



## **June 2009 Webinar Transcript**

### **Recruiting and Serving Stepfamilies**

Moderator: Patrick Patterson  
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12:30 pm CT

**Operator:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for standing by. Welcome to the National Health Marriage Resource Center Webinar. During the presentation, all participants will be in a listen-only mode. If at any time during the conference you need to reach an operator, please press star zero. As a reminder, this conference is being recorded Tuesday, June 30, 2009.

I would now like to turn the conference over to Patrick Patterson. Please go ahead, sir.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you, Myra. Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the June National Internet Resource Center Webinar entitled Recruiting and Serving Stepfamilies. My name is Patrick Patterson. I'm the manager for the resource center and I'll be facilitating today's webinar.

For a little background, we've had a number of opportunities to hear from our audience, whether that is grantees or programs serving couples and individuals, whether funded or not. And stepfamilies aren't a topic that we've heard a lot about. So we've hopefully designed this webinar to meet the informational needs but also as a practitioner to suggest effective ways, effective values to engage stepfamilies as well as the couple relationship that these families experience.

What do we know about stepfamilies? We know that about 16% to 20% of all children in the US live in blended families, where one or both parents in the household have children by other partners. About 40% of adult women and about 30% of children in the US are projected to spend some part of their life in a remarry or cohabiting stepfamilies.

Now stepfamily is a unique experience for a lot of children. They face unique dynamics that can contribute to an increased risk of divorce, particularly as we talk about these programs serving these couples. Factors such as negotiating parenting roles between biological...

**Operator:** Mr. Patterson. This is the operator. We're unable to hear you at this time.

**Patrick Patterson:** Okay. I'm sorry.

**Operator:** Okay. Everything's back to normal. Thank you.

**Patrick Patterson:** Can you hear me now?

**Operator:** Yes, we can thank you.

**Patrick Patterson:** Oh, good, good. I'm sorry. I may have hit the button.

I'll start with again a welcome to everyone to the June Resource Center Webinar entitled Recruiting and Serving Stepfamilies. My name again is Patrick Patterson. I'm the manager of the Resource Center and I'll be

facilitating today's webinar.

My start out point, I want to just kind of acknowledge that stepfamilies, many programs serve them whether it's funded by OSA or not funded by OSA or any kind of government resources. We've heard from practitioners around the country about a webinar designed to address how to best serve and meet the needs of stepfamilies.

As a little background about what we know about stepfamilies, we're aware that about 16% to 20% of children in the US live in blended families, where one or both parents in the household have children by the other partner -- or other partners. About 40% of adult women and 30% of children in the US are projected to spend some part of their life in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily.

Stepfamilies face unique dynamics, unique challenges as they blend two families into one. Factors such as negotiating parenting roles between biological parents and stepfamilies and relations between stepparents and stepchildren constrain the marital quality of stepfamily couples.

Our speakers today are experts in the field of working with stepfamilies. We are very delighted, very excited to have a research perspective to kind of set the framework. And we also have some practical applications for how programs can best serve stepfamilies.

Before I introduce our speakers, I'm very delighted to also announce that we have two resources where I will draw your attention to that are on the Resource Center Web site that are very timely as relates to this webinar. The first is the Promising Practice Guide for Healthy Marriage program serving couples and individuals.

For about six months to a year, we've done national research. We've surveyed national programs that have been effective at working with couples to find out what some of the best lessons learned are and practical strategies for serving couples. That is a completed product now we're very proud of and it's posted on the Resource Center's Web site, our homepage, at [healthmarriageinfo.org](http://healthmarriageinfo.org). Please take a moment to look at that. You'll be very proud. But again you have many things that will apply to your direct program services each day.

The second resource that I would point your attention to is very timely as it relates to this webinar is a Fact Sheet on Working with Stepfamilies. This is briefer than the Promising Practice Guide, but it's directed to how best programs can serve stepfamilies but also through outreach to those families as well. So those are two resources that I would draw your attention to. Again, they're on our Resource Center Web site at [healthmarriageinfo.org](http://healthmarriageinfo.org).

Our presenters for today are Dr. Brian Higginbotham, Extension Specialist and Assistant Professor of Family, Consumer and Human Development at Utah State University. Our second presenter is Pamela (Morrell), Project Manager, Teaching Healthy Marriage Skills to Ethnically Diverse Low Income Couples and Stepfamilies. We're again delighted to have both of them because they bring both distinct perspectives to

today's topics.

A few housekeeping notes before we get started. First, this webinar is being recorded, for those of you that take copious notes. If you'd like you, you can continue doing that but I will alert you that after this webinar, around 7 to 9 business days following today, we're going to post the recording along with a number of resources that go along with this webinar.

All the materials will also include a Frequently Asked Questions document for questions that come in via the webinar technology. I will take a moment also to announce that we are using webinar technology today which allows us to have you submit questions via the webinar technology while our presenters are presenting. And so for just a brief 101 on how to use the technology to submit questions, I will ask Jillian Scollan to walk us through how to submit a question. Jill?

**Jillian Scollan:** Thank you very much, Patrick, and hello everyone. I would like to direct your attention to the demonstration slide that's currently displayed on your screen. You should find the Questions and Answer page designated by the letters Q and A located at the top of your screen. You can either click on that portion of the menu bar to open the pane or you can open and then drag the pane off of the menu bar to display it as a standalone box.

To ask a question this afternoon, we request that you type your question into the Send box located here and then click the Ask button here. You will automatically receive a reply thanking you for your question and letting you know that your question has been forwarded to the facilitator. This automatic reply frees up your Question and Answer pane allowing you to ask another question if you choose. Thank you very much and I'll turn it back over to Patrick.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thanks Jill. Feel free to submit questions throughout. At the very end of today's webinar, we're going to facilitate a Q&A process where all the questions that we can get in we're going to pose to our presenters.

For today's webinar, we have three objectives. The first is to address the research on challenges stepfamilies face to healthy family functioning. Our second objective is to provide estimation and respective strategies on how marriage education programs can best serve the needs of stepfamilies -- very important. And then third is to discuss marketing and recruitment strategies for reaching this population. And I will say the caveat; it's slightly different as you recruit couple who are in non-stepfamily situations.

So this will be very exciting, I think very intriguing. We've discussed it a couple times before today's webinar. So I'm very excited about what you're going to hear moving forward.

Our first presented is Dr. Brian Higginbotham. And briefly I'll introduce him. Dr. Higginbotham again is at Utah State University. He will discuss issues facing the healthy functioning of stepfamilies and how marriage

education programs can best assist this population. He's a licensed marriage and family therapist whose interests center on the development and enhancement of healthy relationships over the life course.

His extension and research projects include premarital education, marriage enrichment and factors which influence remarriage, quality and stepfamily functioning. Dr. Higginbotham is also Project Director for Teaching Healthy Marriage Skills to Ethnically Diverse Low Income Couples and Stepfamilies, an OSA-funded healthy marriage program run by Utah State University.

Dr. Higginbotham, the time is yours.

**Brian Higginbotham:** Thank you, Patrick and thanks for having me here.

I'd like to begin by just acknowledging a few individuals who -- let's see, my screen's not working here guys. Is it working for you, Patrick?

