BUILDING LOVE TOGETHER IN BLENDED FAMILIES

A LOVE LANGUAGE™ RESOURCE

The 5 Love Languages® and Becoming Stepfamily Smart

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The 5 Love Languages®*

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Building Love Together in Grandparenting

TIANA'S FACE LIT UP with a smile from ear to ear. "You're right, she doesn't leave her daughter with just anyone. I never thought about it like that. This is so helpful."

Tiana is stepmom to Aniyah and stepgrandmother to Hannah. Her relationship with Hannah is fantastic; her relationship with her stepdaughter, the granddaughter's mother, not so much. At least, so she thought.

After listening to Tiana describe her adult stepdaughter's distance, I (Ron) made an observation she had never considered. "Aniyah drops her daughter off with you fairly regularly, right? She may not need a close relationship with you, but she doesn't mind you having one with her daughter. Don't miss the message embedded in that. Parents don't just drop their kids off with anyone, so she must trust you to care for her daughter. That is an indirect reflection of how she values you. She might not be able to communicate that to you directly at this point, but it certainly is being said. On some level she trusts you. No, it's not the same as her loving you, but since trust is often a precursor to love, it seems to me you have more going with her than you realized." Tiana had

never thought of it that way. She was encouraged.

Stepgrandparenting involves three generations of family members, and each person involved has needs, desires, and a stake in all the other relationships. Thus, this chapter explores these relationships from multiple perspectives, offering something for each generation. We suggest you share it with the other generations (depending on the age of children, of course). Reading and then discussing it may help all three generations understand how they can better love the others.

BLENDED FAMILIES: TALL AND WIDE

The new marriage of a blended family is part of either the older generation (we'll call it the *upper* generation) or the *middle* generation (adult children). Families of European descent often only think of the household with stepchildren in it as "the stepfamily"; in reality, the blended family includes at least three generations and multiple households. In some situations there are former in-laws, who are still invested grandparents, making the family system even broader. We like to say blended families are tall *and* wide.

Stepgrandparenting is common in the US today. Nearly 40 percent of all families in the US include a stepgrandparent,[1] and by 2030 it will be almost as common for grandparents to have a stepgrandchild as a biological grandchild.[2] And while we don't have much research to draw from to understand what makes for healthy or unhealthy stepgrandparent relationships, two dynamics stand out: bonding in all three generations is always determined by the least invested person, and middle-generation adult parents serve as the gatekeepers for stepgrandparents.

In chapter 5, we observed that the least invested person in

any relationship has the most power over the level of closeness in the relationship. That's true in a business relationship, dating relationship, marriage, in stepparenting, and in stepgrandparenting. If a stepgrandchild doesn't care to let you into their life, you won't be able to build a strong bond. If a stepgrandparent doesn't desire closeness with an adult stepchild or stepgrandchild, it simply won't happen until their heart opens. And a middle-generation parent can prevent their child from having a close relationship with the stepgrandparent. This *gatekeeping* behavior dramatically impacts the role the older generation can play.

One stepgrandmother who married into a family in her older years went to the hospital to support her stepdaughter who had a baby. After spending a couple of days in the waiting room with other family members, the woman noticed two things: the family thanked her for coming (none of the other grandparents were thanked; as full-fledged family members it was assumed they would be there, but not her), and she didn't get to hold the baby nearly as much as the biological grandparents. Why? Because the baby's parents (middle generation) limited her time with the newborn.

Who is the least invested person in your situation? Are the gatekeepers opening the gate or keeping it shut—and if so, why are they moderating the closeness between generations? (If you were to ask them, their answer may differ from yours.)

We hope in this chapter to help each of you understand the other's experience and needs as it relates to grandparenting. We encourage you to consider the other's needs above your own as you seek pathways to mutual respect and varying degrees of connection.

"I THOUGHT THEY WOULD BE FINE WITH ME GETTING MARRIED AGAIN . . . "

When the middle generation is the one that made a decision to marry and form a blended family, they tend to be highly motivated to figure out the role of the stepgrandparent in the lives of their children. But when it is the upper generation that has made the decision to marry, adult children, just like younger children, have a wide variety of emotional responses. This can blindside later-life couples. "We just didn't see this coming," one man in his late sixties said. "It's been many years since their mother died and my children expressed concern that I would feel lonely. One of my kids even encouraged me to date online. I thought they would be fine with me getting married again, but they haven't been." His wife then added, "I thought adult children should be adult about this."

