

STEPFAMILIES

Providing Education and Support

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Single Parents in Stepfamilies

By Sharon Klempner

While members of blended families are concerned with dancing to different tunes and not stepping on each other's toes, there is another member of the stepfamily, who may appear, to some, as the wallflower (male or female!) the single parent who does not have a significant other. In fact, many single parents do not even think of themselves as part of a stepfamily. They certainly are!

That single parent may be hotly debated as an object of envy or derision by the step-parent and/or the former spouse. He/she could also be considered a relief pitcher who can take the kids back when things seem too unwieldy or an emergent problem occurs. That same single parent can be a wonderful source of information. He/she may provide new historical perspectives to a stepparent about the children's development and experiences. The former spouse may have forgotten, not deemed important, or not even known or noticed certain things. In good situations, single parents can provide reinforcement for specialized study plans, behavioral guidelines, etc. Lastly, but foremost, is the fact that the single parent also has the love and allegiance of their offspring. *Both* parents are their role models. Children love and need to be able to feel good about each parent in order to develop and mature more fully and feel optimally positive about themselves.

Single parents have their own perspectives about their position in the stepfamily. Some feel woefully out of the loop, some-

what of a "lonely only," especially when their children are at the other house. Particular isolation or a sense of loss may occur when one's former spouse has children with a new partner. The single parent may have no relationship with the new child who has a common blood line to his/her children. If one's self-esteem is shaky, it may seem as if the other household has more to offer, teeming with life. As a newly discouraged, single mother reflected, "There's more joy around the holiday table in numbers. Ours is so quiet."

The single parent, not residing with family, has to do it all *alone*. There is no back-up at home, when he or she is not feeling well, has to bring work home from the office, or is going to be late. There is no one else to share the household chores and parenting responsibilities. On the other hand, there is no compromising to do when making decisions.

Discomfort may arise from a number of sources for the single parent. Some feel that he/she has less bearing in the community because that household is not a *complete* family with two adults. If a single parent is dating, he/she may be viewed by others as providing a less stable household. Then, there are the vagaries of reentering the world of dating, with children. Sometimes married friends drift away and/or maintain social contact with one's former spouse. Single mothers, in particular, find themselves dropped from couple-oriented social

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Margorie Engel



Ready or not, summer vacation and extended visitations are upon us. Children in homes across the country will be as pool balls in a break — going in all different directions. Everyone is supposed to be filled with joyous expectations. Too many of us are filled with dread. While custodial and non-custodial parents are making arrangements for the transfer of their offspring from one to the other and back again, it's time to point out that most divorced and remarried parents elect to do the hard work of joint or parallel parenting their children. Problems arise when parents and stepparents find themselves in a difficult situation with no prior experience and no quick answers. Sometimes both families simply need ideas and suggestions from those parents and children who have "been there, done that, and bought a 'T' shirt."

For instance, when you're sending children to their other parent's home, instead of being a travel agent for guilt trips, find out what's on the agenda for the vacation. You can't help your child pack without knowing if special items are needed — dress or good pants for dress-up events, swim suit for the beach, or backpacking/camping gear. These items are the beginning of a checklist of things to pack and for repacking to go home. Checklists make the job easier and also serve a practical purpose — for example, medication that absolutely must be taken during a visit and also when the child returns. And a child who sleeps with a special blanket or toy may be inconsolable if it's left behind at either home. Consider sending along the children's usual bed pillows (I'm a grownup but I still lug my special pillow wherever I travel) — and maybe even the favorite bedtime book.

Some preparation for environmental changes may be helpful. This is especially true if your children are crossing time zones or facing major weather changes. Haul out an atlas and maps to peruse, log on to the Internet and find data about the area to be visited, watch the weather channel, use the library to find relevant travel books, and look

into getting some age-appropriate geography games. These will provide the basis for many conversations about the differences and similarities in the environment of your children's two homes.

