

STEPFAMILIES

Providing Education and Support

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Miss Minnesota Hopeful Promoting Stepfamilies

Alyson Gilbert, Miss St. Paul, 1999, was eight years old in 1987 when her parents divorced and she moved from Texas to her mother's home state of Minnesota. Alyson, her mother and two brothers first lived with her grandmother before moving into their own home. Alyson's mother, Phyllis, was remarried about two years later to a man with two sons, one grown and one at home.

There wasn't a lot of warming up or getting to know each other. According to Alyson, "One day we just moved into Jim's house. I'd never even met my new stepbrother!" Reading the SAA materials, especially the book *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead*, and attending a recent SAA Professional Training Institute in Kansas City, has shown Alyson that there are ways of making such transitions easier.

"If my mother had known some of these steps, I know things would have gone easier for us," Alyson says. As it was, Aly and her stepfather pretty much took separate corners for most of Aly's high school years. Alyson's great refuge was in school, friends, and singing. "In choir and in my singing, I knew I had my own place. This was something of my own."

The topic of stepfamilies was chosen as Alyson's platform in 1998 when she was preparing for the Miss St. Paul competi-

tion. "I was discussing the important issues in my life and over and over again the subject of my family came up. Finally it became clear that the topic I was most passionate about was stepfamilies, particularly the child's experience in a stepfamily." She is the only girl in a family of six boys: two biological brothers, three stepbrothers, and one half-brother.

When the half-brother was born, Aly was intent on not liking him. This dislike lasted about one week, and now Henry is the light of her life.

This spring Alyson prepared for the Miss Minnesota competition held in St. Cloud, Minnesota on June 17-19. Her platform program was called "Step-Up!" and concentrated on building healthy stepfamilies. "When people ask me what I think are the most important things to do to start a new stepfamily off right, I always say 'get to know each other first'. Then, if possible, it would be ideal for the



*Alyson Gilbert
Miss St. Paul*

Continued on page 3

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D.



He was sitting with his head resting in his cupped hands, chair pushed against the wall near the front of the room. A tall blonde was in the chair next to him, leaning forward with one hand resting gently on his knee. I heard a whispered voice behind me say, "Do you think that's his father?"

We were at a wake. The wake for a young man, a dear friend of my daughter's, who had died suddenly. The day felt topsy-turvy – backwards. Parents are not supposed to bury their children; it's supposed to end the other way around. But, here we all were, offering our respect to the dead and our sympathy to the parents. Or, were we?

His mom was accepting hugs from a line of friends while her husband stood close beside her. It turned out that the man in the chair near the casket was the young man's dad – and he was doing his grieving alone. He did not reach out to others and few in the room, other than his companion, took notice of him. I wondered if this would become the accepted funeral ritual for divorced and remarried couples – moms and children still connected and dads having a difficult time maintaining those relationships. That possibility is enough to break your heart.

In the early '90s, while I was on tour with my first book, *The Divorce Decisions Workbook*, the owner of a funeral home asked me how they should "handle" divorced and remarried relatives of the deceased. "On a case by case basis" is not much help when professionals, friends, and families are looking for some kind of framework in this most emotional ritual.

The number of divorced parents and stepfamilies has reached a critical mass. As a result, "What to offer as guidance to grieving families?" is not an idle question. Americans aren't noted for planning ahead so maybe

stepfamilies haven't talked about death and the subsequent decisions that will have to be made. On the other hand, maybe members of the Stepfamily Association of America have had personal experience with death in a "complicated family" and have ideas or suggestions to offer. If you do, please send them to me.

At the very least, it will help for us to think about our own personal preferences and establish our own guiding principles regarding death. Parents and adult children might consider preparing health care directives. A health care proxy, also called an advance medical directive, deals with the kinds of life-sustaining measures that are acceptable to you. This legal document can relieve your spouse and other relatives of a terrible burden and give you the peace of mind of knowing that you will be able to die with dignity.

Each state has its own regulations concerning these directives. For a free copy of the official form for your state, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to The Society for the Right to Die, Dept. NL, Suite 831, 250 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10107.

If you already have a health care proxy, there are two issues to consider. First, is the health care proxy written for the state in which you currently reside? Second, who is the person designated to act as your proxy? Not all states automatically remove legal powers, previously designated to a spouse, upon completion of a divorce. If you do not want a former spouse to continue with health care proxy authority, make sure that authority previously given is properly revoked.

Does your family know how you feel about organ donation? Cremation? Burial plots? If they don't, who will have the legal authority (or responsibility) to make those difficult decisions? One thing is crystal clear. Because we are members of a stepfamily, the issues surrounding death have become more complex.

***In memoriam.** "Tom, by your death we are challenged to establish a completely new and different kind of connection with you. May you rest in peace."*

STEPFAMILIES

A Publication of The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.

Editor: Jean McBride, MS, LMFT

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DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn, Executive Director

Upon arriving in Kansas City for SAA's Professional Training Institute and Board of Directors meeting I heard the tragic news of the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. At that time, little information was known about the victims or the shooters. Speculation, however, was rampant as to whom these individuals were and as to what kind of persons could commit such violent and senseless acts. A part of the immediate speculation by news commentators and professional pundits focused on the type of family in which these young men were raised. It was generally implied these violent young men must be from "broken homes" living in a single parent family or stepfamily situation.