**Patrick Patterson:** It's a blue screen right now, but we're going to pull up the next slide for you.

**Brian Higginbotham:** Just acknowledge briefly my staff here at Utah State University who manages not only the OFA-healthy marriage grant, but also one through the office of Head Start. I'm grateful for all the work and service that they do in providing these lessons that I will share today.

I also would like to acknowledge Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder who is the Director of the National Stepfamily Resource Center and has been instrumental in helping me understand stepfamily functions in my interactions with her over the years.

And then of course would like to thank the Federal government for their support, both the Office of Family Assistance and Head Start, for funding the projects that we have going here.

Let me begin by using a -- talking about some definitions. Today I'm going to talk about stepfamilies and when I do that I want us to all be thinking about a family unit in which there is an adult couple where at least one of the individuals has a child from a previous relationship.

So here's our little case study. Here's a young man who's responding to the census worker. And he says, "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," and etc., etc., etc.

Now under the legal definition of a remarriage family, this probably would not fall under that because mom and boyfriend aren't married and this kid's going back and forth to different homes. So this would fit into the broader definition that we like to use when talking about stepfamilies, because here you have a situation where there's

a child being parented by a non-biological adult. And that will create as you will see the opportunity for some unique challenges and some issues too present themselves that we as stepfamily educators and family life educators can help with.

I've also used today the word "step-couples." And in this I mean a committed relationship where one or both adults have children by another partner. So here's our second case study. We're your new neighbors. I'm Steve Fitzpatrick. This is my wife, Martha Jorgenson, and our kids, Jason Connelly and Beth Townsend.

I would imagine that many of you have families very much like this in the programs that you run. We certainly have a number here in our state. You'll notice that there's no ring on the finger of these individuals. Maybe they are married, but maybe they're not

And I point that out because too often when we look at the statistics that come out over the news or from the census reports and the numbers of remarriage and stepfamilies seem to be smaller or lower than what we are accustomed to seeing in practice, it's because often those numbers are reflective of the legal definition of remarriage that requires an official and legal wedding.

But we know that there are a lot of individuals who are cohabitating, who are living together off and on, who are in serious dating relationships that are experiencing some of these stepfamily issues of co-parenting across households and parenting non-biological children. And of course there are the financial factors as well.

So that in mind, some of these numbers may seem a little bit small to you. But here are our best estimates according to the demographers and folks from the census bureau. About half of all marriages in any given year are remarriages. And the majority of those have children involved. A growing number of first marriages also form stepfamilies.

And in fact half of all the remarriages in any given year are first marriages for one of the individuals, but they're marrying somebody who's been previously married already or twice or three times. And so often I hear people say to me as I talk to them about what I do, "Oh, yeah, those people who just get married two, three, four, five times." And I say, "Well, actually, a lot of remarriages are first marriages for folks and so they're trying to, you know, they're trying to get used to the whole idea of marriage at the same time they've already got two or three kids that they have now in the home because they're partner had a child."

So it's important that we as educators are sensitive to that, that there are some first marriage issues for a lot of these stepfamilies as well as the remarriage issues. About half of all cohabitating couples live in stepfamilies and, as Patrick already talked about; a fair number of children under the age of 18 are living in blended families or will at some point in their life.

Now here in Utah, a lot of the work that we do is focused on low-income families because the funding that supports the majority of our work comes from the Federal government from TANF funds. And so I'm interested

in low-income families and how they may differ from other families.

And the Florida study gives us some insights into this as well as into diverse populations, which is also an interest of ours out here. So in Florida, they did a fairly large study and identified that about 40% of all married couples with children would be considered step-couples. Now this isn't all married couples. This is just married couples with children. About 40% of them would be considered step-couples.

But amongst the low-income married couples with children it was nearly 50%. African-Americans as you may have guessed in other research and presentations on these webinars are slightly higher and Latinos is slightly lower. Both though have substantial numbers of families in step situations.

So in light of those demographics, I'd like to spend the remainder of my time talking about how to effectively meet the needs of couples and stepfamilies. This slide here illustrates just a few of the unique challenges that may be impacting their ability to function effectively or that's impacting their marital quality and stability.

They include things like the timing of the parent-child bond in the stepfamily that predates the couple relationship with the new partner. Whereas in a non-stepfamily, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage.

In a stepfamily, you have a spouse who in some cases becomes an instant parent. The first time marriages when somebody's marrying into a relationship with someone who already has a child, they become a parent with really no training or preparation.

Biological parents typically live in separate households in a stepfamily. Whereas in a non-stepfamily, they are living in the same house typically.

Children may be moved between two households. You don't see that same movement traditionally in non-stepfamilies. There's often co-parenting involved, as we'll talk about in some of the diverse populations we don't see as much co-parenting across households in some ethnic groups.

And then finally but certainly not least or last, there are others I don't have here, there's typically some type of transition or change, whether it be a separation or divorce or death that precedes a stepfamily. And that's important because some of those feelings, particularly in the lives of the kids, have not fully been resolved. And then when the stepfamily gets created, some of the frustrations and the anger or the difficulties are really an outgrowth of that unresolved hurt and pain extending from the death of a parent or the divorce.

Now in identifying these kind of unique needs, I think is step one in being an effective family life educator for stepfamilies. The second would be taking a family strength perspective. Too often I hear individuals compare stepfamilies to first marriages or non-stepfamilies and it turns into a discussion that would be characterized as a deficit comparison, where the stepfamilies are worse or not as good because of this and they don't have that

and etc., etc.

Well, from an academic perspective and in writing an article, that's one thing, but when you're sitting down with a family who's coming to you for assistance and coming to a class, for them to hear that they're in a broken relationship or that their family has failed or that -- the list goes on for the different terms they use to refer to stepfamilies. And that doesn't really help them out all that much.

The reality is these individuals who are in stepfamilies and in remarriages have as much desire to be successful and to have stability and to have quality relationships as anybody else. And as we help them identify the strengths that they have and what they bring to their new relationship, you will find that they will resonate much better to the information that is shared.

And so I would just recommend as a programmatic implication that if you are providing marriage education that involves a mixture of individuals from different family types, that you have stepfamilies in the same room as individuals in first marriages, be careful how you talk about divorce and those who have already been divorced. And as you talk about broken homes and failed marriages, be aware that that may have a very personal connotation to individuals who went through a divorce some years ago, but are now trying to be successful where they're at.

I want to talk -- instead of about a specific program, though there are certain some really wonderful programs out there, recognizing that all of you may be utilizing different curriculum and some that are not focused on stepfamilies -- I want to just talk about the research on the keys for successful couple relationships, step-couple relationships.

And to the degree that you have a curriculum that specifically addresses these, like a stepfamily curriculum, great. But, if not, if you're teaching a more generic or broad-based -- if you're using a broader curriculum, you can still strive to implement some of these keys into the material that you present, through the use of Fact Sheets like Patrick has talked about or through some of the other resources that I'll share throughout this presentation.

For more details and for more information about most of these keys, I would refer you to an ACF-commissioned paper that was published in 2007 called "Meeting the Needs of Stepfamily Couples and Marriage Education Services," and I have the Web address listed there. And it is a wonderful resource for those who want to do marriage education to more fully understand some of those needs and how to effectively address them.

So here's number one. Like all couples, step-couples need to know basic relationship skills, like all of us in our relationships, being able to empathize with our partner and to communicate and to handle stress and conflict are all critical and essential skills. And so those are things that should be incorporated into all programs and certainly stepfamily programs as well.

