



October 2010  
Volume 48 Number 5  
Article Number 5R1B1

[Return to Current Issue](#)

# Community Education Programs Serving Couples in Stepfamilies: A Qualitative Study of Format, Content, and Service Delivery

**Francesca Adler-Baeder**

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist  
Auburn University  
Auburn, Alabama  
[francesca@auburn.edu](mailto:francesca@auburn.edu)

**Anne Robertson**

Senior Associate Researcher  
Abt Associates Inc.  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
[Anne\\_robertson@abtassoc.com](mailto:Anne_robertson@abtassoc.com)

**David G. Schramm**

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, Missouri  
[schrammdg@missouri.edu](mailto:schrammdg@missouri.edu)

---

**Abstract:** This article examines current efforts to provide community education programs for couples in stepfamilies. The study used qualitative interviews to explore the range of approaches, formats, settings, costs, and content used by Extension/non-Extension educators in programs for stepfamily couples. Results indicate that despite the prevalence of stepfamily couples in our communities and their unique needs in relationship programs, a dearth of current offerings exist. Those that do are as likely led by a volunteer as a trained professional; however, key concepts taught are similar across programs. Implications for educators are offered.

---

## Introduction

There is evidence that living in a stepfamily is an increasingly common experience (Robertson, Adler-Baeder, & Schramm, 2006; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Among representative samples of married couples with children, a recent state survey found that 40% of couples reported having one or more stepchildren (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003). Similar proportions were found in the same study from two other states. Overall, indications are that stepfamilies are highly prevalent in local communities, particularly among low-income families and cohabiting families, and among African Americans. Based on both the common experience and the unique needs revealed through reviews of the research on stepfamily dynamics (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Adler-Baeder, Robertson & Schramm, 2010), there is a clear need for

family life and couple education that is specific to stepfamilies.

Assessments of couple/family life education implementation efforts of Extension agents and other community professionals exist (e.g., Goddard & Shoup-Olsen, 2004; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004); however, we have no information regarding efforts to provide community-based education specifically for couples/parents in stepfamilies. The goal of the reported here study was to find current, consistent stepfamily program implementation efforts and explore the range of approaches, methods, formats, settings, delivery options, costs, and content used in selected programs.

## Methods

We cast a "wide net" to identify face-to-face community educational programs for couples in stepfamilies by contacting curriculum developers experts in the stepfamily and relationship/marriage education fields, and representatives of "umbrella" and membership organizations likely to know of programs consistently offered for stepfamilies (e.g., National Stepfamily Resource Center <<http://www.stepfamilies.info/>>; Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Services; the Extension Family Science Network; the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education; the Office of the Military Community and Family Policy; and individual military branch family service programs). We also conducted Internet searches using relevant key words and sent requests through faith-based and secular organization listservs.

After considerable effort through electronic means and over 200 personal contact phone-calls for leads, we identified approximately 40 programs consistently serving stepfamilies and spoke with program delivery staff and conducted brief interviews that focused on the format, content, goals, design, and setting. After coding for implementation format and organizational setting, we established four categories of program types (explained further in the results section) and selected 16 total program for in-depth interviewing. The 16 were randomly selected within category, proportional to the prevalence of the 40 programs in each category (i.e., 37.5% multi-session workshops; 25% single-session workshops; 25% support groups; 12.5% distance coaching).

Our conversations with these 16 program staff who were involved in direct program delivery lasted an average of 45 minutes. The interviews were exploratory, open-ended discussions of key aspects of the programs, including more detailed information related to program content, design and format, and outreach efforts. The following results are based on the findings obtained from the interviews conducted with individuals that represented the 16 stepfamily programs.

## Results

We organized the information collected into themes that represent elements of service delivery, participant and facilitator characteristics, and program content. We present these findings descriptively.

### Format and Design

The programs studied can be separated into one of four formats.

- Multi-session workshops: The majority (37.5%) of the programs typically offered instruction weekly in 2 to 2½-hour sessions for a 6- to 12-week period lead by a facilitator. Multi-session workshops for smaller groups, typically fewer than eight couples, allowed for a larger number and broader range of topics to be presented.

- Single-session workshops: Twenty-five percent of the programs consisted of workshops that met once and ranged in length from 90 minutes to 4 hours and were lead by a facilitator. The latter workshops (i.e., 3-4 hours) were intended as complete programs, whereas the shorter 90-minute workshops were used to introduce stepfamily topics and skills and inform couples of ongoing support groups or other programs/services in the community. Participant numbers ranged from 10 - 75.
- Support groups: Twenty-five percent of the programs offered services in the form of support groups of 6-15 individuals that met weekly for 1-2 hours and were both faith-based and secular. Most groups were designed specifically by and for stepmothers. Topics were driven by the group membership and tended to focus on challenges faced.
- Distance coaching: A few (12.5%) of the programs offered services via individual telephone or email sessions. The emphasis is on providing general information about stepfamilies and then helping couples deal with their particular challenges through skills practice. The telephone coaching sessions given by an individual experienced in work with stepfamilies run 60 to 90 minutes, and a couple usually has from 6 to 10 coaching sessions.

