

# STEPFAMILIES

*Providing Education and Support*

Volume 18, Number 4

Winter 1998

Inside

Counselor's Corner / p. 1

President's Message / p. 2  
*Stepmom*

Research Update / p. 4  
*Contemplating Stepchild  
Adoption*

Director's Report / p. 5

Chapter Highlights / p.6

Book Review / p.7  
*Weddings: A Family Affair*

**PUBLISHED BY THE  
STEPFAMILY  
ASSOCIATION OF  
AMERICA**

## COUNSELOR'S CORNER

by Susan Gamache,  
MA, RCC (PhD Candidate)

### The Hidden Moral Landscape of Divorce and Remarriage

**A**s helping professionals involved with stepfamilies, we consider divorce and remarriage from many perspectives in order to be of better service to our clients. However, within the mental health field, we rarely venture into the domain of morality. Yet, in my 10 years of study and clinical work with divorce and remarriage, I have come to the conclusion that issues of morality are exerting a powerful influence on our clinical thinking and on our clients as they attempt to move through marital transitions within their communities. Further, it seems that many clients feel judged at a moral level by society in general, and carry heavy burdens of guilt, shame, and blame regardless of the intelligence, compassion and goodwill with which they participate in family life post-divorce and remarriage.

Are divorce (and by association remarriage) really indicative of moral inadequacy? There appear to be two positions from which to attempt to address this question. The most prevalent is the belief that divorce and remarriage are essentially a bad thing, i.e., a series of events that are evidence of problems within the individuals concerned or society in general. In contrast to the images of the first marriage family, (i.e. the proud family portrait, Norman Rockwell

dinners), images of the divorced family include the broken heart, shattered glass on the family photo or the photo torn down the middle. Images associated with the stepfamily include the wicked stepmother, the abandoned child, or suitcases at the bedroom door.

From this perspective, divorced families and stepfamilies have somehow "failed," and they are now not as "good" as the nuclear family. They have fallen from the moral high-ground to the moral low-ground. They cannot regain the moral "high-ground" no matter how well they navigate the divorce or how hard they work to create a successful co-parenting relationship with a former spouse. Further, this negative cloud also seems to follow the family into the next stage of the process, the creation of the stepfamily.

This perspective, the association of moral inadequacy with divorced families and stepfamilies, can be held by anyone regardless of family type (i.e. first marriage family, divorced family, stepfamily). Those who live in a first marriage family sometimes feel a sense of superiority regardless of the quality of their family relationships. Those who are in post-divorce families or stepfamilies can also tend toward this view. They

Continued on page 3

## COUNSELOR'S CORNER...

Continued from page 1

seem to carry the guilt, shame, and blame that come from living outside of one's own moral code. This negative perspective does not seem to be influenced by managing a divorce process well or establishing strong, supportive family relationships in the post-divorce family or stepfamily.

The other view is that marital transition is not a statement of moral deficit but rather a normal occurrence and an important option for today's families, i.e., a social phenomenon that is reasonable given the social context of the late 20th century, and not necessarily indicative of personal or social deficits.

There are no images of the post-divorce family, or stepfamily that communicate basic "goodness."

Nevertheless, there is growing research evidence that divorce and remarriage may not be the universally negative and damaging event once assumed. It is clear that there are risks involved in marital transitions, especially for children. However, there are also risks for children in prolonged exposure to parental depression, conflict and marital maladjustment. In addition, there are benefits in marital transitions. These findings are in contrast to the myth that divorced families would be problem-free if only the divorce had not occurred. What many scholars are concluding is that divorce and remarriage cannot be assumed to be either good or bad, and that it is not the structure of a family but rather the quality of relationships within it, that are most important.

From this perspective other social phenomena that influence the likelihood of lifelong marriage can be considered. For example, our ever-increasing life expectancy is profoundly changing our ability to remain in one marriage "til death do us part." In the past 150 years, our average life span has doubled, thereby making a "til death do us part" a more challenging proposition. In addition, our society is rapidly changing and the pace of this change is steadily increasing. Who had heard of the Internet five years ago? Did our grandparents have to deal with gender equity? The challenges associated with remaining in one marriage for a "lifetime" have increased dramatically.

Accepting divorce and remarriage as important options is not incompatible with supporting lifelong marriages as valid social institution.

Initiatives such as The Smart Marriages Conference are essential to the growing challenges involved in lifelong marriages. However, to accept divorce and remarriage as legitimate choices is to acknowledge that lifelong marriage may be right for many people much of the time, but not for all the people, all the time. If a choice is made to end a marriage, this is not necessarily an indication of personal, social, or moral deficits.

It is rare for someone to hold this view unless they have been through a marital transition themselves. People who hold this view must generally work hard to maintain it, given the constant barrage of negativity about divorce and remarriage in

our professional and public discourse. Even if they have successfully worked through their own marital transition, they face constant evaluation from society, whether it is from the principal at their child's school, a nurse at the hospital, or a cashier at the grocery store.

### Let's Make A Deal!

In order for clients to resolve emotional issues, it is important that clinicians are prepared to address the social context that helps keep post-divorce and stepfamilies inhabiting the moral low-ground. In response to the moral undertones inherent in our current social climate I offer to my clients an opportunity to play "Let's make a deal." I offer to take a little of the guilt, shame, and blame they may feel for having been in a marriage that did not last a lifetime, or for struggling to create a stepfamily. I invite them to replace it with accountability for learning to do it to the very best of their ability. Whether it is about being the best former spouse they can be, the best parent or stepparent they can be, or the best partner they can be in their new relationship. I encourage them to challenge moral judgments communicated through media images or comments from teachers or neighbors that leave them feeling ashamed of their family. Remember, in the end it is the quality of relationships that makes the difference, not the structure of the family. Being married "til death do us part" may not be the only moral high-ground. Perhaps tending to the relationships in their post-divorce family and stepfamily to the very best of their ability can be their new moral high-ground, a place where they can stand up straight and tall and feel "good" again. □

### President's Message

Continued from page 2

connector for the two women in his life – less than I would have liked – however, he is a very involved dad. And he consistently puts the needs of his children at the forefront of any altercation with his ex, never forgets her importance to their children, and openly appreciates the parenting responsibilities accepted by the stepmom. Columbia Pictures has captured a winner on film. The acting is superb and *Stepmom* is a movie almost everyone can relate to – it shows the world that there is no one kind of perfect family; that the makeup of "family" is changing and expanding. Columbus did not set out to make a social statement, rather, he wants to give us all "a sense of reality." He succeeds admirably. At the same time, *Stepmom* also gives us a role model.

This emotional movie is not a chick-flick. *Stepmom* allows every member of a stepfamily to feel. The movie dredges up painful and happy memories, touches on ways the legal system can damage families that are already hurting, quietly depicts typical and unnecessary difficulties caused by a failure to clearly communicate with one another, and dares to speak the unspeakable thoughts. Take out your tissues when mom and stepmom begin discussing their feelings about the teenaged daughter's far off wedding day. When all is said and done, this scene portrays the essence of stepfamily-and-former-family complications.

*Stepmom* opens on Christmas Day. At some point over the holidays, gather together your scattered stepfamily members and go to the movies. You'll all have much to talk about afterwards. By the way, *Stepmom* is the first film to be recommended by the Stepfamily Association of America. □