



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Thriving as a Blended Family – Part 2

Guest(s): Ron Deal

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson, and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Did you know that 35% of all people in the U.S. have some sort of step relationship? As a matter of fact, do you know that every day you listen to Family Talk, you're listening to a stepdad who has stepchildren? That would be me. Blended families have become so common today. They're really becoming the new traditional family for many of us.

I'm Roger Marsh, and today here on Family Talk, Dr. Tim Clinton and Ron Deal will conclude their discussion about the phenomenon of the blended family. They'll tackle some of the common struggles that families face when they're first coming together and combining households. They'll also offer some tips on how parents and stepparents can help their kids through the confusion and sadness that often come with this transition. Ron Deal is a licensed marriage and family therapist. He's a podcaster and the author of several books, including the topic of today's show, *Preparing to Blend*.

He specializes in marriage enrichment and stepfamily education, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Ron is married to Nan, and together, they are the proud parents of Braden, Connor and Brennan. Let's get into Dr. Clinton's conversation with Ron Deal right now here on Family Talk.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, it's so great to have you yesterday, joining us on a topic that, it certainly has stirred a lot of conversation on our end, and Ron, your heart and your love for blended families is so strong. Thank you again for joining us.

Ron Deal: Well, thank you for having me. This is an important topic, and I'm glad we're talking about it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, yesterday, we got into the conversation about children and what they're up against, and the word loss was something that we centered around a lot of discussion. Ron, just go through that again and tell us why that word is so important for parents to understand.

Ron Deal:

Everybody, adults and children, but children in particular are carrying loss just below the surface, so everything that has led up to the new stepfamily situation has loss just dripping all over it, and so let me put it this way. When a child looks at their stepparent and says, "You're not my dad. You can't tell me what to say," yes, that child is telling you they didn't want to clean their room, but they're also telling you about their loss. See, what they're really saying underneath those words is, "I wish my dad were here, but you are a walking billboard, stepfather, of what has not happened in my life. Dad died, mom and dad divorced."

"Dad's in my world. I see him on a regular basis, but he's not here right now in this moment. I'd rather it be him telling me to clean my room, but now, I got to deal with you," so yes, that is a moment where we have to manage the child's behavior, but we also have to try to connect into their heart and their sadness, and that's a delicate thing. I coached up parents to say, "Well, you know what? Everybody in this home has to clean a room, and so you have to clean yours, and I'll give you the choice."

"You can do it or we'll use your allowance and pay your brother to do it for you, so you can either deal with the consequence or you can make the choice to obey," but inside that stepparent has also logged sadness. Later, we're going to come back and try to connect into sadness. Maybe it's mom that comes back at the end of that day, after hearing the story from her husband and goes to her son's room and says, "Man, I heard you had a rough day. Boy, your brother was happy making some money to clean your room for you. I hope next time you'll make the choice to do that, but oh, by the way, I'm wondering, I'm wondering if you and I get a little extra time together." When was the last time you talked to dad? Could we make an arrangement for you to visit with him, FaceTime him a little bit?" You try to begin to speak into the sadness that is underneath that behavioral anger that's on the outside.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Yeah. Sometimes, Ron ... Let me go back to that statement we referred to yesterday, we act out what we haven't worked out. Sometimes I'll push every button I can basically to test and maybe prove that you really don't love me. You're in here saying you do.

Nah, that's not true, and I'm banging on that door and, Ron, a lot of that behavior, again, is just that statement screaming out of my heart, "I'm lost," "I'm confused," "I'm frustrated," "I'm angry," "I've lost my voice," "Nobody hears me," "I'm dying inside, and I don't think anybody knows it."

Ron Deal:

I really think confused is a right word for a lot of kids. There's a part of them that's glad, "You're standing in front of me, telling me to clean my room." There's another part of them that really wishes it was somebody else, and so they don't know what to do in that moment, and it comes out as, "No, I'm not going to clean my room." Comes out as an attitude. Okay, we're going to deal with the attitude, but we're also going to try to connect into that sadness and

help that child give expression to, as you say, to work out that sadness, rather than act out that sadness.