And don't forget to provide information to the other household about some of your child's changes and idiosyncrasies. Has your daughter "shot up" three more inches in height and changed her long tresses to a pixie cut? Will the little one eat sandwiches if the crusts aren't cut off? Was an allergy to lactose diagnosed since the last visit? Are bananas on your son's "Ugh, I hate them" list? Is an adolescent going through a vegetarian phase? The temptation might be great to show how much the absent parent doesn't know but, for the sake of the children, you have to help out. It's the child who will feel lost at the airport if you don't send a picture ahead of time, the child who will become ill if you don't warn about the food allergy, and it's the child who won't eat if bananas are cut up on the cereal or a medium-rare steak is put on the plate. That's the way it goes. You have to be there for your kids.

When you're receiving children from their other home, how do you get from the possible dread of the vacation to joyous expectation? To begin with, if you want the system to work — if you want a more effective parenting relationship with the children — you will have to find ways to get along with the parents in their other home. Volunteer information about any special plans you may have so the children can arrive with appropriate clothing and gear — or learn early enough that they don't already have what they might need for your plans so you have time to obtain the items yourself. This keeps the kids out of that awful middle spot.

Think about things you do when you are traveling away from home for any length of time. Do you take family pictures with you? Then suggest that the children bring framed pictures of the family they are temporarily leaving behind and encourage their open placement in the child's space in your home. Do you call home every so often just to check in? Then coordinate periodic phone calls for times that are convenient in both households. If both homes

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STEPFAMILIES

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Editor: Lynn Naugle Haspel

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SINGLE PARENTS IN STEP-FAMILIES

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get-togethers and feel relegated to seeing their married friends, usually the wives, at lunch or other times when their former spouse is not around. Older, single mothers commiserate about being older, single women in a youth-oriented society. Feelings about this social situation may be intensified by having had a former spouse who left for a younger woman.

Single parents may have to deal with a “two against one” mentality when trying to settle parenting disagreements with a former spouse and their new partner. They feel that someone else, who is not even their child’s parent, can now ‘outvote’ them. This predicament occurs more frequently when the children are in agreement with the other household. One can imagine when this sort of standoff might arise . . . “Daddy and Anne say I can stay out all night for the prom,” etc.

Being single, and going alone, can be uncomfortable at public events when both sides of the family are likely to attend. Such situations arise at school functions, such as parents’ conferences, graduations, and recitals. Family gatherings may be even more awkward because they are usually smaller and more intimate. Religious rites of passage, birthday parties, weddings, having grandchildren and celebrating their special moments can be a challenge to one’s resilience, maturity and dedication to one’s children.

After a second divorce, different issues may arise for divorced parents who are both single. Each parent may have renewed feelings about the romantic life of the other, although this situation can also occur with remarried spouses as well. It is best to understand the source of such feelings and work through them. Sometimes it may seem

more permissible to intervene in what goes on at a former spouse’s house when there is not a new partner. Sometimes the war continues to be waged on two battlefields . . . not a good idea.

Having two single parents again, as a result of a second divorce, presents other problems. It is especially difficult for only children and those whose parents go through multiple divorces. With no full-time partner to distract and absorb them, some parents seek emotional gratification, which should come from other sources, from their children. This scenario is painful for all involved, especially when that child is old enough and it is time to start letting go.

It is important for single parents in stepfamilies to prepare for a new lifestyle. Much of the fortitude needed comes from within; a healthy self-esteem goes a long way. The more one likes oneself and feels competent, the more one feels entitled to happiness and able to achieve it. Developing a good self-identity which goes beyond one’s role in the family can fill in some of the gaps left by a spouse. In most healthy marriages, each spouse enjoys a separate identity. When we feel reasonably good within ourselves, we are in a better position to utilize outside supports wisely. If this is not one’s profile, a therapist is often useful, particularly one who is experienced in working with stepfamilies. Family friends, and work can all be part of the healing process involved in feeling alone in a seemingly coupled world. Knowing or meeting others in a similar situation adds immeasurably to remembering that you are not alone. Support groups and workshops are an excellent solution to meeting others who “know what you are talking about.” There are many avenues to being single, but not alone. It’s worth taking a stroll!

