

UNC School of Social Work Clinical Lecture Series

The multi-dimensional family tree:
Best practices with stepfamilies



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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 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 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

Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Stewart, 2007.

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

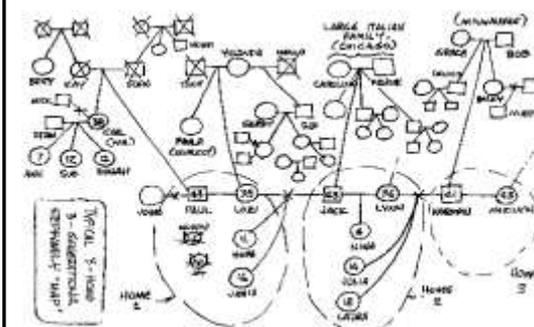
National Commission for Children; Stepfamily Association of America

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



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
 - McColdrick & Carter (1989)
 - 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 any where 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 reorganizatin

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

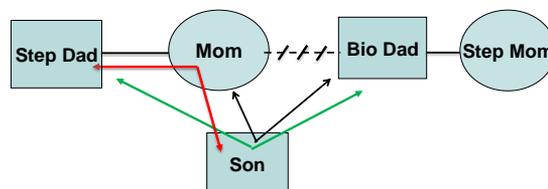
Common Stepfamily Dilemmas

- 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 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

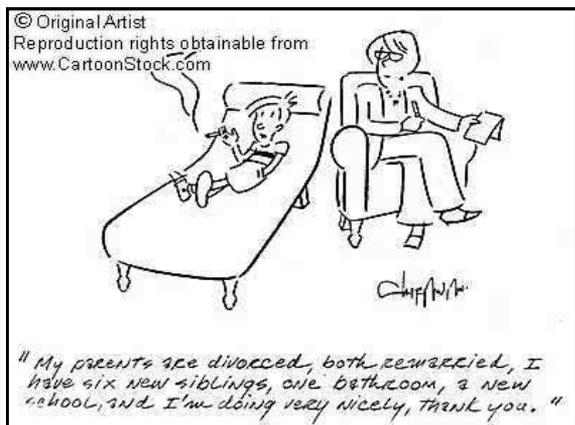
- Increase knowledge about stepfamily structure and coping by assigning helpful books, blogs and web resources
- Refer to stepfamily educational-support groups
 - Face-to-face if available
 - Online Internet groups

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



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