

*The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues (FFCI)*  
A refereed e-journal designed to integrate, apply, and transmit knowledge about issues of  
current interest in family and consumer sciences  
ISSN 15405273

### **Marriage education for stepcouples**

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., CFLE  
Associate Professor and State Extension Specialist  
Dept. of Human Development and Family Studies  
Director, Center for Children, Youth, and Families  
Alabama Cooperative Extension System  
Auburn University  
286 Spidle Hall  
Auburn, AL 36849  
334-844-3234  
334-844-4515 fax  
[fadlerbaeder@auburn.edu](mailto:fadlerbaeder@auburn.edu)

Mallory Erickson  
Department of Human Development and Family Studies  
Marriage and Family Therapy  
Auburn University  
203 Spidle Hall  
Auburn, AL 36849  
Phone: 334-844-8710  
Fax: 334-844-4515  
[mallory.erickson@auburn.edu](mailto:mallory.erickson@auburn.edu)

Brian J. Higginbotham, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor and Family Life Extension Specialist  
Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development  
Utah State University  
2705 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322.  
Phone: 435-797-7276  
Fax: 435-797-7220  
[BrianH@ext.usu.edu](mailto:BrianH@ext.usu.edu)

**Abstract**

A significant proportion of marriages form stepfamilies. It is important for educators to recognize and consider these couples' educational needs to ensure that they function well as a couple within the context of stepfamily development. From a review of the literature, we present prevalent issues and factors associated with healthy couple functioning in stepfamilies for marriage educators and practitioners. Information is offered on such implementation issues as guiding theoretical perspectives, program content, learning objectives, facilitator and participant characteristics, and recruitment for work with couples in stepfamilies.

**Keywords:** education, program, remarriage, stepfamily, relationship

**Introduction**

To meet the needs of all couples, marriage educators and practitioners must understand diversity in regard to family development and composition. This includes the recognition and consideration of developmental and couple dynamic differences between couples in first marriages and those who marry and have children from a previous relationship (Halford et al. 2003). An understanding of the unique experiences of stepfamilies coupled with an appropriate theoretical framework will facilitate research-based program content and implementation design in educational programs for couples in stepfamilies.

**The prevalence of stepfamilies**

The formation of higher-order unions has always been common practice in the United States; however, in our earlier history the commonality of stepfamilies was a result of shorter life expectancies for men and women as well as high rates of maternal mortality during childbirth (Coontz 2002). It is the combination of a high divorce rate and a high remarriage rate that has brought the growing phenomenon of complex stepfamily systems into current focus. These stepfamily systems include members of the new household as well as connections to other family members outside the household such as former partners and children residing with former partners (Coontz 1992).

Government statistics indicate that 75 percent of divorced people remarry within 10 years, and serial remarriages are increasingly common (Bramlett and Mosher 2001; National Center for Health Statistics 1993). Higher-order marriages account for nearly half of all marriages performed in the United States each year (Wilson and Clark 1992), and the majority of these remarriages (approximately 65 percent) include children from previous relationships (Chadwick and Heaton 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998). Typically, these new marriages are formed quickly. The average divorced individual will remarry within 2 to 5 years after divorce (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Kreider and Fields 2001). In addition, because of increased rates of nonmarital births (1 in 3), more adults are entering first marriages with someone other than the child's other parent and forming stepfamilies as well (Ganong and Coleman 2004; Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995).

It is also noteworthy to consider that the growing number of cohabiting unions form stepfamilies as well. It is estimated that of cohabiting couples with children, half are living in a stepfamily situation (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995; Seltzer 2000). In fact, the vast majority of married

couples living in a stepfamily report having cohabited prior to marriage (Ganong and Coleman 2004). Consistent with these demographic reports is growing evidence from family science research and the marriage initiative work to date that finds that a large proportion, if not majority, of low-income nonmarried couples are dealing with co-parenting and stepparenting relationships. The Fragile Families study found that 43 percent of nonmarried low-income mothers had children with at least two men (Parke 2004; McLanahan et al. 2003). In the Family Connections in Alabama project, which piloted marriage education with low-resource parents, 55 percent of participants reported living in a stepfamily situation.

