Implications of Remarriage and Stepfamily Formation for Marriage Education[*]

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Couples in remarriages with stepchildren are a significant portion of the marriage population and have unique educational needs regarding aspects of couple functioning within the context of stepfamily development. From a review of the literature, we examine current curricula focused on these couples. Information is offered on implementation issues regarding recruitment, delivery context, facilitator and participant characteristics, and evaluation.

For practitioners to best meet the needs of couples through marriage education, recognition of the diversity of couples' experiences is important. Best practices involve the consideration of developmental differences between couples in first marriages, and those who remarry and have children from previous unions (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Recent figures show that approximately half of marriages annually are remarriages for one or both partners, and the majority (approximately 65%) of those adults have children from a previous relationship, thus forming stepfamilies (e.g., Chadwick & Heaton, 1999; U.S. Census Bureau, 1998, Table 157).

Research suggests that remarriages are at slightly greater risk of dissolution than first marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Estimates do not differentiate remarriages without children from stepfamilies, so little is known about the dissolution of stepfamilies in comparison with dissolution of remarriages in general. However, the research on remarriages that form stepfamilies has grown steadily and provides an empirical base to inform practice aimed at reducing risks of redivorce. Stepfamilies are complex; their dynamics differ from those of first families. For example, parenting roles among biological and stepparents have to be negotiated (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), former partners affect the decision making that goes on within the household (Brown, Eichenberger, Portes, & Christensen, 1991), and stepparent-stepchild relationships have to be developed (Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). These issues do not exist for couples entering first marriages without children. Because of the added complexity, researchers and clinicians argue that effective interventions to promote satisfying stepfamily couple relationships should address factors that are unique to stepfamilies, as well as factors that are common to all couples (e.g., Halford et al., 2003; Lawton & Sanders, 1994).

Little evidence shows that the processes affecting couple functioning in first marriages differ from those affecting functioning in stepfamilies (e.g., communication skills, empathy, values and beliefs, social skills, and positive marital illusions). However, it is our observation that the general research on marital couples offers an incomplete examination of the full range of factors related to couple functioning in stepfamilies. Relying solely on the general couple and marital research to inform practice with couples in stepfamilies may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet their unique needs. Thus, educators run the risk of leaving out important information and skills.

Previous efforts to organize the empirical knowledge on stepfamilies and remarriage suggest implications for clinical intervention (Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993) and policy (e.g., Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989); however, no recent efforts suggest linkages between empirical information and remarriage education for couples in stepfamilies. Based on a review of relevant research and information on best practices for effective family life education, we examine available educational curricula targeting couples in stepfamilies regarding the programs' content and design. We also offer information and suggestions for implementation of marriage education for couples in stepfamilies.

Methods

We applied recommended procedures for the development of effective family life education (Hughes, 1994) as a guide for examining existing curricula. Recommendations focus on the use of theory, clear linkages with research, attention to the educational context, components of curricula, and use of evaluation. We reviewed the literature and identified factors affecting functioning in stepfamilies and organized them into themes for examining current educational programs for these couples. We also included program design elements associated with effective family life education noted by Hughes (e.g., variety of teaching methods, teaching aids, theoretical framework stated). From this, we explicated specific criteria for such programs. Using existing curricula for couples in stepfamilies (descriptions and sources are provided in the Appendix), we applied the criteria to examine each program's content and design.

Reviewing the Literature

To build a basis for reviewing program content, we searched the literature on stepfamilies. Because stepfamilies begin with more than two persons, we identified studies related to both stepfamily and couple functioning. Researchers note that stepfamily functioning and couple functioning are inextricably linked, suggesting that it is difficult to create " … a happy second marriage without also creating a workable stepfamily" (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 179). We made a special effort to identify studies that empirically link factors specifically to couple functioning in stepfamilies.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed review and critique of the literature (for this, see Coleman & Ganong,

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1990; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Instead, we present a summary of our review and focus on the examination of existing programs. References and examples of findings are illustrative and not inclusive.

Our results are organized in the following way. Following a summary of research themes, we provide suggestions for program content. Interpreting implications for education from research is a daunting task, especially in this area of study, because too few studies are success focused (i.e., few studies identify factors and processes that facilitate the development of healthy couple functioning and stepfamily relationships; Coleman et al., 2000). Instead, studies primarily address problem-focused questions that provide information on what does not work and what negatively affects couple functioning in stepfamilies. The implication is that the goal of prevention or intervention work is to raise awareness and build skills to avoid or reverse these processes. Certainly, we note where there is information on factors associated with successful couples in stepfamilies. We also note a key limitation in the studies reviewed: Vastly more is known about stepfather families than stepmother-only families, or complex stepfamilies (which contain a stepmother and stepfather, and children from both spouses' previous relationships). This is due in large part to the prevalence of stepfather families (roughly 80% of residential stepfamilies [Fields, 2001]). When drawing implications for program content from this research, generalizability to other types of stepfamilies should be cautiously considered and remains an empirical question. Continued work to evaluate programs with empirically informed topics will validate the interpretations offered.

Results

Themes

Our review resulted in an extensive list of factors that influence couple functioning in stepfamilies. We then identified themes and labeled categories and subcategories to use in examining program content and design (see Tables 1 and 2). Importantly, our organization offers a broad picture of the most consistent themes in the literature. We do not attempt to fully and completely articulate the nuances and complexity of this literature.

