

FamilyLife Blended®

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Episode 42: Helping Military Families Be Mission Ready

Guests: Todd Gangl
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Todd: There's times to this day that Tammy knows she can look me in the eyes and say, "You're having a hard time." I'm having a hard time talking about it. [With Emotion]

When you lose friends and that reality comes home, then you just don't come home the same person you left. All that blending and all the relationship development that you did before you left was with this other person that you *can* no longer be.

Ron: From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network, this is *FamilyLife Blended*. I'm Ron Deal.

This podcast brings together timeless wisdom and practical help and hope to blended families and those who love them.

Do you know that military personnel marry, divorce and remarry at a younger age and more frequently than civilians do? Did you know the military has a high rate of couples in stepfamilies? Did you know that military couples experience added stressors that other stepfamily couples don't? We want to talk about that on this edition of *FamilyLife Blended*.

But before I introduce my guest, a little feedback from a listener: "This podcast will bless your blended family." Boy, I appreciate that vote of confidence. "My husband and I," she continues, "recently became a blended family. We were so excited when we found this podcast. You need not look any further for a podcast that is enlightening and helpful to you and your family."

Thanks for that review. I appreciate it. If you have never left a review, we would love for you to do so. It helps other people find the podcast and perhaps be blessed by it as well.

As you've heard me say on this podcast before, blended family living comes with some stress. Now imagine adding the uncertainties of military life on top of that. We're celebrating veterans this week so it's a perfect time for us to serve those who are serving us. Helping military stepfamilies be mission ready is our topic today.

Todd Gangl and his wife, Tammy, are cofounders of Military Ready Stepfamily and hosts of the military-focused Stepfamily Bootcamp seminar that is available to military bases around the country. Todd is an author of an eight-week small group curriculum

entitled *Real Steps*. He and Tammy serve as affiliate staff for FamilyLife working with military stepfamilies. They married in 2004, blended six children and live in Huntsville, Alabama.

Here's my conversation with Todd Gangl:

Todd, I don't think you know this, but at our recent *Blended and Blessed*[®] worldwide livestream, we had at one point—we had people tweeting in pictures and people posting things connected to the event. It was a lot of fun.

We had a couple that were—well, they were in two different locations I should say. She was somewhere here in the US and *he* was deployed in Africa. At one point he tweeted in a picture of him sitting in—you could tell it was a military base by the walls and how everything was hanging and the dress. There was four or five people in there with him and the big TV monitor on the front. They were watching the event. He was watching from where he was, and she was watching where she was.

First of all, let me just say how great was that that they were able to attend the event together. That's pretty awesome the way technology works these days. Second of all, to that gentleman, don't know your name but thank you for your service. We appreciate that and your dedication to your family. Here you are deployed in who knows where and you're still committed to being a part of that event.

But, Todd, here's the thing I want to ask you. I could see a couple of different scenarios for this couple, right. Let's say she's the biological mother and he's the stepdad. What challenges does this create for their family, for him to be the stepfather? Let's just say it's within the first five years or so of their family's experience together and he's deployed for six months to a year and a half. What challenges does that create for them?

Todd: She is the biological mom. He is the stepdad. We're within the first five years. The first thing you have to understand is that the minute deployment begins, for the most part, blending ends because of the distance in the relationship.

With it being within the first five years, that brings into question a few things for me such as, "What kind of relationship has he already developed with the children? How old are her children?" If they're teenagers and they're getting ready to go to college, they may not have even started to accept or are in that mind frame of "Maybe I don't need to really do a lot of work on this relationship because I'm leaving," in which case maybe that's not as big of a deal.

Or maybe they're younger kids and they were developing a relationship, and now you see stress in the kids because that relationship has gone and been deployed. They're worried about now what happens to their stepdad. They definitely see mom now being more concerned. Maybe some of her time is taken away from trying to keep up with, not

just her house, but what is going on with her spouse and how much information is she getting as far as his whereabouts and concerns she might have for him.

There's a lot of challenges it brings up; not just that but legal. Now you gave the easy side first. She's biological. Let me say this. So far, we've run into less of that and more of the military-deployed spouse is biological. Reason being, Ron, is because in the military—especially men who are remarrying more often than women who are in service—the reason they're remarrying is they have little kids and they need someone to take care of those little kids so they can go off and be deployed.

Single parents cannot be deployed unless they have a very rigid family care plan in place, so they're remarrying for that exact reason. The hard side, the real challenging side, where you run into all these huge legal aspects is what if the biological parent deploys and now you're leaving a stepparent within the first five years in charge of kids.

Ron: Yes, now that's a different scenario. Let's come back to that in just a second. But what I heard you say on the first scenario is if he's the stepdad and he's deployed, distance, physical distance, is going to equal some emotional relational distance, even as people are calculating how much they're willing to give and connect of themselves toward the other person—stepchildren towards the stepdad for example. But then his bonding process with the children, everything just kind of goes on hold. I think that's really profound and important to say.

