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Special Strategies for Divorced and Blended Families

*Courage is not defined by those who fought and did not fall,
but by those who fought, fell and rose again.*

— UNKNOWN

For my readers who are divorced, living as a single parent, or in a blended family: I recognize that there are a lot of you out there who need a lot of answers, and you need them now. How do I play both mother and father? How much do I push and require from my child during the divorce transition? What role do I play with my stepchildren? And many more questions. The divorce rate in the United States is estimated by some statisticians to be close to 50 percent. What this means is that millions of parents in America and their children are wrestling with significant problems and needs.

Before I address the challenges your children will face if one of their biological parents is outside the home—or if you’ve introduced a new spouse into the family unit—I want to caution you that the majority of hurdles faced by parents in a nontraditional structure are the same as those faced by parents in a traditional structure. Kids are kids, and you shouldn’t assume that because you’re soloing the parenting process or parenting with a partner who’s just come onboard, the tools of parenting and family life are somehow different. That said, you clearly have some extra challenges to contend with, and extra challenges require extra tools.

That’s what this chapter is all about. I’m going to tell you what I believe is the truth about what you can and must do to create a phenomenal family, even if yours is a divorced family or a blended one. I’m going to give you a separate list of action items here because your situation expressly calls for it. Your job will be to jump into this chapter with a willingness to give it your full attention and focus consciously on the tasks

presented. But you can't stop here. The actions I'll give you must ultimately fit into a bigger plan, a plan that works for all families, divorced, blended, or with both biological parents in the home. That plan is what you will find on every single page of this book. You must commit to folding into your family life all the tools, actions, and strategies I'm going to give you as we progress through this book. Immerse yourself in this work with a commitment of both heart and soul, and you too will emerge a winner.

Even before a divorce, children have internalized parental conflict and may already be exhibiting behavior problems. So let's talk about the conditions you're likely to find in a home touched by divorce or separation. If you're a single or a blended family parent, your child's life has been shaken to the core. While children respond to these kinds of events differently, watching a divorce unfold is likely to be traumatizing. Your son or daughter may experience great fear regarding the future. They may worry that the parent who's been awarded primary custody may "abandon" them as well. They may react with a predictable clinginess or with anger-based aggression. You must understand that if your child's mother or father has in their view been ripped from the home, the child may blame *you* for that departure. His anger will be very real, even if it's nothing more than an outward expression of hurt, fear, or frustration. Anger is often a way of coping with vulnerability. It can be a protective mechanism because if you're on the attack, getting rejected is no longer an issue. Unconsciously, the child's attitude becomes "get them before they get me." You must not personalize these reactions, but instead look past the surface and compassionately see what lies beneath.

Whatever your child's outward reaction, you can bet that the departure of a parent and/or the addition of a stepparent to the family environment will provoke a major mental and emotional response. Some children will mask it; others will not. Either way, it is there. There is now and will continue to be a reaction, and your job is to manage that reaction in as constructive and as rehabilitative a way as possible.

Both research and my own clinical experience have taught me that your child's psychological needs are greatly increased during and after a divorce. The trauma of a fractured family leaves a residue well beyond the shorter term. That residual reaction can be emotional, logistical or both. For example, when a marriage unravels, financial problems are often not far behind. Money problems can create grinding hardships. There's often an unexpected, unsettling inequity between the standard of living for a

divorced husband and that of his wife, a contrast that can be very confusing to a child. Statistically, more women than men are named the custodial parent, and usually it's the women who suffer the most significant drop in income. After a divorce approximately half of all children do not see their fathers. And here's what's sad to me: Children live in the middle of this economic and emotional roller coaster and experience guilt and fear in addition to the confusion.

What's more, if you're a single parent who fought hard for primary custody, you may now be faced with supervising and disciplining your children largely on your own. And it's tough. There's a natural tendency to let the discipline slide. All too frequently, you're stretched too thin and your child suffers.

Remarriage also brings with it an explosion of stress-inducing newness, with new stepbrothers and stepsisters, new rules, new demands and new religious practices. The loss of a role model can be particularly devastating, as children faced with accelerating daily challenges and choices find that a custodial parent's compass is not always reliable. (This is a crucial topic that we will discuss in depth in Chapter 13.)

