

STEPFAMILIES

Providing Education and Support

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A RESEARCH STUDY EXAMINING THE FINANCIAL (IN)SECURITY OF WOMEN IN REMARRIAGES

By Margorie Engel

*ed note: This article is the first in a four-part series by Margorie Engel, Ph.D. and President of SAA. Look for the continuation in upcoming issues of the **Stepfamilies Quarterly**.*

The voices of women on financial issues in remarriage have been virtually neglected. I am grateful for the candor and detailed information provided by 426 women who are members of the Stepfamily Association of America. As promised in the cover letter attached to the Questionnaire, the results will be reported in the **Stepfamilies Quarterly** beginning with this issue.

Many aspects of current family life and demographic trends in marriage, child-bearing, divorce, remarriage and re-divorce, are adaptation to changed economic conditions and to the demands they put on people. In this study, women seem to embrace the idea of an equal partnership before marriage and make allowances if the marriage functions in a less-than-equal partnership between husbands and wives. That is an extraordinary leap of faith when our laws and policies do not support marital equality in either an ongoing marriage or at the time of divorce.

This report is a look at *What Is* and not *What Ought to Be*, and the real and perceived consequences of *What Is*. Simply put, "What economic security is there in

this marriage?" In broad terms, this study tested for wives' actual financial security along with whether, and if so, when, wives felt financially secure.

HER STORY

Women and men experience marriage, even the same marriage, in different ways and they receive very different and unequal benefits from marriage. This research study, relying on wives' replies exclusively, will be reporting on the wife's perception of her financial security in her marriage. The husband's perception of his wife's financial security would not necessarily be the same.

Women made a number of changes in their lives when they said, "I do." Almost half moved to a new town, city or state. While one-fourth of the women quit a job, over one-fourth of them began a new job. Respondents sometimes noted hardships around the job change, but none so vehemently as this professional woman with a Ph.D.

If I could start this marriage over, I would never leave my 60+K job, dump my house, roll out (of state), meet the stepchild from hell, and watch this entire marriage go into the toilet as the stepchild smiles with satisfaction.

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AMERICA

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D.



Because our membership and our volunteer base are so diverse, SAA represents a collaborative effort of these interests joining together. The Association is really a lot of people each doing a little bit of the entire job of strengthening stepfamilies, rather than a few people doing everything. Over the

past couple of years, while doing the research on laws and policies affecting stepfamily members, I met by mail, phone, fax, Internet, and face-to-face a number of these unsung heroes. Today, I want to tell you about three of our members with imagination and the ability to get things done.

Priscilla Storm witnessed first-hand how a divorce decree can be used as a baseball bat between parents when she became a stepmother at the age of 23. When she and her husband divorced eight years later, she decided she wanted something different for them and their 6-year-old daughter. It was then that she designed the first Custody Helper™ forms and began sending them to her ex-husband. These forms are a system for documenting children's activities and interests, parents' communications, and financial records of child-rearing. They worked so well [no subsequent litigation] that when Priscilla remarried a man with custody of his son and daughter, they began sending the monthly reports to his ex-wife.

While Priscilla acknowledges that there have been returns to court for modifications to her husband's divorce decree, she also points out that the Custody Helper™ documentation supported the court awarding each time in favor of Priscilla's husband. One thing leads to another and Priscilla, after her day job in a family wholesale trees business in Tucson, AZ, obtained training as a mediator. She founded Storm Solutions, Inc. and now uses her documentation forms to help divorced and remarried couples maintain good commu-

nication about the lives of their children. ExStepcional Ideas was an offshoot of the corporation. It is directed by her three children and provides humorous and supportive items for the children of divorce and remarriage. The teens hold workshops during which youngsters design greeting cards. Priscilla says, "I have laughed and I have cried when reading the cards. The ideas just pour out of these children. I've seen a child design as many as 40 cards in an hour when they are given permission to design what they are thinking." An example of a humorous card? On the outside: "Happy birthday!" The zinger was on the inside: "I don't know you, but my Mom says we're related."

Judy Osborne is a therapist who heads Stepfamilies Associates in Brookline, MA. As many therapists do, Judy conducts workshops and support groups in addition to individual and couple counseling because, "We all have a picture of a family. It is not usually a stepfamily." It was Judy who assembled stepfamily members into a focus group to assist in the development of my research questionnaire about the "Financial [In]Security of Women in Remarriages."

