

RON L. DEAL

THE SMART STEPFAMILY MARRIAGE

SMALL-GROUP STUDY GUIDE



Keys to Success in
the Blended Family

RON L. DEAL

THE
SMART
STEPFAMILY
MARRIAGE
SMALL-GROUP STUDY GUIDE

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The Smart Stepfamily Marriage

Small-Group Study Guide

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CONTENTS

Your Relationship Deserves a Checkup	1
Getting the Most from This Study Guide	1
SESSION 1 — The Stepfamily Marriage	4
SESSION 2 — Building on Your Strengths	7
SESSION 3 — Beating the Odds of Divorce: <i>The Stepfamily Connection</i>	11
SESSION 4 — Mapping Closeness and Flexibility.	14
SESSION 5 — Eyes Wide Open: <i>Finding Realistic Expectations</i>	18
SESSION 6 — Children and Parenting: <i>When Kids Are Part of the Package</i>	23
SESSION 7 — SCOPE Out Your Personalities	29
SESSION 8 — The Vital Importance of Healthy Communication	33
SESSION 9 — Managing and Extinguishing the Fires of Conflict	37
SESSION 10 — Leisure: Maximize Your Fun Factor.	42
SESSION 11 — Remarriage Finances: <i>Yours, Mine, and Ours?</i>	46
SESSION 12 — Finding Your Spiritual Core.	51
SESSION 13 — The Sex Connection (Optional for Group Discussion)	55
Group Leader Notes.	58
About the Online Couple Checkup	61

YOUR RELATIONSHIP DESERVES A CHECKUP

The odds are that sometime this year you will take the time to have a physical exam or get a dental checkup. Most people think nothing of it. Very few, on the other hand, take the time to get a relationship checkup.

But your relationship deserves a checkup.

This group study provides an opportunity for couples to enhance their relationship and build intimacy. It will help you to apply the principles found in *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* to your relationship, whether dating, engaged, or married.

Congratulations! You're about to add strength to your relationship.

Ron L. Deal

President, Smart Stepfamilies™

Director, FamilyLife Blended™

Member of the Couple Checkup Research Team

GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS STUDY GUIDE

Whether you are an individual, couple, or group of couples studying this series together, this guide can be adapted to serve your needs. Each session walks you through discussion questions that will help you strengthen your relationship. Individuals and couples are welcome to complete the study by themselves (for example, as part of a premarital counseling program), but I strongly recommend that you work through the material with a group of couples if possible. Research and experience in marriage education suggest that fellowship and discussion with other couples is a vital part of applying the principles found in *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*. Together you will support each other as couples and discover how to enhance your relationship. Premarital couples are encouraged to attend groups with married couples to glean from their experience.

Editorial Note: From this point I'll abbreviate *TSSM* for *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*.

GETTING STARTED

Here are a few tips for your study:

- **Use this guide to take notes during the discussion.** Space is provided so you can write down key observations or applications for your relationship.
- **Get a copy of *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*.** This study assumes you have a copy of the book. When used in combination, the book and study guide make an excellent learning system.
- **Use the wisdom of the Bible.** God's truth is very evident in our research findings. We encourage you to look up and consider the scriptural references included in this guide.
- **Don't skip anything.** For those of you studying with a group, be sure to complete the "Before Your Meeting" sections. This will prepare you for the group discussion time and further your application of the material. Individual couples not meeting with a group can discuss the group sections on their own.
- **Understand the terminology.** Because this study is applicable to dating, engaged, or married couples, we will use the term "partner" throughout the study.
- **Take the online Couple Checkup inventory.** This relationship profile is the most-researched inventory of its kind and will give you tremendous insight into the current strengths of your relationship. Like a GPS that pinpoints your current location and then provides direction to your destination, this Couple Positioning System (CPS) identifies your relationship strengths and growth areas and provides specific feedback on how you can deepen intimacy.

The online inventory adapts to your couple type, whether dating, engaged, or married, and provides personal feedback for your relationship. It only takes each partner about 30 minutes to complete the inventory. Take it at SmartStepfamilies.com.
- **Come prepared.** Come to each group meeting with four items: a Bible, a copy of *TSSM*, your Couple Report, and this study guide.
- **Use discretion.** This group study includes an optional discussion on the topic of sex. Many people do not feel comfortable discussing that topic with others, so we are leaving it to your discretion. Sexuality is an important matter, so if you choose not to discuss it in your group, be sure to have a private conversation with your partner. Likewise, there may be other matters to keep private; don't mention them in a group setting unless you have permission to do so.
- **Agree to a few group guidelines.** See the next section.

GUIDELINES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussions that take place in a safe environment will bless everyone. Take a few minutes during your first few meetings to review these guidelines and agree to abide by them.

GROUP LEADERS

Guidelines for effective group discussion and instructions for leading groups through this material are available at the back of this guide. See page 58.

GROUP GUIDELINES

- **Confidentiality** – We agree that what is said here stays here. We honor one another's privacy and will not share stories or details heard in the group meeting with people who are not in attendance.
- **Honor** – We agree not to share intimate details without first asking our partner whether it is okay to share with the group. If you're not sure it's okay to share, then it probably isn't. Wait and ask your partner outside of the group.
- **Advice** – We agree not to offer unsolicited advice to one another. If after telling about a frustration, someone receives advice, he might feel judged and pressured to abide by the advice. This creates a sharing barrier for him and others in the future. Agree only to give advice if someone first asks for the group's input.
- **Respect** – We agree to show common courtesy to one another. Examples include showing up on time, allowing everyone to talk (not dominating the group discussion time), not interrupting, and not engaging in side conversations during the group discussion. Even making a commitment to regular attendance shows respect to others who are counting on us to be there. Call if you cannot attend a session.
- **Acceptance and Encouragement** – We agree to build one another up in the Lord. We will share our faith, love, and support and strive to walk alongside one another in mutual encouragement. If we disagree, we will continue to love in spite of our differences.

1

THE STEPFAMILY MARRIAGE

—Covering the preface and chapter 1 of *TSSM**—

Welcome! Take a few minutes to get to know each other as you begin this study together.

A. When was the last time you had a dental appointment or an annual physical? Why do we do this on a regular basis?

B. How often do you get your car serviced or the oil changed?

C. Why do you suppose couples rarely, if ever, get a checkup on their relationship?

**The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* book

D. Take some time to introduce yourselves to one another:

Share a brief sketch of your family, including whether you are dating or married and how many children or stepchildren you have. Share one unique thing about your family that most people do not know.

STUDY OVERVIEW

This study is about growing your relationship and encouraging others as they grow theirs. To accomplish this, each couple will be asked to

- read a corresponding chapter of *TSSM* before each meeting and
- discuss the “Before the Meeting” questions with your partner.

