



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Thriving as a Blended Family – Part 1

Guest(s): Ron Deal

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- Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.
- Dr. Tim Clinton: Hey, thanks for joining us today on this edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors and your co-host here on Family Talk. Our guest today is here to talk about a subject that is needed by a lot of people, but not addressed on a regular basis. It's the topic of blended families and preparing to blend. Ron Deal is the bestselling author, licensed marriage and family therapist, podcaster, popular conference speaker, who conducts laugh and learn marriage and family seminars and professional training around the country and online on this particular topic and more. He specializes in marriage and family enrichment and stepfamily education. Frequently featured in national media, Ron is a leading national expert and the most widely read and viewed author on blended families in the country. He's married to Nan, he's the father of three boys. Ron, always great to have you. Thank you for joining us.
- Ron Deal: Thanks Tim. It's always good to be with you. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you.
- Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, this issue on stepfamilies, blended families, when I started just doing some research and reading your work, and we've had many conversations through the years on this topic, Ron, I'm sobered by the statistics. Do you mind just painting a picture for us about how prevalent and how challenging this issue is in our culture.
- Ron Deal: Yeah. Let me give you three different snapshots, because I think depending on how you take a look at family and individuals within the US and across the world, it gives you a little different perspective. So the first snapshot is individuals, 35% of every man, woman and child in the United States has a step relationship, either a stepparent, a step-sibling, or a stepchild. That's a third, it's a very common experience for individuals. Somebody listening to us right now is going, "oh, I don't live in a stepfamily," but if you stop and think for just a minute, it could be that you have a brother who just married a woman who had

children. And so you're a step-uncle. And so you can reach out and touch this, especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas, when everybody gathers.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yes.

Ron Deal: And you begin to meet new people, and you have a sense, yeah, this is what a stepfamily is. Here's another snapshot. If you look at households, parents raising children, 40% of parents raising children, this is under the age of 18, are blended families. That's an awful lot of people.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah, 40%.

Ron Deal: The children might live in your home, they might live partly in another person's home, the other biological parent's home, maybe sometimes they live in a single parent home and then every other weekend they're in your home, but you're a stepfamily. And then here's actually two more stats that I'll give you. If we look at generations, one of the most telling numbers to me in recent days, just in the last year, is a study that they did where they looked at couples under the age of 55, does either one of the partners have a stepparent, or does either one of those partners have a stepchild? Now I'm 55 years of age, so if my wife and I, either one of us, if she had a stepparent, if I had a stepparent, if we had a stepchild, we would be counted in this statistic. 62% of couples under the age of 55 have one of those two things, a stepparent or a stepchild connected to their union. That's a ton of people. And it certainly is the future of our country.

And lastly, 15% of first marriages form blended families. Now, a lot of people just got to stop and go, wait a minute, wait, I thought stepfamily was all about divorce and remarriage and, well, that's part of the story, but an increasing part of the story is people who marry for the very first time, but one of them already has a child. And so they're forming a blended family, and it's a first marriage, 15% of first marriages. And if one of those two people is over the age of 30, then it rises to almost one fourth of first marriages form blended families. This is a very common experience, not only in the United States, but around the world. The same narrative is true in Europe, in Australia, in New Zealand and in many parts of Africa, non-traditional family is the new traditional family.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, I was also sobered by this statistic, 1,300 new stepfamilies are formed every day. And that may be an old statistic. Is that right or no?

Ron Deal: It is very old. I'm glad you brought it up, because that stat is about 25 years old. Nobody has redone the configurations. I would guess that it's at least double or triple that number every day.

Dr. Tim Clinton: For whatever reason, however, or whatever has happened in their lives, this is their new family system. Let's go a step further, Ron, terms, blended family, stepfamily, help us understand these terms for a moment.

