

STEPFAMILIES

Providing Education and Support

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Inside

General Interest:

- Stepfamilies & the Law . p. 3
- Chapter Highlights p. 4
- Book Reviews p. 10
- President's Message p. 11
- Director's Message p. 12
- SAA Website p. 12
- Step WriteUp p. 13
- Moving ? p. 13

Professional Section:

- Physical Child Abuse in Stepfamilies p. 5
- Professional Affiliates Survey p. 7
- We're Changing p. 7
- Counselor's Corner p. 8

HUSBANDS AND WIVES MANAGING MONEY IN THE SAA STUDY

By Margorie Engel, Ph.D.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the third in a four-part series by Margorie Engel, Ph.D. and President of SAA. Engel is a noted author, speaker, and media consultant, specializing in families complicated by divorce and remarriage. Look for the continuation in upcoming issues of the Stepfamilies Quarterly.

While we would like to think that fewer women are being taught to believe they won't be good at managing money, the wives in this sample still foresee that a man will take care of it for them. This is exemplified by one response to questions about existing insurance policies and agreements, "My husband handles the insurance and he isn't here for me to get all of this information." Another wife admitted, "I'm very ignorant [about money]."

Even though fewer than 2 out of 5 husbands were deemed to "always get financial advice" before making decisions, wives in this sample rated their husbands their Number One choice as most useful resource, followed by personal financial planners, newspapers and magazines, a tie between accountants/friends/relatives, and purchased books. Responses to the question "Do money issues cause tension in marriage?" were about equally split between yes and no. While husbands and wives appear to talk with each other about money, less than half of the respondents talk about personal finances with their children.

Over half of the women surveyed were responsible for maintaining the financial files. Over 60% of the wives mostly or somewhat agreed that their financial involvement was greater in this marriage than in prior marriage(s) and identify communication as the key.

The method by which household expenses are paid is a key emotional issue for remarried couples. Many women refer to splitting the cost of running the household and feel a disproportionate burden due to the difference in income between husband and wife. A typical suggestion was to "set up a clear percentage of contribution to household expenses rather than vague commitments".

An earlier study found that remarried women were often secretive about some monies they may have brought into the marriage thinking it necessary to keep some money aside in the eventuality of yet another divorce. This was not replicated in the current study where 1 in 4 respondent women reported secretly keeping some money aside. In an early presentation of the survey's results, men in the audience ex-

Continued on page 2

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Managing Money

Continued from page 1

pressed surprise at this finding. They considered it perfectly normal to have a "secret stash" and assume that women consider it typical/acceptable behavior for themselves as well. It seems as if today's cookie jar is empty of secret funds while the cash-filled cigar box of yesteryear is alive and well!

Child Support - Wife's Children

Slightly over half of the wives brought children to this current marriage. Though self-reporting, one-fourth of these women pay full or partial child support while only four percent of them do so by court order. Medical coverage and educational expenses are paid by more than half of the women. Over 70% pay for special occasions and other extras. It is surprising that less than half of the women talk about personal finances with their children despite their limited personal financial resources and disproportionately high financial responsibility for the children.

In three-fourths of the cases, husbands were ordered by the court to pay child support. In 60% of those families, the amount is paid in full, with another 7% of non-custodial fathers making partial payments. By the remarried mothers' count, fewer than 20% of these dads pick up the full tab for education, special occasions, and extras. One-fourth reportedly paid partial amounts for these expenses for their children. Interestingly, these moms reported that over 75% of the stepfathers contributed financially to their stepchildren. The availability of these contributions is an important factor in the decision to remarry. "Don't enter the relationship if your mate doesn't have the sincere desire to help your children".

Child Support - Husband's Children

In this study 93% of the husbands are also fathers,

which makes stepmothers of virtually all the respondents. In a little over 13% of the families, the non-custodial ex-wife has a court order to pay child support. These mothers pay the full amount in almost all of these cases and most of them pay on time. By the stepmothers' account, very few of these non-custodial moms pay education expenses while almost one-third pay for part of the expenses associated with special occasions and extras. The resident stepmothers were uniformly similar in their frustration with a legal system that, from their vantagepoint, appears to relieve non-custodial mothers of adequate financial responsibility.