Okay, so let's go ahead and shift to that second scenario. He's the biological dad and he's left his kids with stepmom. What are some of the challenges that presents?

Todd: The biggest challenge that presents is in the area of custody because custody is non-transferrable. In the military when we deploy, sometimes we don't get a lot of notice. It just depends. Sometimes it's planned—where a movement may be planned and they may give you two, three months' notice.

Sometimes it's not planned, and you may get one month to a week's notice. The problem that brings up is that within the military we're very used to simply saying, "Here's a power of attorney. Take this power of attorney and use it to give whatever power that stepparent needs to take care of your kids." The biggest problem with that is right there on the power of attorney on the cover it says that this does not transfer custody.

You're taking a power of attorney and you're assigning a stepparent roles that by family court law they cannot hold. They cannot sign for medical releases without that other parent's signature. They can't enroll that child in school without that other biological parent's signature. Even with that power of attorney, they're on very, very shaky ground. That's the first thing.

The second thing that we've heard a lot about is "You just left me to deal with your ex and you don't even like to deal with her."

Ron: Right.

Todd: "How much do you think I'm going to enjoy dealing with her?" because now guess who has to drop the kids for visitation or get the kids ready to travel, get them on the airline, get them to the home, talk to them while they're away, handle anything in the house and then get them back after visitation. That is if they come back.

There's been cases where parents deployed; biological parents left a power of attorney with his stepparent; kids went on visitation; kids never came home because the other biological parent, once they had physical custody, contested the old custody agreement and the fact that a non-biological parent was now overseeing the children and in many cases, won because of "best interest of that child," which as you know for courts that's a guiding principal.

Ron: Yes. Hey, Todd, we're going to come back to some of the details around that co-parenting stuff and these scenarios. You've already raised some big flags. Already, what I just want to say to our listener is these quick scenarios that Todd has laid out, I hope has captured your attention. I hope that you see now why this is such an important conversation for us to have.

Todd, you and I have talked off and on for years. I've lost track. Maybe you remember. But we've been talking for years about the importance of educating people within the military, educating chaplains, educating officers and leaders within the military, pastors in local churches, extended family members about some of these unique challenges going on in stepfamilies.

Let me just ask you, why do we need to start by acknowledging that? Why do family members and friends and people who care about families, why do they need to understand this?

Todd: I think the main reason, Ron, is for those of us who've been in the service, we realize that the military is a *whole other culture* than what we're dealing with out here in what we call the civilian community. When you're in the military, you are on a base. I know you've been on military bases before. But the one thing that always intrigues people when they're on there is it's a community. It's a town. It is designed so we can shut the gates and sustain life on that base. That is on purpose.

When you go through basic training, it is drummed into your head over and over and over again, "You're no longer a civilian. You're now in the military." It comes with things like, "When I order you to jump, you jump and then ask me how high while you're in the air." There's very rigid authority.

There's all sorts of things in the military environment and in that military culture. There's different laws. We're under the United Code of Military Justice that civilians aren't under. There's all sorts of different languages. We speak in acronyms. I mean if you've ever heard a military person speak—

Ron: Oh I have, man.

Todd: —it'll make your head spin. [Laughter]

Ron: It'll make my head spin. Then I'm trying to catch up on the last three acronyms and they've already moved on to four, five, and six, and I'm totally lost. It's like, yes, there is a whole new language. There are laws. There are customs. There are courtesies and there are core beliefs. Those are some of the things I've heard you talk about. Educate those of us that are civilians about some of these matters.

Todd: Within a culture, we talked about the law. Civilians are under civilian law. We're under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. There's traditions that we do in the military that come from just way, way back: Dining Outs, where it's a very formal event and there's certain things in Dining Outs that we follow. There's a whole script we actually follow in Dining Outs that comes from, some of it, way back in Revolutionary War times.

There's a lot of traditions but there's also this: within every culture whether it's a Hispanic culture or whether it's an Asian American culture or the military culture, there's expectations of how you behave and the roles you perform within that culture.

In the military, we teach that by something called core values. In the army, some of those would be "loyalty," "respect," "honor." In the Air Force, we had "Service before self." Basically, it's a quick way that they forced all members to memorize that basically says, "Hey, these are your expectations when you're within this culture."

We thought it would be fun for a military stepfamily to define our own set of "Military Stepfamily Core Values." Here's our "Military Stepfamily Core Values": "Love takes time," "Respect losses," "Hurts happen," "Marriage comes first," "Everyone is equal," and "Celebrate small victories."

That's kind of what we set as our expectations for how do you function in a military stepfamily culture?

Ron: Expand on one or two of those core values that you have drafted for military stepfamilies.

Todd: Let's take "Respect losses." Every stepfamily—you know we learned this from you, Ron, and we have been following you—I won't use the other word—I'll say "following you"—since 2003, by the way. Tammy and I were married in 2004. We went

and saw you for the first time in 2003, and listening to the things you said about stepfamilies are formed from loss.

There's some kind of trauma that forms your stepfamily. Whether that's the loss of a spouse through death or divorce, there's a loss involved.