Within myriad stepfamily issues, we all seem to develop a particular passion. Judy is determined to eliminate the negative language about stepfamilies descriptive vocabulary from within stepfamilies and inappropriate monikers from the outside. For example, she is firm with clients when it comes to speaking respectfully about the ex-spouse and she bristles when the media refers to stepfamilies as "blended."

As a way of taking her language points to the community at large, Judy does national and local radio and television interviews. She is a commendable spokesperson for stepfamily members when she speaks of two families coming together. Judy points out that we don't have to think in terms of "first priority" for first families because that does a disservice to everyone. Ever the diplomatic therapist, Judy admonishes both first and second families, "Everyone

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STEPFAMILIES

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Editor: Jean McBride, MS, LMFT

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A RESEARCH STUDY...

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There was no spousal support for most of the women to give up, and only 18% of the women acquired a house by inheritance or divorce settlement, while 29% of the previously single women owned their own homes. Initially, one-third of the wives moved into their husband's homes, while over half of the couples moved into a home that was new for both spouses within the first couple of married years — a decision strongly encouraged by many of the respondents when giving advice to women about to remarry.

Half of the wives acknowledge becoming more active in money management. Most of them discuss financial responsibility with their husbands, while over half of them created a joint investment strategy and actually developed a financial plan together. And 40% brought debts from a previous marriage. Husband's debts were a hot topic when wives were asked what they would do if they could start this marriage over again. The general reply went something like, "Watch to see how your future mate handles finances **before** you marry."

Age, Remarriage, Education and Income

Of the respondent wives, almost all are white and over half of the women are in the 40-54 age bracket. Results indicated that 71% of the wives and 96% of the husbands had been previously married. In a little more than half of the stepfamilies, the couples began their financial partnership by living together before the marriage. One-third of the women remarried within two to four years of a divorce while 39% of the men remarried in less than two years. Thirty-eight percent of the women waited more than four years to remarry.

In this study wives are more highly educated than their husbands and earn significantly less of the family income. Frequencies show that most of the wives have at least some college experience and over half of them are working toward or already hold a graduate degree. At the same time, 68% of the respondents had 1997 "personal income" levels of less than \$50,000, while 30% had personal incomes of less than \$25,000.

The education level of wives compares with only four out of five husbands having some college experience and less than half of them working toward or holding a graduate degree. Notwithstanding the discrepancy in educational status, only 12% of the SAA respondent families have a "total household income" of under \$50,000.

A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE ABOUT MONEY

The questionnaire included four open-ended questions that allow the wives to use their own words. There appears to be a distinct pattern of responses that provides insights into how wives in remarriages view their financial position.

Women were asked, "As a result of previous financial experiences and answering these questions, do you have a different feeling about money?" Respondent wives focus on debt and communication about money as the primary issues they would assess differently if they could begin the relationship all over again. Discuss, disclose, decide were the words used.

SAA Wives' Report Overall Reactions to Money Issues in their Remarriage

When respondents had an opportunity to write freely, they had a great deal to say about money issues in their stepfamilies. Overall, commentary fell into three basic categories, with the general consensus conveyed by the following pronouncements:

Good

I wouldn't change anything. I think we have done a good job with it. Helps to have some money to work with and to have similar goals and "money sense". We have spent hours and hours on this area of our marriage.

Fair

Because of stepfamily financial needs, you may reach times in the marriage that you feel deprived. The minute you feel deprived, make moves to buy yourself something (maybe less expensive) that you've been wanting. If you don't do this it will build up into resentment over time.

Poor

Money and finances are big stressors in a stepfamily. If I had known he was going to be like this, I would never have married him. I am contemplating divorce.

SAA Wives' Financial Advice to Women About to Remarry

Financial problems are almost exclusively related to ties to the first marriage rather than to a lack of resources:

Knowing that future child support payments are subject to increases resulting from later filings is the single greatest source of financial ambiguity in our marriage.

To sum up respondents' warning advice in three words. "Proceed with caution!" Wives in this study are, by and large, happy in their marriages and with their lives in general. Along with numerous cautionary tales, they offer "softer" thoughts:

Don't set things in stone if you can help it. You may be surprised how much your feelings and attitudes may change over time.

Stepfamilies bring a truckload of baggage into a (new) marriage relationship and you need to be strong spiritually to cope with the various issues that are most assuredly unresolved.