During each session our group will share thoughts and insights into how to apply the principles of *TSSM*. Creating a safe environment where you and other couples can learn and find support is everyone’s job. To facilitate that safe environment, spend a little time reviewing the group guidelines. When you agree to abide by these guidelines, everyone has a shared expectation of how the group will interact. This deepens trust and, therefore, the level of support experienced. Take some time now to:

- Review the Group Guidelines (see page 3). Make sure that everyone understands them and is willing to abide by them.
- Decide how you will remind each other of the guidelines if someone accidentally steps over one.

FOCUSING ON STRENGTH

Most marital research focuses on problems or divorce. This study is based on the largest in-depth survey of stepfamily couple strengths ever conducted and proposes that building on your strengths is much more productive than focusing on your weaknesses.

- Share a quality of strong marriages that you have witnessed in the marriages of family or friends.
- In general, what qualities do you think contribute to a strong marriage?

PRAYER TIME

Take some time to pray for your study and each other. Ask the Lord to provide valuable insights as you meet each week.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read the preface and chapters 1 and 2 of *TSSM*, and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section privately as a couple.

2

BUILDING ON YOUR STRENGTHS

—Covering chapter 2 of *TSSM*—

The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping-stones
is how we choose to use them.

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 35

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapter 2 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the Couple Exercise on page 39 of *TSSM*.
- C. Complete the Couple Positioning System (CPS) discussion on pages 40–41 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 2. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

- 1. Consider this quote:

“Frequently one person in a couple is much happier than their partner. In fact, there is

a low correlation in marital satisfaction between spouses, meaning that if you know the satisfaction level of one partner, you will only be able to predict the other partner's marital satisfaction 25 percent of the time" (*TSSM*, 30).

- How can it be that men and women have different levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their relationship (communication, finances, etc.)?
- Discuss why it is important to remind yourself from time to time not to get lulled into assuming that because you are happy, your partner is also happy.

2. Review the list of Key Strengths of Highly Satisfied Stepfamily Couples on page 32 of *TSSM*.

- The items are listed in rank order. What surprises you about the list?
- Share one positive aspect of your relationship with the group. Remember to celebrate one another's strengths.

3. Consider this quote:

"Understanding the differences and obstacles in our relationships removes some of the power they have over us. Awareness generates in us the ability to maneuver more intelligently, perhaps by confronting the challenge that these stumbling blocks pose rather than tripping over them" (*TSSM*, 36).

- Why do we sometimes hide from the obstacles in our relationships?

- Read James 1:2–8. Knowledge that gives direction to life in Scripture is referred to as “wisdom.” Sometimes we seek the Lord’s wisdom but then remain closed to what He is trying to show us. How can you open yourself to the Lord’s wisdom for your marriage?
- Discuss as a group how you will share wisdom with one another during your group time. Is it permissible to give advice to one another? If so, how might you go about doing so?
- Hebrews 12:7–11 suggests that hardship is discipline that God uses to grow us into righteousness. How do the challenges of marriage also function as God’s discipline for our refinement?
- Review the list of Stepcouple Stumbling Blocks on page 33 of *TSSM*. Which can you relate to? Which have you witnessed as problems in the lives of other remarried couples (before or after the wedding)?

B. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from the book that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

- B.** Pray as a group about the relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 3 of *TSSM* and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section.

3

BEATING THE ODDS OF DIVORCE: THE STEPFAMILY CONNECTION

—Covering chapter 3 of *TSSM*—

The remarriage journey has plenty of surprises along the way.

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 45

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A.** Read chapter 3 of *TSSM*.
- B.** Complete the CPS discussion on pages 49–50 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A.** The higher divorce rate for remarriages and stepcouple relationships draws a clear connection between the added stress of stepfamily living and marital dissolution; living in a stepfamily is hard on a marriage. If already married, in what ways did you underestimate this truth when you decided to get married?
- B.** Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 3. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

“The unique challenges of being a stepcouple work against marital success, and only those who intentionally work to overcome them find the rewards they dreamed of before walking down the aisle” (*TSSM*, 45).

- How can you be more intentional?
- What attitudes, time adjustments, or habits need to change in your family to help you overcome the challenges of your stepfamily?

2. Consider this quote:

“The term *stepcouple* also accurately communicates our conviction that marriage in a stepfamily cannot be enhanced without consideration of the entire stepfamily system. One cannot compartmentalize the couple’s relationship as if it exists in a vacuum. In other words, the health of the couple’s relationship is interdependent with the health of the stepfamily. Each greatly impacts the other” (*TSSM*, 45).

- The word “stepcouple” is an awkward term, but very descriptive. In what ways do you think it is accurate of your relationship?
- Currently, what aspects of your stepfamily most impact your marriage for good? For worse?

3. Many people, like Frank, (see page 47 of *TSSM*) interpret having to work hard at bringing a stepfamily together as a sign that they shouldn’t be together.

- How is it reassuring to learn that all stepfamilies struggle with added stress and strain the first few years and that working hard is normal?
- How can you keep from being overly discouraged by this process?

4. Consider this quote:

“The fantasy of marital peace and harmony that leads couples to the altar usually doesn’t become reality for seven or more years for most stepcouples. (Some lucky couples with small children may discover the honeymoon within a few years.) Until then, it is hard work and determination—one step at a time—which finally pay off in a ‘honeymoon’ experience” (*TSSM*, 48).

- How is it helpful to know that the average stepfamily needs around seven years to solidify their bonds and become “family”? How is it discouraging?

- Why is having this realistic time frame important?

- What happens if adults/parents get impatient with this process and try to force people to like or love one another?

C. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 3 that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapters 4 and 5 of *TSSM* and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section.

4

MAPPING CLOSENESS AND FLEXIBILITY

—Covering chapters 4 and 5 of *TSSM*—

Nearly everyone knows that communication and conflict resolution are key ingredients to a happy marriage. But closeness and flexibility are just as important.

—Ron L. Deal

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapters 4 and 5 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the CPS discussions on pages 62–64 and 81–82 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A. Throughout this chapter, healthy closeness is defined as a balance between individuality (separateness) and togetherness. In what ways does God maintain this same balance in His relationship with us?

(Hint: God wants to draw near to us, but He never limits our free will.)

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 5. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Closeness is not just a feeling. It is also an action. Review the Getting Close list on page 68 of *TSSM* and discuss how you can live these qualities of close couples. Share as many real-life application examples with the group as you can.

2. Review the Five Levels of Closeness chart on page 69 of *TSSM*. Discuss the following:

- Which level of closeness best describes the family you grew up in (your “family of origin”)?
- Keeping in mind that we tend to either repeat or reject the closeness style of the family we grew up in, how is this similar or different to your current relationship?