We do that here with our curriculum and the response from one participant is listed on this slide. This Hispanic female said, "I found out more about my husband. There are some things that we really had 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."

Embedded in that, particularly in a stepfamily situation, is that for some intimate step-couples, there is a whole other life that they've experienced with another partner that their new partner may know very little about. And for some couples, it's kind of dangerous ground to go there and others really want to know about that. And I don't think it's our place to tell them exactly how much to disclose. That's a couple decision. But we need to give them the skills to be able to talk about some of those issues, particularly painful or hurtful issues in the past, and give them the skills to be able to empathize and to address any anger or frustration that may come about.

Number two. Successful stepfamilies and successful adults in stepfamilies understand some of the unique dynamics. For example, they recognize that there is time needed to establish relationships, particularly with the children, and that there is an established history, traditions that the different families bring to this mix, and that it's going to take time to create new traditions and new connections.

Successful stepfamilies also recognize that there are not set norms on how to function effectively in a stepfamily and that if they merely try to copy the first family model, they may come up against some roadblocks, particularly when the other biological parents and other households want to continue to be involved and interact. (Andrew Sherilan) talks about this as the undeveloped institution and that there are not set norms or behaviors in stepfamilies.

But successful stepfamilies recognize that and they work together in identifying what's going to work for them and not try to just mimic those of their neighbors who don't have those same challenges.

The programmatic implications for this include validating the experiences and the lack of norms for step-couples. I would say it also includes for those of you who serve mixtures, you know, whose classes invite anybody and everybody, so you're going to have half of them in there as stepfamilies and half of them not, that you don't proscribe certain behaviors or that the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is the stay-at-home mother. That may not work in any family situation.

But my example is simply to illustrate that some of the norms or stereotypes or traditions in our respective cultures or regions of the country may or may not apply to individuals who have more complex family structures. Increasing the knowledge that they have about stepfamilies experiences and the development that their stepfamily situation is not necessarily worse is just different, is a very validating thing for people to hear.

We did this, again, with our programs and one of our participants, who happened to be an American Indian, said, "This was so great. We learned about how many people are parts 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." That's a really positive thing

for somebody to feel that they are normal, that their experiences are different, but that they're not in a bad or abnormality.

Other program implications include offering guidelines for realistic expectations, that it may take years for adjustment or years for the children to really come to see the stepparent in a father-type of role. A lot of stepparents expect that intimacy and that trust and that closeness within a very short period of time -- I mean, we're talking weeks or months. And that is unrealistic and they should hear that so that they don't get frustrated.

Helping individuals assess their expectations and roles and articulating those is another important implication. Let me just say a few things though, particularly to those of you who work with diverse populations. And this first bullet really comes from the work that Francesca Adler-Baeder has done in Alabama. And that is in African-American families, we tend to see families adjusting more quickly to the stepfamily situation in large part because of the multi-parental norms that are already pretty much embedded within African-American community.

It's not uncommon for grandmas and grandpas and uncles and aunts to be involved in the home or to be living together. And so consequently when you have another adult come in the marriage situation or stepfamily situation, we don't tend to see the same type of adjustment -- the length of time for adjustment for the children.

In Latino families, it may also occur a little bit more quickly because of the strong traditional family norms and because often there is geographical separation between the noncustodial parent. And so when biological dad still lives in Mexico and biological mom is now living here in Utah and remarries somebody and the new husband comes in, often that transition to being in a father-type of role for the children tends to occur a little more smoothly.

And there still needs to be a lot more research on this. But that's some of the anecdotal experiences that we have seen in both Alabama and Utah.

The recruitment implication here is that, you know, some stepfamilies, particularly minorities, may not see themselves as step. They may not call themselves stepfamilies. This is particularly the case with Latino stepfamilies and with African-American stepfamilies.

Here's a quote from one participant who said, "My wife's daughter is not my stepdaughter, she is my daughter. She is my son's sister, not their stepsister. We've always been that way." And so like recruiting for stepfamilies may not really resonate with individuals who prefer to foster more of a nuclear family feel in their home.

The third key for effective stepfamilies is an effective stepparent/stepchild relationship. Some of the great work in this area has been done by Kelly & Hetherington and they'll say in a lot of their work that the -- in a nuclear family because the couple relationship predates the children's, even the existence of children, which is really

the foundation.

Yet in stepfamilies and in remarriages, the parent/child relationship predates the couple relationship, and so navigating an effective stepparent/stepchild relationship is critical in making sure that the couple relationship stays strong. When that relationship is poor, when the stepparent and the stepchild are at each other's throats, they don't like each other, which tend to spill over into the couple relationship. And very often the biological parent will be put in a bind. Do they favor their biological child who really doesn't like their new partner? Or do they favor their partner at the expense of alienating their child, who they already feel they've put through the ringer because of the divorce or whatnot?

So helping couples appreciate the value and the importance of this relationship is really critical. I think it's important that all of us remember the ABCs of human needs and that is that all of us need to feel appreciated, need to feel belonging and we need to feel control. And particularly in stepfamilies, the children tend not to -- there's the risk that children aren't feeling these three things, because they want to be at home with mom and dad, their biological mom and dad and all of a sudden there's this divorce and now they're being required to come move into this other home.

They don't really feel a sense of control of what's going on in their life. And often they don't know where they belong. Should they stay with mom? Or, if they have the option, should they go with dad? And so a lot of the negative behaviors that we see from stepchildren are really an outgrowth of just feeling the lack of these three needs.

And if stepparents and the biological parents can appreciate that and try to work on their children -- work with their children to let them know how much they love and appreciate them and to help them have a sense of belonging and giving them control over some aspects of the stepfamily, like what they call the new adult in their life. I mean, not requiring them to call him father or dad. Giving them control over some of those things can be very helpful.

Helping couples empathize and respect children's feelings is also critical. Here's a response from a Hispanic participant, "I think it was beneficial as far as getting some understanding where my fiancée's daughters were coming and their concerns. I'm more conscientious 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."

You know, this key is not unique to stepfamilies. Obviously, in all couple relationships we want to help people identify how other people are feeling and respect those feelings. I would say this is particularly meaningful in the stepparent/stepchild relationship.

Some additional programmatic implications to try to incorporate into your programs would be recognizing that for some stepparents they have very little basic parenting knowledge. If they're in a first-time marriage with

no children of their own marrying into a relationship where there's already children, they may not realize that some 12, 13, 14-year olds are just pains in the neck anyway. And that it's not because they don't like the new stepparents, it's because they're a preadolescent. And helping them understand some of that can soften some of the blows.

Both biological parents and stepparents should have shared expectations and parenting roles. That just goes back to effective communication. And to help the new stepparent when parents, the biological parents can share in the history and what the routines are, it helps stepparents from making mistakes of just coming in and trying to change things around, often with very good intentions.

Parental status often evolves. Not telling stepparents that they don't have to, you know, be the parent, but that they can be a friend and they can be a support. Not trying to require that they have this unrealistic role that the children don't even want them to have.

Recognizing that age matters. For young kids, the transition to stepfamilies can be relatively smooth. For teenagers, it tends to be typically quite turbulent.

Understanding and using the team approach. Helping couples do this the way that we typically teach them to do this is by empowering the biological parent to be the primary spokesperson for the team, but the team still gets to talk together about what the rules and what the consequences are going to be. But when it comes time to enforcing those and imposing the discipline, it's really the biological parent who should be the spokesperson.