As with most things we don't understand, we look for simple answers so we can assign blame as to why something happened. Somehow this process allows us to reassure ourselves that it won't happen to us or our family if we are not in the stereotyped group. Stereotyping family structures and assigning blame to them is an age-old problem, which unfortunately continues to make great sound bites for those espousing simple answers to complex issues. It was almost in disbelief, the commentators later noted, they had learned the shooters were from "intact" middle to upper-middle income families.

I certainly have no profound insights as to why this tragedy occurred and how these young men made such a terrible and deadly decision. I, along with millions of others, mourn the loss of the students killed and wonder if this tragedy could happen at my child's school. I discuss this issue only because our media and society continue to perpetuate false thinking through its stereotypical presentations. Certainly family and parent child

relationships have a major impact on our children's growth and development. It is on these relationships which we must place our primary focus and concern. Why are we so hesitant to do so? It could be that these issues come too close to home because they would no longer be reserved for "those families" but would now include each of us.



Vishers, Engel Make Presentations At Chautauqua

During the week of July 5th through 9th, John and Emily Visser, founders of the Stepfamily Association of America, and Margorie Engel, the current president of SAA, were among the presenters at a course at the Chautauqua Institution of Chautauqua New York (near Jamestown, N.Y.) The course entitled ***Remarriage: A Family Affair*** provided an illustrated road map for those living in or interested in stepfamilies.

MISS ST. PAUL...

Continued from page 1

new family to have its own new apartment or house with a private place for each person to feel truly at home. The biological parent should continue to make special time with his or her own child. I also encourage kids to find ways to express themselves. For me it was singing. For two of my brothers it was art and sports."

When asked about the highlights of attending the national SAA conference, Alyson said, "I really enjoyed meeting the founders of SAA, Emily and John Visser. Also talking with Susan Gamache was great. Her main point was that nuclear families and stepfamilies are nei-

ther good nor bad, they are merely family structures. It is the quality of the parenting within those structures that makes the difference for families and children. I think people need to hear that message."

"As a member of a stepfamily for ten years, I can tell people that even challenging situations can work out. Now as an adult, I could choose to go my own way. Instead, I belong to a large, diverse family and that feels good. We may have three different last names in our family, but we know who we are!



STEP WRITE UP

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

Dear SWU,

My name is Jack. I've been a stepfather for a little more than three years now. My wife Julia has two children, Matt, fourteen, and Maddy, twelve years old. We've done pretty well at working through our awkward period of getting to know each other and making the necessary compromises to become a new family. I had to learn their rules before I was accepted and we all worked together to modify the ones that worked fine for three but not for four. Making sure everyone gets heard and taking all views seriously has gone a long way to resolving the ongoing issues of any family.

Julia's parents have shown great understanding and patience by giving us support while not taking sides as we figure out what seems to be best for each yet works for all. Even the kids' grandparents on their father's side have apparently spoken to their son when he was causing problems over child support, testing loyalties and drinking too much.

My parents, however, are having a hard time adjusting to our new family. They feel the children are stand-offish and they don't respond to them as grandparents. I know my parents can come on too strong at times and they've told me they don't approve of the children's father. But, they genuinely want to treat Matt and Maddy like their own grandchildren. As their only child, I offer their only opportunity to be grandparents. I've encouraged my parents to give the children time to get to know them and let their relationships develop gradually. My parents feel it has already been a long time and they think I haven't done enough to encourage the children in their direction.

What can I do?

Dear Jack,

With the description of your new family's progress and your obvious understanding of the importance communication and patience play, I'm certain you will work this out. Although, I fear you don't deal as well with your parents as you do with your new family. Based on what seems to be between your lines, there are several potential reasons why your parents and the children may not be hitting it off.

These may include:

- Unrealistic Expectations
- Breaches of Family Confidentiality
- Ill-defined Boundaries and Limits

Unrealistic Expectations often sabotage otherwise healthy relationships. Your parents seem to have their own agenda, perhaps, making Matt and Maddy uncomfortable around them. In all relationships, the personalities of the individuals play a significant role in the core their relationships take. Just because you like someone doesn't mean that others will share your feelings, even if they love you. The children cannot be expected to fulfill your parents' desire for grandchildren. Their relationships will develop slowly as a function of how they treat each other over their many encounters. The more relaxed your parents are around the children the more likely the children will become relaxed around them.

Family Confidentiality is of major importance to the development of trust in any family, perhaps more so within stepfamilies. The children may be aware of how your parents feel about their father, directly or indirectly. The children may also have closed ranks, excluding those who may seem to know too much already.

Boundaries and Limits are the frameworks upon which families succeed or fail. The amount of information that travels between family members is not necessarily the same information that travels well to extended family members. You may need to rethink the boundaries and limits of what you share with your parents. It's appropriate for you to share your thoughts and feelings with your parents but the children need to feel you will not breach their confidences. It might be more appropriate for you to share with your parents the effectiveness of Julia's parents' ability to offer support without taking sides. Or all this might simply be a natural tendency for children entering their adolescence to prefer the attentions of their peers to adults of any kind, let alone pushy ones.