Among lower-income individuals, both rates of divorce and rates of remarriage are higher (Ganong and Coleman 2002). In addition, rates of nonmarried births are higher among low-income individuals (Ooms and Wilson 2004), suggesting that married stepfamilies (from both first marriages and remarriages) are even more common among low-income groups than in the broad population. A recent state survey conducted in Florida (Karney et al. 2003) showed that among married couple households with children, 36 percent Hispanic/Latino, 55 percent African American, and 39 percent White respondents reported at least one stepchild. In addition, nonmarital births are highest among African-Americans, making it comparatively more likely that African-Americans are forming stepfamilies through first marriages. Low-income and ethnic minority adults also have higher rates of cohabitation (Seltzer 2000). Combined with high nonmarital birth rates, it is likely the prevalence of low-income cohabitators living as stepfamilies is much more than half.

### **The importance of specialized content for stepcouples**

Couples who form stepfamilies (i.e., “stepcouples”) are at slightly higher risk for divorce than couples who both are in their first marriage without children (Ganong and Coleman 2000). Factors associated with higher marital quality and stability for first marrieds (i.e., communication skills, empathy, common values and beliefs, and conflict management skills) are also important for stepfamily couples, but there is evidence to suggest that stepfamily couples experience unique family developmental patterns and face unique issues that are related to healthy marital functioning (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004; Halford et al. 2003). This is an important consideration for program content.

The general research on marital couples offers an incomplete examination of the full range of factors related to high quality marriages in stepfamilies. Therefore, relying solely on the general couple and marital research to inform our programs for couples in stepfamilies may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet their unique needs. Thus, educators run the risk of leaving out important information and skills necessary for the development and maintenance of healthy marital relationships in stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004). Marriage education programs can serve as a primary resource contributing to the formation and/or maintenance of strong relationships within stepfamilies by presenting topics and developing skills specifically related to stepfamily functioning.

### **Theoretically grounded approaches to working with stepcouples**

It is always good practice for educators to be explicit about the theoretical assumptions guiding their approach and their work (Hughes 1994). For work with couples in stepfamilies, it is critical to use an *ecological systems perspective* (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The ecological perspective

recognizes environmental influences on individual behaviors. Many factors influence human development and these factors are nested within four ecological levels: the background and characteristics of the individual (ontogenetic level), family relations (microsystem level and mesosystem interactions), family interactions with elements outside the family (community – or mesosystem and exosystem level), and socio-cultural variables at the macrosystem level. In practice, this framework allows for the consideration of such variables as stress management skills, which is an individual characteristic; the co-parenting relationship and the stepparent-stepchild relationship, which are microsystems and mesosystems; the lack of support from in-laws, which is an element of the exosystem; and community bias in favor of first families, which is an element of the macrosystem. All these factors are associated with stepcouple marital quality.

Assumptions underlying *systems theory* are used and have been validated in studies specifically related to stepfamilies (Ganong and Coleman 2000; White and Klein 2002). Most importantly in this research is the evidence of spillover effects from one relationship in the family to another. This framework draws attention to and even prescribes targeting other subsystems within the family – such as co-parenting relationships and stepparent-stepchild relationships – in marriage education work because of these subsystems' impact on the couple relationship.

Assumptions from *cognitive-behavioral theory* can also inform work with stepcouples. Essentially, cognitive-behavioral theory maintains that (a) beliefs about how relationships should function and (b) expectations about relational dynamics affect one's behavior in a relationship (Baucom and Epstein 1990). To the extent that the beliefs and expectations positively affect relationships, the beliefs/expectations are considered functional; to the extent they negatively affect relationships, the beliefs/expectations are considered dysfunctional (Epstein and Eidelson 1981). Beliefs can also be realistic or unrealistic based on generally supported "truths" about stepfamily living. According to cognitive behavioral theory, program design and content should suggest the consideration of or reflection on distinct beliefs and expectations about stepfamily living because of their potential impact on the quality and stability within the stepcouple relationship.

Work with stepcouples should also use a *lifecourse perspective*. This perspective takes into account differential effects of events based on the interaction of the individuals' and the family's development. In practice, this means that "it matters when." Different information is relevant for different families based on developmental considerations. For example, it matters when you marry following a divorce/separation in terms of timeframe; it matters how long you have been a stepfamily in terms of the recency or duration of that family system; and it matters when in a child's development he or she experiences parental divorce and remarriage.