What we were talking about in this core value was you need to learn to respect those losses, not fear—maybe fear the losses—so that it's something that becomes a value within your home, something that you can take. You can make it a part of your expectation. Everyone has losses. We're going to respect those. We're not going to try and discipline those when they act out. We're going to respect them.

Hurts happen. Anyone that's ever been in a stepfamily realizes it's hard not to step on toes, whether that's you stepped on a tradition, maybe, or they lost a tradition, right. There's another loss but it's also a loss that brings a hurt with it.

I love your story you used to share about the Christmas tree and the two families couldn't agree on decorating so one side was neat and the other side they threw the ornaments at and stuff. I think back about that and I think Tammy and I, when we blended our six kids, there was a lot of times that we got into some hurts sometimes by mistake. I simply didn't know that maybe their dad had said something about that, and when I came against it, it wasn't coming against them, it was coming against their dad. All of a sudden, they shut down.

Sometimes my own rigidity of being in the military for so long and realizing in the military, authority comes with rank. In a stepfamily, it comes with time. I went the rank way to start with and caused a lot of hurts, not intentionally, just in ignorance, not knowing. Having rules without a relationship would lead to that kind of rebellion or rejection, which it did. It led to hurts.

Those two I think are big. "Love takes time" is just stepfamilies. It's your idea of crockpot mentality. Realize you've got to be patient. You've got to realize that everyone is going to either accept or not accept, but it's going to be in their own time. You can't rush it.

Ron: They may not accept it in the beginning and eventually evolve into accepting it. That's part of what the crockpot does is it softens ingredients over time so that they eventually do share of themselves really often.

Right off the bat we've established that there's a different culture within the military and with that different expectations, a different way of doing life together. There's a community mentality that exists there. People who are listening right now who are outside that culture have a lot to learn about it. People who are listening right now understand that culture because they are living it day in, day out.

I think there's certain things from either vantage point that are either assets or liabilities. Like if you're in the military—you just said one—like if you're in the military, authority comes with rank. But in an actual family situation, it doesn't. It comes with relationship, and that relationship has to be established and bonded and tested with time. That's when a stepparent's authority begins to increase.

In some ways, the military culture can be an asset and, in some ways, it can be a liability depending on how you're looking at it.

For people who are listening that are invested in helping others in the military, maybe it's a friend or a family member or you're a pastor or a leader, and you don't understand that culture, it's really helpful if you take some time to dive into understanding at least a little bit—wouldn't you say, Todd—so that people have a basic understanding; so that they're able to encourage a family who is in the military?

Todd: Yes, I think that's important, Ron. I think the first thing you have to understand about the military is it is a very authoritarian structure. It is based on rank and time and grade and low man usually gets the bad jobs, right?

Ron: Digging the ditches.

Todd: He's digging the ditches. If I've got shiny things on my shoulder and you don't, I can tell you what to do. As long as it is a moral order, then you are required to obey it.

But it's all about goals. I mean I think if you're trying to help out, you have to think of it this way. You have to say, "What is the goal of the military of the United States?" It's what I said when I raised my right hand and I was sworn in. "I swear to defend the constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic." That's our goal.

When you're inside the military, those things that we learned that are forced into our head either in basic training, or in officer candidate school or reserve officer training candidates if they're in college and they're coming into the military, that's what's drummed in there. That's that I'm going to have the authority because of rank to tell people what to do. That's leadership.

If we're in a wartime situation, you sure don't want someone in a foxhole questioning you about "Well, I don't really feel like we have a relationship, Ron. I'm not sure I want to charge that hill for you. I don't really like you that much." [Laughter]

Ron: That's not a good—that's a bad problem to have right there.

Todd: My other dad told me I didn't have to charge the hill, Ron, so you're on your own. I'll be right here.

Ron: Point made.

Todd: I've got your back.

Ron: You make a really good point. In situations like that, you need clear lines of authority. You need a clear chain of command.

Todd: Right.

Ron: But life, it's just not that clear.

Todd: Life's not that way. You think, goal of the military: "Defend the constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic." I hope that's not the goal of your stepfamily, right. [Laughter] I hope your goal of your stepfamily—when we teach these Stepfamily Bootcamps we actually walk people through and have them raise their hand, "Tell me what a good goal for your stepfamily is." Inevitably, it's something to do with "We want to blend," or "We want to be a normal quotation marks family," whatever that is.

In the end we tell them, "Here's what Tammy and I think, after all the years we've spent, is a good goal." We say, "To develop a culture"—again, there's that culture word—so important—"to develop a culture where love and acceptance and patience and open communication gives everyone the opportunity to blend."

Doesn't say everyone will.

Ron: Right.

Todd: It just says it's up to the two, to the spouses, to create a culture that has those characteristics of acceptance and love and patience and open communication so that eventually, people are—you're either going to go, "Hey, I like this and I want to get to know you and I want to be a part of this," or "Ah, I'm out."

