

# STEPFAMILIES:

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## FOR PROFESSIONALS

### RESEARCH UPDATE

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## What Stepparents Do to Get a Stepchild to Like Them

**I**n 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

**W**hen 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".

**I**tried 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.

**G**inger 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.