Finally, it is recommended that work with stepcouples uses a *family strengths perspective*. This perspective assumes that all individuals and families have strengths and that focusing on adding to these strengths (rather than focusing on deficits) best facilitates improvements in individual, relational, and family functioning. Strength-building strategies used in programming can include adding to individuals' knowledge base, encouraging awareness of negative cognitive and behavior patterns, and practicing skills that enhance individual and family well-being. Using a strengths perspective in work with stepcouples would also include the assumption that despite

the increased risks to individual, couple, and family functioning that stepcouples face, building strong stepcouple marriages can result in nurturing home environments within which adults and children thrive. Marriage education for stepcouples requires this multifaceted theoretical framework to best meet the needs of couples forming and sustaining their union within the context of complex families.

### **Program content and learning objectives**

Prevalent issues and factors associated with healthy couple functioning in stepfamilies include: negotiating roles and rules within a family structure in which few social norms exist, promoting realistic expectations, strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and navigating relationships with children's other parent(s). While this is not an inclusive or exhaustive list of unique areas to address with stepcouples, these are the general categories and most common issues that should be addressed in program content to promote healthy family development. Specific learning objectives associated with each of these areas should help guide the educational approach used by marriage educators.

**Incomplete institution: Negotiating roles/rules.** Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies, norms about roles and rules (i.e., patterns of functioning) have yet to be developed. Cherlin (1978) described this phenomenon as the “incomplete institution” of stepfamilies and noted the lack of societal prescriptions for how stepfamilies should operate. Stepparents do not have a legal parental relationship with stepchildren, which likely impacts a stepparent's perception of his or her relationship to a stepchild. There are no agreed-upon names for stepparents and other step-relationships. Especially relevant for low-income stepcouples is the lack of norms about financial management in stepfamilies.

There is no social prescription for stepfamily roles and rules; instead, individual families need a common agreement of expected roles and rules between family members. Agreement on family and parenting roles between spouses is associated with less couple conflict and greater marital satisfaction (e.g., Bray and Kelly 1998; Palisi et al. 1991; Pasley et al. 1993). For example, research indicates that agreement about combining separate assets and agreement about the level of support provided to stepchildren and nonresidential biological children is related to healthy stepcouple functioning (e.g., Engel 1999; Lown, McFadden, and Crossman 1989). Overall, research indicates that relational quality and stability is associated with congruent beliefs regarding stepfamily member roles. Researchers have observed that well-functioning stepfamilies and couples in their longitudinal studies actively negotiated roles and rules and worked toward consensus (Bray and Kelly 1998; Hetherington and Kelly 2002).

Marriage education program content for stepcouples should include explicit discussions of stepcouples' “non-normed” existence. For examples, messages would center on raising awareness of these issues, including the ambiguous legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren, validating feelings of “not fitting in,” and promoting the use of negotiating skills for establishing their family-specific roles and rules. Topics should focus on the names they will use for each other (in the household and across households), financial management practices, financial responsibilities to children and stepchildren, parenting strategies, and individual roles (including gender roles) in the family as well as within each dyad. From a lifecourse perspective, program content should also raise awareness of the dynamic nature of these processes. That is,

negotiating roles and rules is not a one-time event, but rather, is a continuing, evolving process that incorporates family experiences and developmental changes. Unlike skills training, these program content suggestions focus on cognitions – expectations, attitudes, and knowledge – rather than behavioral skills. Research on marital quality demonstrates that several dimensions of individuals’ “thinking” are important predictors of actual behaviors in relationships and powerful predictors of marital quality (e.g., Bradbury and Fincham 1990). Thus, these topics can be integrated into specific learning objectives that facilitate the negotiation of roles and rules. Marriage educators should ensure that participants will

- feel validated in their experiences in a non-institutionalized family structure
- have an increased understanding of the importance of reaching consensus on roles and rules (i.e., understand that there is no “prescription”)
- be able to articulate their couple consensus in several important areas of family functioning (e.g., balance of family responsibilities, financial management practices, names for stepfamily members, etc.) and
- be able to identify their strengths as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

**Realistic expectations and positive beliefs/views.** When individuals are open with each other about their expectations and have similar beliefs and expectations, they are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships. This is true for all couples, and especially true for stepcouples. It is also important to identify whether some expectations are unrealistic. Research indicates that successful couples in stepfamilies have realistic and congruent expectations about stepfamily dynamics and development at the onset of stepfamily formation.