3. Closeness Case Study: Review the story about Matt and Sherry (see pages 69–70 of *TSSM*).

- If Matt and Sherry better understood each other’s need for and definition of closeness, how could they serve each other better?
- When partners have differing needs for closeness, how can they keep from taking it personally that their expectations are not equal (that Sherry’s need for closeness is less than Matt’s)?
- What insights have you gained?

C. Discuss relational flexibility.

"Flexibility refers to how open to change a couple's relationship is in the areas of leadership, relationship boundaries, roles within the marriage, and problem solving. Healthy couple relationships maintain a balance between a predictable pattern of interaction ('stability') and the ability to adapt or change when circumstances call for it ('flexibility')" (TSSM, 72).

- Case Study: Review the story about Kay (see page 71 of *TSSM*). In what ways can you see flexibility being lived out in her life?

- How might things be different if she remained rigid and unbending?

- What happens when there is too much change in a marriage or family?

D. Review the Five Levels of Flexibility on page 73 on *TSSM*.

- Which level of flexibility best describes your family of origin?
- How is this similar to or different from your current relationship?

E. Review the Couple Flexibility chart on pages 73–74 of *TSSM* to contrast the qualities of happy and unhappy couples.

F. Digging Deeper: We theorize that humility is a fundamental attitude of flexible, adaptable people. Humble people are not rigid in their thinking or prideful that their way is right. Is it any wonder that our study found that flexible couples compromise more and share leadership equally?

- God makes it clear in Scripture that He “opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). A prideful attitude in us creates opposition from God, while a humble attitude in us fosters closeness and grace from God. How do pride and humility function similarly in your relationship with your partner? (Hint: It fosters either distance or closeness, opposition or grace from your partner, too.)

G. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapters 4 and 5 that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 6 of *TSSM* and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section.

5

EYES WIDE OPEN: FINDING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

—Covering chapter 6 of *TSSM*—

Since love is often blind, we usually keep one—or both—eyes shut during the dating process. We want to see the future as being full of possibilities and, therefore, tend to skip over reality.

—Ron L. Deal

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A.** Read chapter 6 of *TSSM*.
- B.** Complete the CPS discussion on page 98 of *TSSM*.
- C.** Complete the Bonus Couple Exercise in Ghost Busting on pages 99–100 of *TSSM*. Allow 15–30 minutes for this exercise.

DISCUSSION

- A.** What wisdom does this Jamaican proverb hold for both dating and married couples?

“Before you marry keep both eyes open; after marriage shut one.”

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 6. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. “When unrealistic expectations meet reality, disappointment sets in and becomes a huge relational obstacle for many couples. Once disillusionment is felt, persons tend to blame the relationship itself or their spouse instead of their own unrealistic expectations. When this happens, partners posture themselves against each other, not beside each other” (TSSM, 89).

- Disappointment and disillusionment are natural outcomes of unrealistic expectations. How can you keep them from turning you and your partner against each other?

- Why is it important to examine your expectations?

2. Discuss unrealistic expectation #1: “Getting remarried and creating a stepfamily might be stressful, but what’s the problem?” (TSSM, 90).

- Why is it important to accept that creating a stepfamily is stressful?
- It is common for the stepparent to experience more stress than the biological parent because stepparents are adjusting to everything—the marriage, parenting, relationships with children, ex-spouses, etc., while biological parents are mainly adjusting to the marriage. Why is it important for biological parents not to minimize the stress of the stepparent?

3. Discuss unrealistic expectation #2: “If we love each other, the children will follow close behind” (TSSM, 91).

- The couple relationship (marriage) and stepparent-stepchildren relationships can be on different trajectories; the openness of children to the stepparent, for example, can

operate quite independently of the couple's relationship. Why is it important to accept this truth?

- Trying to work with the openness of children instead of pushing them to like or love stepsiblings or the stepparent helps everyone relax with one another. Why do you think this is important?

4. Discuss unrealistic expectation #3: "If we are in love and our marriage is strong, children, outside forces, and ex-spouses will not divide us" (*TSSM*, 91).

- It is common for stepparents to feel left out when their spouse is spending time with the biological children. How can you prevent that feeling from becoming a wedge in your marriage?
- Outside forces (ex-spouses, extended family, court proceedings) that impact your family schedule, finances, relationships, etc., can lead to feelings of helplessness. Accepting the reality of these forces can help to ease the ensuing distress, even though it doesn't get rid of the frustration. What attitudes can help you cope with these dynamics?

5. Discuss unrealistic expectation #4: "Emotional resolution of previous losses and painful relationships means they won't affect us in the future" (*TSSM*, 92).

- A dead and buried past is easily resurrected by the intimacy of a new relationship. What are you learning about managing your internal fears of being hurt by marriage or the stepfamily?

- Because fear erodes marital confidence and trust, you must recognize the warning signs: not working through hurts from the past, high distress when your spouse talks about a previous marriage/partner, anxiety or worry about another relationship breakup (or loss), or jealousy or worry about not feeling as important to your spouse as you expected to. Share an example of these concerns in your life.

- Marital ghosts “can lead one partner to live as if negative things are happening when they’re not and . . . interpret behaviors, attitudes, or words with meaning that was only justifiably attributable to the previous relationship” (*TSSM*, 94). Have you experienced a moment when you interpreted your spouse’s behavior or words through the lens of a previous relationship? Share an example.

If you completed the Bonus Couple Exercise on page 99 of *TSSM* share some insights to “busting your ghost.”

C. Digging Deeper: Review the story of Gary and Shirley (see pages 94–95 of *TSSM*). What can you learn from Gary’s ghost and how he tried to protect himself from further pain?

D. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 6 that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

- A.** What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

- B.** Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 7 of *TSSM* and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section.

6

CHILDREN AND PARENTING: WHEN KIDS ARE PART OF THE PACKAGE

—Covering chapter 7 of *TSSM*—

Before I got married, I had six theories about bringing up children;
now I have six children, and no theories.

– John Wilmot

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A.** Read chapter 7 of *TSSM*.
- B.** Complete the CPS discussion on pages 116–117 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A.** What makes the quote by John Wilmot so humorous?

- In what ways can you relate to it?

- Parenting is a humbling process. Time and time again raising children reminds us that we cannot control everything and that our child-rearing theories don't always prove correct. Share a time that you were humbled by parenting or realized that you still have much to learn.

- How often do you pray for yourself as a parent? How often do you pray for your children's development?

- Some parents "pray in the moment" when dealing with their children. How can you make this a part of your parenting?

B. Group Check-in: Your Couple Checkup Report indicates your current relationship strengths. When did you see one of your strengths at work over the past week? Share a recent example where you put a strength into action.

C. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 7. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

"Before the wedding, couple satisfaction is based more on the couple's interactions than the stepfamily 'package.' But after the wedding, parenting and stepfamily dynamics become even more salient to couple satisfaction and happiness" (*TSSM*, 102).