Ron Deal: Yeah. It is confusing, isn't it? It depends on where you live, around the world stepfamily is the predominant term, in Europe, in Africa. Blended family is a term that is used commonly in lots of places. It's the more predominant term actually in the media, and in general when people just talk about, or when they search something online, they search blended family. But in the Southeastern part of the US, blended family often refers to a biracial marriage. And so that's something different. That's not necessarily a stepfamily. So it does depend on where you live and what terminology people generally use in that region. So, I can tell you, we use the term, in our ministry at FamilyLife, we use stepfamily and blended family interchangeably, because really essentially, they're describing the same thing. Somebody has brought a child from a previous relationship for whatever reason into this current marriage.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, I was up on stepfamily.org and saw this definition, blended family is a family consisting of a couple and their children from this and all previous families. I saw another definition on stepfamily that said a family that is formed on the remarriage of a divorced or widowed person, and that includes one or more children. And so bottom line is you've got family systems coming together. Ron, would you also include a family that has adopted children now placed inside of it? How do people talk about that?

Ron Deal: There are some common dynamics between adoptive families and blended families, but they're not exactly the same either. And so that's really a separate category. I would say that's an adoptive family versus a blended family. So there are some things that we talk about, that we teach related to parenting, for example, and bonding with children, that would be similar for adoptive parents as they are for a stepparent, but it's not exactly the same overall family dynamic.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, when you merge unrelated parents and children into a family, there are obviously a lot of dynamics that are going on, but Ron, I saw this piece, and again, it stopped me, 75% of stepfamilies complain of not having access to resources. Why don't we even add the word discussion here for a moment about stepfamilies?

Ron Deal: Yes. It is really something. When I was preparing to write my latest book, *Preparing to Blend*, which is a book for engaged couples to help them get ready for the wedding, but also for counselors and pastors who do premarital counseling. I was stunned to discover what you just said. 75% of couples forming blended families with their wedding get no preparation whatsoever. And even went as far as most of them don't even read an article, let alone a book, or watch a video series on this topic. In other words, they really walk in with some huge assumptions about how this is going to work and no training or preparation at all. And you and I know that premarital counseling really works, it lowers your risk of divorce by 30% and couples who go through premarital counseling have an almost an instantaneous qualitative lift to the quality of their relationship by 30%, it does people a lot of good, but when it comes to

pre-blended preparation, very few couples get it, honestly, most premarital counseling takes place in religious institutions.

They go to your church and, hey, if you're going to use our building, the pastor requires you to go through some premarital counseling. And often what pre-blended couples get from a church is exactly what a first time married couple with no children get, who are in their early twenties. All of a sudden you have a couple in their late fifties walking in, and there's five kids between the two of them, and they have assets and they have homes and they have bank accounts, and they have a history and they have lost narratives and the children have deep investments in what's happening with mom, or dad's life. That is not anywhere near the same scenario as this couple getting married for the very first time. And so, my contention is premarital counseling has to fit the context. It has to help this couple be prepared for what they're going to deal with when they marry and merge their families.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah, Ronald, we've all heard the nightmare stories of families trying to come together. And some would say it's like mixing oil and water together. It just doesn't happen. But Ron, I want to go to the positive here for a moment. We've also heard of and seen, I have, growing up as a boy, I've seen families that have come together and it was really a gift from God. Take us there first.

Ron Deal: Absolutely. Sometimes we enter this subject as if there's something inherently wrong about stepfamilies. And I don't think that's true. Sometimes people make decisions that are sinful and bring about consequences. And then yes, that bears fruit in terms of a different marriage and a different family composition, but that doesn't mean the family itself is sinful, we serve a God of second chances, that's who God is. Most of the families in the Bible are families that were complex in nature, that looked like modern day families. Joseph ended up being the father of the Messiah. He almost walked away saying, "That's not my child. That's not my obligation, or responsibility." And yet this Holy Spirit invites him into something bigger, and he takes on those things. That's something we celebrate. We celebrate that when people adopt a child, why don't we celebrate stepparents a little bit more?

