

Stepfamily Developmental Tasks

Ron L. Deal, LMFT, LPC

Death of a Spouse

Precipitating Loss Event	People / Relational Subsystem	Single-Parent & Pre-Remarital Tasks	Marriage & The Integration Years (approximately 0-7 years)	Solidifying & Enhancing Family Identity (8 years and beyond)	Abbreviation Key:
<p>Death of a Spouse</p> <p>Factors to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of the death (e.g., traumatic, expected or unexpected, suicide) Quality of the marital relationship preceding death Age of children at time of death and remarriage Support system Cultural background and beliefs Spiritual world-view and meanings attributed to the death 	<p>Widow/Widower:</p>	<p>Description: Identifies tasks related to single parenting and relationship development as it relates to dating, courtship, remarriage decisions, and pre-stepfamily preparation (PSP).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Significant time & effort spent grieving their deceased spouse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> spiritual and emotional healing resulting in personal stability Introducing the dating partner to children; later, communicating decision to remarry Negotiating post-wedding boundary changes with adult children or residential and part-time stepchildren, & extended family. 	<p>Description: Identifies critical tasks relative to the early years following the wedding: developing bonds, roles, rules, loyalty issues, and family identity.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Accept the reality of being a “stepfamily” so as to not impose first-family expectations; accepts being “different” Gain an awareness of typical stepfamily development over time; develops a “crock-pot” mentality of the integration process; able to empathize with children’s experiences of the stepfamily <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compartmentalizes relationships Builds on “middle ground” Anticipate increased levels of stress; proactively manages conflict; avoids triangulation of insiders and outsiders New marriage makes room for ongoing grief expressions and memories as children grow and mature. 	<p>Description: Identifies common tasks for stepfamily growth once a basic family identity is formed. Lists potential sources of stress as the family progresses through the family life cycle.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain balance between marital and parental tasks insuring that the marriage relationship remains protected and strong Continue to weave first family characters (e.g., deceased BP) into the ongoing intergenerational family story Navigate marital pressures as children enter adolescence, and/or leave home, or return home as adults (see “Stepfamily Unit” below) 	<p>Description: To save space, abbreviations are used throughout the table. See key below.</p> <p>KEY:</p> <p>BP = Biological Parent SP = Stepparent NR-BP = Non-Residential Biological Parent PSP = Pre-Stepfamily Preparation (assumes concrete plans to marry have been made) SF = Stepfamily SS = Stepsibling(s)</p> <p>NOTE: Numbers beside tasks do <u>not</u> connote priority or sequencing.</p>
	<p>New Dating Partner / Spouse:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Initial relationship development primarily with widow(er); “date” children only after a significant couple relationship is established PSP: Formulate realistic expectations regarding relationship fantasies & bonding with children PSP: Willingness to marry not just a person but their intergenerational family and history; accept the ongoing “presence” of the deceased parent PSP: Identify fears about forming a new family 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> See Key Marital Tasks below Accept evolving stepparent roles (“baby-sitter”; “uncle/aunt”; “parent role”) Gradually move into discipline; 		
	<p>Couple / Marriage:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Slowing the pace of the dating relationship and becoming intentional about the courtship process; managing sexual temptations; conscious decisions not to cohabit PSP: Formulate realistic expectations for the new family and marital relationship including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> amount of couple time after wedding vs. during courtship family together time (confront “blended family” fantasy) values and spiritual guidelines for the family PSP: Engaging adults and children in pre-stepfamily counseling PSP: Identify unrealistic expectations, make overt, & replace with realistic expectations PSP: Consider involving children in the wedding; give medallion gift 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Key Marital Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize the marital relationship (while remaining connected to bio children); must manage anxiety and fears of bio children during this transition Recognize marital ghosts (from previous relationships); diminish their impact on new marriage Learn conflict resolution skills (apply to adjustments in parenting, finances, and expectations) Develop qualities: dedication, perseverance, stress-tolerance, patience, & flexibility Achieve consensus on matters of parenting and finances 		