The "Incomplete Institution"

Originally conceptualized by Cherlin (1978), "incomplete institution" refers to the lack of norms and institutional supports for stepfamilies. Consistent evidence is provided for both the lack of sociocultural supports and the lack of positive opinions of remarriages and stepfamilies (e.g., Mason, 1998; Visher et al., 2003). Members of stepfamilies face stigmatization, have fewer extrafamilial supports, or are simply not acknowledged in social policies and practices. For example, few policies and legal practices exist that recognize a familial relationship between stepparents and stepchildren (Mason). Perceiving stigmatization and nonsupport is thought to negatively affect the couple and stepfamily members (Dainton, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Knox and Zusman (2001) found specifically that lack of support from extended family and friends was related to lower marital happiness among second wives in stepfamilies. Norms about financial management in stepfamilies also are undeveloped. Research shows that financial issues affect couple functioning in stepfamilies, particularly issues pertaining to decisions regarding

the combining of separate assets and the support of the resident and nonresident children (e.g., Engel, 1999). Lown, McFadden, and Crossman (1989) summarized the research and concluded that establishing mutual agreement on money management and responsibilities is key to stepfamily functioning and should be advocated in remarriage education programs.

Implications for program content. We suggest that educational program content encompass information and skills related to formal and informal institutional supports for the couples in stepfamilies. Specifically, program facilitators could have explicit discussions with couples and provide information that validates the experiences of stepfamily couples outside the family, noting stigmas, lack of supports, and the ambiguous legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren. In clinical work, validation was helpful for couples (Visher et al., 2003). Strategies for building support can be included. These might include forming support groups and advocating for school policies and practices that recognize stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett, 1995). Programs also can elicit from participants strategies that they have found helpful. Further, information and skills for negotiating financial issues and building consensus also are needed.

Realistic Stepfamily Dynamics and Development

Research indicates that successful couples in stepfamilies have realistic expectations about stepfamily dynamics and development, with an emphasis on the time necessary to establish roles and to determine their family's particular functioning pattern for success (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Visher et al., 2003). Expectations of "instant love" among family members and "instant parent-child relationship adjustment" are associated with lower marital quality (Hetherington & Kelly; Visher et al.). There is consistent evidence from both clinical and nonclinical samples that the first several years can be turbulent for stepfamilies (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998), and remarriages are at greatest risk for divorce in the first 5 years (Clarke & Wilson, 1994). We note that Papernow (1993) identified eight developmental stages based on interviews with 50 stepfamilies (half clinical and half nonclinical families), but her stages lack further empirical validation. Bray and Kelly observed a developmental pattern of three "cycles" of turbulence, adjustment, and the re-emergence of turbulence across time among their sample of 100 stepfamilies. However, predictable patterns found across a larger representative sample of stepfamilies show a more general pattern of 1–2 years of disorganization and turbulence and 1–3 years of stabilization (Hetherington & Kelly).

Research on other aspects of stepfamily dynamics that affect couple functioning suggests that successful stepfamilies form relationships slowly and most often form relationships dyadically rather than as a family unit (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). Family cohesion may not be necessary for couple strength and stepfamily success (Bray & Kelly, 1998). In fact, rather than a functionally best type of stepfamily, successful stepfamilies generally are defined in terms of respectful behaviors among members and flexibility (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Instead of a prescription for family roles and rules, spousal agreement on family and parenting roles is associated with less couple conflict and greater marital satisfaction (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Pasley et al., 1993). For example, Palisi, Orleans, Caddell, and Korn (1991) found that decision-making processes and agreement regarding decisions about stepchildren were the

Table 1
Topic Coverage in Reviewed Remarriage Curricula

Program Name	Theme 1 Incomplete Institution			Theme 2 Stepfamily Development		Theme 3 Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship			Theme 4	Theme 5
	Validation of social experience	External supports	Financial issues	Realistic expectations about development	Skills to promote unique form and roles	Recommended patterns of interaction and authority roles	Discipline strategies	Stepchild behaviors	Couple Relationship Priority	Relationship with Former Partners
Designing dynamic stepfamilies: Bringing the pieces to peace. Taylor & Taylor (2003)	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	1
Learning to step together: A course for stepfamily adults Currier (1982)	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2
New beginnings: A remarriage preparation program manual Chidwick (1994)	1		2	2	2				2	1
Skills training for stepparents: A personal development program Levant & Nelson (1984)	1				2	1	2	1		1
Smart steps for adults and children in stepfamilies Adler-Baeder (2001)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Stepping stones Olsen (1997)	2	2	2	2	2	2		2	2	2
Stepping together Bosch, Gebeke, & Meske (1992)	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2
Stepping together: Creating strong stepfamilies Visher & Visher (1997)	2		1	2	2	2		1	2	2

Note: Blank = Not included in program; 1 = Some reference (i.e., an example, a discussion question, etc.); 2 = Discussion of the issue or area.

strongest predictors of marital adjustment in their sample of step-families.