We know from research that there is a generational redemptive nature to healthy stepfamilies. Let me back up. A child goes through their parents divorce. It is unwanted. The kid certainly didn't want that. They go through this difficult experience. Now they're living in a single parent home and the economics have changed on that family. And this single parent is doing the best they can, but life is not like it was, and one income, and it's harder to maintain behavioral management of your children, and we've had to move three times into different homes and apartments and different schools. And this kid's been through a lot.

And then a stepparent comes into their world, a stepfamily, and it's a healthy narrative, it's a healthy family experience for this child. We know from research that children who grow up in that healthy blended family, when they get to be adults, you ready for this? They choose better partners than kids who did not

have the mitigating factor of a healthy stepfamily. They choose better partners. They're more likely to have lifelong first marriages. And the quality of that marriage is healthier compared to children who grow up, for example, in a single parent home, when there's never the redemptive nature of the stepfamily involved. In other words, we can take back God's design for the family in one generation if the stepfamily is a healthy place for kids.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. As couples prepare to join their separate families in marriage, where should they start? You have a new book out called *Preparing to Blend*. Tell us a little about it, because you kick it off really focusing in on what you call our growing activities.

Ron Deal: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So here's the premise of the book, coupleness does not necessarily create familiness. It's one of the key factors that helps build a family. You got to strong marriage in the midst of your blended family in order to keep it moving forward to lead from a position of unity as a husband and wife. But just because you've fallen in love with a person does not mean you know how to be a family, or that everyone entering into this stepfamily experience has the same level of desire to be involved in the family. Let me explain. So, you fall in love with this individual and you're thinking, "Yeah, we've got a similar vision and I could spend my life with this person. I've got a friend, a lover, a companion. This is God's gift to me." They have children, perhaps you have children, maybe you both do, whatever the scenario is. Kids often are motivated towards moving into the new family. They like the stepparent, maybe they like their step-siblings, or they like one of them, maybe not all of them, but kids are also a little confused about it.

So, it's a mixed bag from children. Adults on a scale of one to 10, are a 10, in terms of their motivation to build this family. Children are somewhere between two and nine. Okay. And if you have three kids, one of them can be an eight, one of them is a six, and one of them is a three.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sure.

Ron Deal: And that child that's a three is like, "Look, I like my stepdad, but I don't need him. I don't want him. I don't want to let him in my heart deep. I don't trust him that much, just a little, we'll play baseball together, but I'm really not interested in anything other than that." Well, the stepdad's, he's a 10 on the 10 scale. So he's working hard to build a connection and gain trust. And he really wants this child to feel loved and cared for and safe. And he also would like to be accepted and respected for what he's contributing to the home. You can see there's a gap there, he's a 10, this child's a three. It's not that anybody's a terrible person, but so far we're not connecting. We're not finding each other.

And so, this stepdad is working hard, but he's not seeming to get anywhere. And so what does he do? He goes to his wife and he says, "Hey, honey, I don't know how to merge. Your son, and those words come out of his mouth and she just stops, and what do you mean my son? Are you telling my son there's something

wrong with my son? And oh, by the way, I think you just also told me I've been a bad mother, because my son who he is, is based on how I've raised him to this point in his life. So, you not only criticized my son, but you just criticized me.” And Tim, what we now have in this instant moment is not only a parenting dilemma, but we just crossed into a marital dilemma.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah.

Ron Deal: And those two things come into intersection with one another constantly in blended families in ways that end up creating stress and distress on the couple's relationship. And it's just difficult. Now, if we help people prepare for that kind of moment.

Dr. Tim Clinton: There you go.

Ron Deal: And navigate it differently, it is a totally different story. We end up helping the stepdad go, you know what? Oh, Ron just taught me that I'm not being rejected by this child who's only a three on the 10 scale. I'm just not that important to him. He's got a dad, he's got a relationship. He likes me, that's something. We're going to be friends, but I'm not going to be able to be a father to him, not today. And so what I'm going to do is I'm going to join him at a three and we're going to start figuring out how to play baseball more often. And someday that three may become a four, and who knows over time, it might be a six.