<p style="text-align: center;">Death of a Spouse</p> <p>Factors to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature of the death (e.g., traumatic, expected or unexpected, suicide) • Quality of the marital relationship preceding death • Age of children at time of death and remarriage • Support system • Cultural background and beliefs • Spiritual world-view and meanings attributed to the death 	Children:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Significant time grieving their deceased parent; family grief expressions 2. Adjust to single parent home; added responsibilities; loss of family income, etc. 3. Resolving faith questions relative to parent's death 4. Wrestle with conflicting emotions when their parent begins to date 5. PSP: Find mutually suitable boundaries with future SP 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue psychological grieving over time (coincides with emotional & cognitive maturation) 2. Develop a "living image" of the deceased parent 3. Cope with stress of further change and loss (especially sharing BP with SP and SS) 4. Deciding what to call the SP and how to relate to them 5. Key loyalty conflict to resolve: "Can I be close to my SP and still honor the memory of my deceased parent?" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Deciding how to include SP in significant life events (wedding, new baby, graduation, etc.) 	
	Parenting Subsystem:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single parent must establish/continue authoritative discipline & structure of home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop adult alliances to support parenting efforts (g-parents, mentors, etc.) 2. PSP: Parents should try to bring each household's routines & parenting styles in line to diminish changes after the wedding 3. PSP: Define the parenting system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pace of bonding between stepparent and stepchildren; includes how much intimacy with stepchildren is desired by & expected of the SP • Discuss process for stepparent's developing authority with minor children • Define appropriate expressions of affection 4. Listen & consider children's fears of a new marriage 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allow for and demonstrate ongoing grief related to deceased parent 2. Give permission to and affirm children's connections & attachments to deceased parent's extended family (g-parents, etc.); find ways to support and sustain these relationships 3. Bio Parent & Stepparent (SP) roles defined; bio parent extends power to SP; SP initially focuses on bonding with stepchildren; moves gradually into disciplinary role; accepts limits of role; become a united front 4. Consider developmental differences in children & adolescents as it impacts relational attachment to new SF members and individual child development 5. Recognize & be sensitive to loyalty/new tie conflicts for children 6. Establish emergency medical decision rights for SP 7. Adults relax & let stepchildren set the pace for their relationship (re: affection & time together) 8. Parenting team determines behavioral expectations, family values, & a system of discipline 9. SP actively engages in affinity-seeking behaviors with stepchildren 10. Establish phy/sexual boundaries & discuss possible sexual thoughts& attractions over time 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SP functions in authoritative role with some children (i.e., if enough relational equity has been developed) 2. SP continues to build/deepen closeness with stepchildren as they enter the next phase of their life (adulthood, marriage, parenting, etc.) 	
	Stepfamily Unit:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gradual introduction of single parent's dating partner to the children 2. Once a decision toward marriage has been made, future SP begins intentionally "dating" the kids 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Retain/combine family rituals; create new traditions unique to the new SF 2. Regular displays of appreciation toward one another; communicate value of others 3. Begin to embrace a "stepfamily identity"; understand that acceptance of this identity will progress differently for family members 4. Learn open, healthy communication skills 5. Play together regularly; compartmentalize relationships to facilitate bonding 6. Proactively deal with conflict, crisis, & changes; seek out "getting along" even before "love" develops 7. Stepgrandparents & extended family accept the new family& support it (e.g., honor birthdays equally); contribute effort to developing new bonds 8. Bring unrealistic hopes & expectations to awareness, articulate them, & choose to release them 9. Channel the feeling, "something is wrong with us," into problem-solving efforts 10. Identify personal concerns & needs, listen to those of others 11. Family education as to normal SF struggles & development; learn what's normal 12. Negotiate differences & remain committed to family permanency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand that life cycle changes can again ripple waves of stress throughout the family. Normalize & remind family how far they've come. Typical waves include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extended family life cycle changes (deaths, weddings, births, etc.) • children moving into adolescence &/or early adulthood 2. Deepen attachments & intimacy via family activities, rituals, & traditions 3. Affection & authority of SP expands & deepens 4. Previous "territorial wars" give way to common territory that solidifies relationships 5. Gain appreciate for what has been accomplished 	
	Social:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single parent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may need to establish extended family and social networks to aid in child-rearing and financial stability • Same-sex peers is very important for emotional 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish couple-to-couple social network 2. Establish church membership & relationships 3. Establish community living network including work, neighborhood, physicians, etc. to support the family 		

		<p>support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reestablish connections with some relationships lost during the death 			
	Spiritual:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. View God as spiritual refuge in the midst of loss 2. PSP: Couple should discuss their spiritual values and intentions for raising their children in the faith; if values do not match, the couple should seriously consider discontinuing the relationship 3. PSP: Establish rituals of couple prayer, church attendance, and Bible study 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish membership in a local church family 2. Couple spirituality / Christ-centered living 3. Establish family faith identity and practices 4. Faithfulness & discipleship is modeled by adults 5. Engage in family spiritual time and service/ministry activities 6. Stepfather's seek to "lead through their wives" as they fulfill their role as servant-leader in the home 7. Join or create a fellowship/class for couples in stepfamilies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue to deepen individual study & the family's walk with the Lord 	
<p>Death of a Spouse</p> <p>Factors to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature of the death (e.g., traumatic, expected or unexpected, suicide) • Quality of the marital relationship preceding death • Age of children at time of death and remarriage • Support system • Cultural background and beliefs • Spiritual world-view and meanings attributed to the death 	Financial:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PSP: Addressing financial changes resulting from marriage (inheritance, debt, etc.) and changes to wills; communicate & negotiating boundary changes with children (of every age) 2. PSP: Develop a plan for monthly money management & debt reduction 3. PSP: Consider moving into a new house after the wedding 4. PSP: Discuss each adult's obligation to stepchildren (allowance, college tuition, medical insurance, etc.) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Change wills, estate planning, etc. to reflect the values & composition of the new family 2. Implement monthly money management plan and tithe; adjust as needed 		
	Later Life Remarriage: <small>(Issues specific to older couples. Also reference "Widower/Widow & New Couple" section above)</small>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dating: finding balance in amount of time spent together & apart 2. Introducing the dating partner to adult children; later, communicating decision to remarry 3. PSP: Financial considerations & inheritance issues 4. PSP: Discuss how "leaving father and mother and cleaving to spouse" applies to adult children; communicate changes 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Negotiate SP's posture with adult stepchildren: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Mom's husband," "friend," etc. • May have to build relationships with adult stepchildren via the stepgrandparent role 2. Honor family identity & traditions while making space for new spouse 3. Family identity defined: "stepfamily" or "family and mom's husband" 4. Define role with stepgrandchildren & create opportunities for contact & relationship development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seek to negotiate adult-adult relations with stepchildren 2. Late teen & young adult stepchildren need to be reassured that their parent will still be available to them after leaving home 3. Move toward "intimate-outsider" relations with extended family 4. After the death of a BP: Define relations with stepchildren & stepgrandchildren & desires for continued contact 	