Long-term, kids are much better off when somebody steps into their world. Imagine a stepdad, for example, Tim, who right around Father's Day goes to a stepchild and says, "Man, you know, I was thinking, you're with us this weekend, and this Sunday is Father's Day. You're not going to be with your dad. Man, if I were you, I'd be sad about that." This is a stepdad talking to the child about their relationship with their biological father, and he's stepping into that sadness, and he's saying, "I get it."

"I'm sorry about that. I would love to do something to try to help you honor your dad for this weekend. Can I help in any way?" What this stepdad has just done is A, minister to this child's sadness. That's important. That's valuable, but B, here's the bonus, he has proven to this child that, "I am not competing with your relationship with your father."

"As a matter of fact, I am going to give blessing on your relationship with your father. I'm never standing in the way of that." Guess what? That just made this stepdad respectable and honorable and safe emotionally to be around, and so this child goes, "You got a few points there. I can see you're not standing in the way of my relationship with my dad. You're not trying to erase and replace, so I like you a little bit more."

Dr. Tim Clinton: Now, because he probably has some loyalty issues, maybe he's struggling.

Ron Deal: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: "If I even remotely think that I like you or want to hang out with you, that makes me bad to my dad."

Ron Deal: In particular, "If I think you're trying to erase and replace my dad in my life." Like, "If I have any hint that you're trying to move in on his territory, then if I move toward you, I really feel guilty as a child." I really have that loyalty thing come to the surface, and everything inside me is going to say, "No, I cannot draw close to you, so now I've got to be mean to you. I've got to have an attitude toward you." Again, there's a lot going on under the surface in our children, and this is not necessarily a horrible thing. It just is what it is, and it's when adults see it and hear it and reach and try to minister to it, that can be transformative not only for the child, but also eventually for the whole family.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, in your new book, *Preparing to Blend: The Couple's Guide to Becoming a Smart Stepfamily*, you talk about an important step in the process of getting to a healthy place is doing what's called a blended family map. Ron, can you tell us a little bit about through the years, why this has become so significant? I get it from a counselor's perspective. It's like developing a genogram, but explain that for our listeners and why and how important it is.

Ron Deal: Yeah. Family therapists have used genograms for years and years and years. It's simply a way of, sort of like drawing a family tree where you connect people and relationships, and this person married this person and they had these children, but even more than that, it explores relationship patterns and mental health patterns through the generations and between family members. In a premarital counseling situation, it helps you anticipate what's coming, what the new family's going to look like, what it's going to feel like, and what it's going to be like to be each of the different individual members of your family. I have some friends that have dedicated a fair amount of money and time and energy to create a digital family map, a digital genogram.

People can go online, take this inventory essentially and create their map, and it gives them this picture, "This is your new family. This is what it's going to look like." What's really great about it is there's so many insights that naturally come. One of them is for a parent to go, "Oh, wow. I just sort of thought in my head of our family as being you, me, husband and wife, and your two kids and my one child."

"There's going to be five of us in the family," but when you look at it on paper, you go, "Oh, but wait a minute. From the child's viewpoint, they have another parent over here, and that parent has recoupled." Maybe they're dating somebody, maybe they're married, and then they've got another parent in another home over here, these kids, and so for children, it's three households, not one. It's five or six adults parenting them, not just two. It's seven or eight sets of grandparents, not just three or four.

All of a sudden, you look at life through the eyes of somebody else, not just you, and you begin to see the complexity of your blended family, what it means for them to try to maintain all of those relationships, and then you could step in and you go, "Oh, but I've also noticed that this child has three really positive relationships in their life, but they've got one over here that is really difficult."

Dr. Tim Clinton: And making them crazy.

Ron Deal: And making them crazy, and how do we help with that relationship?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah.

Ron Deal: It just opens up questions and insights that you just didn't have any other way.