The stepparent should certainly, you know, remind the children and tell the children that they're going to let bio-mom or dad know. But typically children don't respond too well when the stepparent comes in and, you know, starts spanking or starts imposing the discipline. And typically, the non-custodial biological parent doesn't really appreciate somebody else, a non-bio-parent, putting their hands on their child. So don't put the stepparents in that role and then things will go a lot smoother.

Mutual agreement, developing strategies to promote dyadic relationships or these one-on-one relationships with the stepparent and stepchildren can be really effective and helpful.

Here's just another quote saying how helpful that can be, "When somebody feels that they can just be a friend and help with the relationship rather than having to step in and actually become a new parent without any of that background."

One of the recruiting implications here for I think all of us is to recognize that particularly when dealing with stepfamilies, children impact the functioning of the couple relationship. And so in our programs out here, we have current classes for the adults and for the children.

And so while we're teaching the adults the importance of communication and conflict management, we're also

teaching those same things to the children. They can influence the quality of that home and the family life often more so than some of the things that the adults do. And we also market the content that we think is particularly important to the adults or the things that they may be struggling with, such as step parenting.

Number four; appropriate relationships with former partners. It's important that all couples in stepfamilies recognize that there are other adults in the children's lives. Some of them may just be a memory if the parent is deceased. But too often, couples in stepfamilies are so happy to have somebody to be intimate with again, to share things with, another adult in their life to be with, that they forget or want to ignore or want to move on and move past that ex.

And while that may make it easier for the adults, it can be very hard for the children. Promoting appropriate cross-household relationships may be difficult for the adults, but in the long-term, it will be helpful for the children. And if the children are going through this process with more support and feeling like they have access to the other parent, they tend not to be quite so frustrating. They may not cause as many problems at home.

Of course, what their ex-spouse is feeding them and if they're being used as pawns to get back at each other, that's going to cause additional problems. So you certainly want to, where possible, give this information about appropriate co-parenting to both parties.

Let me just share you a quick story about this. I have a friend whose daughter was in elementary school and was told to draw a picture of her family. And so she did and her family had gone through a divorce and so dad was no longer living there. But she lived -- she drew the whole family together, mom, dad, and herself and her brother.

And someone else in the class started asking things about, you know, what about this person or that person or my dog or whatever. And the teacher finally said, "No, no, don't draw people who don't live in your house, just your families who live in your house." And so she drew a big X over her dad. And this was the picture she brought home to her mom.

Now, depending on what you feel your definition is of a family and maybe yours is more constrained than mine, but in my perspective children can benefit from loving and supportive adults, whether or not they live in their home, and having a supportive father or mother who lives in a different home and having positive interactions with them can be very helpful to a child, particularly as one of their parents begins to transition into a new relationship with somebody else.

And so to the degree that we can foster positive interactions rather than discourage them for the sake of trying to foster this nuclear family again is probably the better strategy for helping kids through this transition. The programmatic implications, co-parenting of course, bio-parenting, and primary communicators, not having the child be the pawn, and acknowledging the children's need for connection with both biological parents.

Again, there are culture considerations to be considered, particularly in Latino families. One of our facilitators here said this in one of her interviews, "It's important to remember that the father doesn't really stay in the picture." And this has been the case with many of our Latino families or more than one where they had the children together when they were living in Mexico or in another country. They never even were married. And then one of them ended up going to the United States. And so there's not even a relationship or some of them don't even know where the biological father of their children is.

Fifth; Effective parenting practices. These are things that probably are universal and some of your more general marriage education classes. The importance of being consistent. Monitoring the children's behavior. That's clearly important in stepfamilies as well. Spending time with children and turning off the TV. Here's a participant who decided that they were going to turn off the TV. They went and bought a kitchen table and now sit around and eat as a family.

Programmatic implications for all of us as family life educators are helping parents appreciate the importance of continued nurturing for parent/child relationships. Certainly we need to provide for them and provide sustenance and food for them. But that nurturing of the relationship, sitting down and spending time to talk with them, is so critical. And that one-on-one time with the bio-parent and their child is very critical. Consistent discipline strategies of course are effective too.

Last that I'll comment on today is just the importance of supportive connections inside and outside the family, particularly for stepfamilies who don't have other role models to go off of, families that they've seen who've successfully navigated stepfamilies. I mean, the Brady Bunch is one that many of us reflect upon, but that is about as unrealistic as they come.

And so helping them identify informal and formal supports, marriage education opportunities, good books and resources, would be an effective and important programmatic implication for all of us to think about, particularly those who are trying to serve a broad group of people and then end up having half of our participants as stepfamilies.

If our information isn't specific to stepfamilies having some supplemental material like Fact Sheets or some references to other groups that focus specifically on some of these stepfamily issues I think would be particularly appreciated by your participants.

As you teach the adults, you may want to encourage them to avoid favoritism and to help them identify times where they can have -- find other types of resources in the community. Just to close up here, let me just hear a few additional resources. Patrick talked about some with the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, which I would certainly encourage you to look at.

The National Family Resource Center also has a Web site that's full of resources. I've already talked about the ACS-sponsored publication about meeting the needs of stepfamily couples, specifically marriage education

services. (NERMAN), which is a group of extension educators, have put together some resources that are provided at that link provided.

And then NERMAN again created some online training modules regarding healthy relationships are available at that link provided and one of those modules, which I believe is about 20 minutes or so, is specific to stepfamilies and remarriages.

So in closing let me just say this and, you know, stepfamilies are -- there's no doubt about it, there's certainly some unique challenges and stresses that they may experience. But in serving them, I would just echo the counselor, (Emily Bischer), one of the pioneers of stepfamily clinical services said a number of years ago and that is, "We need to validate the families as positive and viable units with unique structures that are not imperfect copies of nuclear families but rather complex family systems created from an integration of old loyalties and new ties."

Here in Utah, we have tried to do that and the next presenter who works for me as my program manager is going to highlight how we've taken many of these keys and structured our recruiting and advertising approaches to do exactly this. So that's all I have. I'll turn it back over to Patrick.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you Dr. Higginbotham. Excellent presentation. I think you've set a wonderful context, the research context for working with stepfamilies, but also you gave several points of practical applications for programs throughout the country.

So there are a number of questions I have in front of me. We're going to pose all the questions at the very end, after Pamela concludes her presentation. I'm excited to introduce our next presenter, Pamela Morrell, Project Manager Teaching Healthy Marriage Skills to Ethnically Diverse Low-Income Couples and Stepfamilies.

Ms. Morrell will describe the marketing and recruitment strategies her program has developed specifically to reach this population. She's a Certified Family Life Educator with a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family Education from Utah State University. Ms. Morrell's professional interests include marriage and parenting education. Pamela, the time is yours.

**Pamela Morrell:** Great. Well hello Patrick and to everyone listening. I was asked as a follow up to Dr. Higginbotham's presentation to talk specifically about marketing and recruitment strategies for couples and stepfamilies.

Next slide. The name of our grant is Teaching Healthy Marriage Skills to Ethnically Diverse Low-Income Couples and Stepfamilies. So as you can see we market exclusively and recruit exclusively stepfamilies into our program.

