

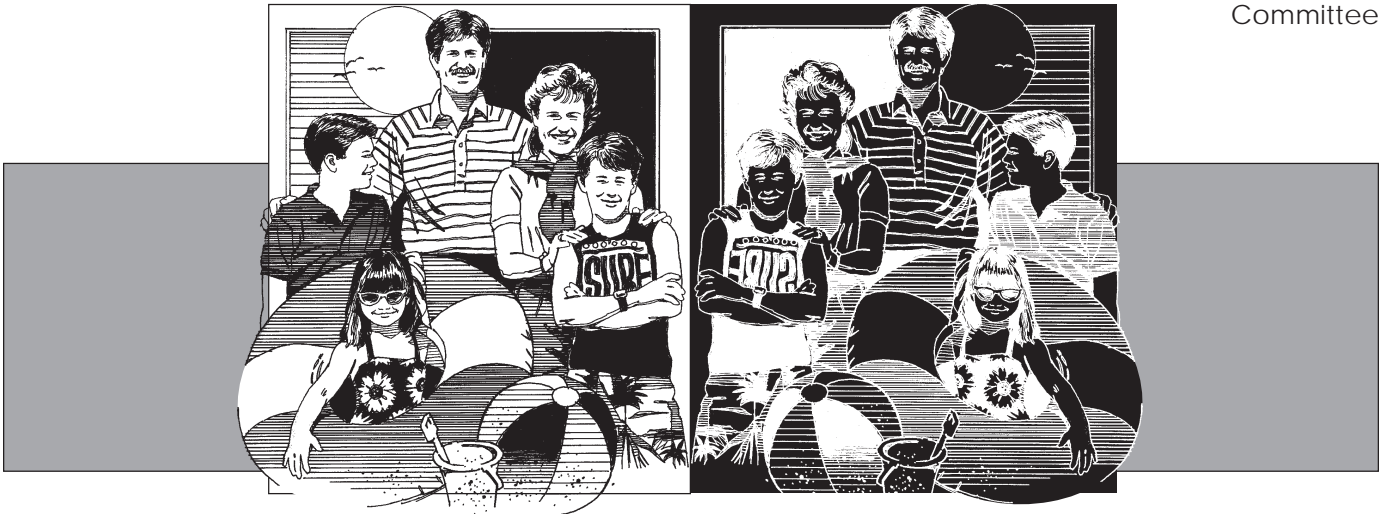
STEPFAMILIES

FOR PROFESSIONALS:

RESEARCH UPDATE

NEW FINDINGS ON THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN STEPFAMILIES AND NONSTEPFAMILIES

By Kay Pasley, ED.D
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In a recent *Monograph of the Society for Research in Child Development* titled “Adolescent Siblings in Stepfamilies: Family Functioning and Adolescent Adjustment,” Drs. E. Mavis Hetherington, Sandra H. Henderson and David Reiss (1999) report a series of findings using a subsample from the Nonshared Environment in Adolescent Development (NEAD) study (Reiss, Plomin, Hetherington, Howe, Rovine, Tryon, & Hagan, 1994). Several things make the content of the monograph unique. The focus of studies reported in the monograph is on the comparison of stable stepfamilies (couples married at least 5 years and an average of almost 9 years with all children from a prior marriage) and nonstepfamilies (both first marriages and remarriages where all children are biologically related to both adults). Also, the study included a sizeable portion of stepmother/stepfather families where children from both spouses’ prior marriages resided in the home (we

call them complex stepfamilies in the research literature). Most studies in the past have focused either on simple stepfamilies (stepfather only or stepmother only) or complex stepfamilies where the children of only one parent reside in the home.

Lastly, the study was longitudinal, and information was collected using various methods (interviews, questionnaires, videotaping) at two periods about three years apart. The study examined information from 259 families regarding the marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships and their association with the adjustment of two same-sex siblings four years apart in age. Clearly, they used a complicated research design that allowed them to capture important information about life in a stepfamily from the multiple perspectives of those involved as well as outside observers.