Keep up the good work, Jack, and your parents will find reasons to feel good about your new family as they recognize what a good father figure they raised in you and those efforts are realized in Matt and Maddy.

Outstanding Stepfathers

In our last issue we asked for stories about outstanding stepfathers. We received some great stories and are pleased to include them in this issue.

STEPPADS ARE FOR REAL

From Diane Ucci of Brevard, North Carolina

After ten years of bachelorhood bliss, independence and peace and quiet, my husband married me when my children were just two and three years old. "A lion-hearted task", said some. "A miracle," said others. And there were times when I watched my husband loving, teaching and nurturing my children and I realized both of those phrases held true.

One particular evening comes to mind when my daughter was about four and awakened in the middle of the night with a high fever and of all the nights, we were out of children's Tylenol! Despite the horrendous storm that was raging outside, without hesitation, her stepdad pulled on his jeans and flew out the door.

He was clearly on a mission of the heart for his stepdaughter who was in need. As I gently rocked my daughter I thought to myself, "Stepdads are for real."

In the eight plus years we have been together, I have seen him stretch in ways that neither of us knew were possible. My children's father is an artist and his woodcuts and photographs are proudly displayed around the house. Their stepfather not only hung them, but, has told his stepchildren how talented their dad is. When their dad comes to town for a visit and wants to see our home or the children's pets, rooms, collections of bugs and whatever else seems significant to them, my husband has pushed his own boundaries and relinquished his need for privacy allowing dad to enter our space for the sake of the children. He has done what some cannot do, and that is, give his stepchildren total permission to continue their love, connection and loyalty to their dad. He has told them that their hearts have room enough for both men in their lives. My husband is a talented woodworker and has assisted the children in making gifts for their father and encouraged them to be creative in the process. When the children return from time with their dad, my husband has comforted them, soothed their pain and genuinely listened while they shared the

excitement of their visit.

I often wonder if I am capable of the same open-heartedness and patience. Would I have the heart of a lioness to bring someone else's children into my life with no legal rights, yet supporting them financially and emotionally?

One Friday evening, when he left for a Boy Scout campout with my son after putting in a grueling twelve-hour workday, and a prediction of torrential rain on the way, the refrain played over in my mind. Yes, stepdads are for real and we sure have a genuine, outstanding one in our lives.

OUR STEPDAD, OUR HERO

From Lisa and Lyn Patterson of Los Angeles, California

"THE SUPREME TEST OF
ANY CIVILIZATION IS WHETHER
IT CAN TEACH ITS MEN TO
BECOME GOOD FATHERS."

- Margaret Mead

When we learned that an issue of *Stepfamilies* was to be dedicated to Stepfathers, we were so excited for the opportunity to share how special our stepfather, Bob Dinkel, is. We absolutely lucked out when our mother married the "Greatest Stepfather in the World"! He is there for us 100% of

the time. He has made countless sacrifices for us, both large and small. We can always count on his unconditional love and support. He loves and accepts us for who we are. We can just be ourselves with him. We can laugh and cry with him. He is one of our favorite people to hang out with. He is fun. He is an awesome cook, and he'll even make a second batch of chili just to accommodate our unique tastes. He is our advocate and our friend.

He is our Bob, our stepdad, and our hero!

FORTUNATE SON

From Stacy Matthews of San Jose, California

My husband is the most incredible stepfather to my eleven-year-old son. Bob came into my son's life when he was five years old. He always treats my son Chuck as his own.

Bob co-parents and is a wonderful provider, both emotionally and financially, for my son. Bob has been a

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BOOK REVIEW

By Patricia Schiff Estes

The Enlightened Stepmother: Revolutionizing the Role

By Perdita Kirkness Norwood with Teri Wingender

If you read the back-of-the-book promotion, you might assume that *The Enlightened Stepmother* (Avon, \$14) will be like dozens of other books: why you should give your marriage top priority, how to handle relationships between your kids and his, how to overcome guilt of not loving your stepchildren and on and on.

But this book is different. It's real. It's powerful. It's rich with ideas.

What it is not: a manual on how to become an ideal stepmother. (Thank heavens!) That's because it rests on a number of premises that haven't been well-connected before – but should have been.

- That every successful stepfamily is as unique as each stepmom – so there are no universal answers.
- That anyone marrying someone with children has to be a pretty good person, otherwise why would she even consider the monumental task of playing an integral role in the lives of someone else's children.
- That a stepmom needs to know who she is and what she wants and then examine how all these new people fit into her life (not how she can blend in with theirs) before making a commitment.

If all this sounds harsh (what about the poor stepchildren who through divorce, death or abandonment have suffered loss), it isn't. The "poor stepchildren" are not shunted aside in the pages of the book. In fact, their issues are clearly and poignantly described. No suggestions are meant to harm them; most are designed to feather the marriage nest for a secure, respectful, and eventually loving home. But the kids are not the focus here. It's the stepmom. The twenty-year old stepmom, the thirty-year old stepmom, the forty-year old stepmom, the fifty-year old stepmom and the stepmom of adult stepchildren.

"You have the central role in building new stepfamily relationships."

"You're not the bystander in your own life."

"Assume your role as female head of your household right away, in conjunction with your mate."

