Recruiting and Serving Stepfamilies
June 30, 2009 ❖ 12:30 pm-2:00pm (EST)

Presenters:

Dr. Brian Higgenbotham, Ph.D., Utah State University
Pamela Morrill, Utah State University
Patrick Patterson, National Healthy Marriage Resource Center
Learning objectives:

• Address the research on the challenges stepfamilies face to healthy family functioning

• Provide information and effective strategies on how marriage education programs can best serve the needs of stepfamilies.

• Discuss marketing and recruitment strategies for reaching this population.
Serving Stepfamily Couples in Marriage and Relationship Education

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Stepfamily Definition

A family unit in which there is an adult couple at least one of whom has a child from a previous relationship.
Well, let's see... my mom's the head of the household, but she works three jobs so she's never home. Her boyfriend sometimes lives here with his two kids, but he's in rehab right now. My half-sister and I are moving in with my grandma tomorrow, so I don't really live here anymore anyway and...
Stepcouples Definition

- A committed relationship where one or both adults have children by other partners
"We're your new neighbors. I'm Steve Fitzpatrick. This is my wife, Martha Jorgenson, and our kids Jason Connally and Beth Townsend."
The Prevalence of Stepfamilies:

- About ½ of marriages in a year are remarriages; the majority involve children.
- A growing number of first marriages form stepfamilies.
- About ½ of cohabiting couples live in a stepfamily.
- 17% of all children under the age of 18 live in a blended family.
- It is estimated that 40% of adult women and 30% of children in the United States will spend some part of their life in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily.

Teachman & Tedrow, 2008; Kreider, 2008; Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1996; Pasley, 2001
Recent FL survey:

- Among married couples with children
  - 40% were “stepcouples”
- Among low-income married couples with children
  - 49% were stepcouples
- African Americans
  - 55% were stepcouples
- Latinos
  - 37% were stepcouples

Karney et al., 2003
# Meeting the Needs of Couples in Stepfamilies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In a Stepfamily</th>
<th>In a Non-Stepfamily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The biological/adoptive parent-child bond predates the couple’s relationship</td>
<td>The couple’s relationship predates the parent-child bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A spouse may become an “instant parent” at marriage rather than having children join the family over time</td>
<td>Children join the family over time, typically one at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of the children’s biological parents most likely lives in a separate household</td>
<td>Both parents typically live in the same household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children may move between two households</td>
<td>Children typically stay in one household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The vast majority of stepfamily couples will be navigating at least one co-parenting relationship with a former spouse/partner</td>
<td>Parent only has to co-parent with current spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of the family have experienced the change of a relationship through separation, divorce, or death.</td>
<td>The family’s formation did not necessarily follow change of some kind.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A family strengths perspective is vital

- Simply raising awareness of potential problems and focusing on differences between first families and stepfamilies is using a deficit approach and is not helpful.

- Recognize the strengths that the couple and family have already and focus on building strengths that successful stepfamilies demonstrate.
Keys for Successful Stepfamily Couples
Implications for Practice

For more information, see the ACF commissioned paper:
Meeting the Needs of Stepfamily Couples in Marriage Education Services (2007)

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html
1. Basic Relationship Skills

- Empathy
- Communication
- Conflict Management
- Anger and Stress Management
- Friendship and Intimacy Building skills
I found out more about my husband. There are some things that we really have not talked about and he was able to share those with me. I felt like we were courting again and that was very pleasing to me. (Hispanic female, age 34)
2. Understanding of Stepfamily Characteristics and Dynamics

- Time needed to establish history, attachments, and connections
- “Undeveloped Institution” and Unique Family Development Patterns
Program Implications

- Validate experiences and lack of norms for stepcouples
- Increase knowledge of how stepfamily experiences and development are different from, not worse than, nuclear family experiences
I thought it was great. We learned about how many people are part of a stepfamily, one way or another. You don’t need to feel like you’re messed up and kind of an outcast from society. (American Indian male, age 39)
**Program Implications**