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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

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are set up for e-mail, that method of communication could replace some of the long distance calls and save money at the same time. Do you send postcards when you are on vacation? Well, you get the idea — and you don’t have to be best buddies with people in the other household to do these kinds of things.

Now that the travelers have arrived, what can you do to create the feeling, “Welcome!” Virtually every experienced stepfamily and professional advises giving time to relax and settle in. Time to settle into a new, even if already familiar, space. That’s quiet time to unpack (in a space that’s reserved for them alone, even in their absence), bathe, nap, snack — almost anything that is not swooping right in with questions, plans, and house rules. Maybe you have a ritual

that the first night dinner is always the new arrivals’ favorite meal. Is there something that all ages in the household could enjoy together for the evening without putting anyone on the spot? Like maybe a video and popcorn. There’s time tomorrow to become “regular members” of your household.

And that leads me to my quarterly question to our members. Collectively, we must have a zillion ideas about how to lay the groundwork for happy and successful visits — whether the visits are for a week or a month or over school breaks or holidays. Granted, we all have our share of horror stories. That goes without saying. What would really help is to hear about your vacation or holiday problem *and how you solved it* or better yet, avoided a recurrence the next time around. Share your story or stories, give us written permission to use the ideas (a notation at the bottom of your letter is fine), and we’ll include as many ideas as possible in

What is a Metaphor Anyway?

Whether attending a group or family session involving stepfamilies that I facilitate, you would without a doubt hear conversations about momma bears and cubs, teaching 15-year-olds to drive, red lights, traffic rules, Nebraska and Iowa farmers to Texas, nickel flipping games and many other seemingly off the subject conversations. For those stepfamily members involved, they have come to know these analogies, metaphors and word pictures as a representation of different aspects of stepfamilies and stepfamily development. Although I have a tendency to think in metaphors and analogies (I was called the "analogy man" as young as 19), it wasn't until late in my undergraduate program that I saw their usefulness in promoting other perspectives. While taking a class on marriage, we read a book "Marriage and the Family through Science Fiction" (Clear, Warrick, Greenberg and Olander, 1976) that contained short stories or metaphors to describe "the nature of family organization, cross-culture family perspectives, the sociology of courtship, the sociology of marriage, the sociology of family dissolution and alternative family forms." I don't recall if any of them spoke directly to stepfamilies, however I do remember that I found it a fascinating way to present issues without actually starting the issue itself. Milton Erickson defines the therapeutic metaphor as "a story with dramatic devices that captures attention and provides an altered framework through which the client(s) can entertain novel experience."

Over the years, I have found that the use of analogies, metaphors, and word pictures are extremely helpful in moving stepfamily members to more effective states (not one of the fifty) as they move through stepfamily stages of development. As we know, stepfamilies encounter times of intense emotions and feelings. Patricia Papernow, describes the Mobilization Stage of Development as a time where there is "an atmosphere of highly charged emotional conflict which results as the stepfamily moves into more openly airing differences and more actively influencing each other over step issues." Furthermore, she indicates that the tasks during this time are "to actively confront differences between family cultures, between insider and outsider needs, and between adults' and children's experiences of the family without shaming or blaming; to begin constructively influencing each other for changes without breaking the family apart." Scott Browning shares in his presentations that enactment as a therapeutic tool with

stepfamilies can be ineffective at best, and lead to disastrous outcomes because of the significant stress and emotionality that already exists in stepfamilies. Metaphors, analogies and word pictures allow individuals, therapists and others to convey concerns and share messages instead of using damaging words. These connections between stepfamilies and seemingly disconnected worlds allow stepfamilies to become unstuck, problem-solve, or create new ways of describing their current situations.

So when working with these families and the numerous complexities attached to intense emotions bring on the analogies, share a word picture, and remember, "what a metaphor is for." The Erickson construction of a metaphor utilizes these six elements: define a specific therapeutic goal for this metaphor; construct a reference picture that contains the necessary components for the unfolding story line; construct an end picture to provide closure to the story line; check that the resources needed to reach a goal will be possible, use the element of metaphoric drama; and observe and incorporate a client's response to the metaphor. Although analogies and word pictures attempt to make more direct comparisons than metaphors, they all have the same purpose. Analogies, metaphors and word pictures change the language of the current situation in order that a different perspective can be used to address the issue at hand.