And finally,

Think! Positively, lovingly and *realistically*. □

Mourning A Loss

Reprinted from Stepfamilies Quarterly, Winter 1995

As a family therapist and psychologist I recognize that certain family compositions and situations are fraught with treacherous emotions. Although there is no plan or pattern that all stepfamilies follow, regardless of how similar their situations may be, certain problems frequently match particular family types. To those families that match the profile, but not the described emotions, I offer my apologies for my presumption. For many therapists and stepfamilies, however, I believe that the details described will seem surprisingly familiar and the intervention helpful.

Some stepfamilies come to therapy with great intensity of emotion. A family type that often exhibits its turmoil is one in which a woman marries a widowed father with children between eight and eighteen. These families often come to therapy discussing one child's problem, or they may actually be brought in because the stepmother feels that "this family has to mourn its loss." The stepmother is often conflicted; she really does "feel" for the children's loss, and she is aware that the family's inability to mourn adds to her own isolation. Without having mourned the loss of their mother, and in the husband's case, his former wife, it is difficult for the family members to view the stepmother objectively. She is either consciously ignored or else her efforts are perceived as unhelpful. This frequent interpersonal dynamic should not be blamed on either party; such a situation often results when a new individual joins a family that has suffered a profound loss.

Although the therapist recognizes the inherent truth in the stepmother's statement that the family needs to mourn in order to heal, to join her completely in this mission is destined to cause some consternation. The importance of mourning such a loss is almost universally accepted. But the issue now is who is generating and insisting upon this mission, and how is this assignment responded to by the family? Hence, a reasonable concern and referral by the stepmother is rendered volatile because of what it represents.

How can the therapist not appear to be siding with the stepmother? Is it wrong to side with the stepmother, especially if she is correct? This commentary is not intended to question the importance of the stepmother's advice. In fact, much of good therapy takes the strong feelings of each person involved and finds a way to help

people share these strong feelings with each other. This particular topic, however, has built-in traps. If the children and father in a stepmother family do not accept the premise that they need to mourn, the therapist needs to articulate the dilemma; as the stepmother becomes more adamant that the family must mourn, the family understands the truth of the message, but is unable to begin the process on demand. In fact, in this situation the process of mourning might be delayed.

It is with great compassion that I experience the stepfamily's feelings and concerns. In most cases no one is feeling good about the tremendous tension in the home. But since stepfamilies are frequently at a loss to explain the origin of their strong negative feelings, a system of attack and withdrawal becomes standard behavior. The therapist is suddenly embroiled in the predicament that is currently affecting the family. Advice from a concerned neighbor that father and children seek counseling might have been viewed as supportive and resulted in motivating the family to explore their feelings of loss, whereas the same advice from a stepmother is reacted to defensively. "If I mourn my mother's death, am I opening a place in my heart for my stepmother?" This question, which can seem extremely benign, then is replaced with, "if I do find a spot for my stepmother in my heart, isn't that dishonoring my mom?" These concerns begin to lock the child(ren) into a pattern of resisting the process of mourning because it is no longer strictly in the service of honoring one's mother and moving on with life; instead, it now represents a betrayal.

It is my opinion that dilemmas such as this demand that the therapist extricate himself or herself from the family's definition of therapist as mediator. There is no happy medium in this situation. This issue represents a dichotomy, which by definition represents two mutually exclusive positions. Therefore, in order to assist the family, the therapist must fully explain the dilemma to the stepfamily. In explaining, use qualifiers to insure that at no time do you label their feelings without their agreement. Hold the stance that neither group or individual is acting to hurt the other, rather, each person is trapped in trying to move on, honor others, feel included, and be allowed to be an individual.

The therapist needs to be able to support each person in the search to resolve painful issues. Those concerns which affect the child (ren) and husband are quite dif-

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STEP WRITE UP

by Rick Harper, M.F.C.C.

Dear SWU,

My name is Lainy, I recently began living with Tom, age 34, who is divorced with two children from his previous marriage. Tom's children are Kimberly, age 12 and Charlie, age 6. The children live with us. Tom has physical custody, although, he shares joint legal custody with the children's mother, Teresa.