Each of these demands and countless others too numerous to mention are part of the reality that is divorce in today's world. Each requires a specific coping strategy. What remains constant, however, are the needs that these demands and stressors accentuate. Whatever your particular challenges may be, they all boil down to disruption for your child and can blunt their very important needs. These challenges could not come at a worse time for you, since you are in emotionally rough waters yourself. You'll feel overwhelmed at times trying to deal with them. Nonetheless, you *must* dial into the needs of your child. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, up to half of all children exhibit a symptomatic response during the first year after a divorce. These symptoms include irritability, increased crying, fearfulness, decreased school performance, substance abuse, depression and aggressive and delinquent behavior. If you are consciously focused on and sensitive to your child's needs during this difficult period, you can and will do a better job of meeting them.

Their most profound needs (which may last for an extended period of time, especially if ignored or mishandled) will include:

Acceptance. This will be your children's greatest need because their self-concept is very likely in a fragile and formative stage, especially if they are at a young age. They will urgently try to gain approval and

“membership,” since their sense of belongingness to your family has been shattered.

Assurance of safety. You'll need to go beyond normal efforts to assure your children that though their family has fragmented, the protection it always provided remains solid. They must experience that their cocoon in life is intact and that you are on patrol. Actions speak louder than words, so the key will be maintaining a normal pace, boundaries and routines in your home, preserving the same involvement in school affairs, and giving your child the same access to interactions with friends.

Freedom from guilt or blame for the divorce. Children often shoulder the blame for the dissolution of marriage. This feeling arises from the many accusations that erupt through the divorce and its proceedings and stems from the fact that children are the central glue that hold families together. Children personalize their part in the divorce, because they know they misbehaved, and they feel that they're somehow being punished for it by the breakup of their parents. Remember that when children, alone or among their peers, experience pain, they feel singled out. And in their minds, the line between pain and punishment blurs. Be conscious of this and assure your children they're blameless.

Need for structure. With the loss of a family leader from the home (either the mother or the father), your children will check and test for structure. Give it to them in spades. This is the worst time to break patterns, even to indulge. Enforce discipline consistently, and with the right currency for good behavior (you'll learn exactly how to do this in Chapter 10). Now more than ever, your children need sameness in all aspects of their young lives. They need to see that the world keeps spinning around, and they're still an integral part of what's going on.

Need for a stable parent who has the strength to conduct business. Whether or not you feel brave and strong, you have to appear to be the best for your children. They're worried about you and about your partner, especially if there's an apparent crisis. They know you better than you know yourself, brave front or not, so they'll pick up on the heavy emotional drain you've experienced. Still, you should do every-

thing possible to assure them of your strength—your capacity to take care of business. In doing so, you make it possible for them to relax again. So show yourself to be a person of strength and resilience.

Need to let kids be kids. Your children should not be given the job of healing your pain. Too often, children serve either as armor or as saviors for parents in crisis. Think about it: Don't children have a tough enough time in this world without being given the job of fixing your life? That said, there are two primary rules you must follow, especially in crisis and during times of instability in your family.

1. Do not burden your children with situations they cannot control. No one, least of all a child, should bear such a responsibility. It will promote feelings of helplessness and insecurity, causing them to question their own strengths and abilities.
2. Do not ask your children to deal with adult issues. Children are not equipped to understand adult problems. Their focus should be on navigating the various child development stages they go through.

Obviously, your overall goal should be to meet all of these needs and to minimize the price your child has to pay for you and your ex being unable to sustain your relationship. I say that because it's the truth, and not because I want to induce guilt. I'm not being judgmental. Only you know whether or not breaking up was the best thing for you and your children. Either way, it is what it is. The divorce has happened, and you, your ex, and your child or children are going to have to make the best of it.

I'm a strong believer that any child would rather be *from* a broken home than *live in* one. Research tells us that quite obviously, children do better in a well-adjusted two-parent home than in a single-parent home. However, that same research tells us that children do better in a well-adjusted single-parent home than in a hostile, emotionally barren, or chaotic two-parent home. If children do better when they're exposed to both parents and when there's a healthy relationship among everyone involved, then post-divorce, your goal further becomes to create that situation, regardless of the geography of the living arrangements. Even though you and your ex have terminated your romantic and committed relation-

ship and taken up separate residences, you can still commit to having a mutually supportive relationship as co-parents of your children. If the two of you are willing to prioritize your children's interests, it will be easy to focus on what you need to do to minimize divorce-related trauma.