Next slide. Now I'm sure there's probably many of you listening who facilitate marriage enhancement programs

out there and face a number of barriers to pull people into your programs and we face all those same barriers that anyone providing a marriage enrichment program would face. But in addition we face some additional challenges when we provide programming that is exclusively for stepfamilies. And so my presentation today will focus solely on the lessons that we've learned in our project on how to market and recruit to stepfamilies.

Next slide. This is a brief overview so you know what we are doing here in Utah. Our stepfamily education program partners with 12 family service agencies throughout the state of Utah. We have thus far concluded 81 classes. That has contained over 1,400 adult participants and over 1,200 children to date.

Our classes are offered in both Spanish and English. And we continue to monitor some ongoing quantitative and qualitative evaluation of our grant project.

Next slide. With our qualitative evaluation piece, we have thus far interviewed 106 male and female participants and that number represents 50 Caucasian and 56 Latino individuals. And they have all answered this question, "Please tell us why you decided to attend the stepfamily course." And of course, it's important for us to know why current families are attending the course so that we can then use that information to market to future stepfamilies.

And here's what we found: 82%, the 87 out of 106 that we asked, indicated their top reason for attending was to improve step relationships. And that goes along with what Dr. Higginbotham presented from previous research that step relationships really do impact and affect the couple relationship as voiced by this female woman -- this Caucasian female who said, "Because it's really hard on a marriage when you're mixing and matching all different children."

Next slide; What we found, pulling that out further, is that of those people who indicated that step relationships were a huge part of what affects their families. 63% said that the main reason for attending was to improve particularly the stepparent/stepchild relationship. That is a huge key and a huge pull in to people who are coming to these classes as voiced by these two individuals.

"I was getting into a relationship with five kids and I have no kids. So I thought it would help with how to deal with them and with my girlfriend when we get married." A Latino male said, "I wanted to learn how to treat my stepchildren and have a good relationship with them."

Next slide; the additional or the final 19% of that number said the reason they attended was to improve stepfamily relationships in general. This Caucasian female said, "It just sounded like a good class, to find out about family dynamics and how best to merge the family."

This individual said, "I have a stepfamily and we seem to struggle on and off with certain problems and I thought it might help us." So you can see that overall some of the biggest motivators for these people -- for people to come to our class are to work with the stepfamily and particularly through stepparent/stepchild

relationships.

Next slide; as was shown from previous research, this is more of the stepfamily dynamic, which is different than in a first-time family. I should explain and should have at the beginning explained that I will continue to use the same definition that Dr. Higginbotham used for couples and stepfamilies, where the family unit or committed relationship where one or both adults have children by other partners.

And then I'm going to refer to first families and I'm referring to a family unit or committed relationship where the couple is parenting their own biological children. So as we can see in the stepfamily dynamic, the parent/child and usually the stepparent/stepchild relationship really impacts the couple relationship as explained by this female who said, "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."

Next slide; so how does this all apply to us in regard to marketing? Well, we've found that we really have to market to those needs and stepfamily issues, that aren't necessarily faced by a first family. And as borne out in our own research as well as previous research is that strengthening step relationships is a huge part of the issues and the problems and the challenges that they face when these families come together.

Now you wouldn't be a stepfamily if you didn't have children in the family. So, therefore, we know that there are children residing in these homes or across these households. And so we advertise through -- one of the successful things we've done is to advertise through school districts and particularly elementary schools.

A couple of our agencies have had great success in pulling a lot of people in by giving these flyers into the parents' hands through the children as stated by this male, "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.'"

Next slide; a couple more quotes. "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."

Another quote: "It was different material. We've done parenting classes. We've done the marriage enrichment classes. It was something new and fascinating to me."

You can see from this that these families are really concentrating on a thing that are uniquely challenging to stepfamilies and that's again why they wanted to come in.

Next slide; so in marketing we've realized we have to sell the benefit to the families and we have to of course target these particular areas that people really want to learn about. And so what we've done in partnering with our agencies and when they advertise, we've said, "Use some of these types of buzzwords and these hot

buttons to get people interested. Come and learn about effective step parenting strategies. Come learn how to parent across households. Helping children adjust to a remarriage. Or strategies for dealing with ex-spouses.”

Next slide; here’s a successful recruiting tool that one of our agencies used. At the top you can read it says, “Are you in a stepfamily. How’s it going?” And that immediately lets people know that this is about stepfamilies and for stepfamilies and it isn’t just a general marriage enhancement class. But it’s definitely dedicated toward people in stepfamilies.

And if you’ll notice on the flyer a little farther down in the green box, they put in there, “You’re going to learn about step parenting skills, dealing with ex-spouses, helping children adjust and financial issues.” You know, in a stepfamily, resources -- and in a first-time family actually -- resources come into a family and they can stay there and that couple gets to decide where it’s all going to go.

Where in a stepfamily relationship, there might be money coming into the household. It may be targeted for two of the five children they’re parenting. Or there may be money leaving the household to support children in another household. So those are all issues that are a little different and they need some help and some skill building there.

Next slide; so with the information that we learned the first couple of years and what we felt like worked, we at Utah State University worked up kind of a generic advertising campaign that we have made available to all of our agencies. And once again we of course identify as being stepfamily, this is for stepfamilies, and we call it Stepfamily Education Classes.

You’ll see in the little Topics Included that we put in there “ex-spouses, financial issues, parenting non-biological children.” Those are sort of the hooks that make people think, “This class has something to offer me.” A little bit more than just parenting and the couple’s relationship.

Next slide; so we realize in marketing we need to get the word out. And as we have a Latino project manager that I work with also who is over most of the Hispanic classes. And as we make visits to these classes throughout the state, these are the kinds of things we hear:

“I never knew that such a class existed.” “There should be more advertising to let stepfamilies know about this.” “Our friends were so excited or surprised when they heard that we were attending a stepfamily class.” “I felt lucky to have seen the flyer in the newspaper; otherwise we would have never known.”

And these are the comments we hear over and over again. So we know that we’re reaching a population. When they hear the word stepfamily, they realize, “That resonates with us. That’s something that would be of interest to us and would help us.” And our big challenge is getting that out there. So we know that using that word “stepfamily” has been kind of critical in our marketing.

Next slide; however, that brings us to another issue in marketing and getting the word out about our marriage enhancement enrichment class is that marketing to stepfamilies is different for Caucasian and Latino families. Here in Utah our two main populations are Caucasian, low-income Caucasian and Latino families. And those -- we also offer our classes of course like I said earlier in both Spanish and English.

But when we advertise a class for couples and stepfamilies, we found it worked very well for Caucasian couples. When people see that in a newspaper or on a flyer, that immediately resonates with them, the Caucasian couples, and they are then interested and will call and get more information.

However, that is not the same for Latino couples. And here are some of the reasons why. First of all, there's no Spanish word for stepfamily. So in their language they don't have a word that labels, you know, bringing two different families and having children from different relationships brought into one marriage or one family.

There is also a social stigma for Latino families in that -- and I know Dr. Higginbotham addressed this as well -- that they tend to look at themselves as being in a first family. They don't look at it there are step relationships in the family. They look at it that we're like a first family. Its son and daughter, mom and dad.

And so, therefore, they don't identify with the term or the descriptions of stepfamilies. So we end up needing to use a combination of words to describe stepfamilies.