## Outreach and Recruitment

Universally, program staff stated that recruiting couples in stepfamilies is a challenge. While none reported formally collecting recruitment data, they offered possible reasons based on informal conversations and experiences in the community.

- Many couples may be unaware, both that stepfamilies have unique characteristics and that many of the issues and challenges they face can be addressed through education.
- Couples in stepfamilies may be reluctant to self-identify as stepfamily couples due to a perceived cultural bias against them. Faith-based program leaders indicated that many couples did not attend church-sponsored programs because of the stigma they felt about having been divorced.
- Stepfamilies often have more children, on average, than nuclear families and may have multiple demands on their time that may hinder their ability to attend a program even more so than nuclear families.

In order to address these challenges, the program staff highlighted their most effective outreach and recruitment approaches. The following categories/themes emerged.

- Reaching stepfamilies through word-of-mouth by program leaders and former participants seems to be more effective than brochures, newspaper advertising, and public service announcements.
- Programs sponsored by churches find that the church leader can have a significant role in encouraging participation in stepfamily programs and in making stepfamilies feel welcome in the congregation.

- Several secular programs commented that most of their outreach is done through their own Web sites and the Web site of the National Stepfamily Resource Center and utilize listservs for announcing and recruiting for programs.

## **Program Participants**

Interviewees reported that the participants attending the programs were almost exclusively White, European-American, middle- and upper-middle-class stepcouples. One exception to this was a multi-session program exclusively serving South American immigrant stepfamilies (primarily from Colombia, Argentina, and Venezuela) in Spanish. All programs reported welcoming parents/couples, whether dating, cohabiting, or married. Program staff believed that the relationship status of stepfamilies (i.e., married, cohabiting) would not influence the fundamental implications, content, and delivery planned. No studies exist that compare family functioning in married vs. cohabiting stepfamilies; therefore, it appears that program staff are using a theoretical assumption of similar functioning.

Although there is some literature suggesting the benefits of including children in programs for stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), few of the programs we contacted included children. None of the programs delivered any educational content on stepfamilies for children, even though some curricula utilized includes lessons for children. This gap may partly reflect our sampling approach, which concentrated on finding programs for adults/couples in stepfamilies. Services for children and youth may be found more often in stand-alone programs that specifically target children/adolescents of divorce and remarriage.

## **Setting**

The programs were held in a variety of settings, including religious institutions, libraries, schools, and space provided in public agency buildings. Some programs were offered by individuals without formal agency/organization affiliation. Among the programs with organizational affiliation, about half were sponsored by churches, one by a large public school district, and the rest by community agencies, including a county Extension office.

## **Cost to Participants/Financial Support**

The costs of participation in the programs contacted varied widely. In a few programs, the cost was entirely covered by the sponsoring agency or through a grant. We noted that most did not report program-specific grant support. Fees in programs that did charge participants ranged from \$15 for the book used in one multi-session program to \$189 for a 10-session program. One coach reported charging \$75 an hour for telephone coaching and \$20 per month for email support. About half of programs charging fees offered financial assistance to couples who needed it. This took the form of reduced fees based on income level.

## **Program Leaders/Staff**

The programs we reviewed tended to have two kinds of leaders. One type was the leader who created programs for stepfamilies after realizing that there were no programs available to help them with their own stepfamily challenges. Most of these program leaders started their programs within the past 10 years, and most did not initially have training in family life education, social work, or a related field. They conducted their own individual self-study of stepfamily dynamics or attended a curriculum training. A second group (a little over half of programs) was composed of professionals with training in family life education, social work, or related fields. Nearly all the leaders of programs had personal experience in stepfamilies, and at

least one program required stepfamily experience of its leaders. Programs contacted were split about equally in terms of whether they were led by an individual or a team of two, typically a man and a woman.

## Common Topics

Whereas we found the programs varied widely in terms of service delivery, we found much more consistency in the topics presented to stepfamilies. Key common topics found consistently across the programs included the following.

- **Developing an understanding of stepfamilies' unique characteristics and how they differ from nuclear families.** There was strong agreement among program contacts that an understanding of the degree to which stepfamilies differ from nuclear families could help to reduce the stress stepfamilies may experience. A key theme was the emphasis that it can take a number of years to adjust to and build relationships in stepfamilies.
- **Building an effective stepparent-stepchild relationship.** Programs emphasized the impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship has on the couple relationship; encouraged stepparents to have realistic ideas of how long it usually takes to form a bond with a stepchild; and normalized the fact that stepparent-stepchild relationships are typically not as close as parent-child relationships.
- **Maintaining a cooperative co-parenting relationship.** The main emphasis here was on the fact that appropriate, civil, and workable relationships with former partners are essential for children's wellbeing and can reduce stress on the couple relationship. It also is important to note that in some instances—such as when a prior relationship involved domestic violence—the most appropriate relationship with a former partner might be having no relationship at all.
- **Couple relationship skills.** Most reported addressing couple communication and conflict management skills, empathy skills for understanding their partner's point of view, and negotiating skills for handling family finances.