"If you allow others to determine your function in the early stages of step-motherhood, later on it can be difficult to claim your position."

The authors' emphasis is to remember to be you and be true to your personality, beliefs, dreams and goals before the wedding and through the years of marriage that follow. Starting with the wedding, the authors write

"Opinions vary widely about what is appropriate for a second marriage. Wear white or not? Religious or civil? Accept from the start that you will not please everyone, whatever choices you make. The most important thing to remember (and to keep reminding yourself about) is that your wedding day is your wedding day."... "At the risk of horrifying critics who believe stepmoms should give way for the sake of the children, we recommend, 'Go for it!'"

The emphasis on expecting respect continues throughout the marriage, say the authors. "No apology or compensation can make up for disloyalty between spouses, even though we might understand a father's own difficulties with divided loyalties. A mate who continues to put his children ahead of his wife is perpetuating an intolerable situation and a continual erosion of the marital relationship."

The stepmoms interviewed for the book didn't all wind up with marriages made in heaven. A number never made it long enough to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary. But by sharing their mistakes as well as their creative ways of handling situations, they enlighten the reader far more than any book I've read on the subject in recent years.

- Consider the step-mom who shocks her truly rude and uncooperative stepchildren by showering the wretches with beneficent attention – unconditionally and outrageously. She compliments them on the way they look, what they wear, how they behave. She thanks them profusely for whatever they do – even the most minor positive acts.
- Or the stepmom who makes allies of the children's maternal grandparents.
- Or the stepmom who understands that her stepson wants to spend his birthday with his mom, but creates an "official" birthday for him on an entirely different day.
- Or the woman who doesn't bring to her husband's attention how little interest his adult children have in his happiness, but instead makes him feel like a hero when they're together.

I wish I had the space to share more of the wonderful ideas crammed into this book. But if I did, you might not read it. And that would be your loss. *The Enlightened Stepmother* needs to be on every stepmother's reading list, then on the bookshelf, to be pulled down and reread from time to time. It's a fabulous soft-cover support group!



STEPFAMILIES AND THE LAW

by Laura W. Morgan, J.D.

Last month, we discussed the obligation of a stepparent to support his or her stepchild during the marriage to the child's legal parent, while the stepparent is acting *in loco parentis* to the child. This month, we will focus on a stepparent's duty to support a stepchild after the child has left home, with specific attention to the stepparent's duty to pay for college.

Last month, we noted that a stepparent has a duty to support a stepchild so long as the stepparent is acting *in loco parentis* to the child. In most states, once the *in loco parentis* relationship has terminated, then the stepparent is no longer liable for support. The various courts held that because the establishment of an *in loco parentis* relationship is dependent on the voluntary assumption of responsibility by the stepparent, the relationship is terminable at the will of the stepparent. Thus, once the stepparent leaves the marital home, then the stepparent is no longer liable for support of the stepchild. This has been explicitly stated in cases from Alabama, Arizona, the District of Columbia, Nebraska, and New Jersey. The same is also true when the stepchild leaves the marital home.

A stepparent, if acting *in loco parentis* to a child, can have the same obligation to provide support for college expenses that a natural parent would have. Only 20 jurisdictions provide by statute or case law that a natural parent has a duty to provide college expenses for a child: Alabama, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, Washington, West Virginia.

A stepparent, like a natural or adoptive parent, can contract to provide support for a stepchild that would otherwise not be imposable by law. Thus, a stepparent

can contract to provide support for a stepchild after the marriage has terminated, or to provide support for a stepchild's college expenses.

Next month, we will take a look at the impact of the duty to support a stepchild or the stepparent's obligation to support his or her own children from a previous marriage.

Laura W Morgan is a Senior Attorney for Family Law at the National Legal Research Group in Charlottesville, Virginia. Laura is currently the Chair of the Child Support Committee of the American Bar Association Section of Family Law, and the author of Child Support Guidelines: Interpretation and Application, a treatise for lawyers on the law of child support. She has also written extensively for various legal publications on a variety of family law issues

OUTSTANDING STEPFATHERS

Continued from page 5

positive role model and mentor. He encourages and supports Chuck in everything he does. He helps with homework and school projects. He challenges Chuck to think through a problem and apply what he has learned to everyday life. Bob has used his technology background to teach Chuck about computers and the Internet and how to compile research for reports and for fun.

Bob encourages Chuck's dreams of space and working for NASA when he grows up. When Chuck was at his dad's for a weekend, Bob painted his room and put up a space border.

Whenever Bob sees an interesting article on space, he saves it for Chuck. Chuck recently told Bob he wants to save his money for a high-powered telescope so he could draw a map of the moon. Bob responded by researching telescopes and found information about the local Astronomy Association.

Bob is a dedicated stepdad! He is the leader for Chuck's Boy Scout den and is encouraging Chuck to obtain his Eagle Scout. Bob was the soccer coach for Chuck's team for the past two seasons. Bob has worked hard to develop a relationship with Chuck's dad. I feel my son benefits from this as he knows he has enough love for both his dad and stepdad. Chuck's dad is not very involved in his activities. When he does not attend a function, Chuck tells me it is okay because he knows Bob will be there for him. Chuck admires and respects Bob. Bob shows Chuck unconditional love, compassion and understanding. My son is very fortunate to have Bob in his life.

