still Do* happening in Chicago on Saturday, August 2\textsuperscript{nd}—Portland on Saturday, August 23\textsuperscript{rd}. Tickets are on sale right now. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information about how to get tickets for *I Still Do*. Or call 1-800-FL-TODAY for more information—1-800-358-6329. That’s 1-800-"F" as in family," “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

Again, right before *I Still Do* in Washington, DC—the Blended and Blessed Summit for people involved in blended family ministry. Information about that is online at FamilyLifeToday.com as well. Click the link at the top of the page that says, “GO DEEPER.” You’ll find the information about the Blended and Blessed Summit. You can register, online, or you can call to register at 1-800- FL-TODAY; 1-800-358-6329.

You know, we are coming up on the mid-point of 2014. I was just looking back on the first six months of this year and looking at, really, some remarkable stuff that has gone on. We’ve seen tens of thousands of couples join us at the *Weekend to Remember*\textsuperscript{®} marriage getaway this year. We’ve had many of those folks indicate to us that they made a first-time commitment to Christ in attending a *Weekend to Remember* marriage getaway. That’s one of the things we get most excited about with the *Weekend to Remember*—is the number of folks who come to faith in Christ by coming to that weekend getaway.

We’ve also had hundreds of thousands of visitors to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com—looking for articles / looking for help on marriage and family issues. Of course, every day, we’ve got more and more folks tuning in to hear this daily radio program. The reason I mention all of that going on in the first six months of this year is that we have many of you to thank for this ministry. You’re partners with us as you pray for us and as you help support the ministry financially.
We couldn’t do it without you. We appreciate your support of this program. In fact, if you can make a donation today, we’d like to say, “Thank you,” by sending you the FamilyLife Bible Study for Couples. This is designed to help husbands and wives work together through what the Bible has to say about things like effective communication, resolving conflict, raising Godly kids, rekindling your romance—things like that. We’d love to send you this Bible study for couples to either go through on your own or to invite other couples to join you in going through it. It’s our gift to you when you support the ministry with a donation right now.

You can donate, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper-right hand corner that says, “I CARE.” Make an online donation that way, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY. Make your donation over the phone and mention that you’d like the Bible study for couples. We’ll get it to you. You can also request the Bible study when you mail a check to us at FamilyLife Today. Our mailing address is P O Box 7111, Little Rock, AR; and our zip code is 72223.

And we hope you can join us back again tomorrow. Paul David Tripp is going to be our guest. We’re going to talk about two really good things that can destroy your marriage—can destroy your life, for that matter. We’re going to talk about money and about sex. I hope you can tune in for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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