What you and your former spouse must resolve to do is form an alliance recognizing that you have not ended your relationship but instead changed it from an intimate, emotional, and romantic day-to-day affiliation to a relationship that's held together by common goals for your children. Joining with your ex, unselfishly putting hurt feelings aside and leaving behind the pain of betrayal and a dysfunctional history are tremendous gifts to your children.

To be cold, sabotaging, hurtful, or exclusionary with your former spouse is, in some sense, to do the same to your children. If you haven't ever thought about it that way, then let me tell you why you should: Children have a powerful genetic, emotional, and historical bond with *both* of their parents, and they need a healthy relationship with both of them. If you, by pursuing your own agenda of seeking payback for hurt feelings, resentment, and anger, alienate your child from your ex-spouse, you're attacking and hurting your child's ability to become well-adjusted. If your child seems to side with you, you may tell yourself you're winning, but I can assure you, you're not. If you undermine your ex, I promise you that your children will ultimately turn on you and resent you for it. It's sweet poison. It may feel good today to know your children are loyal to you, love you more and would rather be with you than with your ex, but in the long run, your children will recognize that what you did was selfish and hurtful to them. That's a fact you can't and won't escape. So, even if you don't work to create a healthy relationship between you and your ex and between your ex and your children, because it's the right thing to do, do it for selfish reasons. You'll pay a high price with your children, if you don't.

Is it possible there are circumstances such as mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, or other self-destructive lifestyles that preclude a healthy parent from supporting the relationship between their ex and their children? Absolutely. If that's the case, you shouldn't lie about the realities, and you certainly shouldn't subject your child to that kind of influence. But make sure your assessment of your ex is objective and not colored by anger, and make sure that you're not using these issues to gain a selfish advantage with your children. If it's less damning to characterize your ex's issues as illness, then do so. Preserve the relationship for their future in the hope that your ex comes around to better behavior.

Although it probably sounds illogical, the best way to know you're "ready" to get a divorce and therefore ready to form a new co-parent relationship is when you can walk out the door with no anger, resentment, bitterness, or unfinished emotional business. You're probably thinking, "If it's possible to feel such acceptance about the relationship, why break up?" Let me clarify: The time to get a divorce is when you can look at yourself in the mirror and honestly say that you've done everything possible to rehabilitate and save your marriage. You should call it quits only when you know in your heart that you've turned over every stone, investigated every potential avenue of rehabilitation, and still come up short. If you still harbor powerful and strong ill feelings, you still have work to do. I bring this up not to coax you into a guilt-driven effort to reconcile with your ex, but rather to make it clear that you must get past hurt feelings so you can have a cooperative working relationship with your child's other parent. If you were not in this state of mind when the marriage ended, commit to getting there now. Your child shouldn't pick up the tab for his parents' inability to get along.

You have a high calling here, and that calling is to nurture and prepare your children for life, despite your ill-fated union. You must put your own emotional agenda to rest. If doing so requires professional help, then get it. Even if you are financially strapped, there are resources in your community and at your church or house of worship that I know will step up and help a parent in need. Whatever it takes to create a healthier working relationship with your child's other parent, then you must do it.

Understand that post-divorce parenting is fraught with danger, danger that you will inadvertently do damage on top of what the divorce has already done. To help you recognize mistakes you may be making and to avoid mistakes you're prone to make, I want to list some of the biggest and most frequent mistakes those in your situation typically make:

- Sabotaging your child's relationship with the other parent.
- Using your child as a pawn to "get back at" or hurt your ex.
- Using your child to gain information or to manipulate and influence your ex.
- Transferring hurt feelings and frustrations toward your ex onto your child. (You may be particularly prone to this if your child bears physical or behavioral resemblances to your ex.)