WE'RE CHANGING

Over the next several issues you will notice the form of the **STEPFAMILIES** newsletter changing. It is our attempt to be sensitive to the needs of our readers. For some time now we have struggled with the challenge of trying to make one newsletter fit the bill for stepfamilies and the professionals who work with stepfamilies. We realize this is no longer possible. Please bear with us as we try several new looks on for size. In this issue you will find a separate pull out section targeted to professionals. In our fall issue, we will be adding a children's column. Like the caterpillar who emerges from the chrysalis a beautiful butterfly, we are excited about what lies ahead with our own transformation. If you have comments about the newsletter and what you'd like to see, please send them to us.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

By: Gloria Clark, B.A., Chapter Development Chair

Advertising Your Chapter – Getting the Word Out

Recently, while I was talking to some chapter leaders, they told me that getting the word out about their chapters was time-consuming and not as effective as they would like. They feel that under-exposure results in a small turnout to meetings.

For many years our Pittsburgh chapter has had the benefit of being in the Social Services Directory or United Way Helpline of our local telephone book, at no charge to us. Many of our members (maybe 90%) come from this service. People browse this section for help.

I spoke to a representative in the United Way marketing department here in Pittsburgh, PA and I asked her how other chapters could get listed in the Guide to Human Service Helpline pages as we are. She said that every state handles this differently but that if you contact your local United Way organization they will tell you if and how this can be done. We feel it is a benefit to us and also to people trying to locate a support group for stepfamilies.

Another way chapters can let stepfamilies in their communities know about their group is to get into the local magazine published by Parenting Publication Association of America. In Pittsburgh it is known as Pittsburgh Parent and we are listed in the monthly calendar. In some cities the publication is listed as (name of the city) Child. Once a year they publish a directory that goes out to over 60,000 homes and professional offices

for a nominal fee. We have calls resulting from this listing as well as from the telephone book.

\$10 REFUND ON MEMBERSHIPS

People who have been chapter leaders for many years will remember receiving \$10.00 for the Chapter from SAA memberships. These refunds were discontinued many years ago because of increased costs of running the national office. However, there is some confusion about this, perhaps because the old edition of the by-laws in the start-up kit had this information and when it is turned over to a new leader they assumed that practice was continuing.

While the chapters do not receive the \$10 refund for memberships they do receive many services and benefits from our national office. One of these benefits is that, in response to calls resulting from our web page and 800 number, referrals are frequently made to chapters and professionals in the caller's area. This is an important part of our mission. We hope that chapters will still recommend SAA memberships (including the free Stepping Ahead bonus book, a \$10.00 value, and the quarterly magazine) as a way of supporting and insuring the continuation of the valuable work that SAA does for stepfamilies.

S T E P S

There are ten steps to my bedroom
And three to my front door,
And when my brand new dad
comes home,
I'll be getting one step more.

"Is this an up step or a down step?"
I asked my weary mother,
"And how on earth can someone make
A step of my new brother?"

– Dorothy Hunter

Stumped for a Wedding Gift?

*Give your friends a membership
in the
Stepfamily Association
of America
and start them off
on the right step.*

*Complete the membership application on the back page
and we'll send notice of the membership to the
new couple with an acknowledgment to you.*

STEPFAMILY DAY CELEBRA-



SEPTEMBER 16

has been established as **STEPFAMILY DAY** in 40 states.

SEPTEMBER 19

is the first national **Stepfamily Day Picnic**.

Celebrate your family with a gathering at local parks and neighborhood backyards. This is a national event!

For more information or to express your support, you may e-mail Christy at:

christy37@aol.com
or phone her at **616-534-7901**

You may also visit the official Stepfamily Day Website where you will find a

Stepfamily Day Picnic Message Board to look for other stepfamilies in your city/state:

<http://pages.ivillage.com/pp/christyb37/index.html>

SALE

SALE

AUDIO TAPES

Steps Ahead with Daisy Petals:

"They Love Me" – College Expenses
"They Love Me Not" – Inheritance

Stepfamily Money Quandaries: 1,2 or 3 Pots? Money Challenges with our Children

By Margorie Engel

The Brady Bunch is a Myth

By John and Emily Visher

Dealing Across Households: Scripts to Get By On

By Patricia Papernow

Writing Your Own Script

By Peter Marshall

STEPFAMILY LIVING SERIES:

By Elizabeth Einstein

- Myths and Realities
- The Stepfamily Journey
- Guiding Grandparents in the Stepfamily
- The Couples Spiritual Challenge

Tapes \$5.00 each or 3 for \$12.00

BOOKS

How to Adopt Your Stepchild in California
\$16.07 *By Frank Zagone & Attorney Mary Randolph*

Living From the Inside Out
\$9.10 *By Teresa M. Adams, A.C.S.W., B.C.S.W.*

Kids' Stepfamily Kit (Book and Audio Tape)
\$13.97 *By Dr. Ken Magid and Walt Schreibmann, M.S.*

Custody for Fathers
\$17.47 *By Carleen Brennan and
Michael Brennan, Attorney at Law*