A key element of appropriate expectations/beliefs is an understanding of the time necessary to establish roles and to determine their family’s particular functioning pattern for success (e.g., Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Visher et al. 2003). Therefore, when expectations of “instant love” among family members and “instant parent-child relationship adjustment” are not held, higher marital quality is more likely to result (Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Visher et al. 2003). Evidence suggests that not only do successful stepfamilies form relationships slowly (3-5 years), but also they form relationships dyadically rather than as a family unit – so expecting family “blending” may not be realistic (e.g., Ganong et al. 1999). Research also suggests that a cohesive, “blended” stepfamily unit may not be essential for a well-functioning stepcouple and stepfamily. Rather than striving for equally cohesive bonds and feelings of connection between stepfamily members, it is more realistic to expect that levels of connection and attachment will vary between stepfamily members. The more important dimension of healthy stepfamily functioning is the level of mutual agreement about the nature of each relationship (i.e., subsystem) within the stepfamily system.

Programs should promote the understanding of realistic expectations for stepfamily development. This includes first raising awareness of individuals’ beliefs and expectations, because these may not be consciously recognized or actively processed. Open discussions can

also be facilitated on the unrealistic expectations regarding (a) instant love, (b) quick adjustment, (c) equal attachment and bonding among stepfamily members, and (d) first family functioning. In addition, program content can include the use of communication and negotiating skills to facilitate consensus-building between couples regarding their assumptions, beliefs, and expectations for their family. It is suggested that marriage educators include specific learning objectives related to positive beliefs and expectations in that participants will

- identify their individual beliefs and expectations about stepfamily living
- identify how stepfamily experiences and development are different from (not better or worse than) first family experiences
- recognize common “myths” of stepfamily living and common realities of stepfamily living
- hold positive expectations for the possibility of healthy stepfamily functioning
- be able to articulate their couple consensus regarding their beliefs and expectations for their family and
- be able to identify their strengths as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

**Stepparent-stepchild relationships.** A critical and consistent pattern observed in research on couples in stepfamilies is the potential negative impact of poor stepparent-stepchild relationships on the quality and stability of the couple relationship (e.g., Bray and Kelly 1998; Crosbie-Burnett 1984). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) noted that

*In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of happy family life, leading to more positive parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed. Establishing some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren ... may be the key to a happy second marriage and to successful functioning in stepfamilies. (p. 181)*

Therefore, knowledge and skills that facilitate positive stepparent-stepchild relationships are viewed as marriage strengthening knowledge and skills for stepcouples.

Research suggests that the biological parent and child(ren) play a key role in the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., O'Connor, Hetherington, and Clingempeel 1997; Weaver and Coleman 2005), whereby the biological parent ultimately holds the power to support or not support the creation of bonds between the child(ren) and stepparent. Conversely, the role and supportive behavior of the stepparent also facilitates healthy development. Stepparents who continually exhibit caring behaviors are much more successful in developing more effective and loving relationships with their stepchildren (Ganong et al. 1999) than stepparents who disengage, interact very little with their stepchildren, and/or use punitive discipline.