Implications for program content. From these findings, we suggest that programs promote an understanding of these relational and developmental differences. Information regarding the common finding of turbulent early years in stepfamily formation can assist couples in forming or maintaining realistic expectations. Additionally, empathy and negotiating skills appear key for establishing mutual agreement on roles for family members and rules regarding household functioning, parenting strategies, and overall family functioning and form. Bray and Kelly (1998) and Hetherington and Kelly (2002) observed these traits among well-functioning stepfamilies and couples in their longitudinal studies. Similarly, clinical observation supports that these skills are helpful and related to better couple functioning (Visher & Visher, 1996).

The Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship

The quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship affects couple conflict and marital quality (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). The direction of influence is not as clear as in first marriages. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) explain:

> In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of happy family life, leading to more positive parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed. Establishing

> some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren … may be the key to a happy second marriage and to successful functioning in stepfamilies. (p. 181)

Therefore, it follows that factors related to stepparent-stepchild relationship quality are indirectly related to couple functioning.

Factors related to stepparent-stepchild relationship quality include parenting behaviors, stepchild characteristics, and stepchild behaviors. The research consistently finds that stepparents who serve as secondary parents initially (i.e., they do not immediately assume a disciplinarian role but are warm and supportive with their stepchild and support their spouse in their discipline role) are more satisfied with their stepparent-stepchild relationships (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In general, stepfathers are more authoritarian, coercive, and disengaged—particularly when they are not biological parents—compared with biological fathers (e.g., Bray, Berger, Silverblatt, & Hollier, 1987; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). The effect of such disengaging behaviors is not clear, but coercive, punitive behaviors can negatively affect the stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., Bray & Kelly; Hetherington & Kelly).

Age of child at remarriage is an important moderator of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and the potential for bonding. When children are younger, there is a greater likelihood of "parental claiming" of the stepchild and acceptance of the stepparent as a parent by the stepchild (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Marsiglio, 2004). However, it is noted that a stepparent need not achieve the same level of a parent-child bond, as

Table 2
Design Elements of Reviewed Remarriage Curricula

Program Name	Theoretical framework explicitly stated	Empirical references provided	Teaching methods that promote interaction	Teaching aids provided	Recruitment and implementation recommendations	Program effects documentation/evaluation materials provided
Designing dynamic stepfamilies: bringing the pieces to peace Gordon & Taylor (2003)	None	NO	Discussion: YES Role play: NO	Background information: NO PowerPoint: NO Video: YES Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: NO	Recruit: YES Implement: YES	Documentation: NO Materials Customer satisfaction: NO Change measures: NO
Learning to step together: A course for stepfamily adults Currier (1982)	Adult learning theory	YES	Discussion: YES Role play: YES	Background information: NO PowerPoint: NO Video: NO Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: YES	Recruit: YES Implement: YES	Documentation: NO Materials Customer satisfaction: YES Change measures: NO
New beginnings: A remarriage preparation program manual Chidwick (1994)	Experiential learning theory	NO	Discussion: YES Role play: YES	Background information: NO PowerPoint: NO Video: NO Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: YES	Recruit: YES Implement: YES	Documentation: NO Materials Customer satisfaction: YES Change measures: NO
Skills training for stepparents: A personal development program. Levant & Nelson (1984)	Parent training and interpersonal process recall method	NO	Discussion: YES Role play: YES	Background information: NO PowerPoint: NO Video: NO Participant manuals or handouts: NO Resource list: NO	Recruit: NO Implement: NO	Documentation: YES Materials Customer satisfaction: NO Change measures: NO
Smart steps for adults and children in stepfamilies Adler-Baeder (2001)	Ecological, systems, life course and family strengths perspective	YES	Discussion: YES Role play: YES	Background information: YES PowerPoint: YES Video: YES Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: YES	Recruit: YES Implement: YES	Documentation: NO Materials Customer satisfaction: YES Change measures: YES
Stepping stones Olsen (1997)	None	YES	Discussion: YES Role play: YES	Background information: YES PowerPoint: NO Video: YES Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: YES	Recruit: YES Implement: YES	Documentation: YES Materials Customer satisfaction: YES Change measures: YES
Stepping together Bosch, Gebeke, & Meske (1992)	Family systems theory	YES	Discussion: YES Role play: NO	Background information: YES PowerPoint: NO Video: YES Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: YES	Recruit: YES Implement: YES	Documentation: NO Materials Customer satisfaction: YES Change measures: YES
Stepping together Creating strong stepfamilies Visher & Visher (1997)	None	NO	Discussion: YES Role play: YES	Background information: NO PowerPoint: NO Video: YES Participant manuals or handouts: YES Resource list: YES	Recruit: NO Implement: YES	Documentation: NO Evaluation Materials Customer satisfaction: YES Change measures: NO

is common for biological parents, to be successful as a stepparent (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Acceptance is also key to stepparent-stepchild relationship quality, such that children's behaviors and attitudes toward stepparents can negatively affect stepparent-stepchild relationships (e.g., O'Connor, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1997). Children, particularly pre-adolescents and adolescents (ages 10–15), often are the initiators of conflict with stepparents (e.g., Bray & Kelly; Hetherington & Kelly).