Teresa visits the children sporadically when it is convenient for her. There are times when our schedule is disrupted because Teresa makes a big stink about not being able to see the children whenever she wants. The children love the idea of seeing their Mom, especially Charlie. Kimberly seems to have mixed feeling, excited one minute and depressed the next. We never know what to expect when Teresa arrives. She may come in and sit for an hour or two only occasionally interacting with the children. She may take the children for a ride to the store and drop them back off in a half hour or take them for pizza when we have dinner waiting.

Tom seems to be worried about interfering because of Teresa's threats to take the children away from him. Tom's a very attentive Father and gives up a lot to spend time with the children. I feel the same way about having the children come first, but, this is affecting my relationship with Tom more than I thought it would.

The four of us have been living together for about five months. Tom and I were going together about a year and a half before we decided to move in together. So, I've known the children for about two years.

I feel sorry for what Tom and the children are going through with Teresa but I can't say too much. I don't want to make matters worse by complaining to Tom or confronting Teresa. I don't know what to do.

Dear Lainy,

The worst place in the world is in the middle between opposing forces. Therefore, the first thing to consider is whether you really want to be a part of this mess. The problems you identify were there before you entered the picture. Tom may figure out his responsibility to set boundaries and limits with his ex-wife more quickly if he has to deal with her by himself. Unfortunately for the children, they are usually the last and least considered in these situations. You may have been brought into the chaos to help stabilize Tom and the children but since you are not the problem, you will not be the solution.

If you aren't packing your bags, here are some keys to consider:

- Families thrive within boundaries and limits
- Parental leadership sets the direction of family development
- Children derive security and esteem from a structured environment.

Tom has done little to establish an identity for his restructured family which consists basically of Tom, Kimberly and Charlie. Interacting with this core is an inconsiderate ex-wife and yourself.

Assuming your desire to stay and help, it would be important for you to share your concerns with Tom. The effects all of this is having on you is something you will have to decide to accept or step away from until Tom makes some decisions of his own. Encourage Tom to figure out what is best for his family. For example:

- Tom may need to speak to his attorney to help him secure regularly scheduled visitation for Teresa as well as confront the risk of having the children taken away.
- Tom may need to learn how to single parent his children before he shares parenting with someone else.
- Tom may need to figure out how to deal with his ex-wife before he is ready to enter a relationship with another woman.

I believe Tom may benefit from some counseling and parenting classes to establish boundaries and limits with his ex-wife and provide some structure and security for his young children. Once Tom gets his feet under him and is able to hold his ground with Teresa then Tom and the children may be ready to expand their family unit by one loving member. But until then and without being on firmer footing yourself, you have little or no say. You may be able to offer more support and encouragement from outside the chaos than from the middle of it.

Good Luck. □

Do Intervention Programs for Stepfamilies Make a Difference?

Dr. Robert Hughes (Dept. of Family Relations and Human Development, Ohio State University) and Jennifer Schroeder (a marriage and family therapist in Danville, IL) recently published a review of family life education programs directed toward meeting the needs of stepchildren and stepfamilies. They made the argument that given the number of stepfamilies in the U.S. today and the more complicated nature of stepfamily life, family life educators have responded by developing specialized programs for these families. What Hughes and Schroeder offer us is both a summary and critique of the programs currently available in the professional literature. I briefly review their study here because it provides some insights for those stepfamilies in search of educationally-oriented programs and for professionals interested in becoming a provider of such programs.

Their study categorized programs for stepfamilies as child-focused, adult-focused, or family-focused in nature. That is, the intervention was designed for children, for adults, or for adults and child together. Only two programs were identified as child-focused and were for use in the general classroom, rather than removing children from their regular class which is typical of programs for children of divorce. One program addressed family dynamics in stepfamilies from the child's point of view, and the second program emphasized different types of families of which stepfamilies were one type. In this second program children are encouraged to talk about their feeling regarding changes in families and discuss communication and problem-solving strategies. Both programs are for all students in the class, so children in stepfamilies are not singled out. Unfortunately, neither program has been evaluated, so we don't know whether they are effective in helping children understand stepfamily life.

