

# STEPFAMILIES FOR PROFESSIONALS:

## Physical Child Abuse in Stepfamilies

By Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder

**W**

### *hat do we know?*

Although physical child abuse has been documented and extensively studied since it was first recognized as a social problem over 30 years ago, knowledge in the area of stepparent-stepchild physical abuse is extremely limited. Annual population reports of the incidence of child abuse give us information on percentages of different types of abuse and age and ethnicity of abuse victims. However, no current U.S. reports tell us the proportion of stepchildren being physically abused each year in this country.

Not only do we lack information on stepchildren as physical abuse victims, we also lack research-based findings about this phenomenon in stepfamilies. Only a handful of studies have examined this issue, and nearly all are at least a decade old. Most studies are the work of Daly, Wilson and colleagues, Canadian researchers who have questioned the incidence of stepchild abuse both in Canada and the U.S. Their studies address the question: Are stepchildren over-represented in reported incidences of physical abuse? That is, are stepchildren at greater risk for physical abuse than biological children? The studies are based on assumptions from socio-evolutionary theory that suggests the biological connection between parents and children lacking in stepfamilies, enhances the motivation of biological parents to be better parents; in non-biological relationships this theory assumes a greater tendency towards aggression in parenting.

The number of abused stepchildren in these studies was compared to estimated population proportions of children living in stepfamilies, using Glick's (1981) "1 in 10" proportion. Wilson and Daly concluded that their studies presented evidence that stepchildren are disproportionately represented as abuse victims (Daly, Singh, & Wilson, 1993; Daly & Wilson, 1981; Daly & Wilson, 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1987; Wilson, Daly, & Weghorst, 1981). Importantly, their methods were questionable, so their conclusions are also questionable. For example, they counted child victims in stepfamilies as stepchild abuse cases, even though it was not clear whether the perpetrator was the stepparent or the biological parent. Secondly,

they did not differentiate physical and sexual abuse cases. This distinction is an important one because there is evidence that stepchildren are over-represented in incidences of sexual abuse (e.g., Finkelhor, 1987, Gordon, 1989; Gordon & Creighton, 1988). If these cases were included, the relationship found between stepchildren and risk of abuse may be confirmation of the link between family structure and sexual abuse rather than family structure and physical abuse.

Other studies did not find evidence of stepchildren over-represented as abuse victims (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Hermann & Martin, 1988; Malkin & Lamb, 1989). These studies clearly included only cases of physical abuse by a stepparent. Thus, when taken together, research has yet to clarify the question of over-representation. Moreover, there is evidence that the majority of child abuse reports come from lower socio-economic groups (NRC, 1993) where divorce and remarriage rates are higher (Larson, 1992; Wilson & Clarke, 1992). The means that the proportion of stepchildren in lower socio-economic levels is significantly higher than the 10% estimated for the total population. It may well be that as much as 20-30% of children living in lower income levels live with a stepparent, an estimate that may be even higher if we consider the number of children living with a single parent and his/her adult partner.

Interestingly, studies that examined the severity of physical abuse (e.g., Hermann & Martin, 1988; Malkin & Lamb, 1989) found the most severe abuse was not necessarily the result of abuse by a stepparent. Instead, biological parents were more likely to commit the most severe abuse.

What does this mean? It is apparent that there remains no conclusive answer to the over-representation question. Further, I believe that researchers have focused on the wrong question, or at least, a less important question. Determining conclusively that stepchildren are at greater risk for physical abuse provides little practical information for either practicing professionals or members of

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stepfamilies. In reality, some stepparents are abusing stepchildren. The important questions remain: Why are stepchildren being physically abused? What is happening in stepfamily life that results in such aggressive acts?

Currently, there are not published studies that address these questions. A multiple stress explanation is suggested from the general physical child abuse literature (NRC, 1993). We know that most physical abuse cases are the result of a disciplinary action or conflictual interaction between a parent and child gone awry. Experiencing a high level of personal stress is a major factor associated with parents "crossing the line." When applied to stepfamilies, evidence shows that they may experience higher levels of stress than first families, particularly in the early years (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington, 1993). They also may experience unique stressors.

