



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Being a Smart Stepmom – Part 2

**Guest(s):** Laura Petherbridge

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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.
- Roger Marsh: Well welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh thanking you so much for joining us today. During the next half-hour, we're going to be continuing a meaningful conversation about the unique challenges facing stepfamilies in America. Now on our last broadcast, our guest, Laura Petherbridge, began sharing insights from her book, *The Smart Stepmom*. One particularly important point she made was about terminology and why the popular phrase, blended family, might actually set up unrealistic expectations. Let's listen to what she shared.
- Laura Petherbridge: I really don't like the phrase blended family. I know it sounds nicer than stepfamily. I know that's why a lot of people use it because that phrase... sort of the Disney thing with the wicked stepmom, can have a negative connotation with it. I actually have a chapter in the book called "The Wicked Stepmom: Did Disney have me in mind?" So, I played off of that. But the phrase blend means that everybody's getting thrown into a blender together and getting all chopped up together. Step families really don't blend. They grow together over time with a bondedness over the years. That whole thought of all of a sudden we're going to be the Brady Bunch and everybody is going to love each other instantly just is not realistic. Unfortunately, that sets the relationship up for some conflict and failure if they've got that idea.
- Roger Marsh: That insightful perspective comes from Laura Petherbridge who joins us again today here on Family Talk. Laura speaks from both personal experience as well as professional expertise. As a respected authority on stepparenting, she's helped countless couples navigate the complex dynamics of remarriage. Laura has taught divorce recovery at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. She's also spoken at conferences all across the country. In addition to the book, *The Smart Stepmom*, Laura is also the author of *When "I Do" Becomes "I Don't,"* as well as other resources that offer biblical guidance for families in transition.

Now on today's broadcast, Dr. Dobson and Laura Petherbridge will focus particularly on the children in remarried families. They'll address why kids often

resist accepting a new stepparent, the loyalty conflicts they experience and what fathers can do to support their new wives in these challenging situations. So whether you're a step parent yourself, or you know someone who is, today's conversation will offer practical wisdom for creating healthy relationships. As Laura Petherbridge describes it, families don't instantly blend together, but rather, they grow together over time with a bondedness that takes years to develop. Here now is Dr. James Dobson to continue this important conversation on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Laura, I told you at the beginning of the program last time that I was so glad you were here because there are so many tens of thousands of stepmoms that are listening to us. I don't know how many. But through the years, I've probably talked, by way of the radio or television, to millions who are going through this. There's so much to talk to you about. I want to begin with this question. When Ron Deal asked you to be his co-author on this book, *The Smart Stepmom*, you did a little research project to find out what the issues were, what the problems were, what people are struggling with. You knew them because you lived them. What did you hear coming back to that question?

Laura Petherbridge: Yes. I sent an email out and just surveyed a whole bunch of stepmoms. I wanted to make sure we were hitting the pulse of exactly what they wanted to talk about, especially when I did workshops. Over and over again, the same phrases kept coming back, such as, "I feel like a stranger in my own home." That when they come in the house, they don't feel safe. They don't feel like they can say whatever they want to say. They don't feel like they can cook whatever they want to cook. They feel like they're walking on eggshells. One of the other things that sort of took me by surprise, because I had not dealt with this, but I had so many stepmoms respond to this, is that they felt the same as when they were in an abusive marriage. Not because the husband was treating them abusively, but because the stepchildren were talking to them or treating them so disrespectfully or treating them with disdain, that they felt abused.

The key there is that dad feels so caught in the middle. Unfortunately, what men do when they feel pressured like that is they retreat and don't do anything. That was the other comment these stepmoms make, "My husband is like a total wimp with his kids. He's parenting out of guilt instead of a healthy place." It's very possible that that stepchild wants to love or like you. It is very possible that they think you're really a good addition to their home, that they're happy that their father has remarried and that now the house is more stable and now there's something other than pizza and Pepsi on the table for dinner. It's very possible that they're happy about that. But if they show kindness to a stepparent, there is often a tremendous fear, "if I like you or if I'm nice to you, that means I am being disloyal to my mother. Disloyal to my biological parent."