Key Tasks Discussion

Dating & Pre-Stepfamily Preparation Following the Death of a Parent.

1. A healthy grieving process and sufficient time to heal the intensity of the death-loss is a vital factor in good mate selection. "Time is your friend" is a mantra I share with many people. Most adults are ready to move into remarriage sooner than is comfortable for their children. Fears of "forgetting about dad" and "what will become of the family air looms that remind me of mom" are of great concern. These questions represent both practical concerns and emotional grief that must be worked through.
2. Note: grief is a journey, not a destination. The goal is not that family members have all "resolved their grief," but that the intensity of their grief is lessened with time via active grieving processes and that they achieve an emotional perspective on their lost loved-one that allows them to enter new family relationships by choice. Good grieving for individuals involves family grieving as well in which family members share their

sadness, memories, struggles, the meanings of the death, and resolution of "unfinished business" with the deceased. It also involves a systemic reorganization of the family system (e.g., new leadership, shifts in cohesion, family legacies, etc.). This is a complicated process; a premature remarriage stalls healthy grieving for the entire family system.

3. Therefore, couples should be deliberate and cautious in their decisions to remarry.

Marriage & The Integration Years.

1. Gaining and accepting a healthy understanding and perspective on the realities of stepfamily living is imperative. Couples who continuously impose on themselves and their family members a first-family mentality find themselves disillusioned and discouraged. The pressure to "blend" often creates resistance and intense frustration.

2. Couples must respectfully (especially with adult stepchildren) find ways of establishing their marriage as important, indeed, a covenant to be honored.
3. At the same time, attention should be given to child nurturance and intergenerational family concerns (e.g., wills and inheritance matters). Not "leaving the children" behind is very important.
4. Making emotional space in the new family for children and the first spouse to maintain a "living image" of the deceased parent/partner is helpful to the development of new steprelationships.

Case Illustration.

Susan's husband died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the age of 47. A popular pastry chef, David owned his own bakery and was loved by his many loyal customers. His death left Susan caring for a 16 year-old daughter, Lisa, and a 10 year-old son, Todd. She also was thrown into a position of keeping the family business alive, but after two years of managing something that was

her husband's passion she sold the business. During that time, the family sought counseling to cope with their grief and sought the support of many Christian friends. It was only after the family business was sold and mom began dating that Lisa showed severe signs of depression. "It's like dad died all over again," she said. She went on to explain that since his death there has been one loss after another for her. First it was necessary for mom to work to keep the family business going but just when she sold it, she began dating a man. "I thought we were going to get her back, but she just moved on to someone else."

After Susan's remarriage, Lisa and her brother found themselves torn between the kindness they experienced from their stepfather Larry and their desire to not let everyone forget their dad. Being moody and making sure everyone noticed his bedroom pictures of his father was Todd's way of keeping dad center stage in his life. His stepfather Jim took such behavior as a person rejection of him and found it difficult to enjoy his time with the kids when they might turn around only minutes later

and “throw their dad up in my face.” Due to the slow adjustment of her children, Susan agonized that she hadn’t waited long enough to marry but also believed she needed the companionship of Jim in her life. Gaining a healthy perspective of typical stepfamily adjustment issues and the length of time involved opened a valuable shift in expectation for the family.

Eventually, with time and continued effort, the family came to find an acceptable balance in their new relationships. Jim and the stepchildren are not as close as Susan would like, but they are able to get along adequately. Susan and Jim carve out time to be alone and value one another deeply. Jim and Todd connect via sports events and a common interest in hunting. After many years, Lisa left home for college and eventually married. Giving birth to her first child gave her and Jim and opportunity to bond in a new a meaningful way.