A study being conducted on substantiated cases of physical child abuse among families in the U.S. Air Force may provide us with some important new information in this area (Adler, Pasley, Pittman, 1998). The study includes reports from biological mothers, biological fathers, stepfathers, and stepmothers who physically abused their child or stepchild. Preliminary results show that stepparents had more rigid parenting beliefs and parenting styles than did biological parents. Such beliefs are associated with greater difficulty in stepfamily adjustment and increased likelihood of negative stepparent-stepchild interactions (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Vuchinich et al., 1991). Also, the victims of stepparent offenders were older than were the victims of biological parents. Specifically, stepparents abused more 11-14 year-old victims. Other research shows that stepparent-stepchild conflict is more pronounced when the stepchild is a stepdaughter (particularly adolescent girls ages 11-13), in part, because the stepdaughter is more evocative in her negative interactions with a stepparent (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Vuchinich, et al., 1991). However, this study showed that girls were not at greater risk for physical abuse by stepparents. For both biological parent and stepparent offenders, the victims were nearly equally boys and girls.

Another report (Adler-Baeder, 1999) examined the relative importance of rigid parenting beliefs, marital satisfaction, and connection with outside-the-family activities and social networks on personal stress levels of the abusive parents and on conflict in the family. Findings were that a low level of involvement in outside-the-family activities and social networks was the strongest predictor of personal stress and conflict in the family among

abusive stepfathers. This may reflect the "outsider" experience noted by Bray and Kelly (1998) where a stepparent does not feel integrated into or has disengaged from the family routines and social networks. This disconnection may increase the risk of stepparent-stepchild conflict that results in physical abuse. The final results of this study will provide some new information on stepparents who physically abuse their stepchildren.

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## Excellent Response to SAA's Professional Affiliates Survey

By Larry Kallemeyn

**T**he Professional Affiliate Survey sent to current and former Professional Affiliates had a response rate of 70+%, which is excellent.

Of the twelve potential services listed in the survey, five services were consistently identified as being the most important or most beneficial to our Professional Affiliate members. Those services were (in ranked order of importance):

1. Availability of one-page handouts dealing with specific stepfamily issues that can be given to clients.
2. Increased advocacy by SAA's national office to help Managed Care and other funders recognize the specialized training needed to effectively work with stepfamilies.
3. A separate newsletter directed specifically to stepfamily therapy and education issues.
4. Increased access to educational materials or research findings dealing with stepfamily issues.
5. Information or materials to assist therapists in advertising and marketing their practice to stepfamilies in their communities.

Within these five services the availability of one-page educational handouts for clients was clearly the number one service identified as being most important and beneficial. The remaining four services, while all very highly rated, were very close in their scoring with each other.

Three additional services, while not scoring as highly as the top five services but which were still clearly identified as being beneficial and important to members, were:

- The ability to consult directly with national experts in the stepfamily field
- Increased opportunities to exchange ideas and information with fellow Professional Affiliates
- Expansion and updating of the SAA Professional Affiliate Directory

It should be noted that none of the services identified in the survey were viewed by a majority of the respondents as being non-beneficial or not important (a scoring of 1 or 2 on the survey instrument). The responses regarding these services did not, however, show the strength or consistency of the other services identified.

It was also noted that 77% of the Professional Affiliates who responded to the survey did have Internet access and e-mail addresses.

Based on these findings, SAA's staff and clinical committee are examining ways SAA can best provide the services identified as being most beneficial to Professional Affiliate members. It is likely some of these services will be offered through SAA's new website which should be up and running by mid-October. We will keep members apprised, as these new services become available. Thanks to everyone who participated in this process.

### We're Changing

Over the next several issues you will notice the form of the STEPFAMILIES newsletter changing. It is our attempt to be sensitive to the needs of our readers. For some time now, we have struggled with the challenge of trying to make one newsletter fit the bill for stepfamilies and the professionals who work with stepfamilies. We realize this is no longer possible.

