

# STEPFAMILIES

*Providing Education and Support*

Volume 18, Number 4

Winter 1998

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**PUBLISHED BY THE  
STEPFAMILY  
ASSOCIATION OF  
AMERICA**

## COUNSELOR'S CORNER

by Susan Gamache,  
MA, RCC (PhD Candidate)

### The Hidden Moral Landscape of Divorce and Remarriage

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

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

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

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

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

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# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D.



**C**lutching my invitation to a special showing of the movie – about two women who dislike each other, two kids caught in the middle, and one man trying to survive – I slid into a comfortable seat in the New York screening room. Without preamble, the marketing pros at Columbia Pictures dimmed the lights and the film began to roll. Within minutes, it was clear that *Stepmom* was going to be real life with all the tears and laughs of a real family.

What's this? A movie about divorce and remarriage that's not implying a catastrophe? For years, movies have been entertaining us with warnings that divorce is a mistake – see Cary Grant and Irene Dunne in 1937's *The Awful Truth*; Burt Lancaster and Rita Hayworth in 1958's *Separate Tables*; Sissy Spacek in 1992's *Hard Promises*; and Bette Middler in 1997's *That Old Feeling*. Or that remarriage isn't successful – see Anne Bancroft and Peter Finch in 1964's *The Pumpkin Eater*, Frank Sinatra and Deborah Kerr in 1965's *Marriage on the Rocks*, and 1994's *Don't Talk to Strangers*. Movies have encouraged children to believe they have mystical powers over their parents relationships – see Van Heflin and Patricia Neal in 1951's *Weekend With Father*, 1988's *It Takes Two*, and especially the 1998 remake of the 1961 Haley Mills gimmicky tragi/comedy *The Parent Trap*, deftly exploiting children's parent reconciliation fantasies.

By far the largest group of films portray stepparents as repellent creatures – see Teri Garr and Sarah Jessica Parker in 1984's *Firstborn*, Bette Davis in 1989's *Wicked Stepmother*, Richard Benjamin and Kim Basinger in 1988's *My Stepmother is an Alien*, 1992's *Radio Flyer* and *Big Girls Don't Cry...They Get Even*; Anjelica Huston and Raul Julia in 1993's *Addams Family Values*; 1993's *Stepmonster*; 1994's *The Secret Rapture*, Linda Evans and Alan Rachins in 1997's *The Stepsister*, Rachel Ward and Lauren Hutton in 1997's *My Stepson, My Lover*, and Anjelica Huston with Drew Barrymore in *Ever After*, 1997's retooling of the Cinderella story.

Until now, according to Hollywood, the only viable stepfamilies are always warm, fuzzy, and slapstick – see Lucille Ball and Henry Fonda in 1968's *Yours, Mine and Ours*, Doris Day in *With Six You Get Eggroll*, Goldie Hawn and Chevy Chase in 1980's *Seems Like Old Times*, and, in a tentative move toward reality, Jeff Bridges

and Farrah Fawcett in 1989's *See You in the Morning*.

Ironically, the one thing *Stepmom* has in common with previous movies about steprelationships is a stellar cast. *Stepmom*'s family is expertly portrayed by professional photographer and soon-to-be stepmom Julia Roberts, perfect mom and ex-wife Susan Sarandon, kids Jenna Malone and Liam Aiken, and dad/ex and future husband Ed Harris.

Forced to confront some uncomfortable truths about mothers' and stepmothers' lives, director Chris Columbus noted that stepfamilies are:

*...much more complex than we've been led to believe by the media. For instance, I know many stepchildren who have a real love for their stepparents. My understanding is based on people such as my nieces and nephews and the children of a lot of friends who have divorced and remarried.*

While directing *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Columbus dealt with issues of a contemporary family and divorce. Focusing on how people actually deal with each other as their lives move forward, his objective in *Stepmom* was to be as realistic as possible. The script aptly portrays this realism with all-too-familiar phrases: "Can you ever fall out of love with your kids?" "You're not my mother!" "Mommy, if you want me to hate her, I will." "No one asked me if I wanted the divorce and a new mother." And the familiar parent's prayer, "The kids will be okay if we're okay."

Columbus agrees that children sometimes live in a fantasy world ala *The Parent Trap*. Nevertheless, *Stepmom* portrays its director's philosophy that "people tend to be wary and suspicious in new relationships." At the same time, Columbus says his message to kids of divorce and remarriage is that "life can go on if your parents aren't together."

In *Stepmom*, life does march on. Mirroring reality, the two moms are distant, draw a little closer, draw back, tentatively reach out again and then repeat the whole sequence. Most of the mishaps are due to their different life experiences. The developing relationship does not proceed smoothly or steadily – but neither woman gives up on the task and, watching the process, even I sometimes wondered why not. The children, a teenaged daughter and younger son, make adjustments at different paces and for different reasons but the movie-goer can watch the sometimes almost imperceptible changes taking place. Dad plays a minor role as the

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## STEPFAMILIES

A Publication of The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.