Next slide; and some of the words that we've come up with that we use to kind of soften the label so to speak, we don't just label them as stepfamilies, as we can when we're working with our English-speaking classes. We use words like "assembled families, combined families, reconstituted families, or new families."

Now in our language, that might -- the terms might sounds just a little strange. But those are basically descriptive words explaining what a stepfamily is, simply because they don't have the word stepfamily in the Spanish language. And these are the kinds of words that we use when facilitators and people invite them into the program, and also when they're teaching the curricula, these are the words that they use. And they wouldn't always use assembled families or always use combined families. They trade off and use them in different ways.

Next slide; so in recruiting Latino couples, we found that the most effective recruitment strategy was personal contact, an invitation from program staff, other professionals. And those other professionals might include counselors. They might include school counselors or teachers. And then other participating families.

And we have found that they get invited to a class to strengthen their family, not a stepfamily class. Now remember that's kind of opposite from what we do with Caucasian families because that really does pull them in. So they understand that this is going to strengthen their family as a whole. And most of the program staff and people that invite them to these classes are aware of their family situation and maybe know that they're in a stepfamily situation and just say, "Here's a class that might be helpful to you."

We have participating families, other participating families invite others that are in similar circumstances. We've had a couple of times in our Latino or Hispanic classes where families have come the first night and when they get an overview of the program and understand what they're going to be learning and realize how helpful this information is, then they go back and they tell family and friends. They say, "Hey you need to come to this class with us. This will really help you as well." And so that's been really helpful in recruiting into our Latino classes.

Another thing that's been used consistently is phone call -- using phone calls to remind and invite weekly. Now this is a little different than if someone just misses a class and you send them a "we missed you" card or, "You didn't come last week, will you be able to come this week?"

This is where they have called; the staff has called in advance of the class every week and said, you know, "We're having our class this week on Tuesday night. This is what we're going to be talking about and we hope that you're going to be there. Will you be able to make it? Great. Well, we'll see you on Tuesday night."

And where agencies have used that strategy consistently, they have had almost 100% retention in their classes. So I know that's a little more time intensive, all of these three things are a little more time intensive in recruiting into these programs, but they work.

Next slide; marketing differences. So we had to realize than when we're marketing to stepfamilies and want to get them in, that we have to understand that we have to work with their cultural values. One of the things that -- another thing that we have learned in our program is that if we want Caucasian couples to come, we target the women, and they in turn are able to get their partners to come.

But in Latino families, we target the men, because they get their partner to come. And the reason for this is that most Latino men tend to look at their family as their responsibility. So if we want to get their buy-in, we have to market this as a family strengthening class.

Next slide; some additional recruitment strategies. And I might add that our curriculum does -- it definitely is a marriage enhancement curriculum and it helps to strengthen this couple relationship. But we realize as you've heard Dr. Higginbotham speak and myself as well today that we really kind of come in at this in a backdoor way.

And these additional recruitment strategies are that we involve the whole family in the class. Typically Latino families do not use babysitters in their culture. They tend to use close family members or take the children with them everywhere they go. Low-income families in general do not have the money to pay babysitters so they can come to a marriage enrichment class for themselves.

And many parents just would like to have their children close by. So for that reason we provide onsite childcare for all of our classes for children zero to 5. We use the curriculum Smart Steps for Adults and Children in

Stepfamilies and that does have a youth component in it. And so, therefore, we have youth ages 6 to 18 attend a parallel class to their parents. And at the end of that we have them come in for a family strengthening activity before they are done for the evening.

Next slide; so as a final note, we feel that we have some great information and some great skill building for stepfamilies and of course are big challenges for everyone is to get them into the classroom and these are some of the ways that have worked for us. This email says, "I want to have a stable family because today families don't last very long and maybe it's because they don't receive information like we received from taking this class."

So our big goal and challenge is to get out there that this class definitely addresses their unique issues and will be helpful to them, and then of course being in a way that's culturally sensitive to the populations we serve. And that's all, Patrick, back to you.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you, Pam. Wonderful presentation. I think several nuggets of wisdom in terms of implications for how programs can apply, what you guys have learned to working with stepfamilies, but I would even go as far as saying beyond stepfamilies with these lessons learned you've shared.

I have a number of questions before me. What I'll do is as they're addressed to each of you, I'll call your name. But if there's one for both of you, I'll ask that you go in a specific order in terms of responding to the question. So we'll all them one at a time as questions are continuing to come in, raising the questions and trying to get as many of those answers as possible.

I'll also take a moment for Jillian to reorient folks to how to submit a question if there are folks who want to submit questions at this time. Jill?

**Jillian Scollan:** All right, Patrick. Again, I'll bring up the slide on how to ask a question. As you can see here, you will find the Question and Answer page designed by the letters Q&A at the top of your screen. Either click on that portion of the menu bar to open the pane or again open and then drag the pane off the menu bar.

And then to ask a question, type the question in the Send box those's highlighted and then click the Ask button which is circled. You'll again receive an automatic reply thanking you for your question and then letting you know that your question has been forwarded to the facilitator. That frees up the question and answer pane, allowing others to ask another question. That's it.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thanks, Jill. First question. This is for Pam. You mentioned just briefly the curricula that you use. If you could restate that. And then the question that's come in is it is on the same frequency as we expect couples to go through? Which I think is six weeks. Do you expect the kids to go through? And then how do you actually implement whatever learning's for the children of these families?

Pamela Morrell: Okay, yes. The curriculum that we use is Smart Steps for Adults and Children in Stepfamilies. It does have a youth component in that. And the children do come to -- we do this in a six-week, typically, in a six-week format. And the children come all six weeks. And the parents and they come in together.

Of course, we always, as with most programs, provide a meal at the beginning and then the children separate into their individual classes and then come together at the very end for a family-strengthening activity, something that was discussed and taught in the classes that they were just hearing about that day.

Now did I answer all the questions on that or was there something else?

**Patrick Patterson:** You did, you did.

**Pamela Morrell:** Okay.

**Patrick Patterson:** Great. Thank you. Dr. Higginbotham, I'm going to read the question as its stated. Do you have any advice for how to address step parenting issues as a part of wider healthy marriage or responsible fatherhood programs, i.e., if 50% of step parenting but the others aren't, how to best address this?

I'll restate the question. Do you have any advice for how to address step parenting issues as part of your wider healthy marriage or responsible fatherhood program, i.e., if 50% of step parenting but others aren't, how to best address this?

**Brian Higginbotham:** You know if you have the luxury of doing some classes that are specific to stepfamilies and those and then other classes that are for first-time fathers, if you're doing a fatherhood program, that would probably be the idea because then you can really have targeted information to them. If that's not a possibility and you can only offer one class and your marketing is for anybody and everybody and half the people who show up are stepfamilies, I think you just want to be prepared.

You want to be able to obviously teach stuff that is relevant to everybody, some of the basic communication, conflict management and this stuff, you know, the required things that all of us have to cover as being ACS grantees. But then having some Fact Sheets, maybe mixing in an example here and there from a stepfamily context and having, what I typically do when I do general marriage presentations around our state, is I just usually have a list of resources for stepfamilies, whether they be good-quality books or whether they be additional classes.

So that when people come up to me afterward and say, "Hey that was really great, but how do you deal with this issue or this issue that we're experiencing in a stepfamily that didn't come up in the class?" I can say, "Well, that's because half the people don't have those issues and I was trying to cover, you know, broad stuff, but here you go. Here's the list for you."