Now the other two stepchildren in my life, I've moved on to eight and nine, and we're doing great, but with this kid, I'm going to learn to be okay with what he's able to give me, and I'm going to bring the influence that God allows me to bring. Now with that heart change, that's just one shift, but all of a sudden he's patient, he's a little kind, gentleness and kindness, fruits of the spirit, have just implemented massive opportunity for he and this child to figure out how to move through life together without excessive conflict. It's that preparation that makes all the difference.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Not easily done, Ron. I think we'd all agree with that. This is a journey.

Ron Deal: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And when I think of children for a moment, and I want to shift our focus for the rest of the broadcast on our kids first.

Ron Deal: Okay.

Dr. Tim Clinton: We act out what we haven't worked out. And I've seen that happen. Ron, you say we've got to be able to see our kids here for a moment.

Ron Deal: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And one word that I circled upfront strong, and I said, ask Ron this, loss, these kids are going through major issues around loss. Explain that to us, Ron.

Ron Deal: Yeah. I don't think anybody in a blended family has had more loss than kids, because really every change that has come about in their life has been an unwanted change for them. More often than not, every one of them is unwanted. So dad died of cancer. Nobody wanted that. That's rocked my world, it's changed who I am, by the way, this applies if the child is eight years of age, or 28 years of age, or 40 years of age, nobody wants to lose their father, and it changes how life goes. It changes your understanding of your family, your place in the family, your identity, it's all wrapped up into that loss. So now we're grieving, mom's grieving, my siblings are grieving. We have had to change schools. We had to change churches, unwanted change, unwanted change, unwanted change. Now here's an insight.

A lot of people don't anticipate when mom finds a wonderful man, who's a great guy, who studies the Bible day in and day out, knows God's word and is a godly man, but I didn't really ask for him either. That's another unwanted change.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sure, it is.

Ron Deal: The research shows, Tim, it is harder on kids to adjust to a parent's remarriage than it is for them to adjust to their biological parent's original divorce. It's always a mixed bag for kids. There's an upside, but there's also a downside. There's some bitter with the sweet. And when you add that to, "I used to crawl up at mom's lap at night and just reminisce about the day. And that's how we survived those single parent years. And her attention was 100% on me. And now it's not. Now I have to share my mother with this new man. And if this new man brought kids into my home, I now have to share my mother with this new man and his children."

Now let me just pause and say, sometimes this is intimidating for people, and I don't want to say it doesn't mean you did the wrong thing by getting married and forming a blended family, it just means you got to step inside the shoes of your children a little bit, slow things down and see it from their point of view, develop that empathy so that you can minister to their heart in the midst of the loss.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And in this process, Ron, they often lose their voice and –

Ron Deal: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: it sometimes can be done subtly, meaning I choose as a parent not to talk about it, thinking that if I don't talk about it, that they're not going to deal with it, or they don't have to face it. Nothing could be further from the truth, they're living in it, they're watching it, they're seeing it, they're processing it. And

nobody's talking, everybody's screaming, but nobody's talking, nobody can hear Ron.

Ron Deal: Yeah. One of the things we know we want to do with grief in a family is we want to grieve as a family. Yes, every individual has their own journey in grief, but we also want to family grieve, which means talk at the dinner table and reminisce and reflect on, and be sad about, and go visit the grave, and all the things that we do in grieving, we do it with somebody else who also feels that, it helps. Now, imagine if we used to do that when mom was a single parent, but now that mom's married, she's happy, she doesn't live in that same sad space that we were all in together before. And so now I'm alone in my grief –

Dr. Tim Clinton: And confused.

Ron Deal: ... as an eight year old.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I'm confused.