Eleven programs were classified as adult-focused and dealt with many of the issues scholars believe are important for stepfamilies (e.g., building a sense of closeness, working out stepparenting issues, enhancing the marital relationship). Use of a workshop format like SAA's own *Stepping Ahead* is common, and programs vary in length from three to eight sessions. All include some lecture and discussion with different degrees of structure that can include homework assignments. One program was unique in that it used a self-study format. Like the child-focused programs, most of these have not been evaluated with three exceptions. Findings from the evaluations varied, such that one program found little measurable change in certain dimensions of family life (e.g., cohe-

sion, conflict, satisfaction, stepparenting beliefs). Another program found decreases in anxiety, increases in satisfaction and more extensive social networks two months after program participation, but didn't use a comparison group so we don't know whether the change was due to the program or some other unmeasured event like the passage of time. The final program evaluated showed program participants improved their communication skills and children reported somewhat closer feelings toward their parents, but there was no change in family adaptability, cohesion or satisfaction.

Four programs were identified as family-focused and addressed family dynamics, although sibling relationships were ignored in two programs. A third program addressed family-related issues (e.g., caring, communication, unity) and paid less attention to any of the dyadic relationship issues (e.g., marital, parent-child); this program used a home-study format. The final program addressed varying topics depending upon the families in the program and focused on six general themes (e.g., family dynamics, transitional issues). Unfortunately none of these programs have undergone evaluation, although two of the programs include consumer satisfaction forms, that could be used for obtaining feedback from participants. Again, we know nothing about the effectiveness of family-focused programs for stepfamilies.

I concur with the authors that in light of the substantial growth of stepfamilies, there are few programs designed to help these families make the transition of stepfamily life. Moreover, of the programs available, few have been evaluated so little is known about the value of such interventions. In addition, few of the programs are grounded in the empirical literature on stepfamilies. Interestingly, programs for children with divorcing parents are increasingly common in schools; given that most children of divorce become stepchildren (either through parental remarriage or cohabitation), schools can address the needs of this growing population of children whose experiences are unique from children of divorce. This truly seems to be an untapped area that warrants attention from a collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

Hughes and Schroeder offer some good suggestions for both the development and assessment of intervention programs for stepfamilies, beginning with a comprehensive needs assessment to determine the "emotional, parenting, family, financial, and legal issues that

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DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn

Backpacking in unfamiliar territory without the assistance of a map or compass can be a frustrating and potentially dangerous experience. None of us would think of placing our loved

ones in jeopardy by not properly preparing for such an outing. Yet every day, families across the country place themselves in perilous positions because they have not taken the time to establish a roadmap or guide they can follow to be sure they reach their destinations safely. In fact, many have not taken the time to determine where they want to go as a family. I encourage each of you not to fall into this trap but to take the time and effort to clarify your family's goals and to establish ways they can be accomplished.

While there is no way to account for all the contingencies or obstacles one might encounter along the way, not having a clear sense of direction and expectation is much more likely to result in failure than anything else.

With that thought in mind, several members of SAA's Board of Directors met the first weekend of June to begin establishing SAA's goals and destination over the next five years.

Clearly some hard choices had to be made but the group worked diligently to create a proposed road map for what should be a successful plan of action for the next several years. Once approved by the full board, I will be sharing the plan with you.

In the meantime, I encourage each of you to create your own family plans and not become one of the many who wander aimlessly through life and then wonder why things didn't work out.

Please keep us informed as to your successes so we can share them with our readers. □



Seeking Volunteers to Participate in a Dissertation Research Project on:

STEPFAMILIES

You may qualify if you answer "Yes" to all of the questions below:

In this study, a stepfamily is defined as two adults living in the same home where one or both adults had children prior to the present marriage. Are you a member in a stepfamily?

Is one of the children living in your family an adolescent between the ages of 12-19?

Is the parent, stepparent, and adolescent willing to complete a questionnaire?

(\$2 is included for each individual who completes a questionnaire to say thanks for your time)

Stepmother and Stepfather families welcome to participate

If interested, please contact:

Katherine Baum 900 West Ave. #1115 Miami Beach, FL 33139
Phone: (305) 673-5019 Email: Kbaum@mindspring.com

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS FOR FALL 1998

By: Gloria Clark

FACILITATING TIPS —

As Chapter Development Chair I often talk to people who are chapter leaders.

One of the most frequently asked questions is how to facilitate meetings so that as many people as possible get a chance to participate and get something out of the meeting and want to return.

In our chapter we do a “go round” at the beginning of each meeting where each person gives their name, how many children they have and how long they have been in a relationship. Most of the time one member of a couple will speak for both.