Implications for program content. Based on information provided from studies of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, we suggest that program content include information on and practice in strategies to build positive stepparent-stepchild relationships (i.e., easing into a parenting role over time, not expecting a parent-child type bond if the stepchild is older). Information on child development and behavior management techniques may be especially helpful for stepparents who are not also biological parents. Information on the developmental differences found among stepchildren (adolescent stepchildren versus younger stepchildren) and their impact on stepparent-stepchild relationships and the potential for bonding also should be included. Raising awareness of the potential difficulties with older stepchildren may promote proactive steps on the part of both the biological parent and stepparent to lessen the intensity of the potential conflict. Further,

normalizing the likelihood of developing less of a bond between stepparent and older stepchildren is suggested.

Building the Couple Relationship as a Priority

The direct influence of the stepparent-stepchild relationship on the couple relationship is evidence of the weakness of the marital dyad compared with other dyads in the stepfamily that have a prior history, such as the parent-child dyad. Indications are that giving priority to the marital relationship and building relationship strengths is essential for reducing marital stress (Dahl, Cowgill, & Asmundsson, 1987), a finding validated in clinical work (Visher et al., 2003).

Implications for program content. We suggest that program content include information on the vulnerability of the couple relationship in stepfamilies and the benefit of general couple strength-building knowledge and skills (e.g., friendship building, conflict management). Programs can either include specific sessions on this topic or suggest participation in general marriage education programs.

Relationships with Former Partners

Most couples in remarriages have experienced divorce rather than death of a spouse. Substantial empirical evidence shows that both a highly negative and a highly involved relationship with a former spouse can negatively affect the new couple's relationship quality (e.g., Buunk & Matsaers, 1999; Knox & Zusman, 2001). Emotionally divorcing and establishing appropriate boundaries with a former spouse are essential for healthy remarriages (Weston & Macklin, 1990). Guisinger, Cowan, and Schuldberg (1989) found that when remarried fathers and their wives had more positive assessments of his former wife, they also reported higher marital satisfaction. High-conflict coparenting relationships also negatively affect children and may result in children's negative behaviors (Amato, 2000). Therefore, children's negative behaviors are just as likely to be attributable to postdivorce adjustment issues and conflict between parents as they are to stepfamily adjustment issues. As described previously, children's negative behaviors can negatively affect the new marital relationship.

Implications for program content. We suggest program content on information and skills that promote a cooperative, businesslike relationship with a former spouse in order to prevent or alter the negative impact of an unhealthy former spouse relationship on the current couple relationship. This may include practices in nondefensive listening and nonconfrontational communication, strategies for having "business" meetings regarding the children's schedules and needs, and awareness of behaviors and strategies that may lead to conflict.

Program Design

Hughes (1994) suggested that research-based family life education programs include an explanation of the theoretical approach and evidence of empirical linkages for program content (preferably explicit). Studies of program effectiveness suggest that the use of a variety of teaching or facilitation methods that move beyond awareness-raising of potential problems and promote strength-building strategies and skills that involve the participants have the best chance for positively affecting outcomes (Hughes). Thus, family life education programs that are primarily didactic are less effective than interactive programs in promoting

knowledge and skills among participants. Further, quality program curricula provide easy-to-follow lesson plans and descriptions, recruitment and implementation recommendations, and evaluation documentation and materials (Hughes).

Criteria

Based on the literature, we identified seven criteria for assessing existing programs (see Tables 1 and 2):

1. Inclusion of expected research-based themes (see Table 1). Importantly, the empirical literature provides no information on the relative importance of the content areas, so we reserved judgment on the adequacy of the coverage and simply looked for inclusion and noted quantity.
2. Theoretical framework explicitly stated.
3. Empirical references provided.
4. Variety of teaching methods that promote interaction. We looked for program elements beyond didactic presentations of information.
5. Teaching aides for facilitator (background information, PowerPoint, video) and participants (handouts, participant manual, resource and referral list).
6. Recruiting and implementation materials.
7. Documentation of empirically validated program effects, including the use of control groups. In addition to short-term effects, we also looked for information that would show sustained effects over time, and any evaluation instruments (i.e., both customer satisfaction and program impact questionnaires) used.

Although the criteria are consistent with quality family life education programs (Hughes, 1994), we recognize that educators must determine for themselves which programs and resources best meet the needs of the couples in stepfamilies they serve. The best length of program, focus of program, and style and design of program may depend on the context, the audience (i.e., characteristics of participants), and the facilitator's strengths and preferences.

Program Information

Information on all currently available programs designed to be offered in an educational group setting for couples in remarriages and stepfamilies is included. We emphasize that marriage educators may not view programs for stepfamilies as "marriage education" programs; however, remarriages with children form marital and stepfamily relationships simultaneously, and these are inextricably linked. To locate curricula, we searched several social science databases (e.g., PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, Academic Elite) for articles on program development, evaluation, and intervention related to stepfamilies and remarriages. We also accessed information from the Stepfamily Association of America (n.d.), a clearinghouse for information and resources for stepfamilies, and SmartMarriages.com, a clearinghouse for relationship and marriage programming (Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education, n.d.).