- Forcing your child to choose a side when there's a conflict in scheduling or another planning challenge.
- Turning family events attended by both divorced parents into pressure cookers. Events that call for sensitivity include birthdays, holidays, school programs, extracurricular activities, and performances.
- Depending too much on your children for companionship and support because you're hurt and lonely and have adopted a siege mentality: "It's us against the world." This isn't a healthy position for either you or your child to adopt.
- Treating your child like an adult because you're lonely or just want help. It is inappropriate to give your child an adult job.
- Becoming so emotionally needy that your child develops feelings of guilt if he or she spends time or even wants to spend time with your ex, friends, grandparents or others.
- Converting guilt over the divorce into overindulgence when it comes to satisfying your child's material desires.

Besides making a commitment to avoid these mistakes, you should affirmatively commit to a family and parenting strategy that will help your child flourish in a divorced home. Key components of such a strategy include:

- Commit to learn, adopt and apply all the principles set forth in *Family First*. The philosophies, tools and strategies described in this book are critical to having a healthy, happy family and raising successful, authentic children, whether or not both parents live in the home.
- Sit down with your ex and make an affirmative plan that sets aside any differences you may have and focuses instead on meeting the needs of your children. If you must agree to disagree about what did or didn't happen in your marriage, put the focus on what *needs* to happen *now* to make sure your children don't have to pay the price for your marital misfire.
- Agree with your ex that you absolutely won't disparage each other to your children. Further, forbid your children to speak disrespectfully about the other parent, even though it may be music to your ears.
- Negotiate and agree on how you can best handle such things as handing off the children for visitation, holidays, or events. Although the

court probably set parameters for such things in terms of timing, in the interest of your children's peace and security, it's up to you to act maturely and without selfishness.

- Agree on boundaries and behavioral guidelines for raising your children so that there's consistency in their lives, regardless of which parent they're with at any given time. This should include such things as bedtime, television and computer access, socializing and other daily behavioral situations and circumstances.

- With regard to extended family members, negotiate and agree on the role they'll play and the access they'll be granted while your child is in each other's charge. I strongly believe that extended family plays a very important role in the lives of children, and particularly, that the role of both sets of grandparents should be active and free-flowing, so long as the grandparents acknowledge and agree to the same standards the divorced couple has agreed on. Your parents disparaging your ex to your children is as unacceptable as you disparaging your ex to your children.

- Communicate actively with your ex about all aspects of your child's development. Both parents should know about any and all positive or negative events in the child's developmental journey. If there are problems at school or with friends or even wonderful achievements, both parents should be fully up to speed so consistent responses can be given. If need be do so in writing or via e-mail, but do it.

- Recognize that children are prone to testing a situation and manipulating boundaries and guidelines, especially if there's a chance to get something they may not ordinarily be able to obtain. It's important that you and your ex compare notes before jumping to conclusions or condemning one another about what may have happened.

- Although it may be emotionally painful, make sure that you and your ex keep each other informed about changes in your life circumstances so that the child is never, ever the primary source of information. If you're dating someone, changing jobs or contemplating a move, be mature enough to inform your ex so he or she doesn't hear it from the child, who may then have to suffer the reaction.

- Commit to conducting yourself with emotional integrity. If you and your ex have agreed to a plan, stick to it. Say what you mean; mean what you say. Absolutely do not secretly curry favor with your child by giving more or allowing more than the other parent. Doing so is nothing less than passive-aggressive sabotage, and it will ultimately hurt your child.

Embracing these dos and don'ts will help considerably to normalize your children's lives. The key is for you and your ex to take the high road and truly make sacrifices for your children. It isn't only self-indulgent, but self-destructive for you to thrust your children in the middle of emotional cross fire. What's more, they simply don't want to hear it. I've talked to so many children in divorced homes who tell me they are so sick to death of listening to their parents complain and whine about each other that they could just scream. So don't be a tedious, immature bore. You wanted children, and now you have them. The fact that your relationship didn't work out is unfortunate, but it's not their fault.

If your spouse simply won't get in the game and adhere to the guidelines I've set forth, you must do so anyway. The only person you control is you. Let me appeal to your greed by saying that, if you do take the high road, in the long run your children will admire you for it. The day will come when they'll look back and say: "My mother [or father] behaved with such class, dignity and respect that I can see how much he or she loved me and wanted peace and tranquillity in my life. I'm so grateful for that gift. I only wish my other parent had been so selfless."

Survey Fact:
The top three problems for blended families are discipline, resolving conflict and division of responsibility.