During the meeting we try to include as many people as possible in the discussion. We strive for a balance between giving time to newcomers and moving the meeting along so that people don't go home without having a chance to speak. We want people to come back to many meetings and become “regulars”. When someone brings up an issue that I know a more experienced person has dealt with I will ask that person to share how he/she handled a similar situation. It is often the personal sharing that will bring about a new insight for members.

A good example of this is the “burning issue” segment of our meetings. Heather Newman-Trivus, MSW and a leader from Pittsburgh's South Hills Chapter, has coined the term “burning issues.” I have asked her to write about this concept and how she feels it contributes to her meetings.

Most people come to a Stepfamily Chapter meeting/support group because they have burning issues that they cannot resolve themselves. Some have tried therapy, arguing, and silence. Couples come to chapter meetings to get support for their pain. Their pain and hurt represent their burning issue(s). People may have difficulty hearing information until they can share what's bothering them. In our chapter meeting, people share their burning issue(s) as part of introductions. We carefully take notes, clarify what the burning issue is, and commit to problem-solving burning issues as a group as part of the wrap up of the meeting in the last forty-five minutes. Spouses seem to be able to hear a non-related person in the group say exactly what their spouse has been saying without becoming defensive. Sometimes burning issues dovetail with the information prepared to share at that meeting. In those situations, the burning issue can be used as a starting place to build the information to be shared. Other times several families will have the same or similar burning issues which then may supersede the prepared topic. Sometimes burning issues may inspire the topic for the next meeting. In all cases burning issues become opportunities to convey information about stepfamilies whether that's learning about: the stages of stepfamily development, communication skills, normal adolescent issues in stepfamilies, parenting skills, etc. Chapter meetings must meet the needs of the people present to be useful.” □

Houston Chapter Hosts Seminar

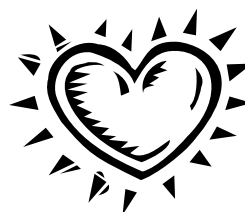
The Bay Chapter hosted a seminar on Saturday, September 26, 1998, titled “Building a Successful Stepfamily”. The presenter was Ron L. Deal, M.MFT., Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Certified Family Life Educator. This seminar was co-sponsored by LifeBuilders “Coaching for a Better Life” and Dr. Beth Wade.

Topics included God's Love for Stepfamilies, 5 Stages of Stepfamily Development, Your Blending Style, The Myths & Realities of Stepfamily Life, How Stepfamilies are Unique, Parenting & Stepparenting Roles, Strategies to Help Your Children, How to Cope with Special Challenges (Sexuality, Fears, an “Ours” Baby, Faith Matters), and Characteristics of Healthy Stepfamilies. □

Stepfamily Day Celebration

Christine Borgeld deserves special recognition for her diligence in establishing September 16, 1998, as National Stepfamily Day. She has worked with governors and their staff of over 40 states as well as the Office of the President of the United States to have this day officially proclaimed as National Stepfamily Day. Thank you, Christine!

For more information or to express your support, you may e-mail her at christyb37@aol.com or FAX an inquiry to her at 616-534-7901. □





FROM OUR READERS

Dear Marjorie,

I am writing in response to your request for input on “the problem with no name” in my stepfamily, as addressed in your article in the Spring 1998 issue of *Stepfamilies*.

I am the stepmother of two boys, ages twelve and almost fifteen. My husband is a custodial father and the children have lived with us full-time for three and a half years. We married two years ago. Their birth mother lives nearby and they visit with her.

The issue of what to call me has been a reoccurring issue throughout our family’s existence. The boys have always called me “Paula.” The youngest child refers to me as his mother when talking with others (school staff, friends, etc...), while the oldest child refers to me as “my stepmother who I live with.” Both of my stepsons regularly answer “Yes, Mother,” to being given directions or requested to complete chores.

On many occasions we’ve discussed the question of what everyone would feel comfortable with calling me. The boys have asked if it bothers me that they don’t have a “mother name” for me. They tell me they consider me “another” or “second” mother. We have never found a name they can agree on or feel comfortable with. Often they express that this is partially due to what their birth mother’s feelings or reaction would be to any name they chose. My position is clear — whatever you want. I joined this family without the expectation that I would be called “Mom.”