## Program Materials

Program staff reported using a variety of resource materials. In many of the programs, leaders developed and assembled program materials based on their own experiences and from reading and attending stepfamily workshops. Lay leaders of some faith-based support groups reported sometimes having the group read a book on a stepfamily topic and then discuss it, instead of using a formal educational curriculum. Several respondents reported using educational programs available through Extension and the National Stepfamily Resource Center, and others reported using a commercial, video-based "curriculum in a box."

## Discussion and Recommendations

This article examines current efforts to provide community education programs for couples in stepfamilies. After an extensive search for programs, we interviewed a sample of program staff who included community volunteers and professionals. Delivery methods included class series, concentrated workshops, and one-on-one coaching.

In our sample, there were nearly as many "lay" leaders, motivated by their own experiences and difficulty finding programs as professional educators offering programs. While there appears to be prevalent use of self-created materials rather than published research-based programs, key topics presented are consistent with recommendations for essential program content for couples in stepfamilies derived from research (see Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Adler-Baeder, et al., 2010 for details).

In this sample of programs, there was no evidence of either outreach to or use by a more economically and ethnically diverse group of parents/couples. It appears that higher resource, European Americans are the predominant participants for stepfamily-specific educational programs. Among those interviewed, only one targeted ethnic minority stepfamilies, and none targeted low-income families. While we cannot draw conclusions about the population of stepfamilies being served based on the results of this initial qualitative study, it is recommended that educators and other professionals working among more diverse populations ensure that opportunities for stepfamily program participation are available.

It was surprising to face such difficulty in finding community educators who consistently provide programs targeting stepfamilies. While the challenges faced in recruitment may serve to dissuade Extension and other community educators from offering stepfamily programs in favor of other family life and couple education programs, information regarding the prevalence of stepfamilies in our communities, particularly among ethnic minority and lower-resource families (Robertson et al., 2006; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008), and the unique family life and relationship education needs of these families, should be considered.

It should be noted that current federal funding to support relationship education is being utilized by Extension and non-Extension community educators to enhance family and couple functioning in stepfamilies in at least one state (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008, 2010; Skogrand, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010), and efforts include an emphasis on ethnically and socioeconomically diverse families. These programs were not underway at the time of our search and interview with program staff.

This study indicates that consistent efforts to provide targeted community education for stepfamilies are limited and continued efforts to explore barriers, from both a program and participant perspective, are warranted. We encourage Extension educators to pursue continuing education and training in stepfamily education programs in order to increase stepfamilies' access to programs. Extension educators can both provide these programs directly, as well as provide technical assistance to "lay" educators in their communities.

### **Acknowledgments**

This work was supported through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. Views expressed in the article reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect views or opinions of the funding agency. The authors wish to thank the interviewees for their time and efforts in the successful conduct of this study.

### **References**

- Adler-Baeder, F., & Higginbotham, B. (2004). Implications of remarriage and stepfamily formation for marriage education. *Family Relations*, 53, 448-458.
- Adler-Baeder, F., Robertson, A., & Schramm, D.G. (2010). A conceptual framework for marriage education programs for stepfamily couples with considerations for socio-economic context . *Marriage and Family Review*, 46, 300-322.

Goddard, H. W., & Olsen, C. S. (2004). Cooperative Extension initiatives in marriage and couples education. *Family Relations*, 53, 433-439.

Hawkins, A. J., Carroll, J. S., Doherty, W. J., & Willoughby, B. (2004). A comprehensive framework for marriage education. *Family Relations*, 53, 547-558.

Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder (2008). The *Smarts Steps: Embrace the Journey* program: Enhancing relational skills and relationship quality in remarriages and stepfamilies. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 13(3). Retrieved October 14, 2010 from:  
<http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2008/v13-n3-2008-winter/higginbotham-adler.php>

Higginbotham, B., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2010). Enhancing knowledge and agreement among ethnically and economically diverse couples in stepfamilies with *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey* program. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 48(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2010february/iw7.php>

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

Robertson, A., Adler-Baeder, F., Collins, A., DeMarco, D., Fein, D., & Schramm, D. (2006). *Meeting the needs of stepfamily couples in marriage education services*. Technical report. Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, D.C.

Skogrand, L., Reck, K., Higginbotham, B., Adler-Baeder, F., & Dansie, L. (2010). Recruitment and retention for stepfamily education. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy: Innovations in Clinical and Educational Interventions*, 9, 48-65.

Teachman, J., & Tedrow, L. (2008). The demography of stepfamilies in the United States. In J. Pryor (Ed.), *The international handbook of stepfamilies: Policy and practice in legal, research, and clinical environments* (pp. 3â 29). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

---

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the Journal Editorial Office. [joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact JOE Technical Support.