The multi-dimensional family tree: Best practices with stepfamilies

Program Agenda:
• Quiz – What do we know about stepfamilies?
• Stepfamily demographics
• Distinctions in family structure and development
• Common stepfamily dilemmas
• Implications for goal-setting and practice
• Case consultations

Definition of a Stepfamily
• A family unit in which one or both of the adult partners has a child (or children) from a previous relationship.

Stepfamily Demographics (U.S.)
• More than four in ten American adults are part of a stepfamily.
• Between 10 and 20% of children under the age of 18 live with a stepparent.
• About 40% of women and 30% of children will spend part of their life in a stepfamily.

Contemporary Stepfamily Formation
• Divorce
• Remarriage
• Re-divorce
• Cohabitation
• Children born outside marriage

Divorce and Remarriage Trends
- 1,000,000 children have parents who separate or divorce each year
- About 65% of remarriages involve children from a prior relationship
- 30-40% of children will experience a divorce of their custodial parent and stepparent

Visher & Visher, 1996
Kreider, 2008; Pasley, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2011

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Why Focus on Stepfamilies?

- Children in stepfamilies are at higher risk for behavioral, emotional well-being and learning problems (than those in nuclear families).
- Adult stepfamily members report high levels of stress.
- Practitioners report being challenged with the complexity in working with stepfamilies.

Coleman & Ganong, 2004; Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000; Heatherington & Kelly, 2002

Stepfamily Structure

- 3 Key Distinctions (from nuclear family)
  - Usually more than two parents in the parent subsystem
    - Or parent figures and sets of grandparents
    - More family members in general
  - Children are typically members of two households
  - Children predate couple relationship

Stepfamily Structure

- Rules vary across households
  - May need to be renegotiated within households
  - Many implicit rules take time to learn and may create “landmines”
- Biological parent-child subsystem may be particularly strong
- Cohesion often not as strong (by necessity)

Stepfamily Structure

- More role variability and ambiguity especially for stepparents
- Power more ambiguous and decentralized
  - Decision making negotiated across households
  - Children may have more power
- Boundaries more permeable by necessity
Stepfamily Development

- Developmental trajectory differs from biological nuclear
- Unique normative stages and tasks necessary for successful adaptation
- Three main developmental frameworks
  - Papernow (1993)
  - Bray (1998)

Common Themes in Developmental Frameworks

- Honeymoon period short lived
- Earlier years often characterized by confusion, misunderstandings, and tension
- Tensions may give way to overt conflict, resentment, and even doubts about compatibility
- Acceptance equilibrium may take anywhere from two to seven years (often depending on age of children)
- Stress and conflict may re-emerge during teen years or as the result of family reorganization

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

- Loss and Grief – Adults
  - Loss of the dream
  - Loss of previous partner/spouse
- Loss and Grief – Children
  - Loss of daily presence of one parent
  - Loss of dream that parents will reconcile
  - Loss of individual parent time
  - Possible role displacement

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

- Unrealistic Expectations
  - Transition to marriage or cohabitation often made quickly
  - During “honeymoon” (often prior to cohabitation or marriage) needed adjustments glossed over
  - Children often not well prepared and feelings not always well considered
  - Expectations for family life based on nuclear family paradigm

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

- Loyalty Conflicts
  - Biological parent – new partner and children
  - Child – stepparent and biological parent (of same sex)
  - Child – biological mother and father

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

- Loyalty Conflicts

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

• Stepparent Assimilation
  – Rejection by children (especially stepmothers)
  – Feeling like an outsider
  – Moving too quickly into disciplinary role
  – Lack of clarity about role/relationship with children

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

• Life Cycle Discrepancies
  – Disparity in parenting and marital experience
  – Parents and children have longer histories together (than couple)
  – Age and life experiences more variable
  – Age range of children more varied

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

• Interdependency Between Households
  – Less control over family happenings
  – Planning involves more people and decision-making requiring time-consuming negotiations
  – Family membership may be continually in flux
  – Children often transition back and forth between households

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

• Lack of common history and traditions
  – Family members may have different expectations and experiences around daily life
  – Initially little or no shared meaning
  – Miscommunication and misinterpretation more likely to occur
  – Family life more unpredictable

Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

• Practical Stressors:
  – Financial strains (child support, legal fees)
  – Time-management
  – Legal Issues
    • Custody battles
    • Stepparents’ lack of legal rights and responsibilities

CLIPS FROM STEPMOM

➢ What family dilemmas did you see?
➢ What were their strengths?
Implications for Goal Setting:
• Basic Therapeutic Tasks
  – Explore and formulate realistic expectations
  – Ease stepparent-stepchild relations
  – Identify appropriate role for stepparent
  – Strengthen couple relationship
  – Find and highlight the strengths
  – Normalize Stress

CBT & FAMILY SYSTEM INTERVENTIONS

Getting Started: General Best Practices
• Instill hope and encouragement
• Validate feelings and normalize (when appropriate) stress and challenges
• Use a genogram to learn about family system and to assist family in understanding stressors
• Be aware of our own biases

CBT: Exploring Expectations
• Explore vision for stepfamily life together; assist family in constructing a realistic and preferred family “story”
  – What are expectations for family life?
  – What are their assumptions parental roles
  – What are they expecting from new stepparents?
  – What is stepparents experience with children and how realistic/age appropriate are expectations?

Family Systems: Role of Biological Parent
• Early on - Encourage biological parent to assume lead authoritarian parenting role with children e.g.
  – Rule-setting
  – Discipline
• Discourage biological parent from negatively comparing ex-spouse to new spouse

Family Systems: Role of Stepparent
• If SP role/relationship with children is problematic, encourage relationship building activities
• Discourage SP from disciplinarian role (early on)
• Assist couple in identifying alternative supportive role for SP
  – friend, coach, aunt, sitter, mentor
• Be aware of and work with cultural differences
  – movement of SP into parenting role may be more acceptable in some cultures
Family Systems: Co-parenting Relationship

- Acknowledge importance and role of other biological parent
- Encourage positive communication and co-parenting alliance between all parents but especially biological parents
- If indicated, schedule sessions to include all or some members of “bi-nuclear” family
- Discourage negativity between households

Family Systems: Couple Relationship

- Assist couple (alone or with children) to map out mutually agreed upon family rules
- Encourage couple to maintain “united front”
- Teach and/or reinforce communication, negotiation and problem solving skills
- Encourage designated couple time in addition to family time

CBT: Merging History and Traditions

- Encourage sharing of “stories,” especially among children and stepparents (e.g. athletics, academics, hobbies)
- Assign tasks around “story telling” and sharing photos and creating family albums
- Encourage “getting to know you” games
- Promote discussion around family traditions and preferred holiday and other rituals

CBT: Psychoeducation

- Increase knowledge about stepfamily structure and coping by assigning helpful books, blogs and web resources
- Refer to stepfamily educational-support groups
  - Face-to-face if available
  - Online Internet groups

CBT: Teaching Skills

- If conflict between couple or biological parents, teach/model communication skills which may also include:
  - Problem-solving
  - Conflict management
- Other skills useful are:
  - Time management
  - Stress management

CBT: Loss and Grief

- Facilitate recognition and acknowledgement of loss, especially for children
  - How does your child express their loss?
- Provide education around grief being an evolving developmental process
- Encourage parents to give children permission to express feelings of loss and grief
- Facilitate the couple sharing aspects of their history around loss
Other general intervention guidelines:

- Use appropriate nonpathologizing language
  - Stepfamily over “blended”
  - Biological parent over “real” or “natural”
  - Noncustodial parent over “other” parent
- Identify supports and strengths
  - Explore and focus on strengths that each member brings to the family
  - Encourage use of natural support networks, e.g. spiritual, friends, extended family

CASE CONSULTATIONS

Wrap-up and Summary Thoughts:
What We Need as Practitioners

- Knowledge about stepfamily structure, life cycle, and common family dynamics
- Familiarity with best practice interventions
- Familiarity with educational resources
- Comfort level with conflict and emotional intensity
- Ability to control sessions in order to keep sessions safe
- Self-awareness and willingness to externalize own issues and biases