- Why do you think this is?

- Discuss this statement: Couples who ignore matters of parenting or stepparenting will likely experience a great deal of dissatisfaction in their marriage.

2. “Even with the awareness that your marriage transition generates insecurity and anxiety in children, couples must openly declare and demonstrate their commitment to the marriage in order to establish themselves as the foundation to the home. It is the first step toward marital intimacy, stepfamily harmony, and effective parenting” (*TSSM*, 104).

- Why might your marriage create insecurity or anxiety in your children?

- What happens to parental authority if a couple doesn’t demonstrate a firm marital commitment to the children?

3. Agreeing on Discipline

“One of the strengths of very happy couples in our study was their ability to come together around matters of child-rearing. Happy couples (84 percent) had discussed their responsibilities, and 68 percent had agreed on how to discipline the children; many fewer unhappy or dissatisfied couples had (54 percent and 36 percent respectively). . . . Couples who find consensus regarding behavioral discipline and expectations grow closer together and are much better equipped to manage the various emotions demonstrated by the children” (*TSSM*, 106).

- The biblical story of Abraham and Sarah—a parent and stepparent who didn’t agree on how to manage Abraham’s son, Ishmael—reveals that even the best of people disagree on parenting. It also reveals that conflict, sometimes excessive conflict, is the result of such

disagreements (see Genesis 21:1–11). Is this an issue in your parenting?

- When disagreements occur, how can you avoid a trap that many couples fall into of assuming that the stepparent doesn't care enough?
 - Most people discipline their children as their parents disciplined them, or they do the opposite. Which is true of you?
 - If you and your partner have different parenting styles and philosophies, what needs to change for you to get on the same page?
- 4.** Review the keys to parenting in stepfamilies on pages 106–110 of *TSSM*. Discuss how they apply to your family.
- Key 1: Biological parents must pass authority to stepparents.
 - Key 2: Biological parents should build trust in stepparents.

- Key 3: Stepparents should move into relationship and discipline gradually.

- Discuss this quote:

“A child’s trust, respect, and honor grow out of a relational history with a stepparent that comes with time and positive experiences. Successful stepparents are dedicated to relationship building over the long haul and don’t try to force their way into the child’s heart. They also understand the limitations of positional authority in the first few years of the stepfamily and rely heavily on the biological parent to manage the children until their own relational influence grows” (*TSSM*, 109).

5. Did the Styles of Parenting section on pages 110–113 of *TSSM* give you any insights into your parenting strengths or weaknesses? Share a few.

D. Digging Deeper: Without a doubt, parents are God’s “plan A” for children. We provide for their physical and emotional needs and teach values.

- What proactive steps are you taking to instill faith into your children?

- Children are the great imitators of our behaviors. Scripture makes it clear that parental modeling is a powerful force in the lives of children. How we live and how we love set examples that they will follow.

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–8. Instilling values in children occurs when we teach faith during the natural rhythms of life (e.g., at home, when traveling, at bedtime). But verse 6 indicates that

the first method of teaching godly values is modeling them (“on your heart”). Share some ways you are modeling godly values for your children.

- Parenting is a sacred honor. Some believe that mothers and fathers together reflect the full parental nature of God. When only one parent is involved, children miss out on the unique leadership abilities of the other parent. How do you share parenting responsibilities in your home?

E. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 7 that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 8 of *TSSM* and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section.

7

SCOPE OUT YOUR PERSONALITIES

—Covering chapter 8 of *TSSM*—

Personality differences can be a challenge for many couples. We often feel that our own style and approach to life are best. But differences in personality can be a strength in your relationship; it just takes awareness and effort.

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 119

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A.** Read chapter 8 of *TSSM*.
- B.** Complete the CPS discussion on pages 137–138 of *TSSM*.
- C.** Our study found that the following negative personality qualities were dangerous for stepfamily couples. Take a look in the mirror and ask yourself which, if any, of these you need to work on: being moody, critical, controlling, and stubborn or having a temper?
- D.** The Couple Discussion section at the bottom of each personality description on your Couple Checkup Report represents the intersection of your personality types.
 - Which aspects of your personalities are different?
 - Which are similar?

DISCUSSION

A. When the personalities of partners are similar, it is easier for them to get along. But different personalities (an extrovert and an introvert) can actually become a mightier strength when couples learn how to appreciate each other. How could this be?

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 8. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

“Personality characteristics are rather stable over time in most people. A common misperception is that you can change personality traits if you don’t like them. While we might achieve slight adjustments in personality over time, our personality is pretty much set by adolescence” (*TSSM*, 120).

- Share one implication of this truth for couples.

- What advice would you give someone who doesn’t like an aspect of his partner’s personality?

2. Consider the four stages that David Augsburger says couples go through on the way to mature love (see pages 122–123 of *TSSM*). Which stages can you relate to? What challenge does the fourth stage present?

- **Stage 1:** During courtship, couples accommodate or tolerate one another’s differences to avoid conflict and keep their dream relationship alive. Why are we prone to do this?

- **Stage 2:** After the wedding, when the reality of a spouse's personality sets in, partners try to eliminate the objectionable differences by criticizing or demanding change. How likely is it that you can change the personality of your partner? What happens when you try?

 - **Stage 3:** When couples reach the third stage, they begin to appreciate the differences in personality as creative, necessary parts of the person they love and of the marriage itself. What has to change within a person before she can appreciate the differences of her partner?

 - **Stage 4:** Mature partners with a mature love then celebrate and delight in their differences, recognizing that each is acceptable and beneficial to the health of the relationship. How does this type of mature love require accepting both each other and yourself?
- 3.** When negative personality traits (being withdrawn, moody, or controlling) become chronically out of balance, they are like a toxic poison to your relationship.
- Read Galatians 5:22–23. If being moody, controlling, critical, and unreliable is toxic poison to a relationship, what impact would living the fruit of the Spirit have?

 - Take some time to discuss each fruit of the Spirit. Share practical examples of how you can live them out in your relationship.

4. How are you learning to manage your couple personality differences? Share an insight from your Couple Checkup Report.

C. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 8 that was helpful, or if you're not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 9 of *TSSM* and complete your "Before Your Meeting" discussion section.

8

THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

—Covering chapter 9 of *TSSM*—

For couples creating stepfamilies, communication alone accounted for nearly 35 percent of what makes for a happy relationship, and the communication scale in our study can predict with 92 percent accuracy whether couples were satisfied with their relationship. In other words, you better learn how to communicate!

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 140

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapter 9 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the CPS discussion on pages 155–156 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A. This chapter indicates that every couple—happy or unhappy—needs to continually enhance their communication skills. Why do you think that is?
 - In what way is it encouraging to you that 82 percent of all couples—both vitalized and discouraged couples alike—have at least one complaint about how they communicate?