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you. Here is another question for Dr. Higginbotham. How do you guys -- and maybe Pam you want to weigh in on this too; I'll start with Dr. Higginbotham -- how do you guys document the outcomes of your program?

**Brian Higginbotham:** We have a pretty extensive evaluation where we do pre-, post-, six-month follow up and then an annual follow up. And we've been doing that now for three years. And our outcome measures include stability, commitment and marital satisfaction. And so we're able to track changes over time.

We also have a very extensive qualitative evaluation where we sit down and interview families. We have Pam for just some of those interviews in her presentation. And so we are now doing the year -- annual follow ups. We're into the second year of annual follow ups. And so we have a couple hundred families we've been interviewing over the couple years.

We have some really rich details about what their changes and -- have been over the years, as well as what their immediate experience was because we typically interview quite a few right at the end of the last class.

**Patrick Patterson:** Okay, good. Next question. Pam, did you want to have a comment on that or not?

**Pamela Morrell:** Nope, I think he covered it. That's pretty much our evaluation procedure.

**Patrick Patterson:** Super, super. Next question. What's your -- this is for Pam -- what's your referral system like? I'm reading the actual extra questions here as well. Do your agencies simply pass out the information? Do they fax it over to the families' information for them to contact? Is there a website? What's your referral process for recruiting your families?

**Pamela Morrell:** Okay. We, as I explained in the presentation too, we partner with 12 family service agencies who already are servicing families in their respective communities. And so they put flyers out and get -- they use radio and several different methods of getting that information out and then have their own contact information in their area to their specific agency. And so they get the calls directly.

But in addition to that, we also have put out some flyers in general to people who might be interested in this type of a class. We have our mandatory divorce education class in the State of Utah, and I know we're having some facilitators of those have these flyers available. And so in that point, we put our Web site on. We do have a Web site that -- it's mainly really dedicated to working with facilitators and then giving them additional information to facilitate these classes.

But we also have a way on there for people to say, "I want to sign up for a class. I want to find out if there's one in my area." And there is contact information for myself and our other project manager, Latino project manager, as well as the phone number. So they can call and once I identify where they are located, then we can then pass them on to an agency in that area.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you. Dr. Higginbotham. Anecdotally or empirically, what do we know about the impact of grandparents or extended family on the stability on the blending of families? Anecdotally or empirically, what do we know about the impact of grandparents or extended family on the stability on the blending of families?

**Brian Higginbotham:** Well, I would say that there's not a whole lot of anecdotal or empirical evidence on that. The initial stuff that I have seen indicates that grandparents can be a tremendous support. They can be the stable kind of objective adult in the whole thing and really help the children through it. There's some interesting work that (Larry Ngong) and Marilyn Coleman have done out at the University of Missouri that have looked at what people's expectations are of grandparents who, you know, have stepfamilies or divorce and remarriage and whether they should still be helping out the grandkids going to college and that type of thing. And it's really it's a mixed bag. I would say just generally if the grandparents can be a support and provide particularly support for the children, while the adults figure out their own issues about the divorce and then the remarriage; it would probably be the best thing for the kids.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you. This question is for Pam. What are some of the best opportunities you've encountered for reaching the parents directly? What are some of the best opportunities you've encountered for reaching the parents directly?

**Pamela Morrell:** I would say some of the best opportunities have just been where our family service agencies are already working with those families and they make direct contact. And or in those agencies they have flyers and information listed about the different classes that they present and then a description and then they talk about these - the stepfamily class and what's entailed in it.

And really that has been, you know, other, you know, we've sent flyers out, we've done radio, and there's been some television, those kinds of things. But really the facilitators or the program staff in each of these agencies really has been key in locating and getting people to come into the program and talking with them personally. And that reaches just the parents. So hopefully that answers your question.

**Patrick Patterson:** It does, it does. This is a question, and I'll start with Dr. Higginbotham, but maybe Pam you might have a response. What are the considerations that you make when deciding staff, volunteers and workshop facilitators? Not, you know, with the understanding, I guess, that everybody is not from a blended family, what are the considerations that you make when deciding who you hire as staff, who you bring on as volunteers and who you decide are your workshop facilitators?

**Brian Higginbotham:** Yeah, well, because we are a state institution, we're, you know, at Langer at University here in Utah, we're not allowed to discriminate based on people's marital status or family history. There's been some research that we have done just with all our facilitators who have been in it. And those facilitators who are currently, who have had stepfamily experiences tend to be slightly better facilitators. But we can't make hiring decisions based off of that. That would be discriminatory.

Fortunately, well, we don't actually do any of the hiring. We partner, as Pam has explained, with other community agencies and then the advice that we give to our contact there, the person who signs on as part of their agencies, we say, "You know, it'd be great if we had -- if you were able to assign those individuals from your staff who had an interest in working with stepfamilies, who have experience working with stepfamilies, maybe have some personal life experience working with stepfamilies and assign them to be the ones teaching this class.

We don't have the money in these programs to actually hire teachers. And so we partner with the agencies and as part of our contract with them and the money that goes to that agency, they are able, just able to pay for some of the time of their existing staff. So we kind of side step that issue by allowing them just to take from who they already have, but I would venture to say that's probably the case for most of the people on the call.

**Patrick Patterson:** Sure.

**Brian Higginbotham:** They're not going to have the luxury of picking and choosing based on marital status any more so than we would be able to do on ethnicity or gender.

**Patrick Patterson:** Do you do - are you conscious about male/female or in terms of facilitation or is it one person? What's the set up for facilitators?

**Brian Higginbotham:** We think that there's a lot of value in having a male/female team, but again we don't micromanage that and mandate that. A number of our classes have been in that. We've had some classes that are taught by male/males. But the majority of them, just by virtue of whom is employed at the family service agencies that we partner with, most of them are female/female teams.

But our classes are extremely interactive. And so while we have facilitators, it's not a didactic, you know, lecture. And so for the two hours where the facilitators are in there, they really are more facilitators than what we would say teachers. And the curriculum is very interactive and so the couples are actually doing things together. And our value is on more effective facilitation, people who ask good questions, people who can help the participants get engaged in discussion and get to be talking to each other. We see that as being a higher priority than if somebody has a certain skin color or speaks a certain language or if they've had certain experiences in stepfamilies.

**Patrick Patterson:** Okay. Pam, do you have any comment on that?

**Pamela Morrell:** The only thing I was going to add is that we find -- we think facilitators and those who facilitate these classes are just a real key to pulling these families in and retaining them. And whereas it's nice if they have some stepfamily experience themselves, we don't feel like it's really necessary. Really what we've found is that those facilitators who are charismatic, who are helpful, who facilitate discussion and kind of help control it so it doesn't get out of control or no one's standing there trying to get into a therapy session, that

those cause a lot of -- those have -- those encourage people to come back and enjoy it.

And word of mouth, people say, "This is a great class." And so we really focus a lot on the characteristics. And we do a training every year. And then I and my cohort also go to -- my colleague, excuse me -- we go out and visit every class that is offered every time a class is offered so that we stay in touch with what's happening with the facilitators and in the classroom.

And we really make sure that in our yearly training, and we require everyone who's going to teach this for us even though we're partnering with other agencies, must come to our stepfamily facilitator training conference once a year. So that's what I've got on that.