But it only offers the opportunity. It doesn't force it. There again, it goes right back to your crockpot, right. We're not microwaving, we're crockpotting.

Ron: When we allow it, we create a climate where it's more likely to happen. But again, you cannot demand it or insist it—what you can do with chain of command, but what you can't do when it comes to love and relationships.

Todd: Correct. In the military, love and relationships plays very little to do with it, especially when you're in basic training. [Laughter] I didn't think my drill sergeant loved me. I'll be honest.

Ron: Hey, you know what, Todd? I don't think he did.

Todd: I don't think he did either.

Ron: Todd, you like to talk about life in the military in 3D. You like to talk about that “distance,” “deployments,” and “demands.” Now, we’re talking specifically about stepfamilies here in the military. Really, for the listener, these are common *battlefields* that stepfamilies find themselves on. The 3D’s. Let’s just talk about them one at a time. Let’s start with “distance.”

Now we kind of talked about that a little bit at the top of the program when we were talking about the scenario where maybe somebody’s been deployed. We’ll come back to that in a minute. But being in the military involves frequent moves, for example. It’s not just distance from each other. It could be distance from other family, your extended family, and from your friends. Talk around that for a minute.

Todd: The main issues that we’re hearing over and over. One is all of the systems that I have for coping that maybe I’ve developed at this base. Let’s say Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama, I had this whole system I have in place. I have people that are listening to me. I have other stepfamilies that are walking through this with me. I have a chaplain that has resources that can help me with this. I’m plugged in. I’m doing life.

Within two to three years, I have to give that up and I have to move. That next base may not have those resources. They may not even have a chaplain that understands what to do with stepfamilies. There definitely won’t be the same people there, so I have to go back and basically start all over developing my systems for coping again. That’s a big issue because I go from top of the mountain to the bottom of the heap.

Then, maybe, in two or three years, I’m back to top of the mountain. It took me real effort to get there and now I’m PCSing. There’s that acronym culture, sorry—permanent change of station. I’m leaving that base and going somewhere else. That’s one issue.

The second issue is if I’m not the custodial parent, there can be a lot of shame and guilt because maybe I was married in Montgomery, Alabama. As long as I was stationed there those two or three years, I got to see the kids on a regular basis. But now I’m being deployed to somewhere in California, let’s say. Now I’ve got this distance which becomes an issue.

If I’m non-custodial, it becomes an issue because, number one, I’m in the military and I’m not making a great deal of money. I don’t go in the military to make money.

Ron: Travel back and forth to see the kids or have them come see you is very difficult.

Todd: Yes. Who’s going to pay for that?

Ron: Right.

Todd: I've got to update our custody arrangement with "How are the kids going to travel? Are the kids old enough to travel? Do they have to be accompanied minors? How do we pay for that? Who picks them up?" Now, for the most part, my visitation may drop to maybe twice a year, where before I was every other weekend, and all the shame and guilt associated with that.

On the flip side, if I'm the custodial parent I may find I'm dealing with some of those losses and the kids when we move, because the kids just lost getting to see the other biological parent every other weekend.

Ron: Right.

Todd: Now my kids are acting out, and I'm having to deal with those losses and handle that conflict within that house.

It could also go back to a whole other custody hearing because many states have that mileage restriction, right? They don't necessarily deem the military to be a good reason for moving sometimes, so there could actually be a whole new custody heard just because I just got orders that I *have* to follow. I can't not follow those orders.

Ron: We alluded earlier, sometimes a former spouse does a power play. You get vulnerable. Here's the irony: you're strong in the sense that you are a part of the military, you are protecting, you're doing your duty, you're helping other people, but you're vulnerable in your own family. Somebody takes advantage of that and really sticks it to you.

All of sudden, you're losing custody or you're losing something. It's hard to stand up for yourself when you're deployed or when you're in another state. All of that—first of all, can I just say it out loud?—that's really low. If you're listening right now, don't do that. That is just really low. It's not right and all you're doing is hurting your kids. I know you don't see it that way, but that's exactly what's happening.

Todd: You're putting the marriage, the old marriage, back in front of your current kids. You don't want to do that.

Ron: Yes, I mean just, no, right. The kids need access to everybody as best you can. It's going to be difficult even as it is. Don't make it worse.

Tell us a little bit. Update us a little bit, because I know you and some other, some JAGs, some attorneys, have been working to try to make sure that doesn't happen anymore. Can you give us a status update on that?

Todd: I can. We were very blessed when we started this out back in 2016, '15, somewhere around there. I went to seminary at a school called Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia. They have a school of law and that school of law really kind of

took up the banner for us. They put together a Family Care Plan specifically designed for stepfamilies.

Now let's talk Family Care Plans because to you that may not mean anything. To the military, it's everything. I am required as a military member who has children to have on file an active Family Care Plan. I have to. Again, that's military law stuff. That way if I am deployed suddenly, my Family Care Plan kicks in.