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 8. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

- All of us are critical at some point. What are you feeling when you are most critical?

- Next time you feel this way, what can you do to avoid becoming critical?

2. Read aloud the story of Anita and Michael (see pages 142–144 of *TSSM*). As you read, point out three dangerous communication patterns: criticism, making assumptions, and failing to listen.

3. Listening is not the same as hearing.

- Why is listening so much more difficult than hearing?

- Read James 1:1–20. Share about someone you know who is quick to listen.

- Read the example of paraphrasing involving Michael and Anita (see pages 146 of *TSSM*). What might make doing this easy or difficult for you personally?

4. Communication skills are really about increasing emotional safety in a relationship so that dialogue can be productive rather than threatening and couples can feel close to one another.

- Solomon agrees. He points out twice that it's better to live on the corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome spouse (see Proverbs 21:9 and 25:24). Without emotional safety we just want to hide from each other. What comments do you have about this?

- What is something you learned in chapter 8 that could enhance the safety in your relationship?

5. Engaged couples have the tendency to look for positive qualities in their partner and overlook negative ones. Married couples, on the other hand, are tempted to focus on the negatives in their spouses and communication styles.

- Discuss why you think this is the case.

- What can engaged couples do to be more realistic about each other?

- What can married couples do to affirm their spouse's strengths rather than focus on negatives?

C. Digging Deeper: Here is a list of the communication skills discussed in chapter 9. Share an example of your partner doing one or more of these.

- A conversation a day
- Self-disclosure
- Assertiveness and "I" statements
- Active listening using paraphrasing
- Daily compliments

D. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 9 that was helpful; or if you're not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapters 10 and 11 of *TSSM* and complete your "Before Your Meeting" discussion section. You will need extra time to complete your CPS dialogue this week, so plan accordingly.

9

MANAGING AND EXTINGUISHING THE FIRES OF CONFLICT

—Covering chapters 10 and 11 of *TSSM*—

Couples in healthy marriages understand that the fires of conflict—managed in a constructive manner—are actually useful to the marriage. Years of research have confirmed that conflict helps to weed out the unhealthy or weak aspects of marriage and replace them with a stronger marital alliance and growing sense of security.

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 160

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapters 10 and 11 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the CPS discussions on pages 166–167 and 183–184 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A. Share a strength.

Over time, growing couples discover attitudes and actions that help them resolve or manage their differences. Take a few minutes to share one thing you have learned to do or say that seems to help your relationship. Take note of the tools others have learned.

B. Group Check-in: Whether conflict resolution is a strength or growth area in your relationship, all of us can learn new skills to improve how we manage disagreements. Share one insight you gained from chapters 10 and 11 about how you act during disagreements.

C. Review and discuss the following key points from chapters 10 and 11. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

“Healthy stepcouples have conflict, but they make having fun and romance a strategic part of their conflict management plan. Enjoying each other makes times of conflict easier to handle because your attitude toward your partner and the problem is one of collaboration. Having a loving relationship makes you more willing to find ways of resolving conflict. But a relationship plagued by months and years of debris will find that even small fires can rage out of control” (*TSSM*, 159).

- How are you adding the “wet rains” of fun and romance to your marriage?

2. Consider this quote:

“Couples in high-quality relationships resolve their differences, demonstrate important listening and understanding skills, and have unity in how they tackle disagreements. In stark contrast, unhappy and dissatisfied couples stockpile the debris in their relationship because they avoid issues, invalidate each other’s concerns, don’t feel heard, turn small problems into big ones, and can’t even agree on how to disagree” (*TSSM*, 161).

- If someone recorded you with a video camera during an argument, what would he see? Mention both strong points and weaknesses.

- What would you tell a friend who repeatedly ended up in fights with his spouse—fights the couple could not resolve on their own?

3. Consider this quote:

“We highly recommend that you too have controlled burns in your marriage. Sitting down weekly (or on some other regular basis) to proactively discuss family decisions, parenting dilemmas, financial concerns, and the status of your stepfamily’s growth is a healthy way of reducing the potential of hazardous fires. In addition, we believe doing so will increase ‘fire-fighter safety’ in your marriage (protecting you from becoming trapped by wildfire) and increase confidence in your ability to lead and manage your stepfamily” (TSSM, 162).

- Have you ever tried having regular proactive business meetings on behalf of your marriage or family? What results did these meetings produce?

- For some couples, one of the advantages of controlled burns is protecting their romance. If an issue arises on Friday night, they can hold off the problem discussion until their next meeting on Monday. This protects their weekend time together. How might this work for your marriage?

4. What’s your conflict resolution style?

- Are you a pursuer, distancer, overfunctioner, underfunctioner, or a blamer? Refer to pages 172–173 in *TSSM*.

- How can knowing this about yourself help you stay in control during a conflict? How can you balance your responses?

5. Consider this quote:

“What makes the constructive approaches to resolving conflict especially effective is an overall posture of humility.

A humble attitude about yourself during conflict means you don’t have to defend your every action or attitude; when appropriate, you can take responsibility for what wasn’t healthy and ask forgiveness. Humility also facilitates listening and considering the other’s opinion or preference without feeling compelled to accommodate or forcefully advance your own opinion. It is a posture of openness and grace, which invites the other to move toward you emotionally. Conflict naturally pushes couples apart, but a spirit of humility directly counteracts that by facilitating softness, gentleness, and self-control—all of which create a safe environment to explore the conflict” (*TSSM*, 176).

- Share some examples of humble people you have observed.
- A demonstration of humility in conflict is not having to defend yourself and also taking responsibility for your actions. How well can you do this? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, and share why you chose your rating.

6. Assuming you completed the Couple Exercise on page 180–182 of *TSSM*, share some insights from your couple discussion. How did the ten-step process help?

D. Digging Deeper: Review the story about Ned and Amy (see pages 163–164 of *TSSM*).

- Do you identify with any part of Ned and Amy's story?
- What insights does this story give you about your relationship's heat, fuel, and oxygen and how those elements intersect?
- What fire-management strategies have you learned that might be helpful for your marriage?

E. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapters 10 and 11 that was helpful; or if you're not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 12 of *TSSM* and complete your "Before Your Meeting" discussion section.

10

LEISURE: MAXIMIZE YOUR FUN FACTOR

—Covering chapter 12 of *TSSM*—

Shared leisure activity was the number four predictor of a healthy, vitalized remarriage relationship. Why? Because it fosters closeness, friendship, and enjoyable opportunities for you to bond. That's why we've dubbed it the "fun factor" of a great marriage.

