



## Healthy Co-Parenting and Blended Family Strategies

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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



## MEETING THE NEEDS OF COUPLES IN STEPFAMILIES

- Stepouples face unique issues:
  - Establishing Roles and Navigating an “undeveloped institution”
  - Negotiating family changes
  - Dealing with Ex-partner(s)
  - Developing stepparent-child relationships
- Couples in stepfamilies have unique needs in marriage education\*

\*(Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2002)



- “General” marriage education is missing vital information for couples forming stepfamilies
- These stepfamily-specific stressors are more potent predictors of marital quality than “general” family stressors



## The Prevalence:

- 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
- conservatively - 30% of children are stepchildren
- More than ½ of Americans today...will be in 1 or more step relationships in their lives

Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1996; Larson, 1992; 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



## Hand-out Info

[www.stepfamilies.info](http://www.stepfamilies.info)



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

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>

## The Program: **Smart Steps** Embrace the Journey

- ✦ Developed with supports from Cornell and Auburn University
- ✦ Research-based; field tested; documented positive impact on relational behaviors and quality
- ✦ 12- hour curriculum; Multi-media
- ✦ Separate classes for adults and for children, with a family activity at the end of each session
- ✦ Training not required; all inclusive curriculum kit
- ✦ Christian supplement by Ron Deal also available
- ✦ Spanish translation available; culturally sensitive version available in late 2007.

### • Important for educators to consider:

- Stepfamily members may not refer to themselves or their family as “step” (particularly minority stepfamilies)
- Recruit for complex families or blended
- Screen and recommend (Do you or your partner have a child from a previous relationship?)

### ✦ Keys for Successful Stepfamily Couples

## Undeveloped Institution and Unique Family Development Patterns

- ✦ Time needed to establish history/connections

### 1. Realistic Expectations Important



## The influence of Attitudes/Expectations

- ✦ One's expectations influence one's behavior in a relationship.
- ✦ The endorsement of particular cognitions can lead to difficulties in adjusting, frustration, and an overall negative impact on marital satisfaction and family functioning.

(Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Kurdek, 1991; Moller & Van Zyl, 1991)

## *Implications*

- Validate experiences and lack of norms for SFs
- Offer guidelines for realistic expectations for stepfamily development.
- Assess individual expectations and share

## *Implications*

- Expectation inventory related to parenting, housework, communication with other household, etc
- Provide opportunities (worksheets/role play/journal) to discuss:
  - Legal issues
  - Financial issues
  - Family traditions/routines
  - Parenting Roles
  - Discipline practices

## Empathic skills evident in successful stepfamilies

### 2. Encourage empathy among all family members



- Children are often the initiators of conflict in stepfamilies
- Poor quality stepparent/stepchild relationship can negatively impact couple relationship



## *Implications*

- A family systems approach
  - Cannot disentangle parenting dyad from the couple dyad
  - Include children in marriage education
- Activities that promote empathy
  - Experientials
  - Videos
  - Journal and share

## *Attachment levels differ among pairs in successful stepfamilies*

### 3. Build Family Strength through individual dyads (pairs)



## Implications

- Open discussion – awareness raising
- Mutual agreement on nature of relationship is the goal
- Nurture parent-child relationships
- Develop strategies that promote dyadic relationships

## Parental Status Evolves; Age of Child Matters

### 4. Primary/Supportive Parenting Roles



## Parenting Styles

		← CONTROL →	
		High	Low
High ↑ WARMTH ↓ Low	Democratic High Control High Warmth	<b>Supportive Stepparent</b>	
	Authoritarian High Control Low Warmth	Permissive Low Control High Warmth	Neglectful Low Control Low Warmth

**Smart Steps**

## Parenting Styles

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**Smart Steps**

## Parenting Styles

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High ↑ WARMTH ↓ Low	<b>Stepparent as Dem Parent</b>		
	Democratic High Control High Warmth	Permissive Low Control High Warmth	
Authoritarian High Control Low Warmth	Neglectful Low Control Low Warmth		

**Smart Steps**

## Implications

- Both bio parent and stepparent should have shared expectations about parenting roles
- understand and use effective stepparenting strategies and the “team” approach
  - Bio parent – primary “spokesperson” for team; SP enforces the rules
- Bio parent may need to enforce respectful behaviors

## Stepparents are often not biological parents

5. Promote basic parenting knowledge and skills



## Implications

- Child development information
- Positive parenting strategies

## The vast majority of stepfamilies are formed post-divorce

6. 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

## Implications

- Open discussion – raise awareness
  - Discuss advocacy strategies
- Teach co-parenting skills – primary focus is on developing low-conflict, businesslike relationship.

## Co-Parenting/Multi-parenting strategies:

- 1. 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!
- 3. Find something you respect about other parent - verbalize
- 4. non-judgmental; neutral language – even in response to negativity from other parent
- 5. Allow for other's parenting style
- 6. Bio parents are primary communicators
- 7. Do not involve child in conflict

The couple has the most vulnerable relationship; dyadic spillover

## 7. Nurture the couple relationship to build family strength and to buffer against challenges



## *Implications*

- Open discussion – raise awareness (beginning and end)
- Strategize “homework” assignments for couple time
- Link to other relationship/marriage education programs that address core skills (friendship building and conflict management)

## Addressing unique needs of Stepfamilies

- Addressing a more at-risk group, but with high potential for resiliency
- *These educational offerings have important implications for promoting resiliency among a large portion of our families and children.*