Let's take an example: a common interactive metaphor I utilize to describe biological, stepparent and stepchild issues around discipline involves the use of three chairs. These chairs are lined up with two placed side by side and the third behind the other two. We have just created the front and back seat of a car, or in this day and age that of a minivan. I will sit in the driver's seat and "be the fifteen year old" while the biological parent sits in the front passenger seat. The stepparent then gets the backseat. From here we can have a dialogue about the effects of a backseat driver; when it would be most acceptable to discuss any concerns and observations of the backseat passenger; and, that the stepparent could even "ask the fifteen year old to go for a drive" without the biological parent to develop the relationship. This metaphor or analogy or word picture is effective in giving the family a different perspective of similar events involving stepchildren, stepparents and biological parents and the potential hazards of "backseat driving"

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STEP WRITE UP

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

Dear SWU,

I am a new Grandma for the sixth and seventh time respectively due to my daughter Gene's recent marriage to Evan. As I understand it, Evan shares joint custody of his two children (Lupe, eight, and her twelve-year-old brother Enrique, or Ricky as he's called). The children spend part of the week with their Latin mother, Chata, and the other time with their father and Gene.

Gene has been coming to me for advise on how to parent Evan's children. Gene doesn't want to be the stereotypical stepmother. She thinks there is something wrong with the children because it's been close to six months since the children began living with her and their Dad. She says she gets a very flat response from the children when she's alone with them.

Gene wants me to talk to the children to find out what's wrong with them and fix it. But I'm not sure there's anything wrong. They seem like nice enough children, follow directions and do very well in school. The thing I notice is they tend to keep to themselves, speak Spanish at times and can be stubborn once in awhile. When discipline is needed, Gene is sporadic and can be a bit bossy. But, I chalk it up to Gene's inexperience.

I'd like to help but I don't know where to start. I think Gene's about convinced Evan to send the children for counseling and I'm not sure that's necessary. The children have been through a lot already. Am I wrong?

Dear Grandma,

You are not wrong. Gene's a bright daughter to ask for help. Luckily, a thoughtful Mother is already a plus. Gene, as you say, is inexperienced and will need guidance to develop more informed methods and expectations. A parenting class would give her a clearer understanding of the tasks at hand and that she doesn't have to do this alone.

The one big unknown in your description is Evan's involvement and his commitment to this new family. Gene and Evan will have to take the lead by figuring out what they want for this new family and how they will get everyone invested in the direction and goals they fashion.

Things to understand:

- Gene does not have to do this alone. The responsibility is shared by each member of the new family. The key is involvement and interactions.
- The children went through a divorce also and need time to recover.
- They experience: loss + fear = anger. The certainties of the universe failed. They must be redefined and tested.
- Gene is a stranger to the children. A few months or a few years by themselves won't change that. Gene will need to share herself openly with the children, individually and as a family member.
- Evan and Gene is not like Evan and Chata. A new family comes with baggage but basically builds their future from shared goals and stresses.
- Trust has been compromised. Trust = Consistence/Time. Stated and even posted roles, rules, rights, responsibilities and rewards as well as consequences plot the course.
- Evan's participation to establish his support is critical. The new parent is often seen as the problem and may be the focus of some anger. A firm, yet, understanding teacher is more appealing than a warden.

Things to do:

- Parenting classes
- Communication to coordinate everyone's efforts
- Family meetings. A benevolent dictatorship with full participation. It is easier to follow rules or shoulder responsibilities you helped to craft.
- One-on-one time, including adults-only time

How all this is accomplished is unique to those involved. The coming together of a new family is not magic and it can't be forced. We all want to be a part of something we can count on. It takes trial and error to build a new family as well as time and understanding. Mustering the cooperation of all involved for common goals with the common sense of mutual respect is the best place to start. There's plenty of help out here, including counseling, but no short cuts. By the way, Grandma, "Abuele", here's a great chance for you to learn some Spanish. Buena fortuna, "Good Fortune"! □

How Does Having a Mutual Child Affect Stepfamily Adjustment?