While adult children should monitor their contributions to family stress, upper-generation couples should not judge adult children too quickly and recognize the many adjustments a wedding requires of them—and the many losses it brings. Further, they need to respect their children's concerns so they can move toward those concerns and not make things worse.

So what's going on with the middle generation?

"It Feels Like We're Losing Her All Over Again"

Loss is a fundamental story line in the backstory of every blended family. How that loss occurred also affects how an adult child responds to their parent's later-life marriage. Divorce, for example, cuts short a child's family narrative and stability (no matter whether the child was young or an adult when the divorce occurred), but how the divorce came down also matters.

A parent who has an affair, repeatedly lies to their spouse and children, abruptly abandons everyone, leaving them to fend for themselves financially and physically, and runs off to Cabo with their new lover should not expect a warm response to a wedding announcement. Your actions have caused great pain. Your "gain" has brought great loss to your kids. That matters. Not every example is this extreme; still the point remains: the backstory to a new marriage matters and you must adjust your expectations of adult children accordingly.

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There is a different story from the middle generation after a parent dies. It goes something like this: "Mom and Dad had a good marriage. It wasn't perfect, but they loved each other—at least we thought they did. When Mom got cancer we fought it together. Dad took care of her . . . he did everything right. She's only been gone a few months. How in the world did he move on so fast? Did he ever really love Mom? It feels like we're losing her all over again."

In a situation like this, the data points just don't line up. Dad's decisions are confusing his adult children, leaving them questioning everything they know—or thought they knew—and doubting their dad. To readily support his marriage to another woman—not to mention bless her role as stepgrandmother—is at best going to take some time.

That's one takeaway for upper-generation couples: you might need to slow your roll toward the wedding. And once married

you certainly need to maintain reasonable expectations for how quickly family members will embrace one another. All of the love conflicts, dynamics of competing attachments, and varying motivations toward accepting each other as family that have been discussed in this book still apply to adult children. It doesn't matter that they are "adults." Loss is loss. Change is change. Be sensitive to all of this and remember, the backstory matters.

"The Outsider in My Own Family"

What we as parents of adult children (both of us, Gary and Ron, have adult children) often underestimate is the psychological significance of our role in their lives. We represent "home."

In relation to our parents we all view ourselves as the child. Maybe you, like we, have encountered the strange experience of caring for aging parents. Isn't that upside down? They're supposed to care for themselves and us—we don't make decisions for them! Life feels disordered when we have to care for an aging parent. And to cope, we all must adjust our expectations and redefine our identity as it relates to the other.

In a similar way, children of divorce sometimes find themselves providing for their parent emotionally and carrying more responsibility in the home. Later, when a parent marries, adult children again find themselves having to adjust to their parent's changing life. Whether it's fair or not, we want stability in our parent's lives so they can support us in our somewhat unpredictable and occasionally chaotic lives. My adult life may be a mess, but I can always "go home" to find stability. To find love. To be cared for.

A parent's marriage sends ripples through the generations. One significant change for adult children is the sense that they can't "go home" anymore. It's just not the same. One adult daugh-

ter said, "When I go to my mom's house for Thanksgiving there are many people there from her husband's family that I don't know—his children and grandchildren, and extended family. I am now the outsider in what used to be my own family. I feel incredibly alone."

Stability is lost, it's harder to be cared for, and you have to compete with strangers for the time, energy, and attention of your parent. But for some it's even deeper than that. Feeling alone at home is about their very identity. You may remember from chapter 5 that when a parent marries the splintered pieces of a child's original family—and their place in it—fracture even further. Not only is it not home anymore for the adult child, they are having to reestablish their place in the family and in the world. If my identity is tied to my family and the family changes, who am I?

Ron once talked with an adult brother and sister, Ryan and Samantha, about perceived competing attachments that were keeping them from embracing their dad's new wife and her family. Their parents had divorced after over thirty years of marriage. The siblings had families of their own at that point and had to help their children deal with the fallout. A couple years later their father married a woman with children and grandchildren. Before they knew it, the special name their children had created to refer to their grandfather, "Paw Paw," had been adopted by his new stepgrandchildren. Ryan and Samantha and their entire side of the family felt displaced and were angry their dad let himself be called that. The message Ryan and Samantha feared their kids would receive was, "You aren't special, but my new family is."

Is that the message their father intended to communicate? Probably not. Was it fair for them to accuse him of not caring for them or their children? Objectively, one could argue for either

side, but that's not the point. Family disruption and subsequent transitions erode family stability and shake the foundations of our identity and perceived value in the family.

