UNC School of Social Work Clinical Lecture Series

THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL FAMILY TREE: BEST PRACTICES WITH STEPFAMILIES

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February 11, 2013
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.

Visher & Visher, 1996
Stepfamily Trends
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 the will spend part of their life in a stepfamily.

Kreider, 2008; Pasley, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2011
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

National Commission for Children; Stepfamily Association of America
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
“Thanks to separations, divorces and remarriages, I’ve got 20 grandparents.”
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
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 Dilemmas
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

- Step Dad
- Mom
- Bio Dad
- Step Mom
- Son
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

Hmm...just like my ex...No wonder there’s problems
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 steprelationships?
  - 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
"My parents are divorced, both remarried, I have six new siblings, one bathroom, a new school, and I'm doing very nicely, thank you."
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