- Offer guidelines for realistic expectations for stepfamily development (*years* for adjustment)

- Assess individual expectations and provide opportunities (worksheets/role play/journal) to discuss:
  - Financial issues
  - Family traditions/routines
  - Parenting Roles
  - Discipline practices
Cultural Considerations

- Movement into parenting role by stepparent in African American stepfamilies may occur more quickly compared to White stepfamilies (multi-parental norms accepted by adults and children) – AL

- Movement into parenting role by stepparent in Latino stepfamilies may occur more quickly compared to White stepfamilies (strong traditional family norms; geographic separation from noncustodial parent) - UT
Stepfamily members may not refer to themselves or their family as “step” - particularly minority stepfamilies.

“my [wife’s] daughter is not my stepdaughter. She is my daughter. She is my son’s sister not their step sister. We’ve always been that way.”

(Adler-Baeder’s Alabama study)
3. Effective Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

- Poor quality stepparent/stepchild relationship can negatively impact couple relationship
- Stepparent-stepchild relationship quality “spills over” into the couple relationship.
ABC’s of Human Needs

- Appreciation
- Belonging
- Control

Children can feel threats to one or all basic needs
Empathize and respect children’s feelings

…I think it was beneficial as far as getting some understanding where my fiancée’s daughters were coming from, and their concerns. I’m more conscious about where my step kids are coming from. I’m more understanding, I think, and I’m learning to be more empathetic. Whereas before, in my mind, I think I would judge. (Hispanic male, age 39)
Program Implications

- Promote basic parenting knowledge/skills - Stepparents are often not biological parents.
- Both bio parent and stepparent should have shared expectations about parenting roles.
- Stepparent should be informed of the “history” of parenting and routines with the children.
- Parental Status Evolves.
- Age of Child Matters.
Program Implications

- Understand and use a “team” approach
  - Primary/Supportive parenting roles
  - Bio parent – primary “spokesperson” for team
  - Stepparent can enforce the rules. Bio parent may need to enforce respectful behaviors
- Mutual agreement on nature of relationship
- Develop strategies that promote dyadic relationships
  - Build family strength through individual dyads
Learning I don’t have to be a parent to her, I can be just her friend and that has helped with our relationship...I feel like I’m actually a successful step parent rather than a failure. (Caucasian female, age 46)
Recruiting Implication

- Involve the children in the program
- Market the content that is related to stepparenting
4. Appropriate Relationship with Former Partner(s)

- Recognize that a child is part of 2 households

- Promoting appropriate cross-household relationships benefits stepfamily relationships (both stepparent/stepchild and the new couple) and child outcomes
my family
Program Implications

- Teach co-parenting skills
  - primary focus is on developing low-conflict businesslike relationship.
- Bio parents are primary communicators
- Do not involve child in conflict
- Acknowledge child’s need for relationship with other parent and encourage connection:
  - Would you like to call your Dad and tell him?
  - You’ll have a great time with your Mom this weekend!
"the cases of progenitors that are not part of the kids life is high. For instance, the progenitor still lives in the country of origin like Mexico, Argentina, etc.... keep in mind that most Hispanic families when they are divorced, the mother usually gets custody. But the most important is that the father doesn't really stay in the picture." (Smart Steps facilitator)
5. Effective Parenting Practices

- Empathizing
- Consistent, predictable parenting environment
- Monitoring
I’ve finally realized that just going to the doctor isn’t enough time with [the children]. I think that we’re actually going to set a night aside as just family night and play some games, no TV. We actually went and bought a kitchen table so we can actually sit as a family to eat. (Caucasian female, age 46)
Program Implications

Discuss and plan for:

- Continued nurturing of parent-child relationships
- One-on-one time with each child
- Consistent discipline strategies
6. Supportive Connections
Inside and Outside the family

- Siblings can have good relationships without high levels of emotional attachment
- Informal (family) and formal (support groups) supports are important
- The couple has the most vulnerable relationship; dyadic spillover
- *Nurture the couple relationship to build family strength and to buffer against challenges*
**Program Implications**