Dr. Tim Clinton: What you're doing is you're mapping out this child's life and you're seeing maybe emotional triangles that are happening between different people that are precipitating, maybe a lot of the insanity that they're going through, Ron, if you don't see that, or let me go to the positive side. Here's support system. Papa is a wonderful voice in his or her life.

Ron Deal: There you go, right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You need papa in this conversation a lot more, that kind of thing, Ron, right?

Ron Deal: Yes. Imagine a child who papa was huge during the single parent years, picked him up from school, spent extra time, really poured into this child's life, and now, this kid has three more sets of grandparents. We don't need papa picking you up from school anymore because we've got this person who's able to do it, and they live a little closer. Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait. No.

For that child, we want to keep papa in the picture because that is a huge asset and resource for this child. That's the kind of thing you begin to realize when you do this digital genogram. That's chapter one in this book, *Preparing to Blend*, that gets people seeing life through the eyes of other people, developing some empathy and beginning to think through strategies that can help their family merge.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, I wanted to ask you, how long does it take, really, to blend or stabilize this new family?

Ron Deal: There's a lot of factors that affect this, but in general, we like to say that somewhere between five and seven years is what it takes for stepfamilies to really begin to find their fit, to integrate. It would be the word that I would use, to figure out the balance of relationships, to have established enough trust, that people feel like they're connected with one another and identify with one another.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You're listening to Family Talk, a division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors and your host today. We're talking with Ron Deal. Brand new book, again, *Preparing to Blend: The Couple's Guide to Becoming a Smart Stepfamily*, one of the best, if not, the best books out there, foreword by our friend, Dr. Gary Chapman. *Preparing to Blend* is one of the best ways to prepare for blended family success. Ron, in this book, and I know through all those years of experience and all the work you've done, the research you've done, you talk about a real challenge for these families.

It's called unrealistic expectations that often kill the good work that's being done. It starts out, Ron, with family members are going to love each other right away, for example. Can you address a couple two or three of them that you highlight in the book?

Ron Deal: I think it's just real easy for couples. They're falling in love, they've developed a vision for their life together. They wouldn't be getting married if they hadn't done that, and along with that comes this vision for their kids. "I want my kids to be blessed because of this union," and so obviously, they've thought it through. There's a part of them that needs the idea that the children are going to fall in love with the family as much as they have fallen in love with this new person and the idea of being a family together, and so with that comes that unrealistic

expectation, "I love you," "The kids are going to love you," "The kids are going to love us."

Well, I would say there's a part of the children that do fall in love with a stepparent, with step-siblings, and there's another part of them that is unsure about it all. There's another part of them that is feeling that loss and loyalty that we talked about, and so they're confused in this journey, so it's clear for you because you fallen in love. As an adult, you can see it clearly, but for children, it's a mixed bag.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah, Ron. "This marriage family will be better than the last one," "We can merge traditions quickly," "Our kids are invested in our marriage as much as we are," "My relationship with my children won't have to change," so much more. Those pieces, when you come into a relationship with those kind of expectations and when expectation and reality don't come together, there's a lot disappointment, Ron, and discouragement that starts to build quickly.

Ron Deal: Yes, yes. You know, if we could wrap all of those up into one unrealistic expectation, I think it would be this, that, "When I marry this person and bring my kids, their kids, we are repairing what has been lost." I really think that's a dangerous expectation. You're not repairing. You're not creating a new biological family, and we've just inserted a new mother.

"We lost the mother that was here. Now, we're a whole family again." Well, actually, what you're doing is you're putting in a stepmother, and her relationship with the children is going to be very different than a biological mother's relationship with the children is going to be, so you're not repairing and fixing, you're creating a whole new family, but hear me, it is a family. It works like a family, it functions like a family. God's principles for relationships still apply to your family.

Here's a cool thing about God's principles for doing life and relationships, Tim. None of it is tied to family structure. It's not dependent on whether you're a biological family or a single parent family or a stepfamily or an adoptive family. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control can be pervasive in any family, and so what you're doing is you're saying, "How do we move those principles forward in our family together with wisdom?" You take that sort of a strategy, and eventually, your whole family does move forward.