The research question in the title is one that is asked often by persons who currently are considering remarriage or who have recently remarried. Yet, it is one of those research topics that we know little about. Because most remarriages occur during women's reproductive years, childbearing in a second or subsequent marriage might be expected. In fact, evidence (Griffith, Koo, & Schindran, 1985; Wineberg, 1990) suggests childbearing is not uncommon in remarriages. Several questions are worthy of consideration here: What effect does a mutual child have on the new marriage? Why do couples elect to have a mutual child? What effect does a mutual child have on the relationships within the stepfamily?

In answer to the first question, we know that in first marriages having a child affects the marriage in two ways. It reduces the risk of divorce (White, 1990) while simultaneously negatively affecting the marital quality or happiness of the adults (Glenn, 1990). This is understandable in that research shows that children act as a barrier to divorce. In other words, parents are less likely to see divorce as a viable alternative to their current situation; they take more time and give more consideration to the effects of divorce on their children when considering divorce as an option. At the same time, children complicate married life in such a way as to bring both added joy and challenge to daily interaction. Complications stem from parenting children and meeting the needs of the marriage. Often the latter takes a back seat to the completing demands of parenthood and work-related responsibilities. In the face of trying to meet such competing demands, it is not surprising that marital satisfaction is diminished.

Like first marriages, we also know that having a mutual child reduces the risk of divorce in remarriages (Wineberg, 1992) in the same complicated way as noted above. In fact, evidence suggests that remarrieds who choose to have a mutual child in the first five years of the marriage are at lower risk for divorce. This lower risk holds for about 10 years of marriage. After this time, however, children born to the remarriage no longer reduce the probability of divorce.

In answer to the question about the reasons for having a mutual child, several scholars have asked members of stepfamilies about this. For example, in a study of 105 stepfamilies, Ganong and Coleman (1988) found that a primary reason was the hope that the mutual child

would "cement the bond" of marriage. Specifically, they noted that of those with such a child, 68% wanted to have a child with this partner, another 14% said they felt obligated to do so, and 14% reported an unplanned pregnancy. Like Ganong and Coleman, Bernstein (1990) found in her study of 55 stepfamilies that the sense of obligation was to a new spouse who had no children, and that this obligation was a powerful influence in their decision. The sense of obligation also stemmed from perceived social pressure to be like "a normal family." On the other hand, when couples in both studies elected not to have a mutual child, their reasons included: (a) they were too old to do so, (b) they were concerned about their economic resources and possible economic strain, and (c) they already had enough children.

We know less about the effects of a mutual child on stepfamily life and stepfamily interaction. Clearly, complications result from bearing a mutual child in a stepfamily because members simultaneously must deal with issues confronting biological families and stepfamilies. The mutual child may experience pressure from the hope placed on him or her for creating a "special bond" among all other family members. Bernstein suggested that this can result in a privileged place for this child that interferes with the relationships between other resident children and their parents, causing jealousy and feelings of resentment. Yet, the scant literature suggests that stepchildren and stepfamily adults both view the mutual child no differently than other biological siblings. In fact, parents saw having a mutual child as a positive influence on their relationship with their stepchildren. However, as might be expected, older stepchildren commonly saw the new child as "extra baggage"—a less desirable addition to their already complicated family life (Beer, 1992; Bernstein, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1988).

Because of the limited nature of the research in this area, we would be remiss to suggest that the birth of a mutual child enhances or inhibits stepfamily life. It appears that remarriers are more conscious of marital difficulties and will weigh the consequences of having and rearing a child born to new marriage and family in their decision. □

**Kay Pasley is the Chair of the Research Committee and on the faculty at the university of North Carolina at Greensboro; Emily Lipe is a master's student in educational leadership at the same university.*

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn

Every now and then organizations, just like families, need to take time out to celebrate what they have accomplished and to make decisions and plans as to what they want to achieve in the future. Most organizations and families do not, however, take the time or make the effort necessary to accomplish these important tasks. This is especially true when things seem to be going well. Instead, we keep doing what we're doing until some crisis occurs and forces us to take action. At this time emotions are high, relationships are strained and we just want to resolve the problem and get back to our normal routine as quickly as possible. During these times we can neither celebrate our past achievements nor look forward to things we would like to accomplish because all of our energy is devoted to dealing with the issues or problems at hand. Unfortunately, within many families and organizations this becomes an ongoing pattern or way of life. For those caught in this cycle it becomes a matter of sur-

viving rather than a matter of succeeding.