- Encourage adults to avoid favoritism
- Strategize “homework” assignments for couple time and other marriage education opportunities
- Proactive support-seeking
  - Link to other relationship/marriage education programs that address core skills (friendship building and conflict management)
Resources

- National Stepfamily Resource Center
  - www.stepfamilies.info

- Meeting the Needs of Stepfamily Couples in Marriage Education Services (2007)

- NERMEN (National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network)
  - www.nermen.org/factsheets.php#Res4Remarried

- Cultivating Healthy Relationships and Marriages: An On-line Training on Effective Programming
  - www.nermen.org/cultivatinghrm.php
Closing thought

“We need to validate stepfamilies as positive and viable units with unique structures that are not imperfect copies of nuclear families, but rather, complex family systems created from the integration of old loyalties and new ties”

-Emily Visher
Marketing and Recruitment Strategies for Couples in Stepfamilies

Pamela Morrill, M.S., CFLE
Project Manager
Utah State University
Teaching Healthy Marriage Skills to Ethnically Diverse, Low-Income Couples in Stepfamilies

Funding for this project was provided, in part, through the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Grant No. 90-FE-0129 and OHS Grant No. 90YD0227. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.
Barriers to Attending

- We face all the same barriers that anyone providing a marriage enhancement program would face.

- We face added challenges when providing programming exclusively for stepfamilies.

- Presentation today will focus solely on lessons learned about how to market and recruit stepfamilies.
Stepfamily Education Project

- Twelve partnering agencies throughout Utah
- Eighty-one classes have been completed
- 1,469 adult participants attended along with 1,203 children to date
- Classes are offered in Spanish and English
- On-going quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the grant project
Qualitative Evaluation Data

- 106 male and female participants interviewed
- n = 50 Caucasian/56 Latino
- “please tell us why you decided to attend the stepfamily course”
What We Found…

- 87 out of 106 (82%) indicated their top reason for attending was to improve step relationships.

- These step relationships affect the couple relationship.

  “…because it’s really hard on a marriage when you’re mixing and matching…all different children” (Caucasian female)
What We Found…(cont.)

- 67 out of 106 (63%) participants interviewed said the main reason for attending was to improve stepparent/stepchild relationships.

“I was getting into a relationship with 5 kids and I have no kids, so I just thought it would help with how to deal with them [and] with my girlfriend—when we get married” (Caucasian male)

“I wanted to learn how to treat my stepchildren and have a good relationship with them” (Latino male)
What We Found…(cont.)

- 20 out of 106 (19%) said the reason they attended was to improve stepfamily relationships

  “...it just sounded like a good class...to find out about family dynamics and how best to merge the family”  (Caucasian female)

  “I have a stepfamily and we seemed to struggle on and off with certain problems, and I thought it might help us”  (Caucasian male)
“...I just wanted some good ideas on how to make our home more peaceful, some ideas on how to cope with my stepson and how to make my marriage better and not allow [the stepson] situation to destroy the relationship that I have with my husband” (Caucasian female)
Marketing

- Market to “unique stepfamily issues”
  - Strengthening step relationships
    - Advertise through school district

“We got one of these flyers in the mail from the school district about a stepfamily strengthening class. My wife talked to me and I said, ‘Absolutely, let’s do it’” (Caucasian male)
“[A friend] said she had attended several classes about parenting and other issues around family relationships, but this was the first one that was...specifically about stepfamilies and this was meeting their needs much better than other things that she had attended” (Caucasian female)

“It was different material...we’ve done parenting classes, we’ve done the marriage enrichment classes, and it was something new and fascinating to me” (Caucasian female)
Marketing

“Sell the benefits” of attending. Some examples:

- Learn effective stepparenting strategies
- Parenting across households
- Helping children adjust to a remarriage
- Strategies for dealing with ex-spouses
Are you in a step-family?.... How's it going?.....