Not only was the study unique in its use of stabilized

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Similarities Between Stepfamilies and Nonstepfamilies

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stepfamilies, but the findings were unique also. Overall, findings suggest few meaningful differences between these stepfamilies and the nonstepfamily comparison group. In fact, when differences were found they were in the normal range. For example, marital and parental conflict was statistically more frequent and negative and relationships were less cohesive and more distant in stepfamilies, but these differences were of little practical meaning (both stepfamily and nonstepfamily groups scored within the positive or normal range). In the final commentary by Dr. James Bray, he suggested that it was "not accurate to characterize stepfamilies as "negative, conflictual and distant." (p.213), a conclusion often drawn from such findings. Obviously the findings of statistical difference means that the statement, in fact, is accurate. At the same time, such statements are misleading because they fail to indicate also that the difference is on the positive/normal side of the scale. Similarly, earlier findings suggested that stepchildren might act out more, but that they are not "suffering from mental or behavioral disorder." Thus, I found Bray's argument to describe stepfamilies as normatively different rather than deviant when comparing them to nonstepfamilies compelling and supportive of such comments offered by other prominent scholars (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 1990, who argued for a normative-adaptive model approach to the study of stepfamilies).

Overwhelmingly, the findings reported in this monograph suggest few real differences between stabilized stepfamilies and nonstepfamilies. Specifically, marital quality is similar both in the negativity and positivity expressed in marital interaction. As noted before, spouses in stepfamilies reported more conflict about childrearing; in all family structures, such conflict decreased over the three years of the study and ultimately the differences diminished.

Findings regarding other family dyads showed that in the parent-child relationship, girls received more warmth and support from mothers, and this was similar in all family structures. Fathers were more harsh and mothers more negative in their interactions with stepchildren; however, again the differences were within the positive range of possible scores. Sibling relationships were characterized as benign by the authors. Stepsiblings relationships were reported and observed to be less negative and expressions of aggression and rivalry were less frequent than found among biologically-related siblings. Again, the differences were marginal. Typical of all sibling relationships was their disengagement overtime as

the siblings aged. Also, younger siblings modeled the behavior of older siblings in all family structures.

Regarding adolescent adjustment in these families, findings indicated no differences by family structure. Adolescents in complex stepfamilies were reported to have more problems, but again the problems were within the normal range of adolescent behaviors. Interestingly, parents saw/reported more problems than did either the adolescents themselves or observers. Another unique finding was that the commonly reported more negative behaviors in female children in stepfamilies was not apparent here.

Taken together, these results suggest that overtime there is a convergence in the patterns of interaction and family processes in stable stepfamilies and nonstepfamilies. Two earlier studies (see Anderson & White, 1986; Brown, Green & Druckman, 1990) also showed few practical differences in the family processes when couples in first-marriage families were compared with couples in stepfamilies. Thus, adopting a "normative difference" approach to thinking about stepfamilies compared to nonstepfamilies, suggests that we may derive more useful information for prevention and intervention from studies comparing newly formed stepfamilies and stabilized stepfamilies. In this way we can begin to identify the specific patterns that inhibit and enhance movement toward the development of stable stepfamilies.

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STEPMOTHER SUPPORT GROUPS

Barbara Perlmutter, MSW

This is the second in a 4-part series of articles on developing a stepfamily oriented clinical practice. The author is Barbara Perlmutter, MSW, stepmother and founder of Stepfamily Consultation & Counseling in Seattle.

Several years ago, as my clinical focus began turning toward stepfamily & remarriage work, I decided to make that shift "formal." My initial step was to send a letter to my colleagues. In it I described my personal stepparenting experience as well as my clinical background and training. I invited appropriate referrals. Shortly afterwards I decided to offer a counseling support group for stepmothers and those considering stepmotherhood. I mailed flyers to therapists, agencies, family and community centers, temples and churches and posted them at food coops, community colleges, bookstores, laundromats and cafes. I also ran a 2-line ad in our local "alternative" newspaper under "workshops and support groups."

The group would meet for 8, 1 1/2 hour sessions, every other week in the early evening. The cost: \$150 for the series, paid in advance (or if eligible, billed to insurance). Within a month the group filled. Initially, I worried about the diversity: two women dating men with kids, a veteran stepmother of 10 years, a Mom with 2 toddlers and a teen stepdaughter, and a newlywed! Meetings were lively, emotional, honest and helpful. Participants' differences actually enhanced the group. I provided a packet of articles and loaned books from my small stepparenting library.

Topic-oriented meetings with structured education were (and still are) rejected in favor of short "check-ins" followed by in-depth work on current issues. At the end of the 8-week session only one member left group. That spot filled and I offered a second group. For 1 1/2 years I had three groups going. Since starting groups three years ago I've raised the fee to \$175/series (still low cost, but affordable). For women unable to pay in full, I will either slide my fee or use the "Stepmother Scholarship Fund" established by a generous group member. I've found that 5-7 members are ideal for the time allotted. The majority of women continue in their groups. As one said, "I'll be here as long as I've got a stepchild under my roof!" (The truth is she has continued to come even though her four stepchildren are on their own!!)