I enjoyed your article and found it thought provoking but, it left me thinking What’s in a name? Is my role in their upbringing lessened by my label? I don’t think so. A friend of mine explained it simply once —we learn, from infancy, to call our parents by a certain name “Mom, Mama, Mommy, Dada, Dad, or Daddy.” That, to us, becomes their name, not their job and does not reflect on their ability to raise us to become happy, productive adults. So, in accepting the job of parent in my family, I did not receive a traditional name. I do not have a traditional job either. I am their primary parent, in that I spend the most hours with them in a week, as compared with their other two parents. However, I have no biological link to them. They don’t look like me. We have a limited history. It seems fitting somehow that I have a non-traditional title. I am involved in my stepsons’ schools parent organizations, transport them to after school activities and sports practices, attend all their games, plays, and parent-teacher conferences. I regularly act as homework consultant. My parenting style, val-

ues, rules, and opinions have had and will continue to have an enormous impact on them as they grow into manhood.

I find the role of stepparent to be complex. Traversing a mine field seems like child’s play one day, and another day is tranquil and rewarding. I would be lying if I said this job is easy. It is not for the faint of heart. You must take your rewards when they come, and accept the emotional bruising that is inevitable. Don’t expect a traditional name—while you may be a traditional parent—you joined this family after it was formed, after all the names were given. You’ll have to find your place in this family. You’ll have to help make a new family, while being willing to accept that one existed before you. It is the relationship you’re able to forge that is important, not what they call you.

— Paula E. F. Martel, Weymouth, Massachusetts

STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, Inc. PROFESSIONAL TRAINING INSTITUTE

**A two-level conference cosponsored by the
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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Continued from page 2

can be important."

By now, I hope that Christy Borgeld has framed and hung two Presidential Proclamations on her wall. Why? Thanks to endless hours working on an issue that is dear to her heart, Christy convinced President Clinton to include *stepmothers* in his Mother's Day Proclamation and *stepfathers* in his Father's Day Proclamation this year for the very first time. Using the Internet, Christy gathered project supporters including governors and other elected officials, organizations dedicated to working with families, and stepfamily members throughout the United States. Husband Jim admits, "I'm blown away that she has done all this from our home!"

Christy had four children from a previous marriage when she met Jim and his two children. In telling me about her family, Christy commented, "We wanted a child together so now we really have a bunch!" Married

for six years this past July 1st, the children range in age from five to 15. Christy's parents were role models for community and charity work and this Wyoming, MI, mom continues the tradition by involving her children in service projects.

Jim is clearly enamored of his wife. He told me, "Without getting mushy, I've never met such a person who was creative, dedicated, full of energy, and when she gets an idea, she goes to the top." True to form, Christy is going to the top once again. This time, she is gathering support for prompting President Clinton to proclaim September 16th as National Stepfamily Day.

I have the pleasure of working with these talented, caring people, who share a commitment to stepfamilies, love this organization, and respect its members. They are helping us to break through walls of silence and to change attitudes about stepfamilies. They're reminding us that being in a stepfamily is truly a remarkable opportunity for a diverse and fulfilling family experience. □

COUNSELOR'S CORNER

Continued from page 4

ferent from those being felt by the stepmother. In commenting on these individual needs, you reinforce the importance of clarifying for each person that no action by the other will remove entirely the pain felt by each individual. You may need to address these needs in sub-system sessions in order to allow the process to proceed

without the contextual dynamic which produced the dilemma. In time the work toward integration of this family will become the priority, and the family members should be ready. □

Scott Browning, Ph.D. is on the faculty of Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia and serves on the SAA Board as a member at large and on the clinical committee.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Continued from page 6

face children and adults living in stepfamilies" (p. 296). Importantly such assessments should take into consideration the perspective of all family members, including resident and nonresident members. At the least, programs should collect client satisfaction information so program developers have some basis of assessing what is and is not working in a particular program. In addition, documenting the instructional process will be a key for wider use of programs and will allow for more effective replication. Lastly, they suggest that systematic evaluations of program outcomes be undertaken that include comparison groups of nonparticipants. This same recommendation has been offered by program

developers of divorce education programs for parents and children, and few such programs have done so. However, if we are to know whether the program results in meeting desired goals, such evaluations are essential. □

For more information on the programs reviewed, see: Hughes, R., Jr., & Schroeder, J.D. (1997), Family life education programs for stepfamilies, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 26(314), 281-300.