Program content should include the recommendation that the biological parent should remain the primary disciplinarian for a given time; the stepparent should ease into a parenting role over time. Information on the developmental differences found among stepchildren (i.e., adolescent stepchildren and younger stepchildren) and their impact on stepparent-stepchild relationships and the potential for bonding should be included. Raising awareness of the potential difficulties with older stepchildren may promote proactive steps on the part of both the biological parent and stepparent to lessen the intensity of the potential conflict. Normalizing the likelihood of developing less of a bond between stepparent and older stepchildren is suggested. Information on child development and behavior management techniques may be especially helpful for stepparents who are not also biological parents. Program content should also include information for children on healthy stepparent-stepchild interactions and stepfamily development. Suggested learning objectives related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship promote the participant's ability to

- understand the importance to their couple relationship of working on healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships
- understand and use recommended strategies that build positive stepparent-stepchild relationships
- understand how age of the child affects the recommended processes and goals for the stepparent-stepchild relationship
- understand normative child/adolescent development and
- identify their strengths as individuals and as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

**Navigating relationships with children's other parents.** Because the majority of stepfamilies are formed after separation or divorce from a partner, rather than death, we can assume that co-parenting relationships with ex-partners exist. Especially for low-income parents, this may include multiple co-parenting relationships (Ooms and Wilson 2004). The quality of co-parenting relationships is shown to impact relationship quality of the new couple (e.g., Buunk and Mutsaers 1999; Knox and Zusman 2001). Another critical element in marriage education with stepcouples, therefore, is the inclusion of information on successful co-parenting strategies. Substantial empirical evidence shows that both a highly negative and a highly involved relationship with a former spouse negatively affects the new couple's relationship quality (e.g., Buunk and Mutsaers 1999; Knox and Zusman 2001). Emotionally divorcing and establishing appropriate boundaries with a former spouse or partner are essential elements for healthy remarriages (Weston and Macklin 1990). High-conflict co-parenting relationships also negatively affect children and may result in children's negative behaviors (Amato 2000). Therefore, children's negative behaviors are just as likely to be attributable to post-separation/divorce adjustment issues and conflict between parents as they are to stepfamily adjustment issues. As previously noted, children's negative behaviors can negatively impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship, which in turn, negatively impacts the marital relationship.

Research on co-parenting relationships indicates that the quality of the relationship is enhanced when individuals communicate unemotionally in a “business-like” manner; when they use neutral mediators; when they use supportive language; when they honor agreements; when they use written communication; when they maintain privacy regarding other aspects of their lives; and when they actively support their child’s connection to the other parent. It is critical that program content in marriage education for stepcouples include information and skill-building that promote a cooperative, business-like relationship with a former spouse or partner in order to prevent or alter the negative impact of an unhealthy former partner relationship on the current couple relationship. This may include (a) practices in nondefensive listening and nonconfrontational communication, (b) strategies for having “business” meetings regarding the children’s schedules, needs, etc., and (c) awareness of “pitfalls” or “games” that may lead to co-parenting conflict.

Educators should also be prepared to acknowledge the experience of having multiple co-parents in the stepfamily system as this situation appears to be quite prevalent among lower-income families (Ooms and Wilson 2004). Recommendations for how to navigate these relationships and promote positive co-parenting relationships are the same regardless of whether an individual has one co-parenting relationship or five. Marriage educators may best address co-parenting relationships by implementing learning objectives that enable the participants to

- understand the importance of positive co-parenting relationships for the well-being of their children and their marriage
- understand and use co-parenting strategies that maintain privacy between households; support a non-emotional, “business-like” connection between co-parents; enhance nonconflictual communication; and support the child’s relationship with each parent; and
- be able to identify their strengths as individuals and as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

Stepfamily relationships encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to distinctive challenges facing stepcouples, thus program content should also address each of these core areas. The four key areas of program content – negotiating roles and rules, promoting realistic expectations, strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and navigating relationships with children’s other parent(s) – and the suggested learning objectives serve as a basic structure for areas critical to the formation of healthy relationships marriages in stepfamilies.

### **Minority or immigrant stepcouples**

Because empirical studies to date have not focused on diverse samples of stepfamilies, information is provided from clinical observations and qualitative interviews with ethnically diverse stepcouples (Berger 1998). Among immigrant families, those from a country of origin that has similar levels of divorce and Western norms (e.g., Israel) appear to function similarly to predominant culture Americans in stepfamilies. When country-of-origin norms emphasize conventionalism and traditionalism (e.g., China), immigrant stepfamilies may be much more likely to disguise their stepfamily status and impose first family roles on stepfamily members (Berger 1998). When the country of origin is highly religious (e.g., Ireland, Latin American

countries, and most Middle Eastern countries) stepfamily status also may be stigmatizing. In these situations, educators may have difficulty with recruitment of and/or identification of “invisible” stepcouples. If identified, these stepcouples may have the most difficulty with altering negative views about stepfamilies and understanding that stepfamilies can operate differently than first families and be successful. In addition, some of these stepcouples from more traditional countries of origin may not subscribe to the idea that nonresidential biological parents should remain involved with their children and that stepparents should ease into a parenting role. Because of cultural pressures, the biological parent may abdicate his (in most cases, the father) parental role and the stepparent may assume a primary parental role very quickly. Educators should be sensitive to these cultural norms.