This search resulted in identifying 19 programs that target stepfamilies and or remarriages. Of these 19, programs that targeted children only or that focused on only one issue area in stepfamilies (e.g., Lown et al., 1989) were not reviewed. We also excluded programs that are designed to be (a) delivered by mental health professionals only in a clinical setting, (b) for in-home

or nonfacilitated use, and (c) early programs that are no longer in print (i.e., Einstein & Albert, 1986; Larson, Anderson, & Morgan, 1984), as well as programs explicitly based on biblical principles and intended for a religious audience only. Further, Internet-based resources that are not presented or available as curricula for use in group educational settings were excluded. Exclusion of any program that fit our criteria is inadvertent or due to inaccessibility of the leader manuals during the review period.

Brief descriptions of the eight programs included in the review are provided in the Appendix. Table 1 summarizes our assessment of the match between the topics suggested by the research themes and each program's content. A blank cell in Table 1 indicates that the program did not include information in that area. A 1 indicates some mention of the topic or the use of brief examples. A 2 indicates a lecture or discussion of the issue or area. Although some discussions were more thorough than others, programs were given a 2 if they provided multiple examples, activities, discussions, commentary, or suggestions. Table 2 summarizes the match between recommended program elements and design. The table format allows the reader a quick view of the programs and an opportunity for comparison. The following summaries highlight elements of the programs reviewed.

Designing Dynamic Stepfamilies: Bringing the Pieces to Peace (DDS). This is a video-based program developed by Taylor and Taylor (2003). The program can be adapted to a 1-day conference or an 8–12 week series. Total running time of the DVD or VHS tape is 4 hours and 24 minutes. To varying degrees, the program touches on all of the topics. Some information is given on incomplete institution issues, the stepparent-stepchild relationship, prioritizing the couple relationship, emotionally divorcing one's spouse, and promoting a positive coparenting relationship. Approximately one third of the program is dedicated to the "Stages of Stepfamily War," an adaptation of Papernow's (1993) developmental stages.

The program is predominantly didactic in nature, and no theoretical framework is explicitly stated. It was designed to be taught by the Taylors through their video; the study guide provides a facilitator with discussion questions. No other teaching aids, background information, nor evaluative material are provided; the program does offer implementation and recruitment suggestions. Although most of the topics covered have empirical support, only two references are provided in the study guide. Instead, the authors refer primarily to their own experiences and include information from popular authors (e.g., John Gray). Empirically validated program effects are not identified.

Learning to Step Together (LST). Developed by Currier (1982), this program addresses in six 2-hour sessions all of the topics identified from the empirical research. To help couples with incomplete institution issues, the program offers minilectures on social support for stepfamilies and on legal issues and a lecture and exercise on finances. The program covers stepfamily myths, expectations, and issues regarding stepfamily development. The program promotes the use of I-messages and family meetings to facilitate communication. An entire session is devoted to stepparenting issues, and gradually moving into a parenting role is advocated. Some information is provided on positive parenting and effective discipline strategies. Two minilectures provide information and suggestions on how to strengthen the couple relationship, and five tips are provided on developing a businesslike relationship with former spouses.

The program is both didactic and interactive. The author articulates an approach guided by adult learning theory and uses a variety of educational approaches, including lectures, discussions, role-plays, and exercises. In addition to handouts, a resource list of books and readings for adults, children, and group leaders is included, but the references are dated (prior to 1982). Other teaching aids, such as background information, recruiting materials, and overheads, are not included. A customer satisfaction evaluation form is provided, but there are no reports of program effects studies.

New Beginnings: A Remarriage Preparation Workbook (NB). This 8-hour program was designed by Chidwick (1994) through suggestions and evaluations offered by a group of remarried couples. Using an experiential learning method, each session includes an introduction of the topic, followed by exercises designed to integrate and personalize participants' understanding of each topic. Program sessions include some of the expected topics (i.e., financial issues, realistic expectations about stepfamily development, building the couple relationship, and dealing with former spouses), but little guidance is provided for developing stepparent-stepchild relationships and extrafamilial supports. Much attention is given to the previous marriage and resolving issues from individuals' histories. This includes exploring the past relationships, one's family of origin, and past patterns of resolving conflict. In addition, there is an extensive discussion of spirituality, defined as an individual's values and beliefs system and its impact on family life.

The format is a balance of information presentation, practice exercises, and discussion. Teaching aids are limited to a participant manual. Recruiting materials and a customer satisfaction evaluation questionnaire are provided, as is a resource list of books and programs (dated before 1992). There are no reported studies of program effects.

Skills Training for Stepparents: A Personal Developmental Approach (STS). Designed by Levant and Nelson (1984), this 24-hour program (eight 3-hour sessions) focuses on personal development and interactional skills for stepparents. Although scenarios for practice are related to the stepfamily context, the emphasis is on the process of communication rather than on the issues related to stepfamilies. There is limited coverage of the expected topics. In fact, there are no references to studies of stepfamilies and little implicit evidence of reliance on empirical information. An interpersonal process recall method, which focuses on identifying feelings that emerge during interactions, is used to facilitate personal awareness and "genuineness." Through demonstration and role play, participants are guided to acquire interactional skills, such as attending, listening and responding to feelings, and self-awareness of feelings. A participant manual is included. There are no additional teacher's aids included, and no stepfamily resource information is provided for participants. The last session focuses on the participants' processing of the program content through open-ended questions and could be used as evaluation by facilitators; however, it is not described as such. Importantly, this program is the only one that provided evidence of program effects (Nelson & Levant, 1991). Using a nonrandomized experimental design consisting of 14 program families and 20 comparison families, differences between groups were found. Results should be cautiously interpreted because of the small sample. Participants showed improvements in targeted communication skills (e.g., empathy skills, communicating directions), and children reported improvements in their relationship with the trained parent. Effects on couple relationship quality were not documented.