The Divorce Decisions Workbook
\$19.57 *By Margorie L. Engel and Diana D. Gould*

Divorce Help Sourcebook
\$12.57 *By Margorie L. Engel*

The Good Divorce
\$9.10 *By Constance Ahrons, Ph.D.*

Vicki Lansky's Divorce Book for Parents
\$4.20 *By Vicki Lansky*

Dinosaurs Divorce
\$4.87 *By Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown*

Child Visitation Datebook & Journal
\$10.00 *By Jerry K. Thomas, Attorney at Law*

Call 1-800-735-0329

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SALE

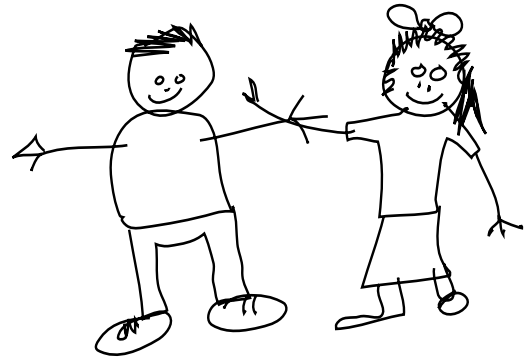
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CHILDREN'S RIGHTS COUNCIL

12TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Keeping Children First in the 21st Century

September 22 - 26, 1999
Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites
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The Stepfamily Association of America is proud to support the CHILDREN'S RIGHTS COUNCIL'S 12th national conference September 22-26, 1999. We urge all members to mark their calendars to attend this important conference.

SAA SPEAKERS

SAA Board members Marjorie Engel, Ph.D, Scott Browning, Ph.D., Kay Pasley, Ed.D., and Jean McBride, M.S.LMFT will speak at the conference. Other speakers and events will refer to stepfamily issues. Other speakers include researchers, judges, lawyers, legislators, columnists, sports figures and authors like John Guidubaldi, Ed.D. of Kent State University; Sanford Braver, Ph.D. author of Divorced

Dads; Federal Child Support Commissioner Hon. David Gray Ross and many others.

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UPCOMING EVENTS:

NATIONAL PARENTS DAY, JULY 25

SAA supports National Parents Day - July 25 - sponsored by The Parenting Coalition International (formerly the National Parents Coalition) Washington, D.C. at 202-539-0849.

EQUAL PARENTS WEEK

JULY 26 - AUGUST 1

SAA also supports Equal Parents Week sponsored by The Children's Rights Council, July 26 through August 1. For information on how to hold a candle light vigil on July 28, contact Patti Diroff:

Phone 909-591-3689

Pattidiroff@worldnet.att.net

Steps to Stepfamily Success

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

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

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What Stepparents Do to Get Stepchildren to Like Them

Continued from page 1

much to help build the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild, although when they did, it included mediating disputes and encouraging the two to spend time together. They also tried to help both the stepparent and the stepchild see each other's perspectives. Lastly, stepparents commented that time constrained their efforts to build a relationship with their stepchildren. Often there were limitations due to work schedules and the commitment that the child sees the nonresident parent.

What did stepparents actually do to help them win their stepchildren over? The authors found, for example, that stepparents often tried to get the stepchild to participate in group activities where the entire family was involved. Also, they planned time together on a one-to-one basis, including time to play together and to talk and discuss things. Working together one-to-one also helped the child to develop positive regard for the stepparent as did the stepparent's advocating on behalf of the stepchild.

The assessment of the effects of these behaviors on the stepparent-stepchild relationship showed that, connec-

tion between stepparent and stepchild was possible and likely for those stepparents who actively sought to develop a relationship. Many of the early seeking stepparents wanted to take the place of the nonresident parent; sometimes stepchildren could not identify stepparent behaviors directed toward helping to build more connection with them. In addition, stepparents who did not exert effort to do so were more likely to have an emotionally distant relationship with their stepchildren.

For more information about the study, I invite you to see: Ganong, L., Coleman, M., Fine, M., & Martin, P. (1999), "Stepparent's affinity-seeking and affinity-maintaining strategies with stepchildren," *Journal of Family Issues*, 20, 299-327.

WE'RE CHANGING

Over the next several issues you will notice the form of the STEPFAMILIES newsletter changing. It is our attempt to be sensitive to the needs of our readers. For some time now we have struggled with the challenge of trying to make one newsletter fit the bill for stepfamilies and the professionals who work with stepfamilies. We realize this is no longer possible. Please bear with us as we try several new looks on for size. In this issue you will find a separate pull out section targeted to professionals. In our fall issue, we will be adding a children's column. Like the caterpillar who emerges from the chrysalis a beautiful butterfly, we are excited about what lies ahead with our own transformation. If you have comments about the newsletter and what you'd like to see, please send them to us.

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STEPFAMILIES:

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FOR PROFESSIONALS

RESEARCH UPDATE

BY: KAY PASLEY, ED.D.

What Stepparents Do to Get a Stepchild to Like Them

In the May, 1999, issue of *Journal of Family Issues*, three members of the SAA Research Committee (Drs. Larry Ganong, Marilyn Coleman, Mark Fine with colleague Patricia Martin) had a study published on "affinity seeking and maintaining behaviors" in stepfamilies using data from a small sample of 17 stepfamilies. They were interested in exploring (a) the strategies that stepparents used to develop and maintain positive feelings toward them by the stepchildren, and (b) what biological parents did to facilitate the development of this pivotal relationship in the stepfamily between stepparent and stepchild. They completed lengthy interviews with these stepfamilies, most of whom were stepfather-stepmother households, of which seven had one set of children residing with them. All adults and children participated in the study.