Editor: Jean McBride, MS, LMFT

The Stepfamily Association of America is a non-profit educational organization founded in 1979 by Emily and John Visher to promote personal and family support through information, education and advocacy for stepfamilies. Stepfamilies is published quarterly by the Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. The publication is free to members of the Stepfamily Association of

America; non-member annual subscriptions are \$14.00, \$16.00 for foreign subscribers, and \$22.00 for institutions. Subscription orders, membership inquiries or questions concerning delivery should be sent to the Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., 650 J Street, Suite 205, Lincoln, NE 68508. Toll-free: (800) 735-0329 • Fax: (402)477-8317 • Website: <http://www.stepfam.org>.

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## COUNSELOR'S CORNER...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Let's Make A Deal!

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

### President's Message

Continued from page 2

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

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

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

## Contemplating Stepchild Adoption

Three members of the SAA Research committee (Drs. Lawrence Ganong, Marilyn Coleman, and Mark Fine) had the results of a study on the issues and motivations for stepchild adoption published in a recent issue of *Family Relations*. While the results are from a small sample (32 adults, 22 children, from 16 stepfamilies), they are interesting and provide some insight into concerns that surround the adoption process in stepfamilies. I summarize their findings for you and include their suggestions for practice and policy.

Few empirical studies exist on stepchild adoption. The notable exception is a study by Wolf and Mast (1987) of 55 adoptions by stepparents that found motives for adoption included name changes, family unity, a good relationship between the stepparent and stepchild, transferring legal rights to stepparents, the request of adoptees, and severing ties from the nonresident parent. Ganong and associates wanted to determine what factors stepparents considered when contemplating adoption and the motivations of stepmembers for adoption. They interviewed 16 stepfamilies as part of a larger project, including children between the ages of 10 and 19 living in the household. The stepfamilies included 14 stepfather-mother households and two stepfather-stepmother households.

While only one stepfamily experienced adoption, all others considered doing so. They found that thinking about and discussing adoption depended on the level of involvement of the nonresident parent. When the nonresident parent was actively involved or "somewhat regularly involved," then adoption was not given serious consideration by either the adults or the children. However, more serious consideration was given when the relationship between the nonresident parent and child was not particularly close but contact was maintained. In these cases, the reluctance to adopt was related to anticipating a hostile legal proceeding and interactions with the nonresident parent over termination of parental rights.

Other barriers to pursuing adoption reported by both adults and children were related to financial issues, such as the loss of financial support to the child (e.g., child support, money for college expenses). In addition, stepparents frequently mentioned that adoption meant they would have financial responsibility for the stepchild should the remarriage end, as well as expressing concern over the actual costs of the adoption procedure.

The findings from this study indicated several motivations for stepchild adoption that reflect the earlier findings from Wolf and Mast (1987). These include the desire to become like a nuclear family, removal of some of the daily hassles of being a stepfamily (e.g., different last names), concern over what would happen if the resident parent died, and the lack of legal-

ly recognized relationship. Interestingly, however, stepfathers thought more about adoption than did parents, and stepchildren also considered adoption more than did parents.

Clearly, the study suggests that members in stepfamilies construct their idea of family from the nuclear family model, such that when relationships felt close and connected, members wanted their relationships to be recognized. Adoption was one way to legitimize these meaningful relationships. The authors argue that adoption is a means to *normalize* stepfamily relationships. They suggest we look to other models for creating stepfamily relationships, such as those that appear in African-American communities where "othermothers" have recognized and valued roles in the process of child rearing (see Hooks, 1984; Hill Collins, 1990). In other words, othermothers assist biological mothers in parenting responsibilities. Applied to a stepparent role, this model of othermothers might provide another way of thinking about parenting and encourage a different way of thinking about family where the boundaries are extended beyond the immediate household. The authors suggest that the concept of othermother might be a means to a legitimate role for stepparents.

In terms of policy, if the experiences of these stepfamilies are common among stepfamilies in general, then developing social policy that promotes a legally recognized relationship between stepparents and stepchildren without termination of nonresident parent ties may be worthy of consideration. Mahoney's (1994) suggestion of "incomplete adoptions" currently recognized in some states is offered as one solution. Here, nonresident parents and their extended family are permitted to continue contact after stepparent adoption. Furthermore, England's Children Act 1989 provides an alternate way of thinking about parental responsibility and allows for a stepparent who has been married to the parent for two years to petition for a legal relationship to the stepchild even over the objections of the nonresident parent. If granted, the petition gives the stepparent the same legal rights and responsibilities as those of the parents. (For additional information on this British legislation, see Masson, 1992).