That is in particular true if the mom, the ex-wife, is saying negative things about the remarriage, about the stepmom. If she's telling the child, "That woman doesn't love you. That woman is trying to keep your father from you. That woman keeps your father from paying child support." If the mom is feeding

negativity... and not all moms are doing that. I don't want the moms that are listening to me today to think that I am trashing all biological moms because many of them are wonderful and they try to co-parent in a healthy way. But if the mom is planting negativity or she's trying to withhold the children from the dad and his new wife, the child will resist the stepparent with more tenacity because children are fiercely loyal to a biological parent. There's just so many wonderful things a stepmom can do.

First thing she can do is say to that child, "Joshua, I want you to know I know you have a mom and that you love your mom and I am not in any way trying to compete with your mother or replace your mother. I just want to be right up front with you and say that I know it's hard living in two families." In my circumstance, as someone that grew up with divorced parents, I can even say, "I grew up in a divorced home, so I get how confusing this is." Just empathize with the child and let them know that you get it. That's the first thing. Steve's two sons, again, they were 11 and 13 when we got married, sometimes they... when they introduce me, sometimes they'll say, "This is my dad's wife, Laura." Sometimes they'll say, "This is my stepmom, Laura." But they call me by my first name.

You let the child discern what they want to call you. If they want to call you mom number two or something like that... Now, sometimes the biological mom is not going to like that. But it's often in the little, little ones. Sometimes the little ones will call both their mom and their stepmom, "mom." So, that can get a little complicated in knowing what to do.

Dr. James Dobson: You let the child make that decision, for the most part, don't you?

Laura Petherbridge: Yes. Obviously, they can't call you something disrespectful. Yeah. We don't let them call her bad words. That has to be the dad stepping up and saying, if the child does do that, the only person who can stop that is for dad to step up and say, "You are not allowed to call my wife the wicked stepmom." Again, you've got to figure out what's a hill to die on. But he, dad, this is one of the biggest mistakes that stepmoms make, is they try to get in the middle of these conversations and solve it, because we're problem solvers, we're very co-dependent typically. We want to fix everything and make everybody happy. Often, dad keeps stepping back further and further and further and letting stepmom take the reins. So, she has to step back and say, "You know what?" To her husband, "You need to sit down and talk with Joshua, talk with Jessica and tell her she cannot speak to me that way."

This is dad's job, not stepmom's job to say, "This is my bride. I stood before God and made a vow to love, honor and respect this woman. You do not have to like her, you do not have to love her, but you do have to respect her in my home." Let me give you a little illustration. I know a stepmom who has the kids half of the time. The one son needs to take a medication every day. He would not take it for her. She was the one in the morning getting him up, getting him to school, fighting her every day on this. She politely resigned, went to her husband. Not

mean, not cruel, not nasty, not threats, just, "You know what? Your son will not do this for me. He needs the medication. I'm turning this over to you to make sure he takes it."

Roger Marsh: I'm Roger Marsh, and we have reached the midpoint of this classic broadcast here on Family Talk. We'll continue hearing from Dr. Dobson and author Laura Petherbridge after this short break.

With another Dr. Dobson Minute, here's Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: We were talking last time about blended families and the special challenges they typically face. But there's a more serious problem that's common among reconstituted families. It concerns the way the new husband and wife feel about their kids. Each is irrationally committed to his or her own flesh and blood while they're merely acquainted with the others. When fights and insults occur between the two sets of children, they're almost always partial to the ones they brought into the world. If the kids sense this tension between the parents, they'll exploit it to gain power over their siblings. It is possible to blend families successfully and millions of people have done it. But the task is difficult. That's why I strongly suggest that those planning to remarry seek professional counseling as early as possible. It's expensive but another divorce is even more costly.

Roger Marsh: For more information, visit [drdobsonminute.org](http://drdobsonminute.org).

Okay, let's get back now to this timeless broadcast on navigating the tough role of the stepparent.

Dr. James Dobson: Laura, how common is it for children to play the two adults against each other? One is the father, the other is the stepmother. They can very quickly figure out how to get what they want-

Laura Petherbridge: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: ... by pandering to one and irritating the other. What do the adults do in a situation like that?

Laura Petherbridge: Well, a key thing is, if the children have already gotten used to when dad as a single parent gave in to every whim and wasn't parenting, was parenting out of guilt. If dad was parenting out of guilt as a single parent, he's still probably going to parent out of guilt when he gets remarried. So, the child has figured this out already. I can get from dad or mom, really, what I want by crying or being sad or just throwing a fit or whatever they do. This is kids, they're kids. It's all about me. So, they're going to still try to do that in the stepfamily. Where the dynamics change is that when the stepmom comes in and says, "No, Joshua, you're not going to do that anymore," the child then views this, "Before you came along, I got away with this with my dad." So, she becomes the enemy.