On June 5, 6 and 7 several board members from the Stepfamily Association of America will gather for a board retreat. We will certainly celebrate our accomplishments over these past 17 years and will work to build a vision for our future. As the board members of SAA take time to accomplish this important task, I want to personally thank them for their forethought and commitment to SAA. At the same time I want to encourage each of you to take the time necessary to hold a family retreat so that you can celebrate your past and plan for your future. I am certain positive things will happen if you do. In fact, I would like to hear from you concerning your family retreat. I, in turn, will keep you informed as to the outcome of our own retreat. □



Seeking Volunteers to Participate in a Dissertation Research Project on:

STEPFAMILIES

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

1. 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?

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

3. 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: KaBaum@aol.com

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS FOR SUMMER 1998

By: Gloria Clark

CHAPTER LIBRARIES, BOOK REVIEW. One of the things that we at the Pittsburgh chapter of SAA have offered to our chapter members over the years is our growing library. Members are encouraged to take out books, tapes or videos and return them at the next meeting. Some of these resources have been gifts and others the chapter has bought from the SAA Resource Catalog or from literature displays at SAA Conferences. Recently we have acquired two new books by Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood called "Let's Talk About It: Stepfamilies" and "Let's Talk About It: Divorce." SAA co-founder Emily Visser was asked by Mr. Rogers to look over the manuscript for the stepfamilies book to be sure that it had accurate stepfamily dynamics. These books are published by G. P. Putnam's Sons and are available in some bookstores. We hope that they will eventually be listed in the SAA Resources Catalog.

We were asked by Mr Rogers' assistant, Hedda Sharapin, to give them feedback on children's reactions to these books, so recently we lent the books to parents with young children and asked them to report back to us at the next meeting. We and the parents were delighted with the results. Initially the children seemed reluctant to be read books with such titles but after hearing the stories and seeing the pictures they told their parents "that book is about me!" It opened up conversation

about what was going on in their lives and helped them to put words to their emotions. One of the children who had begun to act out some of her feelings in school, started asking her Dad some of the questions she hadn't been willing to talk about before. Talking about feelings seems to help young children make sense of the changes in their lives and give them permission to ask questions.

CHAPTERS. Recently I received a list of some chapters that had closed during 1997 and I started wondering why they closed. The need for support and education for stepfamilies is even greater today than ever because of a growing number of people divorcing and remarrying. Of course, people's lives are busier and there is a lot of information available these days that weren't around in the 70's and 80's. Information is helpful but it is my experience that the support people get from talking face to face with other people who have similar problems is invaluable.

If any of you who are leading chapters or have led chapters have suggestions about how SAA could help you, please call the SAA headquarters at 1-800-735-0329. The SAA board is thinking about formulating a training program to assist chapter leaders and would like your input. If any of you would like to write a column about what's happening in your chapter please send it to SAA in Nebraska for approval.

COUNSELOR'S CORNER

Continued from page 4

when there is already a responsible adult in the front seat.

This is only one example of the many metaphors used in my work with stepfamilies. What I find most useful is the de-escalating effect they have for the members of these complex families. Metaphors, analogies, and word pictures help create a new language that this new family can begin to share together to describe their experiences and to effectively take on the challenges of moving through the developmental cycle. The ability of these interventions to take on multidimensional applications in the context of therapy, or group processing, or an educational setting is substantial, and are invaluable when working with the emotionally laden issues surrounding stepfamilies.