Marital Divorce

Precipitating Loss Event	People / Relational Subsystem	Single-Parent & Pre-Remarital Tasks	Marriage & The Integration Years (approximately 0-7 years)	Solidifying & Enhancing Family Identity (8 years and beyond)	Abbreviation Key:
<p>Marital Divorce</p> <p>Factors to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of marriage • Factors leading to marital dissolution (e.g., dying a “slow death”, affair, mutual decision or unilateral) • Acceptance of divorce by extended family and spiritual (church) family • Support system • Cultural background and spiritual beliefs/shame issues regarding divorce • Number of single parent years • Age of children at time of divorce and remarriage • Is this a first divorce or one of many? 	<p>Adult Ex-Spouses:</p>	<p>1. Description: Identifies tasks related to single parenting and relationship development as it relates to dating, courtship, remarriage decisions, and pre-stepfamily preparation (PSP).</p> <p>1. Seek personal resolution & healing of divorce 2. Rebuild self (renew self-esteem & reconnect important relationships) 3. Single Parent Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve psychological de-coupling (accept emotional divorce; no longer pursue personal aspects of marriage; establish new boundaries as parents only) • Reduce conflict & cooperate as co-parents • Accept “dual citizenship” of children across households; strive to make visitation schedule work • Learn to respect the other household • Forgive former spouse & seek God’s forgiveness (see Spiritual section below) </p>	<p>Description: Identifies critical tasks relative to the early years following the wedding: developing bonds, roles, rules, loyalty issues, and family identity.</p> <p>1. NR-BP maintains visitation following the wedding 2. NR-BP gives children permission to honor & like the SP in the other home</p>	<p>Description: Identifies common tasks for stepfamily growth once a basic family identity is formed. Lists potential sources of stress as the family progresses through the family life cycle.</p> <p>1. Maintain balance between marital and parental tasks insuring that the marriage relationship remains protected and strong 2. Continue to weave first family characters (e.g., deceased BP) into the ongoing intergenerational family story 3. Navigate marital pressures as children enter adolescence, and/or leave home, or return home as adults (see “Stepfamily Unit” below)</p>	<p>KEY:</p> <p>BP = Biological Parent SP = Stepparent NR-BP = Non-Residential Biological Parent PSP = Pre-Stepfamily Preparation (assumes concrete plans to marry have been made) SF = Stepfamily SS = Stepsibling(s)</p> <p>NOTE: Numbers beside tasks do <u>not</u> connote priority or sequencing.</p>
	<p>New Dating Partner / Spouse / Stepparent:</p>	<p>1. Initial relationship development primarily with dating partner; “date” children only after a significant couple relationship is established 2. PSP: Formulate realistic expectations regarding relationship fantasies & bonding with children 3. PSP: Willingness to marry not just a person but their intergenerational family and history 4. PSP: Communicate a “no-threat” posture to fiancés ex-spouse</p>	<p>1. Accept evolving stepparent roles (“baby-sitter”; “uncle/aunt”; “parent role”) 2. Gradually move into discipline 3. Adopts a “no threat” posture toward the NR-BP; respectfully communicate this to the NR-BP 4. Gives spouse permission to maintain a proper parenting connection with their ex-spouse (regarding child-rearing) 5. Gives stepchildren permission to maintain appropriate contact with NR-BP 6. SP relaxes & lets stepchildren set the pace for their relationship (re: affection & time together) 7. SP actively engages in affinity-seeking behaviors with stepchildren</p>	<p>1. Have regular couple time (date night & rituals of connection) 2. Deepen communication & conflict resolution skills 3. Protect marital friendship 4. Key Marital Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Couple spirituality / Christ-centered living • Prioritize the marital relationship (while remaining connected to bio children); must manage anxiety and fears of bio children during this transition • Recognize marital ghosts (from previous relationships); diminish their impact on new marriage • Learn conflict resolution skills (apply to adjustments in parenting, finances, and expectations) • Develop qualities: dedication, perseverance, stress-tolerance, patience, & flexibility • Achieve consensus on matters of parenting and finances </p>	
	<p>Couple / Marriage:</p>	<p>1. Formulating realistic expectations for the new family and marital relationship including: 2. PSP: Consider involving children in the wedding; give medallion gift 3. PSP: Discuss fears regarding marriage</p>	<p>1. Continue psychological grieving over time (coincides with emotional & cognitive maturation) 2. Find ways of remaining connected to NR-BP throughout new family transitions 3. Manage loyalty concerns between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bio parents • SP and NR-BP </p>	<p>1. See resolution of parental divorce 2. Deciding how to include SP in significant life events (wedding, new baby, graduation, etc.)</p>	
	<p>Children:</p>	<p>1. Resolve faith questions relative to divorce 2. Adapt to between-home visitation schedule 3. Grieve multiple losses (e.g., change of church, residence, school; loss of contact with BP or siblings)</p>			