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 185–186

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapter 12 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the CPS discussion on page 190 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A. What are your thoughts on the quote at the beginning of this session? Is the "fun factor" more a function of fun (i.e., an enjoyable activity) or of marital friendship?

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 12. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

“Carving out time together away from the children when trying to win another person’s heart is a sacrifice most individuals and parents are willing to make [during courtship]. But once the marriage is official, there is a natural temptation to shift one’s focus back toward the children” (*TSSM*, 186).

- Why do we naturally drift away from intentional fun, romance, and adventurous activities after the wedding?
- In what ways have you seen stepfamily couples focus so much on “not abandoning” their children that they sacrifice their marriage?

2. Which of the following stumbling blocks can you relate to and why?

- Finding time for fun
- Differing ideas on what constitutes a good time

Share other stumbling blocks in your relationship or someone else’s. How can you resolve these?

3. Consider this quote:

“One possible resolution for couples whose ideas of fun or whose personality preferences vary is to find the balance between individual recreation and making sacrifices that seek a common pleasure” (*TSSM*, 187).

- Some refer to this as adding to the “us.” When you don’t personally care for an activity,

but participate in the activity willingly on behalf of the “us” (your relationship), you are contributing to your marital strength. What are some examples from your life that you can share with the group?

“Another strength of healthy couples is not letting individual interests interfere with couple experiences. For 95 percent of strong couples, leisure time together takes precedence over individual interests. This is not to say that healthy couples don’t ever have individual interests; 79 percent of them respect each other’s unique interests and find a balance between leisure time spent separately and together. But they work to ensure that individual time doesn’t come at the expense of the marriage” (*TSSM*, 188).

- How can you find a balance in pursuing individual interests and making sacrifices for the “us”?

C. Digging Deeper: As a group, review the Growing Together Exercise on pages 188–189 of *TSSM*. Complete the discussion as a group. Share as many ideas as you can for maximizing your fun factor.

- D.** Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 12 that was helpful; or if you're not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

- A.** What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?
- B.** Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 13 of *TSSM* and complete your "Before Your Meeting" discussion section.

11

REMARRIAGE FINANCES: YOURS, MINE, AND OURS?

—Covering chapter 13 of *TSSM*—

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

—Matthew 6:24

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapter 13 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the CPS discussion on page 206 of *TSSM*.

Throughout the Bible God has a great deal to say about money and the accumulation of possessions. He understands the temptation it presents, and He wants us to maintain a healthy perspective about its place in our lives. This lesson will guide your thinking and attitudes about money in your relationship.

DISCUSSION

- A. What do you think about the following statement?

Money is often cited as a key reason couples divorce. However, those of us who study marriage view it a little differently. Money doesn't cause problems per se, but when attitudes and values

about money clash, couples find they have many disagreements that divide them. Keeping God's perspective about money is the solution to such difficulties. When you surrender to God's values about money, you will find your relationship coming together in honor of Him.

B. Review and discuss the following. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. "If you sometimes feel as though financial issues dominate your life, you are not alone. It is estimated that we spend up to 80 percent of our waking hours earning money, spending money, or thinking about money. A survey conducted by American Express Financial Advisors revealed that 66 percent of Americans spend more time thinking about money and careers than they do about sex, health, or relationships" (*The Couple Checkup*, 79–80).

Read Hebrews 13:5 and discuss:

- How does God's promise never to leave us keep our lives free from the love of money?
 - Practically, we do have to think about earning money and spending money, but how can we find contentment with what we have?
 - What does Jesus mean when He says, "You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24)?
2. "Consumerism interferes with interpersonal relationships by replacing the normal common-sense desire for an adequate supply of life's necessities—community life, a stable family, and healthy relationships—with an ongoing and insatiable quest for things. We can assume it is this quest for things that has led to a substantial increase in consumer debt and bankruptcies. Many studies have found a link between financial problems and marital dissatisfaction and divorce. But even in marriages and families without debt or financial strain, using money as a basis of success and happiness is sure to disappoint" (*The Couple Checkup*, 83).

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10 and discuss:

- People are often fascinated with the luxurious lives of rich people. We envy what they have. What do we think money and the accumulation of material things will give us that we don't already have?
- Solomon says that those who love money or wealth will never have enough. Why not? What is meaningless about this pursuit?
- By comparing ourselves to those who have more, we rarely view ourselves as being a lover of wealth. What do your couple spending habits say about your attitude toward the accumulation of things?

3. "Spenders and savers are the classic money personalities. Not surprisingly, saving/spending problems are common among couples because individuals often have different personal preferences of spending and saving" (*TSSM*, 201).

Read 1 Timothy 6:6–10.

- Spenders and savers alike struggle with contentment. What insights does this passage give you regarding contentment and the role of money in your life?
- What kinds of temptations do people who want to get rich fall into?

4. There are four common attitudes toward money (see page 193 of *TSSM*).

- Money as status. A person with a status orientation toward money is interested in money as power—as a means of keeping ahead of peers.
- Money as security. A person with a security orientation is conservative in spending and focuses on saving.

- Money as enjoyment. A person with an enjoyment orientation gets satisfaction from spending, both on others and on himself or herself.
- Money as control. A person with a control orientation sees money as a way of maintaining control over her or his life and independence from a partner or other family members.

Read Luke 12:13–21.

- Which of the above attitudes describes the “rich fool”?
- God called him a fool. Why?
- What does it mean to be rich toward God in your marriage?

Read Luke 12:22–34.

- In verse 22 Jesus’ use of the word “therefore” indicates that being rich toward God means that we don’t have to worry about our life. Our provision is a matter of faith, not how much money we have. If you maintained this attitude about money in your marriage, what would change?
- When finances are stressed, why is it so hard to trust God to provide (see verse 28)?
- How would you know if you were seeking possessions over the kingdom of God?
- Jesus seems to be teaching us, then, that money is simply a tool, but it is in “God we trust.” Your stewardship of money over the past 60 days is a good testimony to your attitude toward money. Is it a tool or your treasure?

- How might you live differently if you worried less about money? What decisions would you handle differently in the future as a couple?

C. Digging Deeper: When remarriage money decisions are paired with pain—and the fear of being hurt again—persons tend to be distrusting, withholding, and controlling about money (see page 196 of *TSSM*). How would you advise someone who was acting this way, out of fear?

- There are different ways of managing “yours” and “mine” finances. A one-, two-, or three-pot system of money and asset management is an option for couples. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. How might you know if one partner was holding on to his pot out of fear instead of logistics?

D. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 13 that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Read chapter 15 (note, you are skipping chapter 14) of *TSSM* and complete your “Before Your Meeting” discussion section.

12

FINDING YOUR SPIRITUAL CORE

—Covering chapter 15 of *TSSM*—

High shared spirituality in stepfamily couples is able to predict with 76 percent accuracy whether they have strong, happy relationships or fragile, unhappy ones. Without question, shared spirituality is a significant contributor to overall marital satisfaction.