If in addition to divorcing, you've also made the decision to remarry, you have a whole new set of challenges before you. In addition to the challenges of traditional and divorced families, you must follow the guidelines and actions I've just presented or will be presenting, and you must also have a strategy in place for folding a new person into the preexisting family unit. Whether or not your new spouse will be bringing children into the relationship, the family will have at least one new member, and that will create challenges for you, especially if you're the one being brought into a preexisting family. Definitely include your children in the wedding ceremony. If they have a special role and you can make it a positive experience, you will advance a lot closer to a harmonious home.

It's important to recognize from the outset of a second marriage that if one or both of you have children, whether or not you're the custodial parent with whom the children primarily reside, there are strong emotions associated with those relationships. In addition to the strong ties

that exist between any biologically connected parent and child there may be additional emotional energy created by the parent and child's having been in the same "divorce foxhole" prior to the new marriage. This increased emotion will very likely take the form of protectiveness on the part of the parent. That parent may be thinking that the child has already been hurt, and the parent will be on edge about how the child is treated in the new family setup. For the new spouse, the experience can be one of walking on eggshells, trying not to make a parenting move that is regarded as out-of-bounds or that creates unfortunate echoes of the past. These are things that you and your new spouse should discuss *before* your marriage takes place, but of course it's never too late.

I'm going to discuss what I believe are the most important aspects of having a stepparent in a relationship with your children, and of being the stepparent that has to form a workable relationship with someone else's children. Quite frankly, much of the challenge here is the same as the challenge that would be facing any couple getting ready to have a child. I would tell any couple that's about to have a baby that they should sit down and discuss, and where necessary negotiate, a plan that includes such topics as:

- The role each parent would play in parenting and facilitating the development of the child.
- The division of labor concerning the child, such as feeding, bathing, supervising, doctor visits, homework, discipline, and so forth.
- Expectations as to how much space there will be in the relationship for the couple to be a couple, occasionally doing things without the child.
- What kind of access grandparents and other extended family members would have.
- Long-term goals and priorities concerning education and other developmental opportunities.
- Financial planning and priorities.

These global topics should certainly be discussed within families that have or are about to be merged, or if a stepparent is about to be added. Whether you're about to embark on this journey or are already well down the road, I recommend working through the above checklist early and

often to ensure everyone's compasses are aligned. It's particularly important that I cover here the role of the stepparent and how to make that role as positive as possible.

First, let's talk about how the stepparent should relate to the children. We've all heard about such stereotypes as the wicked stepmother and such phenomena as the Oedipus complex, where children's competition for their parents' love, commitment and loyalty leads to all manner of pain and discontent. We've all seen the grade B movies where the put-upon child screams the seemingly obligatory line "You're not my mother!" There's no doubt that being a stepparent is one of the most difficult roles any adult will ever assume. So much pain can be avoided if you can agree on some very basic definitions of that role, and be alert to sensitivities associated with it.

To handle this situation with the utmost efficiency, both the biological parent and the stepparent should begin with an open and candid discussion about the fears and expectations regarding the relationship with the children. Each should know what the other expects concerning the stepparent's involvement in guiding, supervising and disciplining the children. If both partners are in the stepparent as well as biological parent role, because both have primary or even partial custody of their children, expectations of each other may differ. In other words, you may trust yourself to discipline his children, but not him to discipline yours. That's okay. What's important is that you each have an understanding and hopefully a negotiated agreement about how the stepparent role will be defined. Once you understand what each other's expectations are, you have a place to start shaping what the stepparent role will be. I always think it's important to first identify what you can agree on and thereby narrow your differences. How you ultimately define the stepparent role will, of course, be up to you. The following are my recommendations based on what I've seen work, what I've seen fail and how I think it's best to set up and define the stepparent role:

1. It's my strong belief that unless you as the stepparent are added to the family when the children are very young, it will most likely be very difficult for you to discipline your spouse's children. Every situation is different, but in most situations, disciplining your nonbiological children is fraught with danger, since it's likely to create resentment on the part of your spouse. Again, this isn't always the case, and if that's not the circum-

stance in your family, that's great, because it can give the biological parent an additional resource for handling discipline issues. While I don't believe it's very likely a workable situation for a stepparent to be a direct disciplinarian, it's extremely important that the stepparent be an active supporter of the biological parent's disciplinary efforts. The stepparent can help with enforcement and with monitoring for compliance, even if it's not their role to initiate the discipline. Both biological parents and stepparents should discuss the rules of the house and negotiate an agreement for what standards the children will be held to. This element of family life should be subject to the same negotiation and joint ownership as any other family situation.

