

Therapy with Stepfamilies (that include minor children)

Continuing Education presentation
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INTRODUCTION

1) Prevalence:

Societal changes, new biological changes, shift in marital expectations, all have led to a wide variety of family forms. About 50% of first-marriage families end in divorce, and 75% of divorced individuals remarry, typically within three to four years. Of children born in 1980s, 35% will actually live with a stepparent (more will have stepparents). About 30% of us live in some kind of stepfamily at any one time, and nearly two thirds of us will experience some form of stepfamily living during our lifetime, including those who have stepparents or stepchildren they do not live with. Some also have two stepfamily households. Over half of the population will experience stepfamily living at some point in their lifetime, either as stepchildren, stepparents, step-grandparents, or remarried parents. More will be part of stepfamilies.

Why increase?

Mobility of families, increase in life span, concern about quality of life for adults, conviction that adults have right to happiness

2) Definitions:

- 1) *A Stepfamily is a household in which there is an adult couple, at least one of who has a child from a previous relationship. Can include situations where children are present or seldom present. Also includes when not legally married, same-sex couples, also when one partner brought in child from adoption. All stepfamily members do not necessarily reside full-time in one household.*
- 2) *A Residential Parent is the parent with whom the child lives most of the time.*
- 3) *A Non-Residential Parent is the parent with whom the child lives less than the majority of the time.*
- 4) *A Remarried parent is a person with a biological or adoptive child who marries someone other than the child's biological or adoptive parent.*
- 5) *A stepparent is the new partner of the child's biological parent. The child is not biologically related to the child.*

3) Terminology and self-esteem of family:

Although “step” prefix carries a negative connotation (orphaned or bereaved in old English), it is more accurate (“remarried” not as inclusive, “reconstituted” or “blended” not suggestive of individuality). Important to reduce stigma: adults and children often hide stepfamily status. Important to accept them as a legitimate family and still different than a nuclear family

4) Different Types of Stepfamilies:

a) -Typology I: Can be: 1) Residential children from prior relationship only, 2) nonresidential children from prior relationship only, 3) adult children only, 4) residential children from prior relationship only, 5) nonresidential children from prior relationship and this relationship, 6) nonresidential children from prior relationship and children from current relationship, 7) nonresidential and residential children from current relationship, 8) nonresidential and residential children from past and current relationship

b) -Typology II: 1) Home family mother, visiting family Father and stepmother, 2) Home family Mother and Stepfather, visiting family Father and Stepmother, 3) Home Family Mother and Stepfather, Visiting Family Father, 4) Home Family Father, visiting family Mother and Stepfather, 5) Home family Father and Stepmother, visiting family Mother and stepfather, 6) home family Father and Stepmother, visiting family Mother

c) Typology III: psychological mind-set: 1) Brady Bunch stepfamilies, 2) couples with detached stepparents and engaged parents, 3) couple-focused stepfamilies, 4) progressive stepfamilies

Many, many other combinations: if married, if gay or straight, some children and not others from prior relationships residential, etc.

PART I: THE DYNAMICS OF STEPFAMILY LIVING

1) Cultural Context of Stepfamily Living

Ideal for all families within Western societies remains the first-marriage heterosexual family, so stepfamily is often seen as an incomplete institution, with an absence of guidelines and norms. Many relationships are devalued or even no names (such as ex-spouse), little institutional/social support (signatures for schools, going into hospitals), nonexistent or ambiguous laws/social policies, seen as extensions of divorce/broken homes, words: stepchild is lesser, stepmother is wicked, and stepfather is abusive. Many negative myths: stepchildren resent and dislike their stepparents, stepchildren have more problems, steps can never learn to love each other, children should be loyal to one mother and father only, stepparents should love their children immediately, and stepfamilies are just reconstituted nuclear families. There are many negative or unrealistic media images.

This cultural context affects families and clinicians.