Smart Steps (SmSt). Smart Steps is a 12-hour curriculum developed by Adler-Baeder (2001). Using an ecological family

systems framework, the program features parallel sessions for both adults and children in stepfamilies. The adult program addresses all of the expected topics. Family, community, and institutional supports are discussed, as are financial and legal issues. Reviews of myths and realistic expectations are provided. The module on building couple strengths draws from the work of John Gottman (Gottman & Silver, 1999) to teach participants how to recognize negative patterns and develop strategies for building couple strengths. The session on stepparenting and child conduct incorporates both child development information and authoritative parenting strategies to manage behavior. One session focuses entirely on promoting positive postdivorce coparenting skills that can buffer the negative factors associated with postdivorce families. The skills focus on conflict reduction, such as putting things in writing and using a public place for dropping off or picking up children. Topics for the parallel children's program include stepfamily myths and realities, expected changes, understanding each other, conflict management, and communication.

The program promotes interaction and has an overt strength and skill-building approach. Participants learn through minilectures, group discussions, role-plays, and media presentations. Teaching aids include extensive research background information, PowerPoint slides, resource lists, handouts, recruiting and implementation suggestions, and evaluation material (pre- and postprogram measures). Although the program cites empirical studies, a complete reference list is not contained in the program and must be requested from the author. Empirically validated program effects are not documented.

Stepping Stones (StSt). This 6-hour program (Olsen, 1997) is designed for in-home study or facilitated groups. All expected topics are covered. For information on children's development and general parenting strategies, facilitators are encouraged to access Cooperative Extension publications on these topics to use as necessary, depending on the child's age and discipline issue. A bibliography of references and resources is provided. A theoretical framework is not explicitly stated. The program design uses a balance of information presentation (participant handouts), discussion, and activities for practice with participant families. There is limited background information provided for facilitators beyond that contained in the participant lesson handouts. Additionally, detailed leader guidelines are provided for Lesson 1 only; general guidelines are provided for the remaining five lessons. Teaching aids are provided in the form of color transparencies for Lesson 1, a video, and fact sheets. Extensive recruiting materials (e.g., press releases, brochure master, enrollment forms, certificate forms) are provided. Of particular note is a well-developed implementation plan. An evaluation that includes questions related to gains in knowledge is provided. An unpublished evaluation of program effects is reported. Based on data collected from 32 participants, short-term increases in knowledge regarding stepfamily functioning were documented immediately after participation in the program. No comparison group was used.

Stepping Together (ST). This six-session (2 hours each) program (Bosch, Gebeke, & Meske, 1992) uses a family systems approach and targets both the couple and children (ages 5 and older) for four of the six sessions. The majority of the expected topics are covered through minilectures and practice exercises. These include highlighting differences between first families and stepfamilies, the stepparent-stepchild legal relationship, common issues (realistic expectations), principles of couple communication,

evolution of stepparent authority, and disciplining stepchildren. There is considerable emphasis on developing communication strategies to address issues and applying information and strategies to participants' individual family situations. Stressors and tasks are framed within a model of "stepfamily stages" and listed as Remarriage, Children Are Present, Family Members Try to Identify with Their Position in the Family, Children Leave Home, and Dealing with Loss. The theoretical or empirical basis for these stages is not discussed.

The program is both didactic and interactive, incorporating lectures, group and couple activities, and guided discussions. There is extensive use of reprints of materials (overheads and handouts) from other published programs. Although a video is provided, its use is not clearly defined in the leader manual. Materials for recruiting and evaluation measures—both customer satisfaction and reported change in knowledge and behavior—are included. An extensive packet of resources and articles for participants is provided, but all sources date before 1990. There are no reports of evaluative studies of program effects.

Stepping Together: Creating Strong Stepfamilies (ST-CSS). This 12-hour program was designed by Visher and Visher (1997) for use with couples in stepfamilies. The majority of expected program topics are covered. There is considerable time spent on identifying stepfamily myths and realities, developing the stepparent-stepchild relationship, strengthening the couple relationship, and promoting healthy relationships with former partners. There is less attention given to legal and financial issues, parenting strategies, and building extrafamilial supports. The authors also describe Papernow's (1993) stages of stepfamily development. The program format uses both information presentation and interactive discussion exercises. Teaching aids include handouts, a participant manual, and a video of a stepfamily wedding. A small list of resource materials, implementation suggestions, and a customer satisfaction evaluation questionnaire are provided. No theoretical framework, reference list, background readings, or recruitment recommendations are included. Empirically validated program effects are not identified.

Overview of Findings

The eight curricula varied in their coverage of expected topics, some with a balanced inclusion of all five themes (LST, StSt, and SmSt), others that emphasized some themes more than others (NB, DDS, ST-CSS, and ST), and one that did not focus on stepfamily issues, but on skills to address those issues (STS). Stepfamily stages were emphasized in three of the programs (DDS, ST, and ST-CSS). We believe that, given the lack of strong empirical evidence of a predictable trajectory for stepfamilies, use of stages should be qualified (i.e., the explanation that stepfamily developmental stages have a conceptual base rather than clear empirical validation).