—*The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 225

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A. Read chapter 15 of *TSSM*.
- B. Complete the CPS discussion on page 232 of *TSSM*.

DISCUSSION

- A. Discuss this statement:

Marriage is one of God's tools for shaping us into the image of his Son. Ultimately, shared spirituality is not about enhancing the couple's relationship (it does that, too) but about refining us as individuals to be more like Christ.

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 15. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

“Attending church on a regular basis is but one aspect of shared spirituality. Others include praying together, making joint decisions together based on clearly articulated values, and setting behavioral limits and standards for children so as to teach spiritual disciplines. Happy couples know that shared spirituality does not mean problem-free living, as if faith in God is a self-serving path to happiness and personal fulfillment. Rather, vibrant, intimate couples realize that shared spirituality provides direction for life and orients them to that which really matters. It unites them in vision and purpose” (*TSSM*, 226–227).

- How does sharing spiritual values and activities facilitate a closer relationship?

- When spiritual values are not shared, couples find themselves moving in different directions with their decisions, parenting, and choices. In stepfamilies this is even more complicated because children tend to follow the values of their parent (and distance from the stepparent). What would you advise a couple to do who has differing values in this area?

2. Consider this quote:

"Spiritual submission to God helps relationships by teaching partners to consider the needs of others above themselves. Out of reverence for their God, they seek to serve each other. . . . A marriage centered on two people who humble themselves and seek to bring blessing to the other also results in a competition, but it is a competition of kindness" (*TSSM*, 228).

- In what way does God's love for you teach you how to love your partner?

- What would a “competition of kindness” feel like?

3. Donald Harvey suggests that couples need the following prerequisites to develop shared spirituality (see page 228 of *TSSM*). As a group, discuss each prerequisite and explore how you can make it part of your marriage.

- Couples need a relatively stable marriage from which to explore the deeper dimensions of spirituality. If they do not trust each other and aren’t willing to confront the deepest parts of themselves with the other, they will avoid spiritual conversation.

- Couples must desire to share their spirituality with their partner. Not everyone wants to be vulnerable with his temptations, struggles, and fears. Not everyone wants to be exposed at this level.

4. Discuss these suggestions for becoming soul mates and how you might put them into practice.

- Be continuously curious about your partner’s spiritual beliefs, mood, and prayers.
- Share the deepest parts of your spiritual journey with your partner. Don’t just talk to God, talk to your partner about your conversations with God.
- Serve together. Find ways of giving back, together.
- Make decisions by first discussing the spiritual value behind the dilemma.
- Touch or hold hands during worship. This connects you to each other while connecting to God.

C. Digging Deeper: Couples who engage in corporate worship together on a regular basis sometimes report a struggle in praying privately together.

- What makes praying together as a couple difficult?
- If you pray together, even occasionally, share how it is initiated and who prays.
- If you do not pray together on a regular basis, challenge yourself to begin doing so. What needs to change for you to accomplish this goal?

D. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 15 that was helpful; or if you're not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

FOR NEXT WEEK

Chapter 14 on sexuality is optional. Discuss as a group whether you want to explore this material together or as individual couples. If you decide to meet as a group, read chapter 14 of *TSSM* and complete your "Before Your Meeting" discussion section.

13

THE SEX CONNECTION

(Optional for Group Discussion)

—Covering chapter 14 of *TSSM*—

[Sex] is about connecting the deepest parts of ourselves to another person, resulting in a spiritual oneness that is unlike any other experience on earth. When a couple's sexual experience reflects this affirming and giving spirit, a powerful connection can result.

– *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, 209

BEFORE YOUR MEETING

- A.** Read chapter 14 of *TSSM*.
- B.** Complete the CPS discussion on page 222 of *TSSM*.
- C.** Review and talk through the ten suggestions for enhancing your sexual intimacy (see pages 219–221 of *TSSM*).

DISCUSSION

- A.** Discuss this quote:

“A good sexual relationship goes hand in hand with a good emotional relationship between partners. Couples who feel safe and secure with each other in most aspects of their relationship

have the best physical relationship. For them, sexuality flows from emotional intimacy based on honest communication, trust in each other, a strong friendship, and passionate love. On the other hand, a marriage that is characterized by a lack of trust or that is plagued with destructive conflict is probably not sexually satisfying over time for one or both partners. For many couples, the first step to improving their sexual relationship is to improve the quality of their relationship outside the bedroom" (*TSSM*, 211).

B. Review and discuss the following key points from chapter 14. Make application to your relationship where appropriate.

1. Consider this quote:

"One-fourth (24 percent) of all couples in our study reported having a difficult time talking openly with their partner about sexual expectations, and 16 percent were uncomfortable talking about sexual issues" (*TSSM*, 212).

- What makes talking openly about sexual matters difficult?
- What parameters could couples put on their conversations to make it safer (e.g., giving permission to have different opinions or agreeing not to share each other's comments with anyone else)?

2. Review the case study of Luisa and Ramon (see pages 213–218 of *TSSM*).

- What assumptions did they make that added to their difficulties?
- How did previous hurts (ghosts from the past) play a role?
- How did poor communication contribute to the problem?
- What shifts in their thinking and understanding helped them move toward one another and resolve the issues?

3. Consider this quote:

“Unhappy couples were somewhat more likely than average couples [(19% of all 50,575 couples)] and significantly more likely than happy couples to report feeling concerns about previous sexual experiences. What seems to be in question is how previous experiences compare to the current couple’s sexual relationship or how they might be limiting their sexual fulfillment” (*TSSM*, 218).

- Review the Remarriage Sex: Tips for Not Getting Caught in the Past chart (see page 217 of *TSSM*).
- Which one do you think pertains to most remarried couples? Why?

C. Digging Deeper:

As a group, review the Enhancing Your Sexual Intimacy suggestions (see pages 219–221 of *TSSM*). Which suggestion do you think couples could benefit from most?

D. Open Discussion: Share a principle or insight you learned from chapter 14 that was helpful; or if you’re not sure you understand something, pose a question to the group for discussion.

PRAYER TIME

A. What would you like others to pray for on your behalf this week?

B. Pray as a group about the key relationship principles you discussed and how you can implement them in your relationship.

GROUP CLOSE

Take some time to celebrate what you have learned throughout this study. We encourage you to continue meeting with your group to study additional biblically based materials.

WELCOME GROUP LEADERS!

We have two goals for this series: providing marriage education and giving couples a supportive community of faith in which to apply the educational principles learned. *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* book and this discussion guide will provide education; your role is to facilitate a supportive community of faith.