2) Paths to Stepfamily Living (and how this affects stepfamilies)

Divorce— In general, children mourn for extended periods, much longer than adults realize. In addition, the quality of co-parenting affects the stepfamily. There may be *no co-parenting* (can lead to conflicts under the surface, poorer overall child outcomes), *conflictive co-parenting* (this leads to the most negative child outcomes, with more divorce, loyalty conflicts, difficult for stepparents), or *parallel* (businesslike, can work well if parents would otherwise have high conflict) or *cooperative* (best results, but stepparents can be threatened). *If conflictive, problems in stepfamily can become legal/custody problems.*

Post-bereavement—still loyalty issues, watch with calling Mom or Dad. Need to grieve.

Never-married—children often have particular difficulty accepting discipline of other adult

3) Courtship in Stepfamilies

Men remarry more quickly, except poorer women remarry more

Little evidence that cohabiting is effective

Courtship is usually short, and there is little preparation for remarriage. Why?

Avoidance, naiveté, **myths** of instant love, we'll have a 'real' family again, things "have to" work out, romantic blindness

4) Couple Dynamics

Different than in first-marriage families, multiple relationships, couple relationship often neglected because of presence of powerful and interested third parties (kids, former partners). If from single parent, kid often "demoted", leads to sabotage. Also, former partners intrusive, disruptive. The couple is both establishing solidarity, accommodating, etc., and establishing authority of the stepparent simultaneously. There are more disagreements in general than first-marriage couples (if only because of different interests). Argue about: issues related to children from prior relationships, financial issues, former spouses, extended family members. *Primary issue is negotiating boundaries around and within stepfamily.* Decision-making can be more equitable than in first-marriage families (women especially often have more power), but not equal with respect to children from prior relationships. Generally, women work more, and they handle finances equally. About half have their own children, often seen as 'concrete baby', cementing household. In reality, the effect on the family can be positive, negative, or mixed. Generally, the relationships are more unstable, with higher divorce rates. In addition to selection factors, this can be due to stepfamily complexity and role ambiguity, and lack of social support.

Handout #1

Differences between First Marriage Families and Stepfamilies

- 1) The family begins after losses and changes—magnifies effect of divorce for children, children may lose some attention from remarried parent
- 2) There is less family loyalty and no shared family history
- 3) Adults and Children come together with incongruent individual, marital, and family life cycles.
- 4) Children and adults all have expectations from previous families.
- 5) Parent-Child relationships predate the new couple relationship—prior legal/emotional bonds, often leading to loyalty conflicts.
- 6) There is another biological parent in another household or in memory—competition, anger, divided loyalties, even ongoing custody issues (remarriage is a “material change of circumstance”).
- 7) Children are members of two households, sometimes there are four or more households involved in the caretaking, a “supra family system”
- 8) Little or no legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren. Society compares stepfamilies negatively
- 9) There is not a breakdown of homeostasis; it has not been established
- 10) There is a long integration period with predictable stages
- 11) A solid couple relationship does not signify good stepparent step-child relationships. The presence of children can pull couples apart as opposed to together in first-marriage families.
- 12) Intense, unexpected emotional climate
- 13) Children have more than two parenting figures
- 14) There are ambiguous family boundaries
- 15) Family is reacting to transitional stress

Generally, there is more complexity, more ambiguous boundaries, and more ambiguous roles, less cohesiveness, more loss, and more division

6) The Effect of Stepfamily Structure on Specific Stepfamily Members

The structure of the stepfamily impacts the ability of the family to meet its members **basic emotional needs**--to *belong to a group*, to *be cared about and loved with secure attachments*, and to *have control and autonomy* (Bohannen, 1993). In general, there are difficulties in all of these areas for all family members. There is a more ambiguous group, there are less secure attachments, and people feel less control.