Husbands have a court order to pay child support in over half of the stepfamilies. Stepmothers report that more than 80% of them pay on time and in full. Most pay educational expenses as well as for special occasions and extras. Additionally, over half of the stepmothers financially contribute to their stepchildren in spite of personal incomes that are substantially smaller than their husbands' incomes.

The financial stress created by children's expenses is a determining factor in the decision to have an "ours" child. This was expressed clearly by a respondent commenting on changes she would make if she could start the marriage over, "I'd not agree to have a child unless my husband agreed that his first financial responsibility is to the youngest child(ren), who will require support for years before they can be independent. [Note: Even with a verbal agreement to that effect, law does not support it.] Wives who did not bring their own children to the marriage were more likely to have misgivings about this marriage. Comments ranged from "Be honest with yourself about how much you are interested/willing to financially support your stepchildren" to "You both need to understand that when you married you also married the children - for better or worse." In the midst of the serious comments about the financial needs of children, levity came in comments like, "If there are stepchildren involved, invest in Tylenol and Zantac!"

Continued on page 3

STEPFAMILIES

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STEPFAMILIES AND THE LAW

By Laura W. Morgan, J.D.

In our last issue, Summer 1999, we discussed a stepparent's duty to support a stepchild after the child has left home. In this issue, we will consider what impact the duty to support a stepchild or a new biological child of a new marriage has on the support obligation for a child from a previous relationship.

When parties divorce or when parties have a child out of wedlock, the child support obligation is generally set according to the state's child support guidelines. (The court may deviate from the guidelines' presumptive award in some cases, but that is not relevant here.) When circumstances change that make the original child support award unjust or inappropriate, the support obligor or obligee may petition the court for a modification of the original child support award.

The states want to discourage support obligors from taking on new obligations of support to the detriment of previous born children. They want parents to plan for the needs of additional children through increased earnings, not decreased support for an existing child. For this reason, in most states, a support obligor cannot petition for downward modification of a child support award on

the basis that he or she now has more children to support, either stepchildren or natural born children. The support obligor can, however, defend against an upward modification of the child support obligation on the basis that he or she has new dependents.

The same holds true for support obligees. In most states, a custodial parent cannot petition the court for an upward modification of child support on the basis that he or she has more children to support, either stepchildren or natural born children.

There are a few states, however, that believe all children, regardless of birth order, should share to the same extent in their parents' earnings. In these states, a support obligor can request a downward modification of support based on the duty to support new children.

It is therefore most important that when a stepparent takes on additional support obligations, he or she determine whether this additional support obligation can be used to modify a previous child support obligation.

Next month, we'll move away from support obligations, and discuss instead, the right of a stepparent to discipline a stepchild.

Managing Money

Continued from page 2

When There Are a Lot of Children

In stepfamilies where both partners brought three or more children into the marriage, the emotional issues over "who paid more for what" seem to all but disappear. The sense of teamwork and "one big happy family" is remarkably strong. An "ours" child typically refers to a biological child of the partners in the new marriage. However, these large families had a sense of "our" children when making reference to each other's children. They wanted to be "fair", though fair was not clearly defined. When couples in these families have financial disputes, they are typically about the definition of fair distribution among the children.

When the Stepmother Does Not Have Biological Children

Wives who are not also biological mothers do not seem to have a frame of reference for child-related expenses, feel an additional strain when dad provides monies above and beyond what is legally required, and are surprised by the lack of accountability for the use of child support. In addition, they want appreciation for their personal contributions.

Some of the wives have accepted the financial situation with resignation, "Know that you are accepting financial responsibility as well as parental responsibility and resign yourself to that fact before your marriage."

When the Stepmother Has Biological Children

Wives who bring children to the marriage seem to have a pragmatic view of child support expenses. For the most part, biological mothers [who are stepmothers] promote timely and in-full payments for their stepchildren. "Don't complain about the child support. He owes the money to his child and should feel good about supporting him/her."

Insurance

Most medical insurance in this sample was obtained through employers. Less than 10% of medical insurance comes from other sources, but almost 5% of the respondent families have no medical insurance at all.