Scholars also assert that when working with African-American stepcouples, educators should consider both socio-historical context and current family practices. It has been suggested that acceptance of the stepfamily structure may be comparatively less of a strain for African-American stepcouples. Black families bring with them a legacy of a communal philosophy, permeability of external boundaries, informal adoption, and role flexibility (Berger 1998). It appears that some salient issues among higher-resource, white stepcouples may not be as relevant among African-American stepcouples, for example, difficulties with norming the practice of parenting someone else’s child or the parenting of a nonresidential child. These issues may not be as pertinent among African-American couples because kinship ties are not necessarily dictated by bloodlines and movement of children from one household to another and shared parenting responsibility among multiple parents are common. The African-American community began developing coping strategies for such circumstances in the context of slavery. (Boyd-Franklin 1989; Skolnick and Skolnick 1992).

Program content, therefore, should not assume difficulties with the concept of multiple parents, difficulties with parenting nonresidential children, or a negative view of complex families. Instead programs may focus on affirming and/or enhancing strategies for effective co-parenting among multiple parents, involvement in parenting nonresidential children, and reinforcing positive views of complex families. Another consideration, though, is that because of these readily accepted norms of parenting nonbiological children, it may be that African-American stepparents move more quickly (or immediately) into primary parental status. It is not clear whether this is functional or dysfunctional, as empirical studies have not documented comparisons of approaches in African-American stepfamilies. Without clear empirical guidance, it would still seem that the recommendation to ease into a primary parental role could be used until further studies indicate otherwise. Clinicians note that, in general, the recommendations derived from empirical studies of stepfamilies are useful for African-American stepfamilies as well (Berger 1998).

### **Implementing programs for stepcouples**

Following are some suggestions for issues to consider when targeting stepcouples in family life education. These strategies, coupled with research-based, theoretically sound materials, can serve to improve the experience and development of stepfamilies in family life education programs.

**Recruitment.** Educators know that the cliché “if you build it, they will come” is not necessarily true in family life or marriage education. Despite the prevalence of couples in stepfamilies, many

may not willingly or knowingly self-identify as stepfamily couples (e.g., Visher and Visher 1996). It may be because of the negative stigma attached to stepfamilies that still persists in our culture or it may be that couples simply do not think of themselves as any different from first family couples (Coleman, Ganong, and Chanel 1994). Educators may need to actively elicit information that identifies a couple as a stepcouple. Recruitment and retention efforts may also be enhanced with the use of “like” facilitators, supplemental marriage education, and the involvement of children and teenagers.

**Group homogeneity.** Indications are that potential participants in family life education programs feel most comfortable with others like them. This may be especially true for couples in stepfamilies because of the negative stigma commonly associated with them. Although program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, effectiveness will likely be enhanced if couples forming stepfamilies participate in a homogeneous group. Similarly, it may be useful for at least one facilitator (if co-facilitators are used) to have experience in a stepfamily.

**Supplemental marriage education.** Curricula that address the unique needs of couples in stepfamilies need not serve as a substitute for general marriage education curricula. Indications are that couples in stepfamilies need both. Remember, no evidence suggests that processes involved in healthy first marriages are unimportant in remarriages. It is probably best to think of stepcouples as having “compounded needs.” Educators may address these either by having stepcouples participate in a group together or by having stepcouples attend general marriage education sessions with a mixed group of couples, and then break out in later sessions to address stepcouple-specific topics with other stepcouples.