According to Research (Ganong)

1) Stepparent

In general: Begins as an outsider. Initially stepchildren and parent of children in other household do not accept him. Often, remarried parent is not empathetic, not supportive. Also, society does not validate; active hostility, rejection. They often feel 'constantly slighted', like a visitor in the home. They often have the least power. Their "thin connection" with their stepchildren make their stepchildren's behavior particularly irritating and intrusive, so they often become overly authoritarian. The goal is to have stepparent feel a part of the group, accepted, and loved.

Specifically:

Residential stepmothers are more likely to use stern control. They are often caught between partners and children. Many feel dumped on or excluded, and caught with a lot of the work. Things fare best when they are not given ordinary gender role, and they are not expected to take care of the kids.

Non-residential stepmothers—this is more common. When they try to usurp Mother Role, either as nurturer or disciplinarian, there is often trouble. Many feel powerless, respond by: blaming/belittling biological Mother, have children of own.

Residential Stepfathers—the first two years of stepfamily life is generally the most stressful. Many stepfathers become disengaged; others step in too soon, and take the role of Father with little discussion. Those who focus on developing friendships first—"continuous affinity seekers", fare best when they choose activities chosen by stepchild, as recognition of stepchild's power. The remarried parent and the nonresidential father can have a profound effect on relationships. The best model is 'friends first', go slowly, and then proceed to 'high warmth' (quasi-kin) with less discipline. Key is to function like a parent but to realize you are not a parent.

Non-residential stepfathers—often they are quite distant. Key is supporting Mother, not undermining other family

2) Remarried Parent

Often they are the targets of anger from the children because of remarriage, especially after a death or a divorce following an affair. Often the parent fears further loss of relationships, and finds it difficult to set limits, especially when they are the nonresidential parent. They often become overly permissive with their children. They feel powerless, but usually have more power than the stepparent.

Specifically:

Residential remarried mothers—often see selves as protector/defender of children, “Motherhood mandate”, focus on children, role of “gatekeeper” from stepfather, also mediators and interpreters. Constant triangulation can lead to strain: coalitions, stepfather cut out. Often there is severe strain/role conflict. Goal is to keep stepfather in while attending to children.

Non-residential remarried mothers—Often there is jealousy, feelings of inadequacy, insecurity

Residential remarried Fathers—often push childcare onto stepmother, creating difficulty. Key is to take on more of childcare role

Non-residential remarried Fathers—often push wives onto children. Key is to facilitate going slow.

3) Children

They often feel a lack of control, and feel plucked from their original family.

They have more power, which can lead to anxiety.

Generally: boys relate better to stepparents, and stepfathers fare better than stepmothers. The most problematic relationship seems to be between stepmothers and stepdaughters

In general, children achieve poorer in school, have more mood problems, more behavior problems, more problems in interpersonal relationships. Their problems are equivalent to those in single-parent families, even though they have more financial resources. Still, differences are fairly small, so that over 40% of stepchildren score better on these outcomes than those in two-parent families. Most children do not have significant problems. Why are there more problems? The explanations include cumulative losses, conflicts, complexity, and social stigma. They may also have less nurturance and affection, even though there are more adults around. There is also more child abuse, including sexual abuse, particularly by stepfathers. This usually occurs in the context of disengagement, lack of bonding.

7) The Dynamics of Sibling Relationships (Ganong)

Children may reside either full or part-time with any combination of siblings, stepsiblings, and half-siblings. Full siblings tend to be a bit less close, but not hostile or

overly distant. With half-siblings, the degree of contact tends to determine whether the “half” disappears or not. Presence of a half-sibling can negatively affect stepparent-stepchild relationship. For stepsiblings, they generally do not consider each other kin. They get along better if they have frequent contact, share experiences, do not have to struggle over affection/resources, and there are perceived equal treatment by parental figures.

8) The Dynamics of Relationships between the Stepfamily and Grandparents and Step-grandparents (Ganong)

Grandparents can build ‘bridges’—can be valuable resources, warm and fun, and accept remarriages and accept step grandchildren and new son or daughter in law, or they can build walls, favoring grandchildren over step grandchildren. They can affect all of adults and children in later generations.