Kids on the Move is partnering with Utah State University to present FREE Remarriage and Stepfamily Educational Classes!

Be one of the lucky families in Utah County to participate in a new and exciting 6 week step-family workshop. Come and have fun! Each class will have a small dinner and prizes.

- Parents participate together in different activities & discussions
- Children attend classes that cater to their needs and learning styles
- Combined parent/child activities allow families to learn & have fun together
- Nursery is provided for children under the age of 5
- Prizes are provided for participation

WHO: Stefamilies, future steffamilies, and cohabitating couples with children
WHERE: Kids on the Move
475 West 260 North
Orem, UT 84057
WHEN: Tuesdays, March 18 – April 22, 2008
TIME: 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

EACH COUPLE WHO ATTENDS ALL 6 WEEKS RECEIVES $50

YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT:
- Step-parenting skills
- Helping children adjust
- Dealing with ex-spouses
- Financial issues
- Child/Adolescent Development

CALL TO REGISTER (801)221-9930 ext. 160, ask for Stefanie

Funding for this project was provided, in part, by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant No. 90-PE-0159/03. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.
Stepfamily Education Classes
For remarried couples, stepfamilies, & cohabitating couples with children

Join us for a free educational program focusing on issues unique to stepfamily relationships. Concurrent classes for adults and youth (ages 6-18). Fun and educational activities for the entire family.

WHERE


DATES

TIME

CALL TO REGISTER

Free childcare (ages 0-5) • Dinner is provided

Topics Include
- Communication
- Conflict management
- Ex-spouses
- Financial issues
- Parenting non-biological children
- Plus much more...

SmartSteps
In partnership with
Utah State University
Marketing: Get the Word Out!

- Participants frequently expressed surprise that this type of class is offered
  - *I never knew that such a class existed*
  - *There should be more advertising to let stepfamilies know about this*
  - *Friends were so surprised when they heard we were attending a stepfamily class*
  - *I felt lucky to have seen the flyer/newspaper—otherwise we would have never known*
Marketing: Get the Word Out!

- Marketing to “stepfamilies” is different for Caucasian and Latino families
  - Advertising a class for “couples in stepfamilies” worked for Caucasian couples but not for Latino couples
    - No Spanish word for “stepfamily”
    - Social stigma for Latino families
    - Use a combination of words to describe stepfamilies
Spanish Descriptive Words for “Stepfamily”

- Assembled families = Familia Ensamblada
- Combined families = Familia combinada
- Reconstituted families = Familia reconstituida
- New family = Nueva familia
Recruiting Latino Couples

- The most effective recruitment strategy was personal contact and invitations from program staff, other professionals, and participating families.
  - Inviting them to a class to “strengthen their family” not a “stepfamily class”
  - Have participating families invite others in similar circumstances
  - Phone call to remind and invite weekly
Marketing Differences

- Work with cultural values as you target ethnically diverse populations
  - For Caucasian couples, target women—they get their partner to come
  - For Latino couples, target men—they get their partner to come
    - Most Latino men tend to look at the “family” as their responsibility—to get their buy in—market as a “family strengthening” class
Additional Recruitment Strategies

- Involve the whole family in the class
  - Typically Latino families do not use babysitters
  - Low-income families do not have money for babysitters
  - Many parents want their children close by
- We provide onsite childcare for children 0-5
- Curriculum used: *Smart Steps for Adults and Children in Stepfamilies*
- Youth 6-18 years old attend their own class
Final Note

“I want to have a stable family because today couples don’t last very long and maybe [it’s] because they don’t receive information like we received [from taking this class]…” (Caucasian female)
Thank you for participating in our poll.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center is dedicated to helping your marriage education program succeed.

Please email us at info@healthymarriageinfo.org if there are other areas of research you would like the resource center to address in the future.

www.healthymarriageinfo.org
A recording of today’s Webinar will be available on the NHMRC Website in 7 to 9 days.

Please visit the website at:

www.healthymarriageinfo.org