Please bear with us as we try several new looks on for size. In this issue you will find a separate pull out section targeted to professionals. In our next issue we will be adding a children's column.

Like the caterpillar who emerges from the chrysalis a beautiful butterfly, we are excited about what lies ahead with our own transformation. If you have comments about the newsletter and what you'd like to see, please send them to us.

## COUNSELOR'S CORNER: By Susan Gamache, NIA, RCC, (Ph.D. Candidate)

### Introducing a New Metaphor for Divorce and Remarriage

*“You do not perceive something until you have the right metaphor to receive it.”*

— THOMAS KUHN  
*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

**M**etaphors are powerful vehicles of communication. They synthesize amounts of information into a single, unified package. Perhaps less obvious, they encourage us to SCREEN OUT aspects of a phenomenon that DO NOT FIT with the chosen metaphor. Such is the case with the metaphor we currently use to describe divorce and remarriage. The current metaphors prevent us from seeing important aspects of the divorce/remarriage process and discourage us from moving forward to a more sophisticated understanding of this intensely personal, yet very social, phenomenon of marital transition in the late 20th century.

In our culture today, we understand the nuclear or first marriage family as the “real” family. We describe this family form as natural, “normal”, or “intact”. Should Mom and/or Dad choose to end their marriage, it is popularly understood that their marriage “failed” and the children are now from a “broken home”. The presence of divorce in our society is considered evidence of the moral breakdown or degeneration of society. Thus, the metaphor communicated by our language is what I shall refer to as the broken/damaged/failed metaphor.

**T**hese metaphors describe divorce and remarriage as essentially a bad thing, i.e., a series of events that are evidence of problems within the individuals concerned or society in general. In stark contrast to the images of the first marriage family: the proud family portrait, Norman Rockwell dinners, and The Cleavers, images of the divorced family include the broken heart, shattered glass on the family photo or the photo torn down the middle. The divorcing couple is perceived as of the “Me Generation”, indulging in out-of-control conflict for selfish, petty reasons, out of touch with the impact of this conflict on their broken-hearted children. Images associated with the stepfamily include Cinderella and the wicked stepmother, the romantic new couple and the abandoned child, or suitcases at the bedroom door.

From this perspective, divorced families have somehow “failed”; they are broken, smashed, damaged beyond repair. They can never be as “good” as the nuclear family again. 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 follows the family into the next stage of the process, the creation of the stepfamily.

Although these metaphors are extremely negative, they are not entirely inaccurate. They describe well the damage to children, adults, and family associated with divorce. Thirty years of study on divorce has clearly identified risk factors: family finances may be seriously effected, parenting relationships may be stressed, damaged or lost, children may begin a series of rapid changes to include loss of family home, neighborhood, extended family. Creating a stepfamily can also include risks. Adjusting to new stepparents, stepsiblings, shared resources, shared parenting, coordinating family life with a former spouse, etc. can be stressful for everyone.

**N**evertheless, however accurately the broken/damaged/failed metaphor may describe the difficulties associated with some marital transition, it is far from complete. It does not allow us to consider many other critical factors in the divorce/remarriage domain such as the impact of no divorce on adults and children, the well-managed divorce, the successful stepfamily, and divorce and remarriage as partially a social phenomenon rather than solely a personal experience. In order to consider these other vital aspects of divorce and remarriage we must find another metaphor, one that allows us to see beyond the limitations of the broken/damaged/failed perspective.

### A NEW METAPHOR FOR DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

To this end, I propose a new metaphor of health and wellness for family relationships using a continuum on which the left side represents relational illness, or unhealthy relationships including abuse or toxic forces in couple and/or parenting relationships. In the middle is neutral ground, neither toxic, nor extremely fulfilling. To the far right, high quality health in family relationships, experiences of loving fulfillment in the couple and/or parenting relationships.