Handout #2

Typical Stages of Integration for Stepfamilies/Implications for Who One Sees in Treatment (Papernow)

- 1) Fantasy—adults expect instant love. *If at this stage, see individuals or couples*
- 2) “Immersed” in rough waters. Frequent unfamiliar, unanticipated situations. *See individuals and older adolescents*
- 3) Awareness that changes are needed. Stepparents tend to push for alliance with partners, remarried caught in middle, family splits along biological lines. Need for external validation of stepparent so they can insist on change. *See couple conjointly or individually, children if need help*
- 4) Mobilization, clash between human needs: stepparent to be accepted, appreciate, and belong, remarried fear of loss of closeness with children, children’s need to retain closeness. *See couple conjointly or individually, children if need help*
- 5) Action—three to four years as couple works out alliance. Remarried supports stepparent, stepparent supports relationship of kids and remarried. Boundary around couple is developed. *Emphasis on couple and appropriate sub-groups, including with supra-system*
- 6) Contact—stepparent is “intimate outsider”, more control and predictability. *Any supra-system grouping*
- 7) Resolution—security, cooperation between homes. Still, less cohesive and more flexible than remarried families. Rise of self-esteem in stepfamily *Can see any supra-system grouping*

Handout #3

Elements of Successful Stepfamilies

There are realistic expectations

There is a focus on the Couple relationship

The children are provided with a secure environment, have consistent schedules, and are not involved in adult conflicts. Non-custodial parents are also involved in children's lives.

There is an establishment of Constructive Rituals—bedtime stories, chores, together time, family meetings

There are clear but permeable boundaries with other households

There is an intentional focus on the development of satisfactory step-relationships

The stepparent comes in slowly and does not compete with biological parent

One on one time is emphasized for many relationships

The focus is on the development of respect and civility, not love

There are more flexible gender roles. Stepparents do more nurturing, less discipline, stepmothers less responsibility for kids in general.

There is a clear parental authority with appropriate rules, guidelines that are agreed upon, with a consistent parenting philosophy, even if there are different roles with different children.

There is a focus on cooperation with other households

Grandparents, step-grandparents and other family members are warm, do not take sides, and support development of the family

There is an appreciation of the rewards of stepfamilies—more love, more fun, more presents

Handout #4

The Assessment and Initial Sessions

- 1) Conduct an assessment of the current household--examine the communication patterns, behavioral sequences, affective levels, subsystems and structure, triangulation issues, power distribution, boundary formation, problem-solving abilities of the family.
- 2) Get three-generational genograms that include stepfamily members
- 3) Conduct an assessment of other households
- 4) Ask about legal custody, and get documentation if possible
- 5) When children are the identified clients, try to communicate with all parents and stepparents initially
- 6) Recognize what stage of integration family is in and let it inform who you see in family
- 7) Control chaos coming from the 'supra-system'
- 8) Encourage appropriate naming (no pushing)
- 9) Assess peoples' interpersonal skills and ability to empathize with each other/express themselves effectively
- 10) Conduct preliminary psycho-education about the need to contain expectations, the need not to push or run away, and the need for the stepparent to stay away from disciplinary role initially

Developing a Foundation with the Family

- 1) Validate and normalize stepfamily dynamics
- 2) Reduce collective and group helplessness
 - Help adults let go of situations that cannot control (like other household, attitude of stepchildren), encourage activity within own sphere of influence
 - support each person's point of view; help recognize that they alone are not responsible for difficulties
- 3) Attend to the family's self-esteem/emphasize positive elements of stepfamilies
Validate and support their efforts and the legitimacy of their family.
Emphasize stepfamily advantages: children have more adult role models, people need to learn flexibility in expectations, gender roles, and there may be more outside support systems
- 4) Establish that the couple has a commitment to each other
- 5) Help family let go of unrealistic expectations, but be prepared for clients seeing this as an attack on their image of a model family.