2. The stepparent, although not actively initiating direct discipline, should certainly work to maintain the normal boundaries that exist between an adult and a child. Although it may be the biological parent who delivers an initial consequence for misbehavior, it's important that the stepparent be active in support of that decision, and care should be taken that proper respect and acknowledgment of the stepparent be given. In other words, a stepfather is not simply one's mother's husband. He is in fact an adult and an authority figure in the home.

3. In relating to all the children, the stepparent should seek to define his or her relationship as that of an ally and supporter. Whether the stepparent is the same or opposite-sexed parent, their presence can play an important balancing role in terms of modeling and information-giving about life from the male or female point of view. The role of ally and supporter is in no way to be construed as an attempt to replace the biological parent.

4. It's important that the stepparent not have unrealistic expectations about their level of closeness or intimacy with the stepchildren. Relationships are built, and it takes time and shared experiences to create a meaningful one. The stepparent should also be aware that the child may be experiencing a fair amount of emotional confusion—and may in fact feel guilty that they're betraying their biological mother or father by having a close and caring relationship with their stepmother or -father. Great care and patience should be taken to allow the child an opportunity to work through those feelings.

5. The stepmother or -father should actively support the child's relationship with the biological mother or father no longer in the home. If you are in the role of stepfather, you should make it a priority to nurture a relationship between you and the biological father and to find every possible way you can to support a relationship between him and his children. By taking the high road of facilitation, you'll find it easier to overcome feelings of resentment both on the part of the biological father *and* the children he no longer has daily access to. This may require some real internal commitment on your part, because supporting your stepchildren's relationship with their biological but absent parent may seem tantamount to also supporting that parent's relationship with your spouse. Don't let jealousy or envy of the bond they share with their children or the working relationship and history with your current mate cause you to be less than supportive of that relationship.

6. If you're the stepparent in a truly blended family, where both you and your spouse have children being merged into a "yours, mine and ours" scenario, you must take great care not to be perceived as playing favorites through a double standard in which your children enjoy a better standard of treatment than your stepchildren. The truth is, however unpopular or politically incorrect it may be to say, you'll very likely have decidedly stronger positive emotional feelings for your biological children than for your stepchildren, at least in the beginning. You'll need to cloak this difference in emotional intensity. As time goes on and you share life experiences with your stepchildren, there will be a leveling of emotions toward all of the children. In the meantime, you should be hypersensitive to the need to deal with each in a like fashion. It can be very helpful in the early stages to actually quantify and balance the time, activities and money spent on biological and nonbiological children.

7. If you as the biological parent are having frustrations with the stepparent and what they're doing in relation to your children, I encourage you at a very early point to stop complaining and start specifically asking for what you want and need. If, for example, you feel they're spending more time playing games with *their* children, ask them specifically, for example, to play three board games per week with *your* child. If he or she took his or her biological children to a fun fast-food restaurant—perhaps innocently so because he just happened to be passing by one after picking the

kids up from the Y—he may not consciously realize that your biological child was left out. Specifically ask for what you specifically want.

In summary, let me say it's true that it's difficult to see things through someone else's eyes if you haven't walked in their shoes. Whether you're the stepparent or it's your spouse who's in that role, talk frequently about how it's going and what the experience is from the other's point of view. If both of you have good intentions and a loving heart, this can be worked out. A biological parent can be given what he needs to protect his children. A stepparent can be given the time she requires to travel the relation-building learning curve. The key is to remember that the children are passengers on this train. They didn't get an opportunity to choose whether they wanted a new family member, so great care and patience should be taken to help them adapt to the situation.

As you go forward through *Family First*, remember that all of the philosophies, evaluations and tools apply to your situation as a single or blended-family parent. You have the same challenges before you that every other parent must deal with to create a phenomenal family. I've addressed some of the specific challenges you face by being in this particular situation. I do not presume to suggest that I have covered the whole gamut of challenges you are facing or will face. Hopefully you'll find and embrace my additional recommendations as you move forward through the rest of the book.