Within that Family Care Plan, I have to have who will take care of my kids named, how they will take care of my kids, what they're responsible to do with my kids physically, emotionally, spiritually, school. All these different aspects go into this Family Care Plan, so it's a big document. It's very carefully thought out. Within that Family Care Plan is also my powers of attorney that are already signed. They just have to be notarized. There's a lot of things within that Family Care Plan that just allow me to do my job.

Now the problem with that is let's go back to custody. Custody is non-transferrable. Custody is family court. Power of attorneys are *not* family court. Because they're not in the same court, a power of attorney does not hold half the weight that a family court custody agreement does.

If I have a straight out, by regulation Family Care Plan, the other biological parent does not have to be involved with it. I can actually put in there, and many people have, "I'm remarried; I want my new spouse to watch my kids while I'm gone." There's been a lot of cases, Ron, where that simply got overturned because you can't give a stepparent custody. You can't transfer custody with a power of attorney.

What we did is the Regent School of Law put together for us a Family Care Plan by the regulation that covers everything covered in a normal Family Care Plan, but the key is this: it is negotiated and signed by both bio parents.

Ron: So that it does hold up.

Todd: It holds the weight of law now because the other bio parent is saying "Okay, here is what I will allow that stepparent to do. Here's the authority I will give him," and it's by, "Where school's concerned, what authority will you give them? Where medical things are concerned, what authority will you give them? This is what I'll give him." Then both parents sign.

That's kept in the file for when that service member deploys. Now that can be used and become a legal document with the correct power of attorneys. You still have to have the power of attorneys, but now you have those power of attorneys backed up by *both* bio parents' signature.

Ron: I can't thank you enough for the work and time that you and others put into helping to see that happen. We're going to put in our show notes how the listener can access that and learn a little bit more about it.

Co-parenting, I mean obviously that is a very unique circumstance that people outside the military are not going to face in the same way. Are there other challenges to co-parenting for military families?

Todd: Distance is a biggie, which you did bring up. The other challenge is, again I can't emphasize this enough, but the military culture is a whole different animal than anything that people within the civilian community are exposed to.

Within the military—if you're in the military, you have access to basically a Walmart that's only for service members. Not a Walmart. It's called AFES and it basically is the Armed Forces Exchange. I can go get clothes. I can get groceries. I can get meals. I get whatever I need but I have to have my military ID.

When members are divorced, the other member, if they were not the military member, lose that ID and lose those privileges of being on the base. That can cause issues, even just to get on the base to get your kids, right. If you're going to transfer, now you have to transfer somewhere off of the base if you're even in the same city and distance doesn't play a role.

Ron: Right. Man! Okay, we've talked about the first D, "distance." Let's talk about the second one, "deployments."

Even before we get into the peculiarities there for blended families, what in general is the stress like when someone is deployed?

Todd: That's really hard to put into words. I got deployed as a single service member. I was not married at the time. I was engaged and getting ready to be married. I went to Desert Shield, Desert Storm.

The stress level even as a *single* service member was incredible. Just every day wondering what was going to happen, "Is this the day the war was going to start? Who around us is the enemy?" because they didn't necessarily wear uniforms. Just the stress level of being there itself impacts you. I know it impacted me.

It took a lot of time after coming home to really quit sitting in a corner and looking over to make sure no one was behind you and just to get used to being where I didn't have to be that heightened level of awareness.

As a *married* service member, you're worried about "I need to do my job. I need to be fully focused on mission. What is my mission today?" That's hard to do when you're also trying to focus on "Wonder what my family's up to today? Wonder if my kids are being

taken care of? Wonder if visitation went off without a hitch? Wonder if the kids got on the airplane okay? Wonder how my spouse, who is their stepmother, is holding up under all this pressure?"

That is one of the things that the military has really emphasized recently as a goal wrapped up in this big word called "resiliency." How do we make our families and our service members more resilient? How do we allow that service member to really focus just on mission when they're deployed and not be stressed about family?

Ron: Yes, I mean it's a great thought, "How do we help them be single-minded?" But, oh my goodness, how's the military going to do it? I appreciate the effort. But realistically, everybody's going to be divided to some degree.

Todd: It's very hard to do.

Ron: Right, because there's so many unknowns. Like, one of the conversations we have in helping blended families in general is all things you don't get to control.

Todd: Right.

Ron: You can have influence over a former spouse, for example, in the co-parenting relationship but you don't get to control them. You didn't control them when you were married to them. There's no way you can control them when you're divorced. There's so many factors like that that are just unknowns.

Man, I appreciate that the military wants to try to help people be prepared for as many unknowns as they can be. I'm sure some people do a great job of that. But at the end of the day, there's just going to be things there that make it difficult for that person to just be focused on the mission.

Todd: The military's done a really, really good job of early training, early awareness. How do we train resiliency before we need it, so if I'm going to deploy, before I ever even learn I'm going to deploy, the military is training you and your spouse on "How do you be resilient?" They do seminars. There's mandatory training that service members and spouses have to go through just to help them try to learn to establish good communication, establish healthy discipline, build in that resiliency within your family.