We believe there's emotional work to be done on either side of this equation. Upper generation couples need empathy for how life-disrupting a wedding might be for adult children and should move toward those grown kids with patience, words of affirmation, and other expressions of love to help ward off their crisis of identity. And, middle-generation adults may need to deal emotionally with their perceived losses and further establish their sense of identity separate and apart from their parents' relational choices. Neither is easy, but both are necessary.

Seeking Value: Money and Estate Concerns

Loss of identity is not the only thing that can make an adult child feel devalued in the stepfamily mix. Loss of money—that is, poorly managed matters concerning family inheritance—communicates the same message.

When more money is consistently spent by a parent on their biological children than on their stepchildren, the stepchildren and their parent are likely to perceive that they are less valued. A blended family spouse whose partner constantly lets their ex dictate how their kids' medical bills get paid will also feel less valued. When someone after marriage refuses to revisit the beneficiary list on their life insurance, their new spouse may feel suspicious and anxious that they "rank below children" or even a former spouse in the family.

Likewise, after a parent marries, adult children may have questions about the family inheritance (including cash, assets, and items of sentimental value). How those questions are answered

and the attitude of both parent and stepparent toward the discussion can significantly influence if and to what degree a stepgrandparent is received into the family—and whether the gatekeepers allow them access to grandchildren.

We tell later-life couples that many times questions like "Whose name is on the life insurance?" or "Are you still putting aside college money for our kids like you did before you got six new stepgrandchildren?" are first and foremost about value. On the surface they are asking about money, but more critically, below the surface they are asking if they are still important to you. Family transitions (especially unwanted transitions) seem to call that into question. Always answer the value question first. "Because you kids matter so much to me, I want to keep you informed about what is changing in my financial situation and what is staying the same. Ultimately, what I want you to know is that my wife and I are making sure all of you are provided for. We are creating a trust that will take care of everything should something happen to me. Let me tell you the details . . ." Always affirm someone's importance before answering above-the-surface questions.* Then, deal with the practicalities of money and inheritance in a straightforward manner (and put your plans in writing). Adult children have a right to know what's going on and may need to speak into the process. Try to consider one another's needs as you do so.

Resurrected Wounds

For some adult children there's one more thing going on behind the scenes that is affecting how they respond to a stepgrand-

* By the way, even after doing so, you still need good answers to blended family money questions. A full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this book, but Ron and colleagues Greg Pettys and David Edwards have created a comprehensive guide in their book *The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning* (Bethany House, 2019). It examines both above- and below-the-surface aspects of managing money in stepfamilies.

parent and whether they open the gate or keep it closed. Old first-family wounds can easily be resurrected when a parent's new love creates a new family.

"You never loved Dad this way." Jason was confronting his mother about her announced engagement. "You gave Dad second-best and it crushed him and ruined our family. And now you want me to be happy for you?" Clearly, Jason was still hurt over his mom's decisions. He had forgiven her—and he thought he had worked through his anger. But seeing his mother love another man with her whole heart resurrected his pain because, for the first time, he could see what his parents' marriage could have been like.

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When wounds rise once again to the surface, both generations need to recognize it for what it is and process the hurt—separately and together—in order to find a path forward. The challenge here is bridging the emotional gap between the generations. Earlier we discussed what happens when the new couple, which is eager to move forward with their relationship, and adult children, who are again struggling with pain, overlook the others' needs; a Grand Canyon can quickly form between them. The grandparent and new partner quip, "What's wrong with those selfish kids?" and the adult child feels forgotten and invalidated.

Because loss must be grieved afresh over time, resurrected pain is an opportunity for parent and child to move toward each other, not with blame, but with apology, forgiveness, and recon-

ciliation. Don't miss your opportunity, every time it arises (we recommend Gary's book *When Sorry Isn't Enough: Making Things Right with Those You Love*).

Avoid a quick turnaround

Further complicating relationships between upper and middle generations is what we might call a "quick turnaround" marriage.

After forty-two years of marriage, Greg's wife passed away when he was sixty-six. After forty years of marriage Paula (age sixty-five) became a widow. Both spouses died in May. Greg and Paula connected online in September, met face-to-face for the first time in January, told their adult children they were seriously dating in March, and announced plans to marry in May, one year after becoming widowed.

This is what you call a quick turnaround.

When he heard the wedding announcement, Greg's middle son said, "Gee, Dad, Mom's dead, but not that dead." And when Greg asked his oldest son what kind of special plans he should make for their wedding night, his son responded with just one word. "Gross."