About half of the wives have disability insurance primarily through an employer plan. A surprisingly low 60% of the husbands are covered by a disability policy again mostly through an employer plan. The loss of a regular income from the husbands in these families would appear to create a significant financial hardship.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

By Gloria Clark, B.A., Chapter Development Chair
Guest columnist: Catherine Dudley
Southern New Jersey Chapter Leader

Catherine was a single parent for 13 years with a daughter 13 years old when she met and married a widower with two children, a daughter 16 and a son 20. They felt they had “done their homework” with marriage counseling and were ready for remarriage. The counseling was great for them but didn’t tell them about the stepfamily. They found a chapter of SAA in New Jersey and felt after a few meetings that the support was crucial for learning more about stepfamilies. They persuaded the group to hold two meetings a month. In April after Lori Posner, the group leader, moved west Catherine assumed leadership of the chapter and has been doing a great job there. One of the innovations that she brought to the chapter was a book study group.

SOUTH JERSEY CHAPTER: A BOOK STUDY BEGINS

by Catherine Dudley

Trying to keep in mind the SAA goal to educate and support, I wanted to offer anything and everything I could to meet the needs of people who come to our chapter meetings. I was reading *BECOMING FAMILY* by Robert H. Lauer, Ph.D., and Jeannette C. Lauer, Ph.D., and felt that this small but informative book would answer some of the questions that kept coming up at meetings and in our own stepfamily.

I proposed the idea of a book study at our chapter meeting and the idea of using *BECOMING FAMILY* as our first book. The group did not want to hold the book study during the regular support-group time because that time was so special. We agreed to schedule it for a separate night in each other’s homes so that it would be informal. We decided to take turns and at the end of each meeting we would pick a host/hostess who would provide refreshments as well as their home for the next meeting.

The book study group was born. How to go about it? I had never even belonged to a study group. Fortunately I picked a great book to start because in the back of the book are questions to use to open discussions. We use these questions as a guideline. At the moment we are using one chapter at each meeting (or if a chapter is long we’ll only do 1/2 a chapter) and will go on until we finish the book. In the first chapter of *BECOMING FAMILY* there was a lot of information on expectations and we

talked about how the expectations before remarriage change and what these changes are. For the present we have decided that I will select the books unless someone from the group finds one they really want to discuss. We may want to do something differently later.

Not everyone in our chapter attended the book study group, but enough came to have great conversations, reflections and change-of-hearts. Some people have been married a long time; others are just starting out and some don’t plan to be married until 2000. Because of this variety I opened the meeting with:

“We all come from very different backgrounds. It is from these different backgrounds that we see different insight in each challenge of being a stepfamily. From the different insights we can help to broaden our hearts.”

One thing that I noticed during our study time was that although I had thought people were openly sharing at our regular support group, they were really opening up after reading only one chapter. At the end of the discussion my husband asked “Before we leave, can each say what they learned tonight?” To that, everyone had something they had learned and wanted to instill in their lives.

Anthology for Stepmothers

Editor seeks poetry, short essays, limericks, cartoons, humor and artwork for anthology on the lighter side of stepmotherhood.

Interested in presenting all points of view, especially husbands and ex-wives.

Include brief bio to:

Flynnpub@mindspring.com

Or mail to:

Anthology Editor
Flynn Publications
173 Lamont Drive
Decatur, GA 30030

STEPFAMILIES FOR PROFESSIONALS:

Physical Child Abuse in Stepfamilies

By Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder

W

hat do we know?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Continued on page 6

Physical Child Abuse in Stepfamilies

Continued from page 5

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

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

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

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

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

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Excellent Response to SAA's Professional Affiliates Survey

By Larry Kallemeyn

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We're Changing

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

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

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

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

Introducing a New Metaphor for Divorce and Remarriage

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

— THOMAS KUHN
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions

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

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

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

From this perspective, divorced families have somehow “failed”; they are broken, smashed, damaged beyond repair. They can never be as “good” as the nuclear family again. They have fallen from the moral high-ground to the moral low-ground. They cannot regain the moral

“high-ground” no matter how well they navigate the divorce or how hard they work to create a successful co-parenting relationship with a former spouse. Further, this negative cloud follows the family into the next stage of the process, the creation of the stepfamily.