But that's done, really at a high level for a family, not necessarily considering or taking into account the dynamics of stepfamily and what roles that plays. Because now you're not just dealing with "It's great if my spouse and I are resilient, but what if my ex-spouse isn't resilient." How does that play a role in the kid's stress level, right?

Ron: Right, right.

Todd: That's a whole other animal. Again that's where Family Care Plans came from was this idea of resiliency. How do we lower the stress? If we have everyone plan ahead of time for all these events, "What's going to happen to my kid's schools? What's going to happen to my kid's custody? What's going to happen to my kid's spiritual life?" before I have to deploy, do you see how that would kind of ease stress?

Ron: Yes.

Todd: But then there's other things that become like double-edged swords. Like let's always provide web access where they can do video chats and stuff. That—the idea is a great idea but what if you're getting all those video chats and the other spouse is downloading on you or the kids, "Oh, mom said, 'da da da da,'" so it can be a double-edged sword.

Ron: So trying to be prepared before a deployment is building resiliency for your stepfamily. Once a deployment has begun, what are some of the things you find yourself coaching military families to do?

Todd: I think the big thing, Ron, is if you are the spouse of someone who is deploying understand your rights: "What rights do you have by those power of attorneys? How do I become a peaceful go-between between my spouse who's deployed and their ex-spouse so that the kids stress level is reduced? How do I keep this from impacting my children as much as possible?" Again, given age, what's age appropriate? Utilizing resources because the military provides resources.

In the Army, I know they do Family Readiness Groups and then you have base advocacy programs. Both of those are designed so that a spouse who needs help can immediately go to one of those and they can get the help they need; whether it's through the Judge Advocate General, the JAG—maybe I need something done legally—maybe I just want to make sure I understand what these power of attorneys allow me to do and what they don't or maybe it's just we're running short on funding right now—I need some emergency funds. All of that's covered.

Maybe it's "I just haven't heard from my spouse in 72 hours and I'm panicked. How do I get in touch with my spouse? Can I get the Red Cross involved? How do I do that?" So understanding what your base allows.

The last thing is just keep yourself healthy. Make sure that you're taking time off for you. Because no matter how much you try, if you have not established those coping mechanisms at that new base yet that we talked about just a minute ago—if I've just PCSed, worst case, I don't have coping mechanisms—hopefully, you have it and you have those, but either way make sure you're exercising; make sure you're taking care of yourself.

For the military member that's deployed, stay in touch but don't necessarily tell them everything. Make sure you're taking the stress versus giving that stress back out to your family. A lot of times we can't. A lot of times we can't say a lot of things. Make sure you're taking care of yourself, staying healthy, staying aware, keeping advised of what's going on at home but make sure when you're on mission you are focused on mission.

The key thing is *they want you back home safe*.

Ron: Right, right. That's what everybody is after.

Let's talk a little bit about the third D, "demands." Military life requires conformity to rigid authority structures, to discipline, to chain of command, etc. What if that leads to rigid authoritarian parenting in a home?

Todd: It often does, but it's not necessarily the fault of the service member. It is so ingrained in us that it's hard to overcome sometimes. If you have a certain personality that's already controlling, it can be even worse.

I know when Tammy and I first got married I inherited a 14-year-old son. I didn't have a teenager at the time, let alone a 14-year-old son. We butted heads really badly because I was military. I was used to just saying, "Hey, kids, you need to do this." All the kids were on a set schedule, and he wanted to buck the system.

It didn't go over well. I had to really learn. I thank the Lord for grace, Ron, because now he's getting ready to be 31 years old and he and I talk almost every day. That's *wonderful*. That's just God's grace versus my not having grace early on. [Laughter]

But again, I've told you we've started doing the Stepfamily Bootcamp seminars. I always thought—you know when we'd go into these bases, the first thing we do is we go through the seven issues that military stepfamilies face. Four of them are the same as every stepfamily in the world: "Dealing with ghosts of marriage past," as you say.

"How do I establish my chain of command?" which is what we call it in the military. "How do I set that marriage as a priority again over my single parenting? How do I get over the myths?" knowing, as you say, the Brady's light—knowing the Brady's light how do I get over it?

Those things versus what you're saying, the three D's. We always felt like when we'd go in everyone's going to be like, "Oh, deployment, deployment. That's where I need to know...." Do you realize the one we've had the most reaction to and we spend the most time on is this? It is "How do I get over the rigid demands because it is destroying my family?"

Ron: Wow!

Todd: Again, we go into those goals. You have to really learn to compartmentalize. When you're on the job, rigidity is required because you are training to go to war to defend the constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. When you walk in the front door, you're no longer defending the constitution against all enemies, step or biological, so you have to quit. [Laughter]

Ron: The two-year-old may *feel like* an enemy but not in the same way.

Todd: But maybe not, yes. Just because he's hiding behind the couch does not mean he's after you. [Laughter]

But you brought up a really interesting point. Parenting styles within the military, when you're talking about the four parenting styles, the military tends to be *very* authoritarian.