Some programs were more didactic in nature (DDS, NB), whereas others ranged from a balance of didactic and interactive (ST-CSS, SmSt, StSt, ST, and LST) to predominantly interactive (STS). Programs also varied in their inclusion and type of teacher aids, some providing a broad range (StSt, SmSt), some a moderate amount (ST, LST, and NB), and some very little (STS, DDS, ST-CSS). Only one of the programs (STS) provided published outcome evaluations (Nelson & Levant, 1991), and one provided unpublished outcome effects information (StSt).

Implementation Issues

Regarding the implementation of marriage education programs for couples in stepfamilies, several issues warrant consideration. These pertain to recruitment, facilitator and participant characteristics, the inclusion of children, addressing diversity, evaluation, and the linking of remarriage and marriage education.

Recruiting Silent Couples

Despite the prevalence of couples in stepfamilies, many—perhaps most—do not willingly or knowingly self-identify as different from first-marriage couples (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996). Inevitably, a primary factor may be the negative stigma that persists and perceptions of nonsupportive communities (Coleman & Ganong, 1994). Assuming both a reluctance to distinguish themselves as different and a lack of knowledge of differences between first marriages and those forming stepfamilies, recruitment for participants may be a considerable issue for marriage educators targeting this population. When potential participants contact program providers, they may be screened by asking the question, "Does either of you have children from a previous relationship?" The screener can then say, "As a stepfamily, here are some of the ways you may be different from first families ... ," followed by information on both general marriage education and remarriage education. Additionally, the community context can invite self-identification. For example, church leaders can explicitly recognize the prevalence of couples in stepfamilies in their congregation and community, along with their unique needs, and then validate the offering of a marriage education program for them (Deal, 2002).

Facilitator and Group Characteristics

Indications are that potential participants in family life education programs feel most comfortable with others like them (e.g., Lengua et al., 1992). This may be especially true for couples in stepfamilies because of the negative stigma associated with them. Although program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, effectiveness will likely be enhanced if couples forming stepfamilies participate in a homogeneous group. Similarly, facilitators who are in a stepfamily themselves may be the most effective in delivering program material. We argue that facilitators with such experience may be perceived as more supportive, empathic, and caring because they are members of stepfamilies.

Inclusion of Children

It can be argued that marriage education is for adults, but evidence suggests that children's behaviors toward stepparents can negatively affect the stepparent-stepchild relationship and subsequently couple functioning (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; O'Connor et al., 1997). We conclude that couple functioning is enhanced in stepfamilies by encouraging preadolescents and adolescents to learn about stepfamily development and their common issues and to learn effective communication skills, anger management, and conflict de-escalation strategies. This is consistent with the family systemic approaches often used in therapy (see Nichols & Swartz, 2001). Few of the programs reviewed included children; one program provides classes simultaneously for children ages 10–15 (SmSt) and another suggested attendance by children in four of the six sessions (ST). If one of these

programs is adopted, facilitators should be comfortable with the dynamics of the necessary learning environment for pre-adolescents and adolescents, and knowledgeable in child development and children's learning styles. Marriage educators whose experiences are solely with adult learning environments may want to involve experienced youth development leaders as facilitators.

Diverse Populations

As in marital research, most of what is known about stepfamilies comes from studies of Caucasian couples and family members. There are some indications that the identified patterns that exist among Caucasian stepfamilies may not exist among other ethnic groups, particularly those that have norms of a multiple-parental model and a complex network of kin. For example, in African American communities, it is not unusual for a child to be parented by other family members and nonfamily members (e.g., aunts, grandmother, close friend; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993). Therefore, it is likely that patterns of conflictual interactions among stepfamily members that result from competing roles may not exist or be weaker in other cultural contexts. This remains an empirical question (for a detailed discussion, see Berger, 1998). Until there is evidence of program effectiveness among diverse audiences, educators should be sensitive to cultural differences that may be counter to program assumptions.

Lack of Evaluative Studies

As is common in marriage education, much remains to be learned about appropriate research–practice links and program effectiveness. Studies of effectiveness of education programs for couples in stepfamilies are virtually nonexistent. Educators can significantly contribute to our knowledge by documenting short-term and long-term program effects using randomized controlled experimental designs with this population. This should be considered an essential final step in the implementation of any program.

Evaluative studies also are needed to answer related research questions: What formats work best? What content is most important in preserving a remarriage? Should content differ by type of couple (i.e., stepfather couples, stepmother couples, complex stepfamily couples)? What teaching processes work best with remarrieds? What is the value of follow-up or booster sessions? Is education alone enough to help remarried couples in distress? Further, special emphasis should be given to examining the effectiveness of existing programs with ethnically and economically diverse couples.

Linking Remarriage and Marriage Education

Offering curricula that address the unique needs of couples in stepfamilies need not serve as a substitute for general marriage education curricula. Indications are that couples in stepfamilies need both. As stated previously, no evidence suggests that the processes involved in healthy first marriages are unimportant in remarriages. Compounded needs (i.e., information on general marital processes and information on stepfamily dynamics and development) can be addressed either through the addition of other marriage education curricula to remarriage and stepfamily education curricula, or through the encouragement of couples in stepfamilies to attend both a general marriage education program and one designed for them specifically.