**Involve children/teens.** Because children, especially teens, play a vital role in the overall functioning of the stepfamily, we can assume that couple functioning is enhanced in stepfamilies when preadolescents and adolescents learn about stepfamily development and common issues, as well as learn effective communication skills, anger management, and conflict de-escalation strategies. This is consistent with the family systemic approaches often used in therapy (see Nichols and Swartz 2001). Educators should consider methods for delivering educational services to children in stepfamilies, either via their parents (e.g., take-home information) or through participation in a parallel educational program. Marriage educators may want to partner with experienced youth development leaders in these efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Couples in stepfamilies could be a significant portion – if not the majority – of the population served by relationship/marriage educators. Research indicates that these couples face unique issues not addressed by general marriage education curricula. The functioning of couples in stepfamilies is inextricably tied to the overall functioning and development of the stepfamily. Educators have access to research-based information and materials that address the skills and attitudes observed among successful couples in stepfamilies including negotiating roles and rules, promoting realistic expectations, strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and navigating relationships with children’s other parent(s). This information is best used preventively. A list of several curricula is currently available for educational work with

stepfamilies in Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) and from the National Stepfamily Resource Center ([www.stepfamilies.info](http://www.stepfamilies.info)).

Pioneers in the field of intervention with couples in stepfamilies, John and Emily Visser (1996) found education to be the highest need for couples in stepfamilies and suggested that many couples would not reach the level of clinical need if education on stepfamily dynamics and development were provided preventively. Relationship/marriage educators can provide a valuable service to couples forming stepfamilies by distinguishing them from non-stepfamily couples and offering additional program content specific to their needs.

## References

Adler-Baeder, F., and B. Higginbotham. 2004. Implications of remarriage and stepfamily formation for marriage education. *Family Relations* 53(5):448-458.

Amato, P.R. 2000. The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62(4):1269-1287.

Baucom, D.H., and N. Epstein. 1990. *Cognitive-behavioral marital therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Berger, R. 1998. *Stepfamilies: A multi-dimensional perspective*. New York: Haworth.

Boyd-Franklin, N. 1989. *Black families in therapy: A multisystems approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Bramlett, M.D., and W.D. Mosler. 2001. First marriage, dissolution, divorce, and remarriage: United States. National center for health statistics: Advance data from vital and health statistics 323. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Bramlett, M.D., and W.D. Mosher. 2002. Cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the United States. National center for health statistics: Advance data from vital and health statistics 2322. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Bradbury, T.N., and F.D. Fincham. 1990. Attributions in marriage: Review and critique. *Psychological Bulletin* 107(1):3-33.

Bray, J., and J. Kelly. 1998. *Stepfamilies: Love, marriage, and parenting in the first decade*. New York: Broadway.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Bumpass, L.L., R.K. Raley, and J.A. Sweet. 1995. The changing character of stepfamilies: Implications of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing. *Demography* 32(3):425-436.

- Buunk, B.P., and W. Mutsaers. 1999. The nature of the relationship between remarried individuals and former spouses and its impact on marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology* 13(2):165-174.
- Chadwick, B.A., and T.B. Heaton. 1999. *Statistical handbook on the American family* 2nd ed. Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx.
- Cherlin, A. 1978. Remarriage as an incomplete institution. *American Journal of Sociology* 84(3):634-650.
- Coleman, M., L.H. Ganong, and G. Chanel. 1994. The presentation of stepfamilies in marriage and family textbooks: A reexamination. *Family Relations* 43(3):289-297.
- Coontz, S. 1992. *The way we never were*. New York: Basic Books.
- Coontz, S. 2002. Nostalgia as ideology. *The American Prospect* 13(7):26-27.
- Crosbie-Burnett, M. 1984. The centrality of the step relationship: A challenge to family theory and practice. *Family Relations* 33(3):459-449.
- Engel, M. 1999. Pockets of poverty: The second wives club—examining the financial [in] security of women in remarriage. *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 5(2):309-381.
- Epstein, N., and R.J. Eidelson. 1981. Unrealistic beliefs of clinical couples: Their relationship to expectations, goals, and satisfaction. *American Journal of Family Therapy* 9(4):13-22.
- Ganong, L., and M. Coleman. 2000. Close relationships in remarried families. In C. Hendrick and S. Hendrick, eds. *Handbook on Close Relationships* pp 155-168. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.
- Ganong, L.E., and M. Coleman. 2002. Family resilience in multiple contexts. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64(2):346–348.
- Ganong, L. H., and M. Coleman. 2004. *Stepfamily relationships: Development, dynamics, and interventions*. New York: Kluwer.
- Ganong, L., M. Coleman, M. Fine, and P. Martin. 1999. Stepparents' affinity-seeking and affinity maintaining strategies with stepchildren. *Journal of Family Issues* 20(3):299-327.
- Halford, W.K., H.J. Markman, G.H. Kline, and S.M. Stanley. 2003. Best practice in couple relationship education. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 29(3):385-406.
- Hetherington, E.M., and J. Kelly. 2002. *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co.