Kay Pasley, Ed.D., is Chair of the Research Committee and on the faculty of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



BOOK REVIEW

By Patricia Schiff Estess

Professional or scholarly books don't necessarily qualify as page turners. But the new ideas these books bring on the subject of stepfamilies are worth noting and learning from—especially if you're wondering what the experts are saying about the dynamics of stepfamilies, their influence on children, what it is that makes for good stepfamily counseling, the effects of different custody arrangements on children, and more. And if you're in the profession of counseling stepfamilies — as therapists, attorneys, or judges — they bring useful insights to a subject we're in the midst of living.

Stepfamilies: History, Research, and Policy

(The Haworth Press) edited by Irene Levin and Marvin Sussman. Levin is associate professor in the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research at Oslo College in Norway. Marvin Sussman is UNIDEL professor of Human Behavior emeritus at the College of Human Resources at the University of Delaware. \$24.95

If you're having a difficult time getting your new stepfamily to "work," here's a compilation of studies that focuses not on how difficult is it (which it is) but on the factors that promote family cohesiveness and integration. It's by far the most readable of the three academic books reviewed here — thanks in part to some researchers well-known to the SAA and their "sounds like our family" approach to communicating — people like Marilyn Ihinger-Tallman, Kay Pasley, Marilyn Coleman, Lawrence Ganong, Anne Bernstein, and, of course, Emily and John Visher. This is a good book to keep by the night table — as reference and inspiration — when life in a stepfamily becomes uncommonly chaotic. That's because the research once again debunks the notion that still persists in some areas that the stepfamily is an incomplete or undesirable institution.

Lots of interesting stuff finds its way into the pages:

- How half-siblings perceive the "ours" child in a remarriage. (Best if the "ours" child comes at a time when the remarriage is established; also best if there's only one child from each of two marriages.)
- How people differ in their attempts to establish their new households. (Some try to use the nuclear family as a model; others explore a number of possibilities to see which fits; others try constructing a new and innovative family unit nixing the idea of the nuclear family which didn't work for them the first time around.)
- How men and women differ in their therapy needs. (Stepfathers needed to know about ways to handle stepfamily situations; stepmothers wanted to know that what they were experiencing was "normal" and needed to know what to expect.)

A good read!

Premarital & Remarital Counseling

(Jossey-Bass) by Robert Stahmann, a professor of family sciences at Brigham Young University, and William Hiebert, executive director of the Marriage and Family Counseling Service in Rock Island, Illinois. \$25.95

Leaning in the direction of pastoral counseling (Hiebert is a professor of pastoral theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary), the authors nevertheless provide helpful guidelines to couples for what to expect from any therapist and therapy in general. By reading a handbook designed and written for professionals, you back into what you need to know about selecting a therapist who will help move the new family along down a positive path. The authors tell the therapists to understand that the problems and concerns of stepfamilies are set in a different context than a first marriage, to be aware and sensitive to stepparents' anxieties, and to understand how the family dynamic changes for the children in this new family. So that's what you want to look for in a therapist.

If you've been wondering whether group counseling would be of value, this book enumerates its pluses and minuses. The pluses of a group: you know you're not alone, you learn from others in the same boat, you get satisfaction from helping others and you get reality checks from other group members. (That's what so good about SAA meetings, too.) The minuses: you or your spouse might feel inhibited by the group or you may have problems too intimate to share.

Child Custody: Legal Decisions and Family Outcomes

(The Haworth Press) edited by Craig A. Everett, PhD and director of the Arizona Institute for Family Therapy. \$39.95

This compilation of recent divorce and remarriage research gives you a view of the attitudes some judges have toward divorce and custody issues. Not always a pretty (or useful) sight!

For parents grappling with the residential custody issue, there's a particularly interesting study which tracked 197 children who were living in one of three types of residential custody arrangements — with the mother, with the father, or jointly with both parents. An interesting conclusion: A minority of the children living with one or the other parent changed custody during the two year period, making the custody arrangement fairly stable. But half of those living in joint custody changed the arrangement (more often than not it was younger children and girls changing to their mother's sole custody), making the joint custody arrangements more temporary than sole custody. □

Steps to Stepfamily Success

Plan to have family meetings at least once a month or, if problems arise, more often. Establish guidelines to follow.

Educate Yourself! Read! Participate in stepfamily workshops and SAA chapter support meetings.

Time alone as a couple is valuable. Spend at least 20 minutes of relaxed time alone with each other every day.

Strengthen the couple relationship. Use good positive communication skills. Develop leadership as a couple. Fight fairly!

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