Ron Deal: And confused, and I don't know what to do with it. And I have some more grief going on. So again, this just adds to that gap between adults are happy and excited at the point of the merger when the family begins, and often children are more confused and feeling the weight of more unwanted change. One of the things we teach parents to do is reach into that grief in your children, connect to the heart of your child and make sure they know you have not left them. Imagine you're a stepparent and, man, you've had every parenting class in the world, and you've raised your kids and they're in their early teens, or maybe they're young adults, and you've been very successful at raising your children. And now you have younger stepchildren. One of the things you want to do with goodwill that God has given you towards these kids is you want to come in and help, of course, you do. I love that in stepparents, but sometimes you're overly eager to such a degree that the children don't know how to respond to that.

And so, you're trying to, in effect, fix what's going on with that child, but the child's going, "Wait a minute, you're not my mom. You're not my parent. I don't give you the right to lead me yet in that direction," and there, we got a conflict there, we got some parenting struggles. And that always ripples again into the couple's relationship. It can be quite a burden on them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, I wanted to ask what can be done to ease this? And I noticed that you said, make sure and be sensitive to their voice. In other words, get that communication going, but you also place an emphasis on spending alone time with these children. Can you explain that real quick before we wrap up today's broadcast?

Ron Deal: One of the biggest mistakes a biological parent makes, and once the family has actually gotten married and is living together, is going a hundred percent all in

with all their time and energy in their new spouse. Of course, you're trying to bond and connect that relationship, but don't do it to the demise of your children. So here's the way I see it. Move toward your children, even as you're moving toward your new spouse, there's a triangle there. And if you can imagine that in your head, move toward your children, even as you're moving toward your new spouse. You move toward your children to reassure them of your presence, of your love, of your continued love for them and time with them. But then there needs to be a limit there, and then you move toward your new spouse and trying to build and solidify this new marriage relationship. And kids will not move toward a stepparent if they feel like they've lost you, the biological parent, they will move toward the stepparent initially through their relationship with you. It's a very strategic notion, that when people get...

Dr. Tim Clinton: That's interesting for me, Ron, so much, it almost feels counterintuitive for a moment.

Ron Deal: Exactly, exactly. It does.

Dr. Tim Clinton: But you claim that it really creates more togetherness in the end.

Ron Deal: Yep, because it's that attachment reassurance that a child needs. Oh, I haven't completely lost my mom to this new man. She's still here for me. We still get a little special time, just like we used to have in the single parent years. And that makes me feel good. All right, that's pretty awesome. Now I'm relaxed. Now I can relax about my stepdad. I can move toward him and not feel like I've lost everything.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, what a delightful conversation. It's obvious that you have such, not just a knowledge, but you have a real heart for these blended families and seeing God work in and through them. Brand new book out called, *Preparing to Blend: The Couple's Guide to Becoming a Smart Stepfamily*. Ron Deal's been our special guest. Can't wait to get in tomorrow's broadcast, Ron, as we're going to talk more about our kids and we're going to talk about the parenting element here and how challenging and how important it is that we get it right. Ron, such a delight to have you. On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, their family, the entire broadcast team at Family Talk, we salute you and thank you for joining us.

Ron Deal: Well, thanks for having me. And I got to just say, families are in the balance. All types of families matter to God. And I'm so grateful that Family Talk is giving attention to this and your listeners, we really need to get behind families and help blended families go the distance.

Roger Marsh: Well, you just heard part one of Dr. Tim Clinton's interview with Ron Deal on the topic of blended families, they were also discussing Ron's new book, *Preparing to Blend* here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and Ron Deal is a licensed marriage and family therapist, and a beloved author and speaker, and just an

all-around great guy. If you missed any of today's program, just go to drjamesdobson.org/broadcast, there you can listen to any part of the program that you might have missed. You'll also find out more information about Ron Deal, his ministry, and his many books on the topic of being a smart stepfamily. That web address once again is drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. Well, that's all the time we have for today for this first half of this very important and necessary conversation featuring Dr. Tim Clinton and blended family expert, Ron Deal. Make sure you join us again next time, Ron will be revealing some of the ways that parents and stepparents can help their children walk through the changes that come when a parent remarries, that's coming up next time on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.