They found that some stepparents expended more energy toward building a relationship with their stepchildren than did others. In fact, they observed three patterns of behaviors, some behavior occurring before the remarriage and others after.

1. **NON-SEEKERS OF AFFINITY** – these stepparents did not do much to get their stepchildren to like them prior to the marriage. When they interacted with their stepchildren it was for other reasons such as supporting the parent's efforts with the child. They were friendly toward the stepchildren, but did so because they were interested in doing things to please the new spouse. Typically their spouses were hesitant to involve them in the children's lives until they were confident that the remarriage would occur. Then the stepparent spent more time with the stepchildren. Other couples had a shorter courtship that moved quickly into sharing a residence. In these cases, the stepparents were so consumed with work, pursuing their own interests, and helping manage the complexity of the household that

there was little time for building an affectionate relationship with the stepchild.

2. **EARLY AFFINITY SEEKERS** – building a relationship with the stepchild was one of several goals of these stepparents. They also wanted to build the relationship with the new spouse, help the stepchild accept their authority, and build a feeling of family. Their attempts to get the stepchild to like them diminished after the remarriage as they began to assume a parent-like role. Because the stepparents saw themselves as parents who needed to discipline the children, they implied that affinity-seeking behaviors did not fit with this new role of parent. Children often mentioned their resentment toward the stepparent who tried to act as if they were the child's parent.

3. **CONTINUOUS AFFINITY SEEKERS** – they tried to get the stepchild to like them early on, and they continued such behaviors after the remarriage. These adults gave thought to what they could do to promote good feelings between them and their stepchildren, and they attempted to behave in ways that would please their stepchildren and result in a better relationship. There was a reduction in such behavior after remarriage, although they continued to emphasize the goal of developing and maintaining an affectionate relationship with their stepchildren.

The findings also showed that certain characteristics contributed to building an affectionate relationship with the stepchildren. Stepparents described as "laid back," who had less need for control, who were fond of the stepchild, and who focused on the needs of the stepchild rather than their own needs appeared to have an easier time building a positive relationship with the stepchild. In addition, it appeared that when stepparents and stepchildren share some common interests the relationship is fostered. Apparently few biological parents did

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COUNSELOR'S CORNER

By Helen Devine

PLAIN JANE

When I started to write a note after our first session, I wrote, "Jane is a plain-looking ten year old girl." After tossing that one I tried to capture the girl I had just interviewed with words but she remained pretty non-descript except for her sex and age. She seemed average in size, interests and intelligence. Her eyes were not memorable and she had hair-colored hair.

Jane was compliant with my attempts to engage her with questions, games and activities, but didn't connect with me the way girls her age often do. I felt like she was going through the motions, without the emotions that I had anticipated based on her stepmother's anxious phone call. From my friendly probes I learned from Jane that she is making low-average grades in her fifth-grade classes. She had attended four or five schools since starting kindergarten, but did not offer a lot of detail regarding any of them.

Jane had not played team sports or taken music lessons. She rarely played with other children except for her five-year-old sister and cousins occasionally. She had rarely attended birthday parties and had never been to a slumber party. Since living with Dad and Ginger she has attended Sunday school and children's choir. When I asked her how she liked these activities Jane responded, "It's okay".

Itried for an hour to find the raging girl, whom her stepmother had prepared me to meet, but she did not show herself that day. She helped me pick up the toys and then quietly walked back to the waiting room where I saw her animated little sister playing an engaging game with both her dad and stepmother. I wondered if they were all enjoying a break from Jane. Both adults looked hopefully at me as if I could produce a magic cure for their family pain. I decided to make another appointment without much explanation to avoid talking in front of Jane.

The next morning, assuming Jane had left for school, I called the stepmother and told her I was afraid Jane did not want to come back, and guessed to myself, the parents wouldn't either since I had not talked to them after the session.

Karl and Ginger seemed to perch on the edge of the couch waiting to dive into their story. They had married

three years earlier and were both unsure whether they wanted to have children. Karl told Ginger that he had married Jane's mother, Beverly, when she was pregnant with Jane by a former boyfriend, and convinced her to have the baby. Four years later when Beverly was pregnant with Karl's child, she was again involved with another man. Karl left the area divorced and devastated. Later he learned through friends that she had married the other man, Jim, and given birth to another daughter named Belinda. Karl increased his child support voluntarily but could not force himself to visit the new family. With no real contact he hoped for the best and began a new job in Houston, where he met Ginger.

Ginger accepted Karl's past and did not question that they would pay child support and not press for visitation... until Beverly's mother called one night to express concerns about Belinda, who was being adopted by Jim and his new fiancée.

Karl and Ginger went into motion and had custody of Belinda within three months. Karl worried about Jane and was able to learn that she was, at best, neglected both physically and emotionally. Ginger did most of the legal work, and within two years they acquired physical custody of Jane.