			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Cope with stress of further change and loss (especially sharing BP with SP and SS) 5. Embracing a multi-home, multi-parent family reality 6. Deciding what to call the SP and how to relate to them 7. Learning to accept discipline from a SP 8. Adjust to changes in ordinal position (birth order) & responsibilities 9. Manage sexual thoughts/boundaries between step relatives 10. Adjust to changes in household rules & the parenting style of the SP 11. Learn appropriate ways of disagreement & expressing angry or confused emotions. 		
<p>Marital Divorce</p> <p>Factors to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of marriage • Factors leading to marital dissolution (e.g., dying a “slow death”, affair, mutual decision or unilateral) • Acceptance of divorce by extended family and spiritual (church) family • Support system • Cultural background and spiritual beliefs/shame issues regarding divorce • Number of single parent years • Age of children at time of divorce and remarriage • Is this a first divorce or one of many? 	<p>Parenting Subsystem:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single parent must establish/continue authoritative discipline & structure of home 2. Develop adult alliances to support parenting efforts (g-parents, mentors, etc.) 3. Single parent must establish/continue authoritative discipline & structure of home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop adult alliances to support parenting efforts (g-parents, mentors, etc.) 4. PSP: Parents should try to bring each household’s routines & parenting styles in line to diminish changes after the wedding 5. PSP: Define the parenting system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pace of bonding between stepparent and stepchildren; includes how much intimacy with stepchildren is desired by & expected of the SP • Discuss process for stepparent’s developing authority with minor children • Define appropriate expressions of affection 6. Listen & consider children’s fears of a new marriage 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allow for and demonstrate ongoing grief related to parental divorce 2. Give permission to and affirm children’s connections & attachments to NR-BP and SP in other home; also to extended family (g-parents, etc.). Find ways to support and sustain these relationships 3. Bio Parent & Stepparent (SP) roles defined; bio parent extends power to SP; SP initially focuses on bonding with stepchildren; moves gradually into disciplinary role; accepts limits of role; become a united front 4. Consider developmental differences in children & adolescents as it impacts relational attachment to new SF members and individual child development 5. Recognize & be sensitive to loyalty/new tie conflicts for children 6. Establish emergency medical decision rights for SP 7. Parenting team determines behavioral expectations, family values, & a system of discipline 8. Establish physical/sexual boundaries & discuss possible sexual thoughts& attractions over time 9. Recognize care-taking efforts of children toward an under functioning BP 10. If spiritual values differ between homes, determine how to teach/train children without denigrating the other home (see also, “Spiritual / The Integration Years”) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SP functions in authoritative role with some children (i.e., if enough relational equity has been developed) 2. SP continues to build/deepen closeness with stepchildren as they enter the next phase of their life (adulthood, marriage, parenting, etc.) 	
	<p>Stepfamily Unit:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gradual introduction of single parent’s dating partner to the children 2. Once a decision toward marriage has been made, future SP begins intentionally “dating” the kids 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stepsiblings are given space & time to work out various levels of closeness 2. Retain/combine family rituals; create new traditions unique to the new SF 3. Begin to embrace a “stepfamily identity”; understand that acceptance of this identity will progress differently for family members 4. Regular displays of appreciation toward one another; communicate value of others 5. Learn open, healthy communication skills 6. Play together regularly; compartmentalize relationships to facilitate bonding 7. Proactively deal with conflict, crisis, & changes; seek out “getting along” even before “love” develops 8. Stepgrandparents & extended family accept the new family& support it (e.g., honor birthdays equally); contribute effort to developing new bonds 9. Bring unrealistic hopes & expectations to awareness, articulate them, & choose to release them 10. Channel the feeling, “something is wrong with us,” into problem-solving efforts 11. Identify personal concerns & needs, listen to those of others 12. Family education as to normal SF struggles & development; learn what’s normal 13. Negotiate differences & remain committed to family permanency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand that life cycle changes can again ripple waves of stress throughout the family. Normalize & remind family how far they’ve come. Typical waves include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extended family life cycle changes (deaths, weddings, births, etc.) • children moving into adolescence &/or early adulthood 2. Deepen attachments & intimacy via family activities, rituals, & traditions 3. Affection & authority of SP expands & deepens 4. Previous “territorial wars” give way to common territory that solidifies relationships 5. Gain appreciate for what has been accomplished 	