Ron: Yes, I can see that. I can imagine. It's the world that they live in day in and day out, and there's kind of a personality that is drawn to that even in the front end. What you're saying is you adopt that style within your home, within a blended family, in particular, where the lines of authority are unclear with a stepparent, for example, and all of a sudden that's backfiring, right?

Todd: It is. When you first are married, you get all your authority from the biological parent. They're literally just saying—like when I walked out the door early on when Tammy and I got married, I was looking at four kids that were biologically mine and saying, "Hey listen, Tammy has all my authority—"

Ron: Chain of command.

Todd: "—chain of command. If she says do something, you need to do it. We can talk about it later, but you need to do it." You hear my authoritarian parenting style early on?

Ron: Yes.

Todd: But that was me basically giving my authority to Tammy before I walked out the door.

Ron: Who knows whether or not that works? I mean it's clear to you that you're establishing a chain of command, but it may not be clear to the children. Like this is just harder to implement for most people.

Todd: It is. It is.

Ron: I hear your point loud and clear, but I think it bears repeating. Rigidity works in an authoritative system like the military. It's necessary. It most likely doesn't work in an actual family situation, especially if you're a stepparent trying to establish relationship and bond with kids, so you're going to have to learn a different system.

Todd: You do and remember the goal that we lay out in Bootcamp is to develop a culture where love and acceptance and patience and open communication give everyone the opportunity. All of that love and patience and open communication, that is not taught in the military. If you went to your drill sergeant and said, “Hey, drill sergeant, listen I think you could win us over, but you need to develop a culture.” [Laughter]

Ron: You need to soften up a little bit.

Todd: “This culture of pushups and PT and yelling, it’s not working for me. [Laughter] I think you need to change your parenting style. That’s what you really need to do here.”

Ron: Alright. Let’s just wrap that part of the conversation by making the point that, yes, adjusting your parenting style, learning a different system—something that Stepfamily Bootcamp—I know you guys teach. That’s certainly something that we teach here at FamilyLife Blended and have lots of resources to try to help people do just that.

Todd, I want to ask you about a couple of more things before our time draws to an end. You teach every family that each member of a family has a particular shape. Now I know that’s an acrostic, military style. Thank you very much. We don’t have time to go into all of those—

Todd: We’ll make a soldier out of you yet, Ron Deal. [Laughter]

Ron: Alright, keep working. But I do want to talk about scars for a second. What kind of scars do military stepfamily members have?

Todd: That’s a great issue, Ron. You know everyone again—I’m going back to your seminars and how many times we heard you say stepfamilies are formed through loss and loss issues are always going to be inside of your stepfamily. You need to learn to respect those, not come against those.

But what do you do when a spouse has post-traumatic stress disorder because they *were* deployed into a war environment? That’s got nothing to do with a loss inside the stepfamily.

But when that comes home, that *can* be, and in a lot of cases we’ve heard of, becomes very damaging because that person becomes very sensitive to certain characteristics, loud voices, pops, things that can trigger that person. Maybe they’re just having flashes through dreams at night and waking up just with high anxiety and stress and then walking into a stepfamily that is full of high stress and trying to cope with PTSD.

I think the best resource I’ve ever seen and one that we kind of push—again it’s through Cru, but it’s through the military side—they have two books that they spent a lot of time working on. One was called *When the War Comes Home*. It’s for the spouse of

someone suffering from PTSD. The other is called *The PTSD Survival Manual*, and it is for the soldier who has PTSD. It is a Bible-based curriculum that they've seen a lot of success with, with helping those people.

Ron: That's great.

Todd: That's a big scar, probably the biggest when you add it to all the other scars of divorce and / or widowhood.

Ron: In just that one example, I can see how that potentially creates other smaller scars. Somebody who is struggling, that makes it harder for them to bond. It's harder for a stepfamily member to trust them. You're anxious, you're upset, you're easily reactive and set off because of the PTSD. Now I don't want to draw close to you and that's just puts some emotional distance in our relationship. It just complicates the process even further.

Todd, the more I think about this just since we're talking, the greater gratitude I have for that stepfamily member who is sacrificing in serving their country, serving me, and yet perhaps bringing some complexity to their own life. Which is one reason I know *you* are so committed to trying to help and provide support. I appreciate that in you, and we appreciate them doing what they do every day.

Todd: I have not met anyone who has been deployed into a hostile environment, a war situation, that came home the same person they left.

Now think about that. My personality changes. Mine did. There's times to this day that Tammy knows she can look me in the eyes and say, "You're having a hard time." I'm having a hard time talking about it. [With Emotion]

When you lose friends and that reality comes home, then you just don't come home the same person you left. All that blending and all the relationship development that you did before you left was with this other person that you *can* no longer be. You now have been shaped by those memories and those actions.

It's almost—what we call reintegration which is when you come home from deployment and you reintegrate with your family—it almost becomes starting over. *Literally* having to relearn that person and their likes and their dislikes and what sets them off and what doesn't and "How come they came home angry when before they weren't angry?" and "How come they came home and they're so much more sensitive to emotional issues that before they weren't sensitive to?"