Central to leading effective groups is facilitating a safe environment where couples can interact with each other, process the content they are learning, and find support as they strive to apply the principles to their life. In order to facilitate that safe environment, spend a little time in your first few sessions discussing these group guidelines. Asking everyone to agree or “covenant” with one another to abide by the guidelines creates a shared expectation of how group members will interact. This deepens trust and, therefore, the level of support experienced.

GROUP GUIDELINES

- **Confidentiality** – We agree that what is said here stays here. We honor one another’s privacy and will not share stories or details heard in the group meeting with people who are not in attendance.
- **Honor** – We agree not to share intimate details without first asking our partner whether it is okay to share with the group. If you’re not sure it’s okay to share, then it probably isn’t. Wait and ask your partner outside of the group.
- **Advice** – We agree not to offer unsolicited advice to one another. If after telling about a frustration, someone receives advice, he might feel judged and pressured to abide by the advice. This creates a sharing barrier for him and others in the future. Agree only to give advice if someone first asks for the group’s input.
- **Respect** – We agree to show common courtesy to one another. Examples include showing up on time, allowing everyone to talk (not dominating the group discussion time), not interrupting, and not engaging in side conversations during the group discussion. Even making a commitment to regular attendance shows respect to others who are counting on us to be there. Call if you cannot attend a session.
- **Acceptance and Encouragement** – We agree to build one another up in the Lord. We will share our faith, love, and support and strive to walk alongside one another in mutual encouragement. If we disagree, we will continue to love in spite of our differences.

EFFECTIVE GROUP LEADERSHIP

Effective group leadership is rooted in the art of asking good questions. Your role is not an instructor who answers everyone's questions. Your role is a facilitator who asks questions and allows the group to process answers based on the book and study guide.

We suggest you schedule 1½ hours for your group meetings. Bible classes with less time will likely need to omit some questions. Also, if your group has plenty of enthusiastic dialogue you may decide to give two meetings for every session. Feel free to adapt your schedule to meet the needs of your group.

Finally, empower your group. Let your group make decisions that affect the group. For example, initially most people only want to commit to attending for thirteen weeks. But at the end of that time, because bonds have developed among group members, participants may want to continue meeting. You can study the remaining portions of *TSSM* (chapters 4 and 16) or use another group study. If the group reaches this type of consensus, empower them to continue to meet.

Purchase the Discussion Guide, Purchase the Book

Purchase copies of this study guide for your group. Copies of *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage* (*TSSM*) are also required for each couple in the study.

Encourage the Online Couple Checkup

Taking the online Couple Checkup at SmartStepfamilies.com is a must for this study. A free voucher code for an individual profile is included with each copy of *TSSM* (partners can then upgrade to a full couple profile at a discount). If a couple does not have a copy of the book, they will have to pay the full Checkup price. You will find that couples appreciate the “x-ray” of their relationship and the direction it provides. Three reactions are common:

1. Couples are encouraged. Many couples feel affirmed after taking the profile. It identifies their strengths, confirms their good feelings, and adds confidence.
2. Couples are educated. Many couples will be surprised by something in their report. They may have thought an aspect of their relationship was healthy only to discover that it really isn't. This provides direction for how they can intentionally improve their relationship. If you take time in your group to process what couples learned about themselves, couples will learn from one another.
3. Couples receive early detection. Like an exam that identifies a small lump that needs medical attention, some couples will realize after receiving their results that they need personal help.

They may talk to you about finding a counselor, pastor, or mentor who can help them with their relationship.

Finally, we recommend that you take the Couple Checkup first so you can encourage others to take it. Simply go to SmartStepfamilies.com to get started.

Encourage Couple Discussions Prior to Group Meetings

Each session invites couples to have some individual discussion time before attending group meetings. This will be difficult for some couples who are not used to this level of dialogue. Others will just forget to make time. Please encourage couples to spend 10–15 minutes each week discussing the “Before Your Meeting” questions. A tremendous amount of growth can be gained from this small investment of time, plus couples will be more prepared for group discussion time.

Leader Preparation Steps

To adequately prepare yourself to lead group sessions, follow these suggested steps:

1. Review the chapter and session outline before each meeting. Plan on spending 7–10 minutes welcoming everyone, sharing announcements, praying for your time together, and working through these questions.
2. Review the discussion questions in order. Feel free to add your own questions based on your own insights or to target the needs of your group members, but questions are laid out in this fashion to facilitate deeper sharing over time. Plan for your discussion time to vary with each session.
3. Pray over your time together and pray for each other.

Additional Thoughts

- Have someone prepare refreshments for group members to enjoy during the meeting. Simple finger foods or a dessert generally works best.
- Remind participants to bring this study guide and their copy of *TSSM* each week.
- Within the first two meetings try to connect with group members by phone to thank them for attending and to make sure they feel comfortable in the group.
- Finally, many groups discover that as they approach the last session they don’t want to stop meeting together. Spend a few minutes in session 9 exploring who in the group would like to continue meeting after the study concludes. If group members want to meet for more sessions, empower them to do so.

ABOUT THE ONLINE COUPLE CHECKUP

Introduction

This online tool is designed to be flexible, affordable, convenient, and relevant for couples at every stage of their relationship.

The online Couple Checkup will automatically customize itself to meet the stage (dating, engaged, or married) and structure (cohabiting, children, stepfamilies, older couples) of each couple. This program is designed to

- help couples celebrate their strengths and identify their growth areas;
- encourage couples to dialogue about their relationship in meaningful and productive ways;
- increase practical relationship skills in communication, conflict resolution, closeness, flexibility, and financial management; and
- increase their understanding of multiple relationship issues, including personality issues, affection and sex, spiritual beliefs, roles, expectations and family of origin issues.

The process starts with each individual taking the online assessment. After both partners have completed the inventory, they can immediately print their Couple Checkup Report and an extensive discussion guide (for personal use). These documents are delivered as PDF files, which can be opened and viewed with a computer, saved, printed, or e-mailed by the couple. Couples are also given the option to forward a copy of their results to another individual, such as a group leader, pastor, mentor, or counselor.

Group leaders can also access a summary report for the couples predefined as part of their group. Groups can range from very small (five to six couples) to entire congregations or large events. For more information regarding church-wide events visit CoupleCheckupConference.com.

PREPARE/ENRICH is the Foundation for the Couple Checkup

Over 3 million couples have taken the popular and highly effective PREPARE/ENRICH program nationally. The goal of the program is to build stronger marriages. It has been used by over 80,000 counselors and clergy with premarital and married couples. National studies have demonstrated that the program is highly effective in helping couples develop their strengths and overcome their ongoing issues.

This Couple Checkup is based on the PREPARE/ENRICH Program. The major difference is that the Couple Checkup is shorter, and the report goes directly back to the couple, rather than to a professional counselor or pastor. As such, it provides couples with a wealth of useful information about how to improve their relationship.