<p>Marital Divorce</p> <p>Factors to Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of marriage • Factors leading to marital dissolution (e.g., dying a “slow death”, affair, mutual decision or unilateral) • Acceptance of divorce by extended family and spiritual (church) family • Support system • Cultural background and spiritual beliefs/shame issues regarding divorce • Number of single parent years • Age of children at time of divorce and remarriage • Is this a first divorce or one of many? 	<p>Social:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single parent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need to establish extended family and social networks to aid in child-rearing and financial stability • Same-sex peers is very important for emotional support • Reestablish connections with some relationships lost during the death 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Guard against negative comments & unacceptance of new family by peers or extended family 2. Establish couple-to-couple social network 3. Establish church membership & relationships 4. Establish community living network including work, neighborhood, physicians, etc. to support the family 			
	<p>Spiritual:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. View God as spiritual refuge in the midst of loss 2. Resolution of spiritual guilt; seek God’s forgiveness; repentance of any “hardness of heart” that contributed to divorce 3. Seek to forgive their ex-spouse 4. Re-establish connections within a local church (sometimes means finding a new church home) 5. When abuse or trauma contributed to the divorce, seek counsel for healing and recovery of personal boundaries and self-worth 6. PSP: Couple should discuss their spiritual values and intentions for raising their children in the faith; if values do not match, the couple should seriously consider discontinuing the relationship 7. PSP: Discuss with local minister the Biblical appropriateness of remarriage 8. PSP: Establish rituals of couple prayer, church attendance, and Bible study 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Embrace spiritual acceptance to God; avoid spiritual marginalization by church members 2. Establish membership in a local church family 3. Establish family faith identity and practices 4. Faithfulness & discipleship is modeled by adults 5. Engage in family spiritual time and service/ministry activities 6. Stepfather’s seek to “lead through their wives” as they fulfill their role as servant-leader in the home 7. Join or create a fellowship/class for couples in stepfamilies 8. When spiritual values between homes differ significantly, the choices of adolescent and older children often reflect the confusing spiritual messages they receive. Parents should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a consistent faithful spiritual walk and message • Discuss differences in values and offer inoculations without denigrating the other home • Help to create positive spiritual accountability in the child’s life via social connections and church activities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue to deepen individual study & the family’s walk with the Lord 		
	<p>Financial:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PSP: Addressing financial changes resulting from marriage (inheritance, debt, etc.) and changes to wills; communicate & negotiate boundary changes with children (of every age) 2. PSP: Develop a plan for monthly money management & debt reduction 3. PSP: Consider moving into a new house after the wedding 4. PSP: Discuss each adult’s obligation to stepchildren (allowance, college tuition, medical insurance, etc.) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Change wills, estate planning, etc. to reflect the values & composition of the new family 2. Implement monthly money management plan and tithe; adjust as needed 			
	<p>Later Life Remarriage</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dating: finding balance in amount of time spent together & apart 2. Introducing the dating partner to adult children; later, communicating decision to remarry 3. PSP: Financial considerations & inheritance issues 4. PSP: Discuss how “leaving father and mother and cleaving to spouse” applies to adult children; communicate changes 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Negotiate SP’s posture with adult stepchildren: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Mom’s husband,” “friend,” etc. • May have to build relationships with adult stepchildren via the stepgrandparent role 2. Honor family identity & traditions while making space for new spouse 3. Family identity defined: “stepfamily” or “family and mom’s husband” 4. Define role with stepgrandchildren & create opportunities for contact & relationship development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seek to negotiate adult-adult relations with stepchildren 2. Late teen & young adult stepchildren need to be reassured that their parent will still be available to them after leaving home 3. Move toward “intimate-outsider” relations with extended family 4. After the death of a BP: Define relations with stepchildren & stepgrandchildren & desires for continued contact 		

Key Tasks Discussion

Dating & Pre-Stepfamily Preparation Following Parental Divorce.

1. As with death, grief following a divorce is an ongoing process. Children and adults grieve differently and about different matters, yet they share many areas of sadness. Parents must be in tune with their child's grief reactions and work to facilitate ongoing contact with both biological parents. Managing between home conflicts and creating a workable visitation schedule is an important part of helping children adjust.
2. It is important that single parents not rush into a new relationship or series of relationships ("rebound relationships") and instead focus on their children and personal healing.
3. Ex-spouses must successfully renegotiate the boundaries of their relationship from "partners" to "parents only". Learning to "act divorced," focusing on parental tasks and what's in the best interests of the child is a major hurdle for many divorced couples.
4. Single parents must establish themselves as a competent leader within their home (e.g., regarding rules, consequences, & nurturance).
5. Dating couples should be deliberate and cautious in their decisions to remarry.

Marriage & The Integration Years.

1. Gaining and accepting a healthy understanding and perspective on the realities of stepfamily living is imperative. Couples who continuously impose on themselves and their family members a first-family mentality find that they are disillusioned and discouraged. The pressure to "blend" often creates resistance and intense frustration.
2. Couples must respectfully (especially with adult stepchildren) find ways of establishing their marriage as important, indeed, a covenant to be honored.
3. Children need continued contact with bio parents. Loyalties should not be manipulated and parents sensitive to loss issues.
4. Determining stepparenting roles and how the parental team will work together is critical to stepfamily success. Stepparents must find ways of building relationship with their stepchildren.
5. Spiritual connection with God and a local church is vital to family integrity and a new identity.

Case Illustration.

Joanna (age 35) divorced her husband after he admitted to an affair. She was emotionally crushed and spiritually shaken, but with the support of many friends she and her 10 year-old son and 7 year-old daughter survived.