There's *so much* that goes into that. The chaplains they're handling that on a daily basis. Having been one of those, that's difficult.

Ron: Yes, right.

Todd: They need help. They need resources. Right now, when we go to bases, the first thing we do is we're buying your resources and just with our selves, we're buying Tammy Daughtry's resource. We're buying *Restored & Remarried*, Gil and Brenda Stuart's resource, and we're leaving that at the base because they have no resources. With money the way it is right now, it's hard to realize, "I need resources, but oh yeah, the chapel needs help, too."

Anything we can do—anything we can do to go in there and help them out. It's an honor to go back in to the military now as a veteran and get to speak into the lives of people who I have a very deep respect for, both on the chaplain side, where we can go in and before the seminar. We actually do a two to three-hour training on what's the difference with stepfamilies, how do you do premarital counseling, how do you do marital counseling, how do you just deal with stepfamily issues with the chaplains. Then we do the seminar.

Just hearing these families pour out their hearts—where we did the civilian ministry, Ron, for years there wasn't this immediate connection. It took about half a day to really build up where people were really communicating and kind of opening up. I don't have that in the military.

I know we went—you invited us to speak at one of your *Blended and Blessed*, and we did. It was one of the early ones. We did a session on military stepfamilies. I had six guys, six big guys, all Army in that session. Brenda Stuart came. I'll never forget it. Within the first 15 minutes, all six of us were in the front of the room in a circle hugging and crying because we all lost people.

Ron: Yes

Todd: Brenda told me, she said, "I'm never coming to another one of your sessions again. [Laughter] It's too emotional." But there's that immediate connection where we can go in and consider it an honor to go in and help.

Ron: Even at different battles, different foxholes, but you've all had foxholes, so there's something that connects you immediately.

Todd, I appreciate so much the Stepfamily Bootcamp Seminar that you're doing and making available to bases around the country. It's so important, and this work is important. We're glad to be a partner with you.

Todd, we've been talking about a number of challenges here. But I also know you've had experiences with people who you've been able to help. You've been able to see them turn a corner. You've been able to see the positive outcome of them doing their Family Care Plan and really putting time and energy into it on *behalf* of their blended family. What are some of the things that you've seen go right?

You've been listening to my conversation with Todd Gangl. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*. In just a minute, I'll let Todd respond to that.

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I've got to tell you, something in this conversation with Todd reminded me a few years ago I was walking through an airport and I witnessed a man approach two military servicemen and just simply say, "Thank you for your service." He didn't know either one of them. He just wanted to say thank you.

It got me thinking, it's pretty easy for me to be disconnected from the sacrifices our military personnel make every single day to keep us safe. Yes, movies remind me of the cost of war and stories around Veteran's Day put a face on the sacrifices made. But I must admit, it's easy for me to forget. Which is why now I make it a practice to walk up to perfectly good military strangers and say, "Thank you!" I hope you'll join me.

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Our division, FamilyLife Blended, is the leading resource ministry for stepfamilies around the world. We have all kinds of free content for you as well as books and video resources for individuals and groups. For example, I have a variety of books including *The Smart Stepfamily*, and Gayla Grace, who serves on our team, has authored *Stepparenting with Grace*. Both of those and more are available wherever books are sold.

Now, before we're done, let's get back to my question. I asked Todd to talk about when things go right.

Todd: One of the things I think that the military really gets right where we didn't necessarily see it as quickly when we were doing just civilian stepfamily ministry is their commitment to each other is amazing.

But think about it. Remember we talked about the distance idea. I'm going to PCS every two to three years. When I lose one coping system, who's the only person I have that understands me? It's my spouse. That really draws them together into a bond that is very unusual and I don't see a lot in the civilian community.

When I'm bonded through, "You're all I've got," and "We're in this together," and "We're going to hold on," that's a very strong commitment. When we've gone through things like, "I've spent a year wondering if you are even coming home," and to feel those emotions for 365 days and to worry about that person and to have that time with just the kids, it develops a really unique bond in those stepfamilies.

Even with stepmoms, stepdads, and non-biological children, you're going through that time together and it *bonds* you. I don't care how much you don't appreciate the person. In the end, you appreciate the *person*.

Ron: That's their foxhole that they experience together.

Todd: That's their foxhole. That's something that they can go back to. It's like those traditions that we say, "Yes, it's a great idea to start traditions because it bonds you." It's not a tradition that I would ever recommend to anyone start, but if you have to go through it, it's amazing how resilient you come out on the other side.

Ron: Next time, we're going to hear from Ray and Robin McKelvy about Ray's journey through family conflict when he was growing up and family secrets. On one occasion, his stepdad was fighting with his mom.

Ray: I was either eight or nine and I jumped in to protect her, and he turned and started to fight me as if I were another man. My dad started running toward the front door. I yelled out to him, "I don't ever want you to be my daddy."

Ron: That's Ray and Robin McKelvy, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible.

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