Belinda adjusted quickly and attached to Ginger first and then to Karl. They decided that parenting was not that hard and that their family would not be a stepfamily because they all had the same last name. In a new community, with little contact from Beverly, they could blend in and make up to the girls anything they had missed or suffered. They read parenting books, joined a church and Ginger decided to start a Girl Scout troop for Jane.

Nothing in their background prepared this well-meaning couple for Jane's rage, despair and fear for her mother's well being. She had been Beverly's caregiver for a decade, but was suddenly taken off the job and reassigned to be a child. Ginger could not understand why Jane fought all the benefits they gave her, nor could she understand why Jane grieved over her mother, who rarely even called. When Beverly would finally call, Jane would rage at Ginger, run away and/or cry and act depressed for at least 48 hours.

For four months Jane and I worked hard to help her adjust to her gains and losses. Finally she trusted that I



could hear her pain and anger and not abandon her. Once she said to me, "No one knows who my father is. You know what my mother is. My stepfather wanted to adopt me and doesn't ever call or visit. Now I'm supposed to call these people my parents, who I'm not even kin to... they just want us to be normal!"

Three days prior to and three days after weekends with Beverly, Jane's school work virtually ceased. Her anxiety built and spilt into home life as well with increasing irritability. Before the last visit she had soiled her underwear for three days, broke Ginger's glasses and bruised her forearm when Ginger tried to restrain her. Usually her rages were subdued when Karl was in the house. Jane did not know he was home one day and that he witnessed what he had been minimizing to Ginger and to me in our sessions. Karl became alarmed enough by Jane's behavior that day that he went to court to reduce visitation with Beverly.

The second four months I saw Jane's grades increase and her rage decrease. With much psycho-education for Karl, and support for Ginger, I encouraged Karl to take centerstage as her primary parent, since he had been there before she was born. Ginger supported Karl in bonding with Jane through Karate lessons, homework support and much affection. Both parents spend individual time with Jane and support her need to be a "big" sister, not "one of the kids."

Jane had granted me enough authority by now, that Karl, Ginger and I were able to confront her behavior while supporting her feelings. My game with Jane was, "I asked first". When asked why behavior occurred she would passively repeat the question. I playfully reminded her that "I asked first." Humor helped, but of course, she learned to turn the tables on me when I "therapeutically" repeated her questions. Sometimes we greet each other in the waiting room with "I asked first".

My role with Jane's family included teaching, coaching and cheerleading. I preached patience and heard confession. Despite the history of dysfunction and unknown genetics, Jane remained psychologically healthy. She was angry and grieving. From her point of view her feelings and behaviors made sense. I could not pathologize Jane, nor really diagnose her. Certainly she was oppositional-defiant, depressed and anxious. Once in a while she was explosive and abusive. Most of the time Jane was trying to learn to feel and behave like a ten-year-old. She had learned most relational lessons from television and was not required to put energy into hygiene or homework. She reminded me of a movie I saw in which a young woman was discovered living in the wild and was tamed and house broken "for her own good." She raged and fought for a long time before the rewards of society became rewarding to her.

Jane has one more month of this school year left. So

much has changed since September. We went to court again to limit overnight visits. As her counselor, not custody evaluator, I tried not to testify. I did not want my relationship with Jane to be threatened. At our session the next day I expected silence or rage but the young lady who sat down "next" to me had a cute short hair cut, smiling eyes and couldn't wait to tell me she had started her period. She brought her week's paper to show off (several A's), and didn't mention court. She chatted about family plans and school next year, as if it had never been an issue. On the way back to the waiting room she said, "I heard court went well." I stopped in my tracks and asked, "for whom?" She smiled and said, "for me!"

We have more work to do. The court ordered Jane's mother, Beverly, to attend parenting sessions with me. Beverly gave Jane's custody to Karl. Karl and Ginger have agreed to attend Stepfamily of America support group meetings and have found a stepfamily couples Sunday school class.

Last week Ginger and Belinda needed to see me more than Jane does. I thought that might be a sign of normalizing, if the bad kid is being good, then the good one can be bad for some balance. Balancing this extended family was full time for Jane, leaving little interest or energy for herself. Lately some of her energy is going toward day dreaming about a boy at church, wondering if he likes her. It's fun to see her enthusiasm over her own life, rather than her dread over her mother's. Jane still says "I don't want Ginger to be a good mom, I want my mom to be a good mom."

Jane is a composite of ten-year-old girls I have seen, who have been brought into stepfamilies abruptly with no preparation for the transplanted child or naive stepmother to be. All of these girls were "good girls" in their mother's family, and had responsibility for a young sister. Their education came from television and managing mother through series of lost jobs, lost lovers and lost status. Alcohol abuse was a common theme, exaggerating normal levels of anxiety in the girls. In the stepfamily, anxiety predominated with concerns for the biological mother, loss of control and power struggles with the stepmother.

Anxiety was managed best in these households when the father could be activated as primary parent. Of course, he needed permission from the stepchild, the stepmother and me. Most of the fathers had abandoned the child early on to escape the toxic biological mother, and had to cope with shame, guilt and commitment issues. Empowering fathers to parent young daughters gives the stepmother time and space to move into a parenting style the child will accept. Eventually the stepchild will grant parental authority to the stepmother, hopefully before adolescence.