Before becoming a Christian, Tim (now age 40) left his wife and son, Jacob, because he hated the way they fought all the time. Coming from an alcoholic home left Tim very fearful of conflict and unable to handle the stress involved. Tim became a Christian after going through a divorce recovery program at the local congregation that reached out to him during the breakup.

Tim and Joanna met, dated nine months, and married. Their children's visitation schedules meant that two weekends a month they were without children. Those weekends were "easy" compared to the weekends with all three children. Joanna was a very structured parent with many rules and high behavioral expectations. Tim was happy if the kitchen was cleaned once a week. Tim's son knew how to get out of consequences by wearing down his father with questions; Joanna couldn't stand how manipulated he was a instantly attempted to raise the standard of behavior from Jacob. She refused to back down leaving Tim caught between his wife and child.

Meanwhile, Joanna had ongoing battles with her ex-husband over parenting decisions and visitation schedules that added stress to the stepfamily. Joanna asserted what she thought best at every turn. In contrast, Tim, who avoided all conflict, let his ex-wife dictate many things to him—which only infuriated Joanna further.

Because of her first husband's betrayal, Joanna found herself wondering if Tim was truly committed to her. Every time he "bent over backward" for his ex-wife or refused to stand up to his son, she became more convinced that he couldn't be trusted. This fueled her emotional distance, lack of trust, and criticism. The more she complained, the more Tim withdrew from the conflict. This in turn weakened their parental alliance and ability to structure the home.

With much determination the couple and stepfamily attended a stepfamily educational series at their church. They learned what was fueling their growing distance and mistrust, identified ghosts from the past, and improved their conflict negotiation skills. Still, change came very gradually over a period of years. As the couple's relationship strengthened so did the children's respect for their stepparents. New traditions were created that over time helped solidify the family's new identity.

Out-of-Wedlock Birth

(NOTE: Information in this table is limited to the unique dynamics of marriage preceded by an out-of-wedlock birth. Most tasks of the “Marital Divorce” table also apply.)

Precipitating Loss Event	People / Relational Subsystem	Single-Parent & Premarital Tasks	Marriage & The Integration Years (approximately 0-7 years)	Solidifying & Enhancing Family Identity (8 years and beyond)	Abbreviation Key:
	Description: Identifies significant people & relationships within the multi-home stepfamily and external social connections.	Description: Identifies tasks related to single parenting and relationship development as it relates to dating, courtship, remarriage decisions, and pre-stepfamily preparation (PSP).	Description: Identifies critical tasks relative to the early years following the wedding: developing bonds, roles, rules, loyalty issues, and family identity.	Description: Identifies common tasks for stepfamily growth once a basic family identity is formed. Lists potential sources of stress as the family progresses through the family life cycle.	Description: To save space, abbreviations are used throughout the table. See key below.
<p>Out-of-Wedlock Birth</p> <p>NOTE: Information in this table is limited to the unique dynamics of marriage preceded by an out-of-wedlock birth. Most tasks of the “Marital Divorce” table also apply.)</p>	Adult Co-Parents:	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Co-parents maintain regular contact with the child; if one BP is uninvolved or disconnected, children should be made aware of their biological history 	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> If the NR-BP has been uninvolved, remain open to their return at some point in time An involved NR-BP needs reassurance they will not be pushed out of a significant role with children 		<p>KEY:</p> <p>BP = Biological Parent SP = Stepparent NR-BP = Non-Residential Biological Parent PSP = Pre-Stepfamily Preparation (assumes concrete plans to marry have been made) SF = Stepfamily SS = Stepsibling(s)</p> <p>NOTE: Numbers beside tasks do not connote priority or sequencing.</p>
	Children:		<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> If NR-BP has been uninvolved, loyalty concerns for young children may be minimal. Ready acceptance of SP is common on an emotional level However, making space for authority from another parent figure can be difficult, especially if the SP has a style or manner in parenting that differs greatly from the BP Older children may maintain a “fantasy image” of the missing parent; making space for the imperfections of the SP may be difficult 		
	Parenting Subsystem:	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Alliances between the custodial parent & their parent(s) are typical. Preparation for marriage means boundaries must be adjusted so that grandparents shift to a “secondary parental” role including having less responsibility for the daily care of children and giving less input to decision-making 	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Former single parents who had been completely independent in parenting must now make space for another opinion. Forming a “team, unified front” mentality can be a significant challenge Due to ambiguous loss and a child’s desire to “fill in the gaps” in their familial past, the SP should remain open to older/adult stepchildren—even after years of family solidarity—needing to discover more about their biological parents. A SP should not take this personally but understand it as a common identity need 	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion may result when older children begin to question their stepparent’s “true authority” or begin to pursue a relationship with an uninvolved BP The sudden return of an uninvolved BP can bring confusion and feelings of rejection 	
	Social:	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The pressure to marry from Christian friends and family can be significant. Single parents should be careful not to rush into marriage to fulfill social expectations 			
	Spiritual:	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Deal with spiritual shame and judgment of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Find spiritual healing and a sense of redemption in the Lord. 			
	Financial:	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> PSP: Financial dependence on extended family is common. Moving out of debt and establishing expectations of independence after marriage is important. 	<p>Unique Tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing financial independence is important for couple integrity and identity. 		