See, this is what we were talking about before with what things I tried to change. I tried to get us all to eat healthy. His kids weren't eating healthy. They didn't want to eat healthy. Mom and dad weren't making them eat healthy. It wasn't my place to try to make his... to change the menu of his children. I had to eventually learn this the hard way; I'm the only one fighting this war here and they're not even my children. I had to take steps back, let it go. It's not my place to fix that. Now, when you get into more serious issues, that's when it becomes complicated. Both biological parents can do things to try to turn the child against their other parent or the other home. If only they could see how much that is devastating the child.

Let me just say that right now. If there is a mom or a dad that is already been doing that, they have been bad mouthing the other parent, the worst thing you can do to your child during a divorce is to bad mouth their other parent. It creates low self-worth in the child, the child interprets that. When a dad says, "Your mother is a tramp," what the child hears is, "I am a tramp." Let's start there. That with any parent, maybe there's one that's listening that will say, "You know what? I've been doing that and I need to stop." But when the parent is trying to turn and telling lies, perhaps, about what's going on in the other home, the only thing the parent can do is sit the child down and say, "Joshua, I know your mom has been telling you that I don't pay child support and that I haven't been meeting the needs of your family when you're in their home. I want you to know, Joshua, that that's not true.

"First of all, let me say I am so sorry because this must be hard for you to be caught between two homes with two parents that are telling you two completely different things. I'm so sorry as my son, that you are dealing with this. But Joshua, I need you to know this isn't true." You don't attack the parent. You address the issue. So, you go and tell the child the truth about the issue. Then, "Joshua, if you want to see my bank statement that shows where I am paying your mom what the court has said we're to pay, I'm more than willing to show that to you." You combat this with the facts, you speak the truth, you pray a lot and you then have to let it go. You don't keep -

Dr. James Dobson: You don't say, "She's lying to you."

Laura Petherbridge: That's right. You don't say, "Your mother is a liar." You say, "That isn't true and I'll help you to see the truth." See, when I do stepmom events, I have to say, "Let me be honest with you ladies, if you are the reason the first marriage broke up, you're going to have a harder road bonding with these stepchildren." It's going to take humility. You and your spouse are going to have to humble yourself and go to those children and say, "What we did was wrong." You will never heal that unless you address what occurred with the children. Now, I'm not saying the children are going to forgive you instantly and then all of a sudden you're going to become this big, happy family. But that's where it has to begin. Because if you try to build a relationship on a foundation that is already broken, the children will never trust you. So, of course they're going to side with their biological mother, because she's been the victim in this, and rightly so.

I'm a personal believer that God can heal anything, but it starts with humility in admitting where you were wrong and that this harmed the children, it harmed their home, it was wrong. Now, are we saying that the marriage is now wrong? Well, everybody might have a different theological view on that, so we won't go there. But you have to take the steps to address what was broken.

Dr. James Dobson: Those who heard the program last time know that in preparation for yesterday and today, the broadcast team interviewed a stepmom and got her short comments on what that experience was like for her. We played one of those last time. Let's take a moment to hear the second clip now.

Speaker 6: My biggest question, and I think I handle it the way I need to because it's hands off, but my kids and my stepkids, and it's more my kids, are not that accepting of my stepkids. I know my own mother said to me, "Of course your daughters going to resent those two." I didn't even think of it that way. I don't want it to be that way. But I would ask, how would you recommend, I don't know, reassuring your own that they're not being replaced at the same time that you're loving the new ones?

Laura Petherbridge: Well, this stepmom asks a very good question. We did include a whole chapter in the book for stepmoms about their own biological children, because that is a big concern, of, now I'm pouring so much time and energy into these new stepkids to make sure they're happy and we're getting along, I feel like my own children are getting lost in the shuffle. The key thing, the best thing a stepmom can do in this circumstance is to make sure she has one-on-one time with her own children. This is also true for say the stepmom who doesn't have her own children. The dad should be making sure he has one-on-one time with his own children. This will help the stepfamily to bond. See, everybody thinks it's just the opposite. Everybody thinks, oh, let's go to the zoo together. Let's go to Starbucks together.