Hughes, R.J. 1994. A framework for developing family life education programs. *Family Relations* 43(1):74-80.

Karney, B., Garvan, C., and Thomas, M. 2003. Family formation in Florida: 2003 baseline survey of attitudes, beliefs, and demographics relating to marriage and family formation. University of Florida.

Knox, D., and M.E. Zusman. 2001. Marrying a man with 'baggage': Implications for second wives. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 35(3/4):67-80.

Kreider, R.M., and J.M. Fields. 2001. Number, timing and duration of marriages and divorces: Fall 1996. Current Population Reports, P70-80. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.

Lown, J.M., J.R. McFadden, and S.M. Crossman. 1989. Family life education for remarriage focus on financial management. *Family Relations* 38(1):40-46.

McLanahan, S., I. Garfinkel, N. Reichman, J. Teitler, M. Carlson, and C. N. Audiger. 2003. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study: Baseline national report. Princeton, N.J.: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

National Center for Health Statistics. 1993. 1988 marriages: Number of the marriage by of bride by groom [computer program]. Washington, D.C.: NCHS Computer Center.

Nichols, M.P., and R.C. Swartz. 2001. *Family therapy: Concepts and methods*. Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.

O'Connor, T.G., E.M. Hetherington, and W.G. Clingempeel. 1997. Systems and bidirectional influences in families. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 14(4):491-504.

Ooms, T., and P. Wilson. 2004. The challenges of offering relationship and marriage education to low income populations. *Family Relations* 53(5):440-447.

Palisi, B.J., M. Orleans, D. Caddell, and B. Korn. 1991. Adjustment to stepfatherhood: The effects of marital history and relations with children. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 14(3/4):89-106.

Parke, M. 2004. Who are fragile families and what do we know about them? Couples and Marriage Policy Brief No. 4. <http://www.clasp.org>.

Pasley, K., D.C. Dollahite, and M. Ihinger-Tallman. 1993. Clinical applications of research findings on the spouse and stepparent roles in remarriage. *Family Relations* 42(3):315-323.

Seltzer, J.A. 2000. Families formed outside of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62(4): 1247-1268.

Skolnick, A.S., and J.H. Skolnick, eds. 1992. *Family in Transition*. New York: Harper Collins.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1998. Marital status and living arrangements, March 1998 update P-70-63. Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office.

Visher, E.B., and J.S. Visher. 1996. *Therapy with stepfamilies*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Visher, E. B., J.S. Visher, and K. Pasley. 2003. Remarriage families and stepparenting. In F. Walsh, ed. *Normal family processes: growing diversity and complexity* 3rd ed. pp153-175. NY: Guilford.

Weaver, S.E., and M. Coleman. 2005. A mothering but not a mother role: A grounded theory study of the nonresidential stepmother role. *Journal of Social and Personality Relationships* 22(4):477-497.

Weston, C. A., and E.D. Macklin. 1990. The relationship between former-spousal contact and remarital satisfaction in stepfather families. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 14(2): 25-47.

White, J. M., and D.M. Klein. 2002. *Family theories* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wilson, B., and S. Clarke. 1992. Remarriages: A demographic profile. *Journal of Family Issues* 13(2): 123-141.

### **Cite this article**

Adler-Baeder, Francesca, Mallory Erickson, and Brian J. Higginbotham. 2007. Marriage education for stepcouples. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 12 (1).

On-line: <http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2007/v12-n1-2007-spring/index-v12-n1-may-2007.php>