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

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

A NEW METAPHOR FOR DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Accepting divorce and remarriage as important options is not incompatible with supporting life-long marriage as a valid social institution. Initiatives such as, "The Smart Marriages Conference", are essential to the growing challenges involved in lifelong marriages. However, to accept divorce and remarriage as legitimate choices is to acknowledge that lifelong marriage may be right for many people much of the time, but not for all the people, all the time. If a choice is made to end a marriage, this is not necessarily an indication of failure, or personal, social, or moral deficits. Equally, as the next section demonstrates, post divorce families are not necessarily broken/damaged/failed families nor are stepfamilies necessarily hopelessly chaotic or neglectful of children.

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

BOOK REVIEWS

By Patricia Schiff Estess

"Still a Dad: The Divorced Father's Journey" by Serge Prengle and "Questions from Dad" by Dwight Twilley

This column is for the guys. It's for stepdads who don't have custody of children from a previous marriage and who may have trouble juggling the still rocky role of non-resident parent with the new role of stepfather.

A couple of books – one new and one that's been around a while – have hooked into fathers' feelings and frustrations: "Still a Dad: The Divorced Father's Journey" by Serge Prengle (Mission Creative Energy, \$13.95) and "Questions from Dad" by Dwight Twilley (Tuttle, \$ 16.95).

Being a vital part of your children's lives when you don't come home through the same front door each night is difficult. You become insecure about where you stand and what your actual role is. "Still a Dad" is an emotional journey through divorce. It talks of the pain, anger, and loss of control experienced during the painful expedition. It puts an honest face on how society, the law, the courts, and even friends present you with obstacles that prevent you from being too closely involved with children who don't live with you.

Fathers have a difficult time understanding what the rationale is when the very wife who wanted her husband to be involved with the children when they were married becomes vehement about keeping these very children away from him when they're divorced. That's one attitude that perpetuates the bitterness between the ex's. And many dads don't know how to let the venom go. They wind up retaliating against a former wife and using the kids as pawns in the battle.

The book examines the road from frustration to peace and is supportive to fathers who have been exhausted and tripped up by the trek. It offers practical advice on how to handle difficult situations and provides hope for a brighter future. Its focal point, that "you will always be their father" doesn't conflict with another underlying theme that fathering is going to be different from what it was before. Not living with one's children requires a conscious approach to fathering and a greater commitment to communication from when you yelled, "Hi, I'm home" before. And this book helps you move in a positive direction.

It's this emphasis on creative communication that "Questions from Dad" by Dwight Twilley picks up on. Twilley is a rock star and travels a great deal. If he was going to stay in touch with his daughter, Dion, he had to develop a more creative approach than calling and asking her how her day was. Anyway, he wanted to know more about her - what she likes to eat, what grosses her out, what she's scared of,

what she dreams of doing in the future, if she needs to talk to him about something important. Those seem like small things, but they're really not. They're the threads that stitch the parent-child relationship. And he doesn't want her to forget that she is part of his life and his family's heritage as well as her mother's. He wants her to know he exists and isn't just the guy who sends stuff on holidays or birthdays.

Twilley's "cool." On an intuitive level, he understood his 10-year old daughter's reticence to talk, especially to someone she didn't see every day and probably felt deserted by. So he devised a way of communicating that melted her reserve. He asked questions - in writing. He called the sets of questions, "Dad's Tests," but suggests that if the notion of a test turns some kids off, call them "Secret Questions for Sarah" or "Dad's Amazing Crazy Quiz Game" instead. He sends Dion a "Test" three or four times a year (mostly by snail mail with a postage-paid self-addressed return envelope so that she has privacy and independence in filling it out and can mail the package back (maybe even with a drawing or two) without any adult supervision. (But you can do something quite similar via E-mail if a child is old enough and has access to the Internet.)