It's actually better. Now, obviously not all the time, but to have a designated time. Maybe if you've got...if dad is got girls, daddy-daughter date night on Friday night or whatever. But this stepmom, if she sets aside time for her own children where new stepdad is not there, the other step-siblings are not there, even if they have an "ours" baby, where the new husband and wife have a baby together, if she will take some time to have one-on-one and make it consistent with her own biological children, this will help them to feel like they didn't lose their parent. If they have things they want to say to their parent, so often... In my own life, the only time I had alone with my father after he got remarried the first time, was the 20 minute ride from when he picked us up, to the house with his new wife.

That was the only time I had alone with my daddy. I mean, I'm almost 57 and I was a kid and that's still in my head. I lost my daddy. If the parent can see it through their child's eyes that the child still needs one-on-one with their own parent, that will go a long way in causing them to accept the stepfamily.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Laura, time is gone again. I just can't believe how quickly it does fly by when you're here. What you've done so far is just priceless information for the stepmom and for every member of the family, really. We're going to do one more program. Is that okay?

Laura Petherbridge: It sure is.

Dr. James Dobson: I know that there are people listening to us out there right now that are saying, "Yes, I'm enjoying this and I'm finding it helpful."

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and a practical conversation featuring Dr. Dobson and Laura Petherbridge discussing the joys and challenges of step parenting. Now the insights Laura that shared today provide valuable guidance for anyone navigating these complex family dynamics. You know, something that stood out to me was Laura's emphasis on understanding. Seeing the situation through the eyes of a child while also acknowledging a stepparent's valid feelings. Trust me, Lisa and I know this is a very real situation even when your kids are older and grown. Laura's practical wisdom reminds us that with patience, clear boundaries and realistic expectations, stepfamilies can indeed grow together and build meaningful bonds over time.

Now if you missed any part of today's broadcast or you'd like to share it with someone who might benefit from this program, go to [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). Once you're there, you'll find the complete program, parts one and two, along with information about Laura Petherbridge's book called *The Smart Stepmom*. Buy it for yourself, share it with a friend as a gift. Again you'll find that information and more when you go to [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk), or when you take advantage of the Family Talk app.

Parents and stepparents face unique challenges every day, and having spiritual guidance can make all the difference. That's why I'm excited to share with you about a special resource from Dr. James Dobson and his wife, Shirley. It's the devotional called *Night Light for Parents*. This treasure offers daily encouragement, heartwarming stories, and practical parenting wisdom drawn from the Dobsons' many decades of experience in ministry and in parenting. Whether you are raising your biological children or stepchildren or both, whether you're married or serving as a single parent right now, this devotional meets you right where you are with biblical truth and gentle guidance. Let *Night Light for Parents* brighten your family life. It takes only a few minutes of reading every day to create a bond of love that will last a lifetime. Now, we'll be happy to send you a copy of *Night Light for Parents* by Dr. James Dobson and his wife, Shirley, as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute today. So you can request your copy of *Night Light for Parents* and support our ministry when you go to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) or you can receive your copy over the phone when you call 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825.

And for ongoing inspiration and encouragement to strengthen your family, I invite you to connect with us on social media. You can follow the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X, you know, Twitter, for more daily wisdom, practical parenting tips and updates about upcoming broadcasts. You'll find encouraging quotes, helpful articles and thoughtful reflections to support you in your family journey. We also share exclusive content and behind-the-scenes moments that you won't find anywhere else. Our social community is filled with other parents and families just like yours, more than six million strong on Facebook alone, sharing their experiences and supporting one another. It's a wonderful extension of our radio family, and we'd love to have you join in the conversation. For links to all of our social media pages, just go to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org).

I'm Roger Marsh, and for Dr. Dobson and all of us here at Family Talk, thanks so much for listening today. Join us again next time as we conclude Dr. Dobson's powerful conversation with Laura Petherbridge in part three of our discussion on being a smart stepmom. It's an honest, compassionate look at the complex dynamics of stepfamily life that you will not want to miss. That's coming up next time right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust, for the family you love.

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

Roger Marsh: Hey everyone, Roger Marsh here. When you think about your family and where they will be when you're no longer living. Are you worried, are you confident, are you hopeful? What kind of legacy are you leaving for your children and their children? Here at Family Talk, we're committed to helping you understand the legacy that you're leaving for your family. Join us today at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) for helpful insights, tips and wisdom from James Dobson himself, and remember, your legacy matters.