Ineffective stepfamily therapy treats stepfamilies like a regular family, takes bonding for granted, believes discipline and gender roles should be the same, and assumes there was a homeostasis that was broken. Effective stepfamily therapy recognizes that they are building a complex family that will need different, more flexible, norms in order to be successful. It also recognizes that expectations have probably been challenged, and that people have experienced loss.

Handout #6

Facilitating Stepfamily Integration

- 1) Help them deal with loss and changes
 - Identify/recognize losses: children, time with parents, space, “demotions”, fantasy of parents together.
 - Encourage children to express feelings through words and play
 - Read stepfamily books
 - Attend to each person individually.
- 2) Help them negotiate different developmental needs
 - Accept validity of different life-cycle needs
 - Help them communicate individual needs clearly
 - Help family members develop tolerance and flexibility
 - Foster empathy by emphasizing needs that are not being met: to be loved and appreciated, to belong, and to have control over life.
- 3) Assist them in establishing new traditions
 - Encourage “family meetings”
 - Encourage stepparents to go slowly with discipline
 - Encourage the retention/combining of rituals, integration of new traditions
- 4) Encourage the development of a solid couple bond
 - Accept couple as primary long-term relationship
 - Plan “couple alone time”
 - Make it clear that couple is ‘forever’
- 5) Establish a clear hierarchy between adults and children in all households
 - Establish that children should never have the power to decide on remarriage, custody, and visitation, although their feelings need to be considered and their input increases with age
- 6) Establish an atmosphere where children’s feelings are accepted
 - Establish that parents and stepparents need to assist children in expressing the full Range of their feelings, including divided loyalties and loss

- 7) Help stepfamily members form new relationships
 - Encourage “affinity-seeking behaviors” by stepparents, one-on-one
 - Attend to stepsibling, step-grandparent relationships
 - Reassure children with child-parent time

- 8) Help all the parents build “parenting coalition” (where all are nurturers but with different roles)
 - Communicate directly with parenting adults in other household
 - Keep children out of middle
 - Urge acceptance of minor differences in parenting

- 9) Rebalance the hierarchy
 - Encourage the stepparent to have support outside of home; make sure child’s power is reigned in by biological parent. *The stepparent should not have to put up with abuse. Generally speaking, stepparent should be more permissive and bio parent needs to be firmer. Goal is “authoritative parenting” by those who have developed a strong bond with the children*

- 10) Build an atmosphere of order and calm. Assist with the development of clear communication and assist with mutual problem solving. Teach negotiation, eliminate blaming

- 11) Help the family accept continual shifts in composition of household
 - Give children time to adjust
 - Respect boundary of other household
 - Rules and consequences should only affect your household
 - Provide personal space for nonresident children

- 12) Encourage the continual involvement of stepparents in children’s lives
 - Include stepparents in school, religious, sport, other activities
 - Give stepparent legal permission to act
 - Find groups supportive of stepfamilies

- 13) Provide psycho education about roles:
 - Stepparent roles. Effective step parenting involves: moving slowly, Supporting other parents
 - Role of remarried parent. Encourage “backing off” from insisting on nurturing or authoritative role for stepparent.
 - Encourage flexibility with gender roles
 - In general, stepfathers need to use less discipline, more “affinity-seeking”; stepmothers need to engage in less active nurturance and discipline that may upstage biological Mother.
 - Reduce sense of helplessness by encouraging the specific labeling of problems and focusing on specific solutions

- 14) Make specific suggestions: don't ask about other household, don't push relationships, go through mediators if there is conflict with other household
- 16) Be "rational" and prescriptive--separate feelings and behavior. Strive for stability, structure, and stability, **do not push for love**
- 17) Continually reframe peoples' behavior in terms of needs, and acknowledge achievements
- 18) Reduce therapeutic tension. Aim for comfort and hopefulness, and rely less on enactments and the creation of ambiguity.
- 19) Explore and validate fantasies even as you soften unrealistic expectations.
- 20)) Relate past history of individuals and relationships to current problems. Gently explore why particular scenarios/events affect individuals in certain ways