Baffled, Paula's children talked about what they should do. "Mom has always been very frugal with her money and careful with relationships, but she seems to have thrown all of that out the window. I want nothing more than for her to be happy, but she's not in the driver's seat." "Yeah, she's spending money and making decisions I think she'll regret later. We need to talk to her about this."

Upper-generation adults need to recognize that quick turnarounds add doubt to an already stressful adjustment for middle-generation adult children—and ultimately adds another

barrier to stepgrandparenting. If adult children don't trust how the relationship was formed or the permanency of it, they may be even more guarded with their children.

By the way, we are not suggesting that later-life couples wait for approval from their middle-generation children before getting married. But unwise is the couple that blindly runs into marriage without recognizing the negative impact of ignoring their children's feelings. Your children care for you, are wrestling with their own adjustments, losses, and identity issues, and are deeply invested in your life decisions, so move toward marriage at a pace that considers them (Ron's book *Dating and the Single Parent* examines this thoroughly).

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Which of the above dynamics are part of your family dynamic? If you are sharing this chapter with the different generations, share your observations, try to empathize with one another, and discuss how you move forward.

HOW DID YOU ENTER THE FAMILY?

In addition to adjustments related to the middle generation, the quality of grandparent relationships in a blended family is affected by how you entered the family. Said another way, what type of stepgrandparent are you?

Earlier in the chapter we referenced a situation that could be

called *later-life stepgrandparenting.*[4] This occurs when someone later in life marries a grandparent and they acquire adult (or near-adult) stepchildren and stepgrandchildren. Usually the older adult is highly motivated to connect with all three generations. Whether that is reciprocated depends. If adult children refer to their stepparent as "my dad's wife" and don't define themselves as a "stepchild" (or their children as "grandchildren"), it probably won't be. However, if the middle generation comes to value the stepgrandparent, then connecting across the generations becomes possible.

If the middle generation is nearing adulthood and their life-stage does not afford the later-life stepgrandparent an opportunity to be involved in their parenting, the older adult is what has been referred to as a *skip-generation stepgrandparent.*[5] They may not become close with the adult child, but they have an advantage as stepgrandparents: when stepgrandchildren come along, they cannot recall a time when the older adult was not in their life. This makes bonding with the stepgrandkids more likely and can indirectly encourage acceptance by the middle generation. Still, the middle generation has to make up its own mind and will influence the level of closeness between the other two generations.

When a child who has had a stepparent for many years becomes an adult and has a child of their own, their stepparent becomes a stepgrandparent. The quality of the relationship between the *long-term stepgrandparent* and their now adult child influences the amount of time with the new addition to the family and the quality of the relationship. But because the child has always had the stepgrandparent in their life and likely was able to bond with them while very young, their relationship can supersede the relationship between their parent and their stepmom or stepdad. In fact, we've seen situations where the relationship between

stepgrandchildren and the stepgrandparent helped bring healing to a stressful relationship between the upper two generations. The heart of middle-generation parents, who witness their child being loved well by a stepgrandparent, can be softened.

One becomes an *inherited stepgrandparent* when a grown biological child becomes a stepparent. Notice that in this situation, the older adult did not make a conscious decision to move into this role. In the other three types, the stepgrandparent at some point "walked in" to the situation while inherited stepgrandparents got "tossed in." Thus, these stepgrandparents may have to grow into their motivation to build a strong, close relationship with stepgrandchildren. Further, they may experience love (loyalty) conflicts between investing in their biological grandchildren and their newly acquired stepgrandkids.

As you can see, each situation has natural advantages and disadvantages, which affect stepgrandparenting and generational relationships. What can you do to address these factors and those affecting the middle generation?

BRIDGING THE GENERATIONS

Because grandparenting in blended families is a three-generation endeavor, each generation has its part in strengthening the family. Key words for everyone include patience, pace, and pursue. As much as it depends on you, find ways to live in peace and improve your relationships.

Stepgrandparents

One universal tool stepgrandparents have available is engagement. The more engaged you are, the more influence and opportunity you have. Yes, as previously discussed, you cannot

make someone receive your love or love you. So you must move at their pace, but your willingness to engage is your power. And, of course, the five love languages serve as a guidepost to how you engage. The wisdom outlined in the previous chapters on pursuing relationships and the best order to apply the love languages are relevant to both your developing relationships with adult stepchildren and stepgrandchildren (see chapter 5).