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# DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn

**W**ithin my two most recent columns I spoke of the importance of planning and establishing goals as a family. At the same time I discussed the efforts which were occurring to establish the goals and direction of SAA. Thanks to the hard work and open deliberation of our board members, a three-year plan of action was adopted at the November 1 Board of Directors meeting in Boston. While the plan is too lengthy to be shared in full, the following will provide you with highlights of SAA's plan:

### *Statement of vision:*

Stepfamilies in the United States will be accepted, supported, and successful.

### *Statement of mission:*

SAA provides information, education, support and advocacy for stepfamilies and those who work with them.

### *Statement of purpose:*

SAA's purpose is to develop and disseminate research-based information and materials; design, implement, and evaluate opportunities for support and education; evaluate and recommend programs, materials, and standards of practice; and advocate for financial, institutional, political and social changes that support stepfamilies.

### *Strategic Goals and Objectives (3-year plan):*

#### **1. Expand the visibility of SAA through:**

- Improving our website
- Creating a public relations program and marketing plan
- Expanding inter-organizational relations (network)
- Creating a publishing plan for SAA publications.

#### **2. Evaluate and refine the organizational structure to carry out the mission through:**

- Examining and redefining the structure and composition of the Board Developing procedural guidelines for governance issues
- Redefining our membership structure
- Redefining our chapter structure
- Reviewing and updating our bylaws.

#### **3. Expand training and education for professionals through:**

- Planning, implementing and evaluating two training programs for new professional audiences

- Evaluating and updating current SAA materials
- Presenting training opportunities through programs offered by other organizations
- Becoming a Certified Continuing Education provider for other professional organizations.



#### **4. Achieve financial resources needed to carry out our mission and maintain stability through:**

- Securing \$300,000 of support during the next three years
- Increasing membership revenue by 10% annually
- Expanding annual giving revenue by 10% annually.

This plan is clearly an aggressive one which will require tremendous effort by all involved in achieving it. It does, however, recognize the great needs which exist and reflects SAA's commitment to stepfamilies across the nation.

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# CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS, WINTER 1998

By: Jim and Irene Pierce

**I** have asked Jim Pierce to write the Chapter Highlights column for this issue. Jim and his wife Irene joined SAA when they married 18 years ago and joined their two families. They have been chapter leaders in the L.A. area for many years and are devoted to helping stepfamilies. – Gloria Clark

## SUPPORT GROUPS –

### THE EMERGENCY ROOM

Imagine...a patient on a gurney being wheeled into an emergency room.

DOCTOR: What's the pulse? The blood pressure? What's the problem?

NURSE: We've stabilized the patient. Should we send him to surgery?

A support group is no less chaotic. The biggest difference is sometimes we don't get the entire patient - both parties. And, support groups don't treat the patient.

While we anticipate a certain volatility - a "high" vocal level, a degree of acrimony, and, potentially, some unpleasantness - support groups are the place to discuss issues, get information, and learn new skills. Unfortunately, too often the SUPPORT GROUP becomes "the nurse's office" dispensing a Band-aid® instead of providing the care of an EMERGENCY ROOM.

Why? The explanation is simple. People come to a support group when they are in *crisis*. They may as well be having a heart attack. And, they are! It's just a different type of heart attack. It's not physical - it's emotional. The relationship is hemorrhaging. It's no less stressful. It's no less painful.

Like the attending physician in the E.R., facilitators/support groups try to take a pulse - get a pressure reading - etc. And, then, offer the patient multiple options/ potential solutions. Sometimes, this includes "surgery" - referral to a counselor or therapist. Unfortunately, just like surgeons "lose" a patient - so does the support group. Too often, the patient gets a Band-aid® and leaves.

As such, physicians have it better. Their patients, generally, can't argue with them or walk away. In fact, the physician in the E.R. has the actual patient and can provide effective treatment. On the other hand, too often, it's the spouse instead of the patient (both adults) who comes to a support group. After all, a hemorrhaging relationship requires a lot of attention, care, and the efforts of both persons. The issues are not resolved

overnight. As hard as we try, we can't bandage/treat/suture the missing patient on a second hand basis.

So, all we can do is be there. Like the staff of the E.R. who comes day after day with no patients to treat, one day a catastrophe occurs. In our case, we may have 10 bodies - Mom/ Dad/ Stepmom/ Stepdad/ multiple Grandparents/ and multiple kids in trauma but only one-half of the patient in attendance. Talk about a scramble for Band-aids & sutures!!!!

Our scalpel - patience; our suture - communication skills; our bandage - discussion; our aspirin - *Stepping Ahead Manual* and other literature.

Many times we make a difference - even if the couple decides to separate because they discovered through improved communication that this is a better solution than fighting and negatively impacting the kids and everyone else.