Each group has evolved its own character. Resistance to changes in membership invariable leads to the recog-

inition that groups parallel stepfamily life: inevitable change and transition! Groups still prefer a process model, though I do quite a bit of informal teaching and educating. Frequently I will have a question or topic to include in introductions or check-ins (for example, How do you refer to yourself in your stepmother role? How do others refer to you?) I continue to share articles and books from my now bulging stepfamily library. Occasionally groups will choose a structured activity. One group read & discussed "*The Enlightened Stepmother*" (affectionately called the Bible), another decided to watch and discuss movies involving stepfamily issues.



Groups have generated lists of ideas for new family rituals and one of ideas for how to talk to spouses about difficult stepfamily issues. They have become places for learning and growing, for venting and problem solving, for giving and receiving understanding. Perhaps most importantly, the groups are a place to safely explore and embrace ones "darker" parts. Recently one SM said she's learning to be accepting of her own "unthinkable" thoughts as she recognizes how respectful she feels when others express similar feelings. When asked about how the group has been most helpful, most say it is because they feel validated, supported and have a place to learn positive approaches to stepparenting.

There is spillover into non-group time: shared meals, e-mails, phone calls, potlucks and picnics. The depth of honest disclosure and resulting acceptance within a safe environment foster what many call a "family-like" expe-

rience, a place where they truly belong. Support and trust abound. Many, many changes are made. Every victory, even small ones are received by the group with deep appreciation and understanding: the report that a stepchild referred to a stepmother's car as "our" car, a card on Mother's Day, inclusion in dinnertime conversation, a hello at a soccer game.

Certain issues and themes reappear: Accepting the truth of one's own feelings and experience without judgment. Grieving the losses of a former lifestyle, of never being able to create a nuclear family or of the fantasy of easy transition and acceptance. One stepmother lamented "Nothing I've ever done in my life could have prepared me for how hard stepparenting is." Another said, "This is many, many times harder than getting my Ph.D. was!" Hopes and dreams confront reality, expectations need to be reconfigured. Other common issues include feelings of competition, shame, and rage, dealing with ex-wives, financial issues, self-care, discipline and exclusion. I am amazed at how these stepparents find their way to openheartedness – both towards themselves and towards their stepfamilies.

My clinical tasks keep evolving. I am always working on marketing and advertising for new members. I put a great deal of effort into publicizing groups. I've been willing to experiment. For example, I now add members at any point in the 8-week session. I've learned to be very flexible with new mothers and their demanding schedules. I try to keep current with relevant books, articles, and trainings. I keep revisiting boundary issues around seeing individuals from the group (with or without their partners) in my private practice. I do an enormous amount of outreach to others involved in similar work. I've begun gathering data in hopes of moving towards some writing or at least more knowledge based system. I am working on an annotated bibliography. I take clinical notes during each session. (And I vow to get more organized about all of the above!)

Stepmother groups are the highlight of my practice. I enjoy facilitating group process and am constantly reminded of how powerful setting groups are...particularly with the infinite generosity of spirit, understanding and problem-solving skills so many of these individuals possess. The courage, humor, emotion, and resilience that I witness reflect what each stepmother is called upon to provide, over and over again, in her own stepfamily. The level of integrity, commitment, truthfulness and energy brought to these groups and in the stepparenting by these women constantly moves me. The sense of moral responsibility toward their task is inspiring. Lasting friendships have developed. Babies have been showered and born

(two women in the same group announced their pregnancies on the same day and delivered girls on the same day!). Many baskets of food have been delivered. Stepmothers have married and partnerships have dissolved. We have laughed and cried and played. And now we have experienced overwhelming grief together at the death of a beloved member and her entire stepfamily in a plane crash this winter. All of this has strengthened the bonds. A recent note to me says it all: "Thank you so much—again and again and again—for being the focal point for the group, which is the reason that I have been able to survive these past years." I am grateful to be doing this work.

Thanks to all who contacted me after my first article. Your support and interest are vital to me in creating a clinical community...however great the distance!!! I hope more of you will write with your responses, questions, ideas, and suggestions.