If barriers stand in your way, talk with your spouse and perhaps those involved and try to understand their viewpoint. If the middle generation, for example, is distant, engage with your stepgrandchildren in ways that honor the pace of both them and their parents.

It's helpful to articulate to adult stepchildren that you recognize that you are not their parent—nor will you try to replace their parent. Not being a threat to their biological parent relationships is an important boundary to clarify. Also, be willing from time to time to step back and let them have exclusive time with your spouse and other family members. Giving them the gift of Quality Time with those they cherish reflects well on you.

Another boundary to define has to do with family identity and terms. Ambiguity in steprelationships adds to feeling disconnected. Try bringing clarity to the current state of your relationships by having a conversation around what to call one another, both in private (in your home, for example) and in public. A later-life stepmother and stepgrandmother might bring it up to an adult stepchild this way: "Normally a stepparent like me might refer to someone like you as 'my child' or 'stepchild.' And you might introduce me in public as your 'stepmom.' But I'm wondering what feels comfortable to you in our situation. You're twenty-eight years old; I'm certainly not trying to be a mother to you in any way. Actually, you might be more comfortable introducing

me as your 'dad's wife.' What feels best to you? And how would you like me to refer to you?"

What you are getting at here is a mutually agreeable definition of who you are to one another and what is, therefore, expected of your relationship. This helps clarify the ambiguity and gives you both a path to moving forward. By the way, the terms you use for one another might change over time as a reflection of your deepening care for one another. Or not. Nevertheless, it's important for you both to agree on those terms.

And finally, inherited stepgrandparents who are conflicted about their child's decision about marriage can be tempted to be overly critical of his or her parenting or family circumstances. These won't make right what you feel is wrong. Instead of erecting more barriers for the family, strive to bring positivity and hopefulness to the situation.

Grandparents

Be on everyone's side. Demonstrate an attitude of inclusiveness within the generations, but don't force ingredients to "cook" on your timing. Rather, be patient as you move toward acceptance of the stepgrandparent (see chapter 1).

Move toward your children with time and energy, and move toward their grief. You are a vital part of their family story and they need to know you still share their story—and what you've lost together—even though you're now married. Moving toward them in this way eventually helps them move toward your spouse.

Proactively communicate with your children about inheritance and financial matters, especially in later-life stepgrandparenting situations. The middle generation needs to know that they and their children are still being considered. *The Smart Stepfamily*

Guide to Financial Planning is a highly useful resource addressing blended family finances and long-term planning.

And finally, staying connected with biological grandchildren who primarily live with your child's former spouse can be difficult, especially if the divorce was contentious and you feel stuck between them. It's tempting in these situations to avoid spending time with your grandchildren, which makes it nearly impossible for the stepgrandparent (your spouse) to engage with them at all. Talk with your child and explain that you are not being disloyal to them, then continue to pursue time with your grandkids.

Adult Children

Take responsibility for your emotions, resentments, hurts, and fears. You must seek resolution of these concerns; don't sit and wait on your parent.

At the same time, acknowledge that your parent has legitimate needs and desires that may have resulted in a new relationship. It may be awkward and take time, but choose to make room for new family members and extend the hand of friendship to them. Build bridges, not walls.

And lastly, even if you're struggling, don't stop your children from loving your stepparent just because you can't. Their relationship can stand on its own.

Holiday preparation

Finally, when it comes to holidays and special days, proactively discuss your expectations about who will be there, when they will arrive, what people need to bring, and what is expected of them. For example, each set of grandparents can decide how much they will spend on child birthdays and Christmas gifts, but

stepgrandparents should expect to spend relatively the same on stepgrandchildren and biological grandchildren. There should be no favoritism.

Also, find creative ways of dividing time. Many stepfamilies have three, four, or more sets of grandparents. Finding time for each of them to share in special days can be challenging. Communicate your hopes, negotiate turns and opportunities, and occasionally take a backseat so someone else can have a turn. In the long run, a sacrifice here and there will likely pay good dividends. As we like to say, grace connects, but possessiveness divides.

THE POWER OF GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents are often deeply cherished in families. Grandparent-grandchild bonds can be second only to parent-child bonds, making grandparents important assets to families, especially during times of family instability and stress. In other words, grandparents matter. And so do stepgrandparents. Striving for love and maturing relationships between the generations is a vital part of growing a healthy blended family.

YOUR TURN

Which of the dynamics in this chapter affect your family? Take a minute to list them and then decide who else you could discuss them with. Consider how to move forward in light of these current dynamics.