Some of the questions are silly ("How many freckles on your nose?") Some contain messages (Yes or No: "Do you think if I didn't live so far away I wouldn't miss you so much?") Some aren't really questions at all (Draw a picture of your dog reading a book). Some are straightforward – (My favorite snack is ...); some are imaginative – (What would you wish someone would invent now). And some net heart-warming answers (To the question: "At what point do you think you'll be too old for the Dad's Test?" Dion responded "204, give or take a year.").

He stays away from questions like, "How's your mom?" which could inspire hope for a reconciliation or cause mom to think he's prying. He admits he made a mistake when he asked the question, "Would you ever like to come live with your dad for a while?" because it put Dion in a position to make a choice that she really doesn't have now. And he stays away from any questions that might be interpreted as preachy or teacher-like.

Twilley says the "tests" have opened up conversation between father and daughter so much that they now see each other often and yak on the phone frequently.

The message I came away with after reading this book is that with persistence and creativity, divorced dads can often maintain close ties to children they don't live with – even if they're far away from them or remarried and living with stepchildren.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Margorie Engel, MBA, Ph.D.

As entrepreneurial ideas go, it wasn't far-fetched – simply “change the world for stepfamilies!” Back in 1977, that's exactly what Emily and John Visher decided to do. Following 18 years of unexpected challenges while trying to integrate two families with four children in each, they were convinced that the tasks would have been easier with support and assistance.



Thanks to the Visher's conviction and a like-minded luncheon companion, the California stepfamily organization was born. Brochures were printed, a newsletter was published, and the first annual membership conference was held in a living room. The local media was curious and paid attention. So did network television. The calls began pouring in and they clearly indicated it was time to begin working on a national level. Emily noted, “People were so happy to have someone to talk with who understood where they were coming from.” The Stepfamily Association of America was incorporated in the fall and its first Board of Directors meeting was held on December 1 and 2, 1979. Happy 20th birthday to us!

The daunting task of building a national organization was undertaken by a dedicated group of supporters. By-laws, chapter structures, and even terminology were hammered out. It was decided to use the term “stepfamily” in the organization title because other names describing stepfamilies are confusing (e.g., blended, reconstituted) and all other family types are defined by the parent-child relationships (e.g., biological, foster, adoptive, single-parent). While this choice of name has been seen by some as negative, the Association expressed the hope that, through education, the term “stepfamily” would acquire a positive, or at the very least a neutral, connotation.

Over the years, our newsletter appeared in many renditions and is now in the process of becoming a multi-part publication that will include a segment for professionals and separate sections for the adults and the children in a stepfamily. The initial annotated bibliography has expanded to keep pace with increased research about stepfamilies. Our original catalog of stepfamily resources has become a peer-reviewed compilation that implies professional endorsement of the books and materials carried in our bookstore.

Public awareness of SAA continued to increase and was not limited to the United States. Groups in Canada, Great Britain, and Australia were modeled after the Stepfamily Association of America. In the midst of all this activity, the organization simply outgrew the Visher's kitchen. Management of SAA had been demanding all of Emily's time and, at long last, John would be able to relinquish some of his marketing

and cooking chores. In 1982, we hired a paid Executive Director, the office was moved clear across the country, and we began to call Baltimore, MD, home. “While there, we implemented a fund-raising phon-a-thon and prize-winning Public Service Announcements were donated. Since 1989, the Association's office management activities have been located in Lincoln, NE. Initially directed by professional family therapists, our SAA board now also includes educators, financial advisors, clergy and pastoral counselors, lawyers, business consultants, entrepreneurs, public-policy professionals, chapter leaders, and stepparents.

SAA has held conferences and Professional Institute Programs over the years. Stepfamilies and the professionals who work with them have met with us in Estes Park, CO; Asheville, NC; Pacific Grove, CA; Chevy Chase, MD; Winter Park, CO; Lincoln, NE; New Orleans, LA; Irvine, CA; Houston, TX; Oklahoma City, OK; Las Vegas, NV; Washington, DC; Williamsburg, VA; Oakland, CA; Salt Lake City, UT; Philadelphia, PA; Boston, MA; Kansas City, MO; and Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Always reaching farther and wider, the Association is in the midst of planning a large professional interdisciplinary conference on stepfamilies to be held in the Spring of 2001.

A little over a year ago, the board revisited our organization's direction and focus as we move into the 21st century. 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.