**Patrick Patterson:** Excellent. I'm reading the question here. It says, "We are a (unintelligible) education agency in Texas. How would we create this kind of course in our region? Any recommendations would be helpful."

**Brian Higginbotham:** You know, there's a host of stepfamily education classes that are available. You can find a list of them on Smartmarriages.com and the National Stepfamily Resource Center is the one who sells the Smart Steps curriculum that we use. I know Elizabeth Einstein has a program. There's, I mean, there's a whole host of them out there.

So probably Smart Marriages would be the quickest way to see a list of all those that are available and which ones require training, which ones you can just buy directly and teach right out of the box. And, you know, once you have the curriculum and then if you've gone through the requisite training, it's really just a matter of having the funds and the time to -- and the advertising strategy to start the class.

**Patrick Patterson:** Pam? Thank you Dr. Higginbotham. Pam any thoughts?

**Pamela Morrell:** Nope. I think he covered that.

**Patrick Patterson:** He covered it well, okay.

**Pamela Morrell:** Uh-huh.

**Patrick Patterson:** We've got a number of questions that are still coming in, but we only have a few more minutes left. So I'll ask a couple questions that have come up a couple times. One is for Dr. Higginbotham. What aspect of working with stepfamilies still needs exploring, I guess from a research perspective? What aspect of working with stepfamilies still needs additional exploration?

**Brian Higginbotham:** Well, I would say there's a lot, but one that really stands out to me is -- there are two that I'll comment -- one is working with ethnically diverse stepfamilies. Just because of some of these culture

considerations that I talked about already in both African-American and Latino families.

There are reasons to believe that they view from a cultural perspective, that they perceive the whole step parenting dynamic and the co-parenting dynamic very differently than what people in predominant Caucasian culture view. And studying that as well as what the programmatic implications are for that, I think is much needed.

The other thing that I would comment on is just why don't more people come to marriage education? This month in the *General Family Relations* there's an article that I wrote with one of my graduate students and a faculty member out in Texas about whether or not stepfamilies or couples in remarriages are preparing. And what we see is less than 20% actually go to any type of formal marriage education type of experience.

The majority of them will read a book or visit with family friends or a clergy member. But the other avenue of research that needs to be done is how can we more effectively get people to come. Here in Utah, we're able to get -- we're able to, you know, fill our classes. But we're just really scratching the surface of providing good quality educational resources to the hundreds and millions of people who are getting remarried every year.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you. I think last question. This has been asked a couple different ways and I'll actually give both of you a chance to answer this question. Just from your perspective, how would you advise for folks who are working with stepfamilies or beginning to work with them moving forward, what's your best advice from your experience in this program? And I will start with Pam with this question.

**Pamela Morrell:** Boy, my best advice is to be very much aware, first of all, cultural differences. And secondly, that stepfamilies are saying that, you know, the big thing, the big issue that's keeping us from having maybe a strong family or a great, you know, couple relationship is the step relationships that we are dealing with in our family. And so targeting some of those unique issues that they face and all that goes with that, the finances, working with ex-spouses, I would say targeting those kinds of things and helping them work through those issues will ultimately strengthen their couple relationship and provide a stronger family unit. So that's kind of the angle I would use.

**Brian Higginbotham:** I think there is a lot of value whenever you're starting going working with a new population is just to have a little advisory panel. You know, we've done that with domestic violence out here. We've done it with our Latino partners. We've done it with our Head Start agencies as we've started to work it to incorporate the Head Start centers around our state in this initiative.

So just having a few people around the table. You don't have to pay them. I mean, they are as concerned about us -- as all of us for the stability and quality of relationships and particularly child relationships. So if you've never worked with stepfamilies before, you might just pool around your own office about people who are in stepfamilies and have a lunch together and talk about, "Okay, if we were to do this, how would we go about it? How would we get people to come? And what curriculums do we want to use or what supplemental material would be most helpful?"

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you.

**Brian Higginbotham:** I don't think you need to pay thousands and thousands of dollars for some expert. I think most of us in this field can recognize what some of the important issues are and with people who are already around you, you could come up with something great.

**Patrick Patterson:** Thank you Dr. Higginbotham and Pam.

There are a couple things I'll just remind folks of. The first one is the NERMAN Web site is an excellent resource. It's [nerman.org](http://nerman.org). You're going to find a number of resources that have been referenced doing this webinar.

The second Web site I'll refer you to is the Resource Center's Web site at [healthymarriageinfo.org](http://healthymarriageinfo.org). Two things that I'll point out. One is the Promising Practice Guide that was just posted there today. It's a cutaway or actually a fresh glance at a new resource that hasn't been released previously. The second is a Fact Sheet that we just posted as well in timing with this webinar on working with stepfamilies as well.

So those three are important resources for anybody who's working with couples, whether it's stepfamily or not, I'll point you to.

The second thing that I would do is ask that you would join me in thanking Dr. Higginbotham and Pamela Morrell for their excellent presentations. I think we got a really rich research contact for working with stepfamilies but also a lot of practical application that we can take home with us for working with those couples. So again I thank both of you for your time and expertise.

**Pamela Morrell:** You're welcome.

**Patrick Patterson:** As we close out this webinar, we'd like to find out what you thought about today. So we're going to pull up a couple of questions for you to give us your feedback on. We really work pretty hard at trying to make sure that we're responsive to your needs for these webinars and want to find out how you think we did today. And so we're going to pose four questions. You have a chance to vote and with these questions, after we've changed the slide you can't go back.

So I'll read the first question. I better understand the research on challenges that stepfamilies face. I better understand the research on challenges that stepfamilies face. There are five options there for you to select.

Second question. I have a better idea of how marriage education can serve the needs of stepfamilies. I have a better understanding -- I'm sorry -- idea of how marriage education can serve the needs of stepfamilies. Same five options there.

Third question. I am better equipped to market and recruit from the stepfamily population. I am better equipped to market and recruit from the stepfamily population.

And our fourth question. I found today's webinar to be informative and useful. I found today's webinar to be informative and useful.

Finally, I would say if you have -- that concludes our questions, poll questions for you to give your feedback on. If you have additional feedback or comments, please feel free to email me directly at [Patrick.Patterson@publicstrategies.com](mailto:Patrick.Patterson@publicstrategies.com) or you can email the Resource Center directly at [info@healthmarriagesinfo.org](mailto:info@healthmarriagesinfo.org). Again, you can email me directly at [Patrick.patterson@publicstrategiesief.com](mailto:Patrick.patterson@publicstrategiesief.com) or you can email the Resource Center at [info@healthymarriageinfo.org](mailto:info@healthymarriageinfo.org) to provide your feedback. Lastly, you can also provide feedback to your (unintelligible) project officer if you are an OSA grantee.

A few quick reminders. Our webinars are the fourth Wednesday of each month unless otherwise noted. You'll note that this month was on a Tuesday and was the last Tuesday of the month. We're excited about the upcoming webinars as well, so please stay tuned. You can find out more information on the Resource Center website at [healthmarriageinfo.org](http://healthmarriageinfo.org). Again, I want to thank Dr. Higginbotham and Pam Morrell for their expertise for joining us and I thank you all for listening in as well. Thanks so much and have a wonderful afternoon.

**Operator:** Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen that concludes our conference call for today. We thank you for your participation and ask that you please disconnect your lines. Have a good day.

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