The Health and Wellness metaphor allows us to see the aspects of divorce and remarriage that may put children and adults at risk. At the same time it allows us to consider the well-managed divorce and successful stepfamilies, two categories which by definition must be

screened out of the broken/damaged/failed metaphor. By adding neutral to positive aspects of divorce and remarriage to our pre-existing view of broken and damaged, we can see the whole picture and acknowledge important aspects previously screened out.

A view of divorce and remarriage that does not get much air time is that it is a normal occurrence and important option for today's families, a social phenomenon that is reasonable given the social context of the late 20th century and not necessarily indicative of personal or social deficits. Unfortunately there are no images of "normal" or "goodness" for families post-divorce or remarriage that can match the power of the glow of the Norman Rockwell family portraits, the sharp pain of the smashed glass on the family portrait, or the sinister smile of Cinderella's wicked stepmother.

Other social phenomena that influence the likelihood of life-long marriage can also be considered using this metaphor. For example, our ever-increasing life expectancy is profoundly changing our ability to remain in one marriage "til death do us part."

The average length of a marriage in the late 1700s was only 7 years. As life expectancy in 1850 was on average, only 40 years, marriages were generally ended by the death of one of the spouses before the 10-year mark. As marriages were predominantly ended by the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse was not faced with having to work out custody and access, child support and co-parenting relationships with the deceased. Remarriage rates were very similar to those of today. Furthermore, in the 1800s, 50% of children had lost one or both parents by the time they reached 13 years of age.

In the past 150 years, the average life span has doubled, thereby making a commitment to remain in one marriage "til death do us part" a much more challenging proposition. With an 80-year life span, we can consider the 40 - 60 year marriages as average. Never before have so many had the opportunity to be married to the same person for so long. Never before have we faced the challenge of continuing to be involved with a former spouse through a co-parenting relationship. However, the ever-increasing proportion of our population that reaches 75 or 80 years of age is effecting more than just our pension plans and the need for understanding geriatric needs. It is changing the way we live our lives through all of our adult years.

For example, as adults in our society, we are exposed to rapid change on all fronts, and the pace of this change is steadily increasing. No longer do young people graduate from high school or a university and find the one job they will maintain for their working lives. Men no longer marry a woman who will stay home to tend the home and hearth; they do not envision themselves retiring with the gold watch at 65, leaving them both to rock on the

front porch eager to see their grandchildren. Today, most women and most mothers work outside the home. Changing careers mid-life is no longer new for men or women. The Internet is steadily transforming the world of information technology. And even though some of our grandparents may have lived for 75 or 80 years, they did not have to deal with the ever-increasing pace of change that confronts each of us every day.

The challenges associated with remaining in one marriage for a lifetime have increased dramatically. Perhaps our challenge could be described as how to choose a partner with whom we can grow and change in a compatible fashion through an ever-lengthening adult lifetime of unpredictable and rapid change. Perhaps it is becoming obsolete to consider romantic love as the main criterion for choosing a life-long marriage partner.

Finally, we must consider the "no divorce" option. Our current limited view of divorce seems to suggest that if only we can convince people not to divorce, all will be well. However, John Gottman's research on marriage relationships should convince us otherwise. After twenty-five years of research attempting to predict which couples will divorce and which couples will remain together, Gottman has found that the relationship of couples that chose to divorce were characterized by what he calls The 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and withdrawal/stonewalling. He further found an association between these relationship dynamics and physical symptoms four years down the road. What this research strongly suggests is that when relationships move into the "unhealthy" side of our continuum, they can become extremely toxic, resulting in substantial emotional and physical damage. As much as I believe in the power of couple's therapy, I do not believe that we have the therapeutic technology to restore love and harmony to every troubled relationship. It would appear the "no divorce" option is no panacea.

Accepting divorce and remarriage as important options is not incompatible with supporting life-long marriage as a 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 failure, or personal, social, or moral deficits. Equally, as the next section demonstrates, post divorce families are not necessarily broken/damaged/failed families nor are stepfamilies necessarily hopelessly chaotic or neglectful of children.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The second part of this article, "What About the Kids?" will be printed in the next issue of STEPFAMILIES.*