Exactly how much people bond with one another, to what degree they trust each other, "Do I ever see my stepparent as a real parent in my world, in my life?" those are things to be figured out. Some children, the answer is yes, and for some children, the answer is no, but that doesn't mean we're not a family. We're just a different sort of family. When you embrace that, now you have permission to deal with the relationships as they are today, and then we continue to press forward with them tomorrow.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, let's shift to parenting for a moment.

Ron Deal: Okay.

Dr. Tim Clinton: "We're in love, we have these expectations about where we're going, and so we now got a little work to do, and in this process, we know there's some challenges with our kids and what we're going to do as we consider parenting them. We have our new roof, if you will, and under my roof ..."

Ron Deal: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: This is how we parent in my house, in my family. Oh, no, no. This is how we parent in my family. "What do you mean you're thinking that about my son? You don't know my son," and Ron, it gets churning really quick, doesn't it?

Ron Deal: Yeah, it really does. I have a phrase, "At the intersection of parenting street and marriage avenue are an awful lot of collisions."

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ooh.

Ron Deal: That's true in biological families. It's really true in blended families. You have the best of intentions. "Hey, I want to help you get out of bed in the morning and get to school on time and be ready to learn, and so here's some things I want to bring to your life." You really have good intentions to help this child, but the manner in which you go about it sometimes makes it really difficult for the child to hear that, to feel that, to respond well to it, plus, they're trying to figure out their loyalty and their loss and, "You're not my dad, and I really wish my dad were here."

It's very important for stepparent and biological parent to work in unison with one another. Anybody who teaches on parenting talks about unity for the couple and how important that is. It is triple, quadruple important for couples in blended families because the stepparent has such a weak relationship with the stepchildren, especially in the beginning. It grows over time, but in the beginning, it's just sort of, "I don't know who you are," and so bio parent, stepparent, lots of conversation behind closed doors. Lots of discussion about how to work together. "Your rules, my rules. We got to figure out our rules and how we're going to lead together."

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, one of the big ones upfront is be careful what you say about biological dad or biological mom who's not in the home.

Ron Deal: Yeah, yeah. That's right. If a child hears a stepmother make a derogatory remark about their biological mother, what they just heard is, "You're trying to erase and replace her." You just bowed that child's back and you just made it harder for them to like you, let alone, trust you.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Oh, you did. You got to be careful there. Ron, you talk about a little bit of a hierarchy when it comes to parenting, and the biological parent of the child becomes really significant here. Tell us about that real quick.

Ron Deal: Yeah. Really, it has to do with definition to the relationship. A biological parent has a clearly defined relationship with the child, has a strong emotional attachment with their child. The child trusts them. "We've been through life together, we've been through hard together, thick and thin together. You're my mom, period. End of story. Now, my stepdad, I'm trying to figure that one out. I don't know where to put you. Some days I like you." Some days I love you. Some days I really don't want you around." Okay, so that's a different sort of relationship. All right. Mom can do hard work with a child.

She can take away the car keys. She can say, "No, you're not going to that party." She can say, "Yes, you're going to do your chores before you leave this house, and if not, here's the consequence that's going to happen if you don't follow through." Mom can do the hard work because she's mom. In the beginning, stepdads can join in that, or a stepparent, I should say, can join in that work, but you've got to understand you're sort of like the babysitter.

If you ever had a babysitter ... Like I've had tons of babysitters through the ... We put them in charge, and they can actually follow the rules and tell our kids, "Nope. No movie time until you've cleaned your room," and they can get away with that. Why? Because they're standing on the shoulders of the parent who empowered them before the parent left the house.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah.

Ron Deal: Same thing with a stepparent on day one. We're going to let biological parent empower stepparent. You work together, and the stepparent can get things done. Over time, as the stepparent's relationship gets more definition and gets stronger, then they can stand on their own two feet, and that'll come. You just don't want to get it out of order, because if you create an enemy with a child, now you got to repair and you got to undo all of that before you can even begin to really move into parenting.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Ron, you've got kids who don't like change.