Using individual areas of expertise, each board member works on specific projects designed to further our stepfamily work. These projects include: partnerships with large U.S. family service organizations; managing the stepfamily segment of a new internet company; support for stepfamily programming in the media (national and international television and radio, movies and documentaries, and print media including newspapers and magazines); manuscript review and endorsement evaluation for book publishers; marketing consultant for a line of family-based greeting cards; resource for teachers, administrators, and researchers in our schools, colleges, and universities; promoting state and federal recognition of stepfamilies through Stepfamily Day on September 16th; addressing ways that existing laws and policies are detrimental to stepfamily members; and expansion of educational programs in our own Professional Training Institute.

Can you guess what year SAA was recognized as an important resource by The White House Conference on Families? The Conference made the following policy recommendations:

It should be the policy of the Federal Government that the stepfamily is a reality in America today and that all publications, programming, and funding recognize the fact.

The year was 1980. We are still the only national non-profit membership organization for stepfamilies. While we have made great strides, there is much work to do. Join us and support us in our vision *that Stepfamilies in the United States will be accepted, supported, and successful.*

SAA PRESIDENTS	
1979-83	Emily Visher
1983-84	Claire Berman
1985-86	Roger Burt
1987-88	Joan Howard
1989-90	Marla Burt
1991-92	Sharon Hanna
1993	Judith Bauersfeld
1994-95	Kevin Ricker
1996-97	Judith Bauersfeld
1998-	Margorie Engel

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

By Larry Kallemeyn

Frankly, I am a little tired of hearing about Y2K and whether we're prepared or not. It's not that I don't take the issue seriously – we have reviewed our systems for compliance and compatibility. My concern is that I believe there are bigger issues on the horizon as we enter the year 2000.



Our society has developed and continues to develop increasingly complex and rapid means of communication whereby we can instantly communicate with individuals around the world, at any place, at any time. While I find it fascinating that our technical ability to communicate has grown exponentially during these past several decades, we increasingly seem to struggle to make real human connections and relationships with each other.

While we have learned to communicate instantaneously with the masses, communicating and connecting on a personal level with our children, spouses (current and former), parents, friends and neighbors about issues that really matter seems to have become increasingly difficult and problematic. This not only affects our personal and family relationships where we often experience tremendous heartache and grief when those relationships fail, but also poses real problems for our society.

As a society we are living in a strange paradox where we are spending tremendous amounts of time, energy and money learning how to communicate instantly with others thousands of miles away and yet people feel increasingly isolated, devalued, and disconnected from each other. At what point will we begin to recognize that we need to spend as much time, energy and money on building and nurturing our personal and family communications and relationships?

It is within these relationships that each of us derives our sense of belonging, identity, self worth and trust. Each are vital components in helping us become productive, healthy, contributing citizens within our society.

This issue is of special concern for our children who have already experienced loss through death or divorce and who also experience the many changes and challenges that occur in stepfamily living. We who are a part of the Stepfamily Association know how difficult and complex stepfamily life is for all involved. Yet we know it is vital that all parties communicate and work to make it successful. We hope the information, resources and

support we provide will continue to assist you and your family in this process. Although difficult, and at times painful, we know stepfamily living can be successful and provide the support and nurturing each of our children need and deserve. For me this is a much more important issue than Y2K will ever be.

SAA Website Under Construction

By Larry Kallemeyn

SAA has entered into a contract with the Snitily Carr Production Group (SCPG) to redesign and upgrade SAA's website at www.stepfam.org. The web redesign will provide a wider variety of information and much greater service than the current site. We are looking to create a variety of new on-line services, many of which will be available to members only. We expect these to include:

- Information about SAA board members
- The Stepfamily Gallery - a collection of pictures and stories about successful stepfamily life profiling various members of SAA
- On-line access to SAA's quarterly Stepfamilies newsletter
- On-line access to current research and research bibliography
- A calendar of SAA-sponsored trainings
- Access to SAA's Professional Affiliate Directory
- A chat room for discussions and support with other SAA members as well as scheduled chat opportunities with various stepfamily professionals and experts
- An "Ask the Experts" section where stepfamily members and professionals can pose questions to stepfamily experts
- A direct link to Stepmothers International, an affiliate of SAA, as well as links to other quality sources of information on the web
- A calendar of stepfamily activities and events such as National Stepfamily Day and the Stepfamily Day Picnic
- A Policy and Advocacy Forum presenting proposed changes in public policies as well as an opportunity for members to voice their concerns with government and other institutional policies which negatively impact stepfamily life
- A "Stepfamilies in the News" area highlighting current stepfamilies and posting opportunities for media interviews and research participation

We believe these added services and access to information would greatly enhance the benefits currently available to SAA stepfamily members and SAA Professional Affiliates.

Keep watching at www.stepfam.org as the redesigned site is scheduled to be completed in late mid-October. We are sure you will enjoy.

STEP, WRITE UP

By Rick Harper, M.F.T.

DEAR SWU,

My name is Wes. I'm 39 years old. I lost my wife of fifteen years and my eleven-year-old daughter four years ago to a drunk driver.

About a year ago I met Jenny. Jenny has two kids from her first marriage, Courtney fourteen years old and Krissy twelve years old. Their Dad was also killed by a drunk driver a couple of years ago.

Jenny and I met at a singles function put on by a local support group. We seemed to hit it off right away and after dating once in a while over six months, I was introduced to the girls. The girls and I got along great. They both seemed well behaved and open to my dating their Mother.

I love doing things that include the girls. We enjoyed picnics and going on camping trips over a weekend. Courtney and Krissy have invited me to a couple of their school functions and at times asked me to help with their homework.

My problem is this, I like the girls and they seem to need me but I don't think Jenny's very interested in me. Jenny's a nice person and she is doing a great job raising the girls as a single Mom. I keep thinking how great it would be if Jenny and I got together. I could be the caring father the girls seem to want me to be but Jenny treats me more like a brother than a potential mate. I don't know what to do?

DEAR WES,

From here it would seem you've got the cart before the horse. I think it's wonderful that you and the young ladies are able to support your overlapping needs. However, any potential relationship with Courtney and Krissy is, of course, defined through your relationship with their Mother, Jenny. Therefore, it is essential that you address your own feelings first. There are some obvious questions and parallels to consider. Among them:

- To what degree are your respective feelings driven by a shared grief due to the loss of your spouses?
- To what degree do the girls provide replacement relationships for the loss of your daughter?
- Is your main interest in Jenny as a wife or as a father for Courtney and Krissy?
- Is there a reason Jenny appears to see you as a brother rather than a suitor?

It is very important that you know the answers to these questions yourself before you have a heart-to-heart talk with Jenny. Then, speak to Jenny about those feelings. It

would be important to find out how she feels about you. If you find this is too difficult, you clearly are not ready for the risks involved in committing to a new family.

Jenny, as you say, has been doing a great job raising her daughters as a single parent. She deserves a mate who loves her without compromise, as well as someone who will love her daughters as their own, not the other way around. If Jenny likes you as a friend, can you accept this role should Jenny find someone she wishes to marry, who would then become stepfather to Courtney and Krissy?

I'm certain you understand everyone's future happiness depends on your ability to consider these questions honestly before you speak to Jenny. She may find it necessary to consider her feelings as carefully. The "right thing to do" can often require a perilous journey through conflicted thoughts and feelings only to arrived at taking a chance. Yet informed decisions often have a greater chance of yielding the desired result.

The capacity to truly love this potentially new family demands evidence. The proof is in doing what is best for Jenny, her daughters and you equally. I'm sure Jenny, Courtney & Krissy could always use a reliable male figure in their lives, as you could benefit from the support only true friendship can provide. Best wishes to you all.

Moving ???

If you've moved recently or are planning a move soon, please tell us of your change of address. Every mailing results in paying at least \$25-30 dollars in address correction charges to the Post Office, plus the additional remailing costs. Please complete and return the form below to SAA, 650 J St., Ste. 205, Lincoln, NE 68508 or you may FAX this to (402) 477-8317.

NAME

Old Address

City/State/Zip

NEW ADDRESS

CITY/STATE/ZIP

NEW PHONE #

Thank You!