And then, and then.... a couple draws closer together. Sometimes, they even return to host a support group. AND WE ALL JUMP FOR JOY.

**IT'S ALL BEEN WORTH THE EFFORT!!!!** □

Irene/Jim Pierce  
Los Angeles Chapter

### **STEPFAMILY MEMBERS NEEDED For Survey Study of Stepfamily Life**

If you and your spouse are re-married and both of you have natural children from your previous marriages who live with you or visit, we are hoping that you will want to participate. The purpose of our survey is to identify features of stepfamily life that may contribute to positive and negative stepfamily relations. All information will be confidential, and stepfamilies will be paid a nominal fee for completing the surveys. If you and other members of your stepfamily would be willing to participate in this project, please use this label to send you name, address, and telephone number to:

Professor Sam Gaertner  
Department of Psychology  
University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19716

Or you may E-mail me at gaertner@udel.edu or telephone me at (302) 831-2268. Thank you and we hope to hear from you!!



## BOOK REVIEW

By Patricia Schiff Estess

### Weddings: A Family Affair

by Margorie Engel

I can say with great authority, having been bride and parent at my own remarriage 22 years ago and the parent or stepparent at three children's marriages – that marriages involving children of divorced parents or people marrying for the second time, no matter how sweet, are not necessarily sugar-rose events. At my own remarriage, for instance, the tears of onlookers frequently associated with the exchange of marriage vows were not of joy; the children cried because this event signaled, for certain, the death of their parental "reunion" wishes. And at the marriages of my children and stepson, the planning had to be excruciatingly tactful with everyone on edge right through the reception because "the other side" might act up.

So it was with more than a little skepticism that I perused *Weddings: A Family Affair* (Wilshire Publications, 1998, \$17.95) with its tag line "The new etiquette for second marriages and couples with divorced parents." I had in mind that if it turned out to be some "do-what's-right," "get-everybody-to-love-everybody," "15-steps-to-a-perfect-wedding" book (as the flowers on the cover seemed to indicate), I'd skip the review and focus on a book of real worth (which are sent to reviewers by publishers all the time). Margorie Engel, the author and current president of the Stepfamily Association of America, would understand. I could use the excuse that it would seem like nepotism reviewing the president's book in the organization's newsletter.

But it didn't happen that way. The book is right on target, even if the tag line to the title isn't. It isn't an etiquette book at all, if the dictionary definition of the word ("Conduct or procedure required by good breeding or prescribed by authority") is correct. It's a problem-solving book, rife with wisdom, common sense, ideas, and encouragement. I think it should be re-tagged to read "Creative problem-solving techniques for second marriages and couples with divorced parents" because there are no right answers when it comes to this milestone event. But perhaps most reassuring to those who will be using this book is that with marriages involving "re's" or those in which former partners must join together to celebrate a child's nuptials, the day can be joyful if you lay as much groundwork as possible and have the flexi-

bility (and maybe even sense of humor) to expect the unexpected.

In the section directed to couples with divorced parents (a group that is given short shrift in most marriage guides, even though their numbers are huge), Engel warns that probably the parents aren't grown up – even years after the divorce. She explains their feelings toward each other can range anywhere from "not a jealous bone ... to psychosclerosis (hardening of the attitudes)." In the extreme cases, the marrying kids have to help parents through the difficult task of overlooking offensive behaviors of their former spouses, and they even may have to enlist the help of friends or relatives to achieve simple civility at the event. Engel rightly stays away from "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" because everything about these situations is untraditional, unfamiliar and complicated. Instead, what you find in the pages is a potpourri of creative ideas on everything from how showers can be handled to payment ideas to how invitations can read to who's in the wedding party to who can be in the photos, and what to do with dad's or mom's "friend."

Little attention is given to how to include young children in the ceremony in the second segment of the book which is directed to couples who are planning to remarry. Maybe that's because it's been written about extensively by others. Concentration instead is on teen and adult children's roles, elderly parents' roles, and the role of religion in the wedding. And that's good; rarely are those issues even mentioned, much less tackled. (For some reason, there are segments in this section on financial considerations of remarriage – not weddings – and prenuptial agreements. For a book entitled *Weddings: A Family Affair* that puzzles me. Financial talk and planning is essential; no one doubts that. Just seems like it's out of place along side of invitations, receiving lines, and what to wear!)

That aside, this is a wonderful wedding book – especially for anyone whose children or stepchildren are getting married. If you make it one of "the something new" gifts, buy it at least three months before the planned wedding (better if even earlier). But before giving it to children or stepchildren, read it yourself. Its pull-out quotes are encouraging; its insights invaluable; its myriad examples especially useful. □

# Steps to Stepfamily Success

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

**E**ducate Yourself! Read! Participate in stepfamily workshops and SAA chapter support meetings.

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

**S**trengthen 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

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