Ron Deal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Tim Clinton: They struggle with their emotion regulation.

Ron Deal: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You got kids who ... I can see battlegrounds, lines being drawn with other kids in the family, struggling over money, power, authority, all kinds of thing.

Ron Deal: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Tim Clinton: You can see people trying to move in and move out on parents, trying to influence decision-making any way they can, Ron, and then you've got a couple trying to figure out how to love each other in the midst of it. When they see all this tension going on, it begins to infect or affect how we love or how we don't love even each other. Ron, this is tough.

I wanted to take this latter part of the program, Ron, and ask you, when you survey all the couples you've worked with, when you survey all the data and all the work you've done, Ron, and you distill this down, what are we really trying to do here? What ultimately is this all about?

Ron Deal: Everybody just wants to be loved, to belong and to feel like they're in a trustworthy environment where people are faithful to the love that they bring. At the end of the day, that's all anybody wants, and when we have that, we tend to act better. We tend to give love just as we have received it, and to be faithful in our love just as you have been faithful to me. By the way, we just went vertical there, didn't we? Like this is who God is.

This is what He offers us. This is what He brings to us, is a faithful love. Just as people who are stuck and caught in sin, when they finally embrace their identity in Christ and what God has done for them, and they understand the depth of mercy and grace, it changes us. It softens our heart. All of a sudden, it's like, "I don't have to perform. God loves me."

"I get to love Him the way He's loved me. Now, let me figure out how to do that," and I'm moving in a better direction. The same thing is true in families, and it's true in a blended family. Maybe it's something a child has experienced, "One of my parents died and just, I'm wrestling with God over how could you take my parent? I don't understand."

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah.

Ron Deal: All of a sudden, they begin to feel God's grace in the form of a stepparent, who has entered into their world and who is just persistently pursuing this kid, just like God pursues us, and they just won't go away. They're not overdoing it. They're very gentle in how they approach, but they just keep pursuing this child, and this kid pushes away, pushes away, pushes away, and finally goes, "You know what? This person loves me, and I think I can trust them," and it softens their heart and they move toward their stepparent, and they experience in that relationship another layer of what it is to be loved by God. At the end of the day, that's all any of us are looking for.

Putting that in and working toward it, it's a journey, and sometimes it takes a whole lot longer than you would've prescribed it if it was up to you, but you

can't control that, and so we walk in faithfulness as best we can, and God does amazing things with what little we bring to the table.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It reminds me, Ron, of that verse too. It says, "Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love," and Ron, you're right. I just have in my mind's eye right now some broken kids. They were saying, "Listen, I didn't choose this, and I need help. Help me on this healing journey that I need to go through. Give me hope for a better day. Encourage my heart and let me know in the end that you love me." Ron, that's the beauty here for a moment. That's the goal.

Ron Deal: That is it. Exactly. That's what I want for me, that's what I want for you, that's what I want for the people in my care.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Our special guest again today has been Ron Deal. He is the author of a new book called *Preparing to Blend: The Couple's Guide to Becoming a Smart Stepfamily*. I think he's the best in the business. There's no doubt about it in my mind. On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, the entire team at Family Talk, Ron, we tip our hat to you, and thank you for your heart, your love, and for joining us today here on Family Talk.

Ron Deal: Thank you for having me. It's been a real honor, Tim. Thanks.

Roger Marsh: Well, you just heard the second half of Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with blended family expert, Ron Deal here on Family Talk. On today's program, Ron pointed out that even though blended families come with their own unique sets of challenges and relationship dynamics, they are still families, just a different sort of family, and remember, none of God's principles for relationships are tied to a certain family structure per se. The fruit of the Spirit can be pervasive in any family, whether blended, adoptive or biological. Now, if you want to learn more about Ron Deal or the family map tool that he detailed during today's program, go to our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. We have a link there for that resource, as well as information about Ron's books and his ministry, Smart Stepfamilies.

That's drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. Well, that's it for today's edition of Family Talk. From all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, I'm Roger Marsh. May God be with you and your family as you continue to grow closer in relationship with Him.

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