Please e-mail me at: barbperl@juno.com, write to me at: 613 19th Ave. E. #205 Seattle, WA 98112 or telephone me at 206-329-1711.

SAA Board Member Appointed to Leadership Post at UC Berkeley

Mary Ann Mason, J.D, Ph.D. has been appointed dean of the Graduate Division of the University of California at Berkeley. As dean, Mason will lead one of the nations' largest graduate programs with more than 8,000 students and 100 programs.

Mason says she will work to keep UC Berkeley competitive with private colleges in recruiting top students by building a large endowment for graduate students. She also faces the challenge of maintaining diversity among graduate students. As acting associate dean for UC Berkeley's graduate division two years ago, she established a parental leave policy for graduate students.

A professor in the School of Social Welfare for 11 years, Mason has gained a national reputation as an expert on family and child law. One of her particular areas of interest is stepfamily policy.

Mary Ann Mason joined the SAA Board of Directors in 1999.

Why Didn't Our Two Years of Dating Make the Remarriage Easier?

By Scott Browning



Therapists who are knowledgeable about the unique dynamics that occur in stepfamilies often inform couples that there may be some rough spots that are likely to affect the newly remarried. Certain clients are grateful for this preparation, while other clients inform us that they don't expect to be burdened with some of the common problems. These particular clients are not willing to explore the issues surrounding remarriage because they feel a certain relief that they will somehow not have the same concerns and challenges that often face the stepfamilies they have been exposed to. One intervention is to accuse the couple of being "in denial," however, saying that to someone is one of the best ways to get that individual to pull away from you or feel misunderstood. No, what is important for a therapist to realize is that the couple has become bolstered by the success of the relationship during the dating period. The interpersonal successes they have achieved while dating give them confidence that they are not like those families that seem to have difficulty adjusting to stepfamily life. Most people still feel that the best predictor of the future is the past, and it is difficult to ignore your recent past. Unfortunately, the cruel reality is frequently that the relationships that exist during the dating period are not an accurate predictor of the relationships that will exist after the remarriage.

This issue is made even more confusing because dating really does feel like a dry run or practice session for the remarriage. In my clinical practice, however, I have found that the dating period is an anomaly in the life of a stepfamily. There are significant practical, legal and psychological shifts that occur following a remarriage. Suddenly, one or both adults have changed their status in regard to the family. The oft mentioned refrain that "you are not my father" may be accurate, but you are now their stepfather or stepmother, and regardless of how causally you perceive your role, most people feel some shift in responsibility and commitment.

The frequent result of this change is a rapid shift in perception. Kids you had previously enjoyed now seem more intrusive, more ill mannered and less competent than you had remembered. To the child, the stepparent seems to now have a tremendous level of power and there seems to be little reluctance on the part of the stepparent to exercise this power through proclamations and direct lobbying with the primary parent.

This shift from the sense of compatibility to the increase in familial tension is often a great surprise to the stepfamily and a source of some sorrow. The positive feelings between stepparents and stepchildren become muted, or have disappeared. The primary parent also wonders how things could have changed so fast, as one mother put it to me, "I feel as though there has been a bait and switch, no one is who they were three weeks ago."

It is speculated that the child or children fear the loss of their relationship with their parent, they also perceive a more vigilant posture being expressed by the stepparent. The stepparent often acknowledges that vigilance. He or she frequently feels that the child is permissively parented, and is worried that the child may need additional guidance to be prepared to leave the home upon reaching adulthood. This guidance often is expressed in attempting to assist the child in becoming more responsible. The primary parent, on the other hand, often does not see the child as too irresponsible, and is unsure why his or her new spouse is taking up this cause, when previously (during dating) that issue did not seem important. This scenario is repeated in so many stepfamilies I have seen that I am convinced that it represents a common concern.

While dating, the parent's partner was much more interested in being engaging, than judging the relative competence of the family that he or she would be joining. The priority is to connect with the spouse-to-be, and establish a cordial relationship with his or her children. Now that the marriage has occurred, the competence of everyone involved becomes important, because he or she is now observing this stepfamily daily, and knows that his or her future is tied together with the parent's ability to discipline, and the child's ability to succeed in the world.

It is therefore my recommendation that the therapist be clear when speaking to a couple considering marriage that there is no guarantee that the interpersonal dynamics evident in a system during the dating period will remain the same after marriage. As a therapist you help them see why dating is different and then leave it up to them if they would like the education about stepfamilies before or after the remarriage.