Analogies, metaphors and word pictures take our old mental system struggles that often fail to distinguish the relevant from the trivial, and create a new way of thinking about a situation to become more effective, and thus more constructive in our ways of handling the challenges that stepfamilies face. So the next time you run into a stepfamily (metaphorically speaking), and feel stuck (never mind), or like you have no place to go (this is getting ridiculous), move (now I've done it) the family into a different world that they can work together and establish a new family—one that is healthy and effective in meeting the challenges of stepfamily life.

C.J. Johnson, LCSW, LMFT, staff therapist and systems consultant with Samaritan Counseling Center. C.J. has worked with children, adolescents, and families for 19 years.

Stepfamily Day 1998

By: Christine Borgeld

Stepfamily Day, September 16, 1998, promises to be even bigger than last year. With the changing demographics of the American family, more than half of the families consisting of single parents, divorced and remarried have had a dramatic impact on our family structure.

Power comes in numbers! Debra Mogg of Louisiana and I reached out this year to all stepfamilies throughout this nation and other countries to obtain even more states. The Stepfamily Association of America chapter members and the Stepfamily Foundation, Inc., have combined their effort to help us succeed in obtaining more states to proclaim Stepfamily Day 1998.

We would like to thank the following people who have helped us in our grass roots efforts. Colorado—Daphne Wissel, Georgia—Dick Dunn, Idaho—Marion Summers, Iowa—Jacci Dewdney, Nebraska—

C.J. Johnson, New Hampshire—Christine Landry-Terrasi, Ohio—Renee Hamilton, Oregon—Julieann Fouts, Texas—George and Andria Varos, Virginia—Dee Dee Pickett, and Wisconsin—Grant Anderson.

We have reached out to other countries as well. It is our goal to also have this become an International Day. We would like to thank Canada's Stepfamily Foundation—Corale Ann Marie Shilling, United Kingdom—National Stepfamily Association UK, and Australia—Step by Step, John Faulkner. The replies from these countries are pouring in with positive support.

We encourage anyone who is interested in being involved to get in touch with their state coordinator. If your state is not mentioned in this article, contact Christine Borgeld at (616)534-7901 or e-mail at christyb37@aol.com.

STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

*Professional
Training Institute*

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OCTOBER 30-31, 1998

in the Boston area

Please call 1-800-735-0329 for more details.

What's Your Blending Style?

Every stepfamily has an assumed “blending style” (whether they know it or not). Which of following best describes your family’s efforts to combine the members of your stepfamily?

FOOD PROCESSOR:

These families slice and dice the various ingredients (i.e., individuals) with rapid speed. They attempt to instantly combine each ingredient with every other ingredient. When love doesn’t occur right away, persons feel chopped up and torn to pieces. No one remains whole.

MICROWAVE:

These families refuse to be defined as a “stepfamily.” The ingredients are heated in rapid fashion so as to become a nuke-lier family.

PRESSURE COOKER:

With this cooking style, ingredients and spices (i.e., family rituals, values, and preferences) are put under pressure to blend completely and/or melt together. The family is under great duress. Unfortunately, since expectations are so high, the lid often blows off the pot.

Seeking positive and uplifting anecdotes, stories, letters, and articles about stepfamily life to be published in book. Authors and

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TOSSED:

Like a salad, this style throws each ingredient into the air with no consideration as to where it might fall. The ingredients keep some of their integrity, yet are expected to fit together with the other pieces.

BLENDER:

With a quick circular motion this style hopes to whip all the ingredients into a fluid mixture. Ingredients are forced to lose their integrity and their uniqueness. It’s not uncommon for lumps to spoil the taste of the final product. “Remember, when stepfamilies blend too fast, someone usually gets creamed” (Papernow, *Becoming a Stepfamily*, 1993).

Each of the above styles is driven by unrealistic expectations and a lack of understanding of the time necessary to combine successfully. In fact, the stepfamily’s goal should not even be to “blend” each ingredient into others. The goal, rather, is to combine the various ingredients into a casserole of distinct, yet integrated, parts.

