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

• Stepcouples 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, & Lardo, 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, Riley, & Sweet, 1996; Larson, 1992; Pasley, 2001

Recent FL survey

• Among married couples with children
  • 40% were “stepcouples”
• Among low-income married couples with children
  • 40% were stepcouples
• African Americans –
  • 5.5% were stepcouples
• Latinos –
  • 37% were stepcouples

Karney et al., 2003
Hand-out Info

www.stepfamilies.info

Meeting the Needs of Stepfamily Couples in Marriage Education Services (2007)
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html

The Program:
- 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 & Schermer, 1991; 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 expectations.

**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

- **Democratic**
  - High Control
  - High Warmth

- **Permissive**
  - Low Control
  - High Warmth

- **Authoritarian**
  - High Control
  - Low Warmth

- **Neglectful**
  - Low Control
  - Low Warmth

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

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

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!
2. Find something you respect about other parent - verbalize
3. Non-judgmental; neutral language – even in response to negativity from other parent
4. Allow for other's parenting style
5. Bio parents are primary communicators
6. 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.