Handout #7

Addressing Particular Areas of Difficulty in Stepfamilies

- 1) There are insiders and outsiders and biologically-based coalitions

Therapeutic Task: Foster individual dyadic relationships

- 2) Loyalty conflicts—among kids or adults

Therapeutic task: encourage parents to speak in ways that let children know it is all right to care about, learn, and enjoy all adults. Educate parents about appropriate roles for stepparents.

- 3) Boundary problems—ambiguous or rigid boundary around couple, also too tied to other household, often by anger, sometimes affection

Therapeutic Task: encourage couple time; encourage “parenting coalition” where focus is on children

- 4) Power Issues:

- a) Fighting or Ceding too Much Power to Former Spouses

.Therapeutic task: encourage taking of appropriate control of family, focus on future, not past hurts. Don’t cede this to lawyers!

- b) Discipline issues

*Therapeutic task: Foster development of stepparent-stepchild bond.
Biological parent needs to support stepparent, delegate authority slowly*

- 5) Sensitivity about issues of closeness and distance, including what to call people, personal space, sexual feelings among stepsiblings

Therapeutic task: advise parents not to force names on kids, set boundaries around activity in household

- 6) Abuse

Helping couples form good relationships and helping stepparents to nurture their children can prevent abuse

5) Addressing Children's Needs

Common issues for children:

“Loss, loyalty, lack of control”

Hearing biological parents argue, not being able to see other parent, having parent and stepparent fight, feeling caught in the middle between biological parents, feeling a lack of control, adjusting to new rules and discipline by stepparents, frequent transitions, different roles and rules, being blamed, feeling that stepsiblings get more, sharing your room, not feeling wanted. These issues lead to feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, depression. Behavioral disturbances are regression, school failure, defiance, excessive attempts to please

Ways for parents to assist children: one-on-one time with parents (you can conduct filial family therapy), show understanding, offer appropriate choices to give a sense of control, do not criticize other family, give permission to love all parental figures, give support for “transition rituals”, communicate and coordinate with other household, offer appropriate limits

Therapy with Stepchildren: validate feelings, help mourn losses, foster a sense of control of feelings and behaviors, reassure them that this is an “adult problem” even if parent has abandoned them, release them from responsibility for parents, accept and clarify anger (often anger at steps is displaced anger at bios), help them “out of the middle”, help children express feelings in words/art/play, assist them in seeing that reorganization of time is not loss of love. *Key is always to work with adults as well, support “co-parenting”.*

1) *Babies* tend to be anxious or fearful

Toddlers magical thinking—their thoughts cause problems

Suggestions: Stress need for predictable nurturance, encourage cooperation between households, calendars, books on divorce and remarriage

2) *Elementary school*—6-12—judgmental, severe loyalty conflicts, may exclude stepparent, or stepsiblings

Suggestions: encourage slow changes in routines, don't comment negatively about other household, and share what happened when come back, don't push them to share information about other household

3) *Adolescents*—need for individuation, identity, sexuality

Suggestions: Help adults learn to see requests for changes in residence as part of search for identity, normalize sexual feelings about stepparents or siblings, keep “dress code”, keep passion in the bedroom, encourage contact with other parent, recognize role of peers

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Press

Resources:

1) Online

National Stepfamily Resource Center www.stepfamily.info with local support

Groups/therapists

The Stepfamily Foundation www.stepfamily.org informational

Egroups

Online support group www.steptogether.org

2) Good books for consumers:

Visher and Visher How to Win as a Stepfamily

O'Conner The Truth About Stepfamilies

Newman Stepfamily Realities

Einstein and Albert (sic) (1986) Strengthening Your Stepfamily Circle Pines, MI:
American Guidance Service