Key Tasks Discussion

NOTE: Information in this discussion is limited to the unique dynamics of marriage preceded by an out-of-wedlock birth. Most tasks of the “**Marital Divorce**” table also apply.

Dating and Pre-Stepfamily Preparation Following an Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy (Marriage to Someone Other Than the Biological Parent)

1. Unique Dynamic: Grief following an out-of-wedlock pregnancy for both parent and child is more psychologically ambiguous. In death, the concrete nature of the loss is obvious. In divorce, pre-separation relationships are part of each individual's life story and ongoing parental involvement maintains the parent-child bond. Loss after an out-of-wedlock pregnancy is less concrete and therefore, more ambiguous and difficult to define. Some children, for example, may have very limited contact with one of their biological parents (often the father) and not have any direct memories of that parent. Others have regular contact much like children after divorce, but since there wasn't ever a marriage or family identity, the idea of family is lost. Like children who are adopted, children born out-of-wedlock may grow up trying to fill in the gaps in their personal and familial life story.
2. Because there is less family identity with two biological parents, children may bond and attach to future stepparents very quickly. Casually dating single parents should be careful not to inadvertently allow their children to form deep attachments with “casual dating partners” only to dissolve those bonds with a break-up. The good news for couples who are marrying is that bonding between future stepparents and children may progress rapidly.
3. Child bonds with single parents can be very strong. Marriage is sometimes perceived as a great threat to this established relationship (i.e., sharing a parent can be even more difficult for these children).

Marriage & The Integration Years.

1. Bonding between steps can progress nicely. This gives way to confusion when older children begin to question their stepparent's “true authority” or

begin to pursue a relationship with an uninvolved BP. Likewise, the sudden return of an uninvolved BP can bring confusion and feelings of rejection.

2. The couple needs to maintain a psychological awareness of the ambiguous loss issues of the children. For example, how does a child grieve a BP they don't know? How do you respond to a child's idealized image of a missing parent?

Case Illustration.

Sheryl's family was well respected by their church family. She grew up with parents who were actively involved in teaching and spiritual leadership. Because of that, her pregnancy at the age of 18 was made very public. She felt badly for the way others spoke to her parents about the situation and even worse when her father resigned as a leader. She remained financially dependent upon her family and relied on her mother and extended family to help with child-care demands. Even though she remained connected with her church family and attempted to learn more about relationships, Sheryl continued to date immature men because it “helped with the loneliness.” Charles, the father of her child Polly, rarely interacted with Polly leaving Sheryl full responsibility for child-rearing.

When Sheryl met Doug at a church singles event, everything seemed to click. A divorced father of two, Doug and Sheryl began spending an intense amount of time together. Many spiritual mentors cautioned the couple to slow down the pace of their relationship, but they moved forward quickly. Within six months they announced their wedding plans. One of Sheryl's best friends, who didn't care for Doug, soon abandoned the friendship. In addition, Charles (the father of Sheryl's child) became nervous about Doug's future involvement and began saying negative things about Doug in the community and to his daughter. After the wedding when Doug announced that he was up for a job in another state, Sheryl's co-parent immediately stopped the move with a court order.

Despite these efforts, Charles did not increase his time with his child. He remained distant and unreliable. This added a great deal of stress to the new marriage.

Furthermore, Doug's two children, ages 6 and 8, continued to move back and forth between their two homes and challenged Sheryl's authority regularly. Their biological mother was rather argumentative in co-parenting discussions; Doug's practice was to let her have her way most of the time to avoid excessive conflict. Sheryl, however, was unwilling to put up with many of the things Doug has succumbed to in the past and put pressure on him to stand up to her. This put Doug in the middle between his ex-spouse, his new wife, and his kids. Much of the time he was unwilling to bring more conflict to his children so he resisted Sheryl's demands, generating marital conflict, and increasing resentment.

A delicate balance in dealing with co-parents was eventually found, but both Sheryl and Doug felt that their relationships with each other's children were negatively affected. As Polly grew, she began to idealize her biological father Charles. Because she had very little factual knowledge of her father's personality and qualities, she assumed he would be “better than Doug.” She and Doug got along most of the time, but when she didn't like a rule or decision she pulled out her “trump card” and compared him to her idealized father. As a result, Doug stayed at arms-length so he wouldn't be continually hurt.

All in all, this stepfamily maintained and developed workable relationships throughout the adolescent years even after Charles, who eventually remarried, suddenly began to seek more involvement with Polly. Sheryl and Doug felt a loss of control when Charles re-entered the daily routine and occasionally Polly took advantage of the gap between her parents to make choices that were not healthy. Who walks Polly down the aisle when she marries some day is yet to be seen.