Conclusion

Couples in stepfamilies could be a significant portion of the population served by marriage educators. However, these couples face unique issues not addressed by general marriage education curricula. Our examination of the empirical literature on couples in stepfamilies reveals several important areas that can impact couple functioning. We examined eight education programs designed for these couples. Several of these programs include the important topics and match well with the criteria established for effective family life education. However, we recognize that selection of a program may depend more on educator preferences and participant needs.

As pioneers in the field of intervention with couples in stepfamilies, Visher and Visher (1996) found education to be the highest need for couples in stepfamilies, and they suggested that many couples would not reach the level of clinical need if education on stepfamily dynamics and development were provided preventively. Supporters of marriage education hope to reduce divorce rates, protect children from the potential risks of the divorce experience, and increase the number of children who grow up in nurturing two-parent homes that provide children with a healthy model of marriage that they may carry into their own marriages (Horn, 2003). Couples in stepfamilies might be at slightly greater risk of marital dissolution, but there is empirical evidence that successful, well-adjusted stepfamilies can provide as nurturing an environment for both the adults and children in the family as a well-adjusted first-married family, and successful stepfamiles can serve to reduce risks for poor child outcomes associated with the divorce experience (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). We believe that marriage educators can provide a valuable service to couples forming stepfamilies by distinguishing them from first-marriage couples and offering additional program content specific to their needs. As such, we call for increased efforts to meet the unique needs of couples in stepfamilies through marriage education and to document the effectiveness of these efforts.

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Appendix
Program Information

Title, author, year, and contact info	Price	Length of program and available materials	Supplements	Author credentials
Designing dynamic stepfamilies: Bringing pieces to peace Taylor & Taylor (2003) http://www.designingdynamicstepfamilies.com	$100	Video-based curriculum. Eight presentations that can be adapted to a 1-day conference or weekly sessions. Study guide is 124 pp. with 134 discussion questions. DVD or VHS set.	Participant and Christian study guides are $12.99 Christian version: 148 pp. with 136 discussion questions	G. Taylor: LMFT C. Taylor: Certified communications trainer and professional executive coach
Learning to Step Together: A Course for Stepfamily Adults Currier (1982) http://www.saafamilies.org	$18	Six 2-hour sessions. The manual for leaders includes lesson plans, lectures, exercises, handouts and a course evaluation. 148 pp.		C. Currier: CSW
New Beginnings: A Remarriage Preparation Program Manual Chidwick (1994) ann@chidwick.ca	$50	Eight lessons. To be used for a 1-day (8-hour) workshop; includes leader manual and participant manual. 103 pp.		A. Chidwick: BSN, CFLE
Skills Training for Stepparents: A Personal Development Program Nelson and Levant (1984) Rlevant@aol.com	$50	Four 6-hour sessions or eight 3-hour sessions. Price includes leader's guide and parent workbook. 73 pp.		W. Nelson: M.S. R. Levant: Ed.D.
Smart steps for adults and children in stepfamilies Adler-Baeder (2001) http://www.saafamilies.org and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County	$150 $80	12-hour curriculum for couples and their children (parallel programs with joint activity at the end of each session). Includes 350-page leader manual, movie *Stepmom*, video vignettes, CD with participant handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and evaluation forms.	*Growing in wisdom* Deal (2003). A Christian-based *Supplemental guide to smart steps for adults and children in stepfamilies* $40.00. Includes *Smart stepfamilies* book.	F. Adler-Baeder: Ph.D., Extension Specialist, CFLE
Stepping stones Olsen (1997) orderpub@lists.oznet.ksu.edu colsen@ksu.edu	$50	Includes materials for a 6-week workshop series (1-hour each) or 6-week home-study course. Materials include: the home-study course (six lessons), the teaching guide (provides a script and suggested group activities for a 1-hour presentation), single-page fact sheets, a 35-minute video, an audiotape, and evaluation instruments. Includes 18-page training manual and six 8-page lessons.		C. Shoup Olsen: Ph.D., Extension Specialist

Appendix
(Continued)

Title, author, year, and contact info	Price	Length of program and available materials	Supplements	Author credentials
Stepping together Bosch, Gebeke, & Meske (1992) sbrother@ndsuext.nodak.edu	$40	Six 2-hour sessions. Materials include leader's manual, overheads, activities, 1-hour of video clips, and various informational articles. 110 pp.		G. Bosch: M.S., Extension Specialist; D. Gebeke: M.S., M.Ed. Extension Specialist; C. Meske: M.S., therapist
Stepping Together Program–Creating Strong Stepfamilies Visher & Visher (1997) http://www.saafamilies.org	$60	Six sessions. Sessions can be separate (2 hours each) or be combined for a 1-day or weekend format. It includes information, exercises, homework assignments, and guidelines and resources to help accomplish stepfamily tasks. The program kit contains a leader's manual, one participant's manual, *Therapy with Stepfamilies* (text book), and a short video of a stepfamily wedding. 77 pp.	*A Christian Guide to Stepping Together:* Vanessa and Ben Henneke. $10.95 Additional Participant Manuals: $14.95	E. Visher: Ph.D., Therapist J. Visher: MD