CROCK POT:

Stepfamilies choosing this style understand that time and low heat make for an effective combination. Ingredients are thrown together in the same pot, but each is left intact, giving affirmation to its unique characteristics. Slowly and with much intentionality, the low level heat brings the ingredients into contact with one another. As the juices begin to flow together, imperfections are purified, and the desirability of each ingredient is added to the taste. The result is a dish of delectable flavor made up of different ingredients that give a part of themselves to produce a wondrous creation that all can enjoy.

Cooked up by Ron L. Deal, M.MFT., LMFT, CFLE.

Creative culinary insights provided by Drs. Emily & John Visher and the stepfamilies of the Southwest Church of Christ, Jonesboro, Arkansas.



BOOK REVIEW

By: Pat Estess

Their "Television Friend" Helps Children Talk About What They're Feeling And Experiencing.

"Let's Talk About It: Divorce" and "Let's Talk About It: Stepfamilies"

Both by Fred Rogers of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood

Mister Rogers has been in the neighborhood for more than 30 years. Long before Bevis, Butthead or Barney burst onto the television screen, Mister Rogers has been talking about kindness and community, learning and love. What's so miraculous is that this gentle man in his cardigan sweater has survived and thrived alongside these hyperkinetic, kidmagnet shows.

His success is due in part to the fact that he has always tackled subjects that concern preschoolers — being different, being scared, being Red, being upstaged by a sibling, having problems at nursery and elementary school, and the like — in a comforting, reassuring way. Kids sit and listen to his show as if they were sitting on a rocking chair being held by his soft cadence, repetition, rhymes, stories, games, activities, and music.

Mister Rogers (aka Fred Rogers) has talked about divorce and stepfamilies on his television programs, but in case your child hasn't been there that day, he or she can get somewhat the same comfort from two new books that serve as a jumping off point for the sharing of feelings - *Let's Talk About It: Divorce* and *Let's Talk About It: Stepfamilies*.

In both books the underlying theme is that family is a group of people who care about you (the child) and that a family can grow by helping each other through sad times and into better ones. Each book is meant to be read to the child by a parent in a secure and warm setting, and to form the basis of a talk which will validate the child's emotions, help answer some of his or her questions, and lead to an acceptance of the situation.

In the book on divorce, Mister Rogers echoes the worries of preschoolers: where they will live, who will take care of them. And he tells them that sometimes they might feel drawn between the two parents or guilty about having fun with one when the other is alone. He also reassures them that divorce is not their fault; that

divorce is a grownup problem and has nothing to do with them or what they did. And he gives them advice on what might help them feel better when things get tough, like drawing pictures or pounding some clay, going to a special place of their own, or playing with friends.

In the stepfamily book, Rogers touches on some wonderful points and captures the resentments and confusions children feel when a family reconfigures. He talks how "you" might feel when there are too many changes going on, how "you" might have confusing feelings about your parents and stepparents, and how "you" might not like how things are being done in this new family. He emphasizes two key points: Just because you love one person doesn't mean you can't love someone else. And when you get used to this family, it's wonderful to know that you have more people who care about and love you.

“...when you get used to this family, it's wonderful to know that you have more people who care about and love you.”

The *Let's Talk* series urges parents to communicate with their children — understanding all the while that communication is a two-way process, with listening being at least as important as talking. The book's jacket says “If children can learn to talk and play about their feelings when they're young, they can take the 'gift' with them through life. It can often make the difference, when strong winds blow, between bending and breaking.”

Whether your children are as mesmerized by the television Mister Rogers as my children were is not terribly important when it comes to the value of these books. Though his “voice” is evident, the acknowledgment of children's fears and hurts during the upheavals of divorce and remarriage is empathetic. It's hard enough to get kids to tell parents what they're feeling. If they do, parents can help them through these difficult times more effectively and more successfully. □

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!

And the smartest step to stepfamily success is to join SAA now! Complete the application form below.

SAA MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name _____
Address _____
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Telephone _____

Send checks to: SAA

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Or use your VISA or Mastercard and call 1-800-735-0329

One-year Membership in SAA = \$35.00 (which includes the book *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead*)

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