

STEPFAMILIES

FOR PROFESSIONALS:

Building Closeness in Stepfamilies Through Play

By John Morse

One of the major challenges for stepfamilies is building intimacy. Family intimacy can include communication, playfulness, spiritual viewpoints, and problem solving. One way families can grow together and develop intimacy is by sharing playful experiences. This will certainly vary according to the developmental stages of the children and the styles of the two merging families. What is appropriate for a family with a six-year-old may seem out of touch for a teenager.

Playful experiences can occur in many areas. A family does not have to spend a small fortune to stand in line at Disneyworld to have playful closeness. This can happen either spontaneously or be more planned. The important thing is to be sure to have playful times with each family member. This might include playing a board game where the children decide the "rules" of the game. It may include throwing a ball, Frisbee golf, kite flying, making music, reading stories, making up stories, or a thousand other activities. For the parents, it is most important to concentrate on the relating or experience and not on the score/ the right athletic techniques/ or establishing who must be in charge. Often the children can be great teachers of how to do things in a very different way.

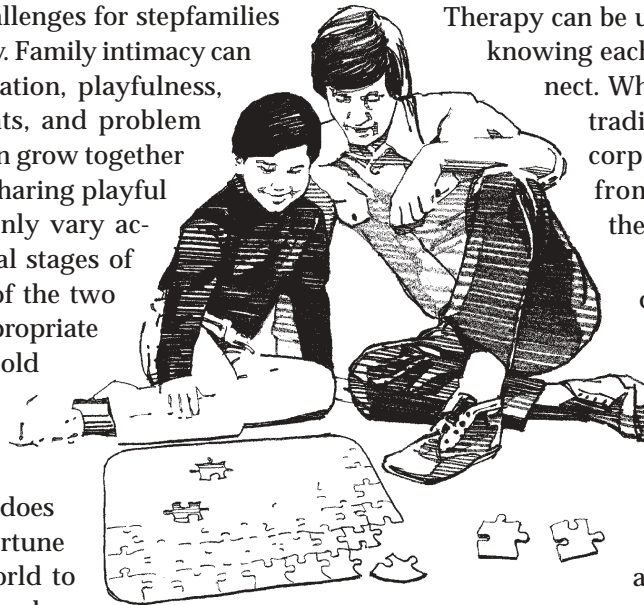
A key to successful parenting is to create a bond between the newer parent and the child. The bond between them grows through experiences that are successful from the viewpoint of both participants.

There is an emerging field of psychotherapy that can help with this relationship building process. Family Play

Therapy can be used to help stepfamilies grow in knowing each other and learning how to connect. While Family Play Therapy utilizes traditional family therapy, it also incorporates concepts and techniques from a type of children's psychotherapy called Play Therapy.

When we think of how children communicate their view of the world, it often happens through their play. A child who throws a ball to a stepparent is inviting that adult into his/her world. When children invite stepparents into their imaginary play, this is certainly displaying a growing trust, which will grow

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CALL FOR PAPERS

SAA Families for Professionals is requesting articles for publication. We are seeking submissions by professionals who work with stepfamilies, and researchers whose work focuses on issues related to remarriage and stepfamilies. The clinical and/or research committees of SAA will review all articles. You may submit articles via e-mail to Jean McBride, editor at cdr@verinet.com. Articles must be in Microsoft Word format, and no longer than 750 words. **Submission deadlines are April 15, 2001, July 15, 2001, and October 15, 2001.**

RESEARCH UPDATE

By Kay Pasley, ED.D
Chair, Research Committee

Investing in Stepchildren – Rethinking Controversial Findings

Recent research by Anne Case, I-Fen Lin, and Sara McLanahan has made the headlines in many of our newspapers. They have suggested that children reared in stepfamilies, especially those in stepmother families, are at greater risk because there were fewer resources allocated to meet the needs of stepchildren. Specifically, the popular press reported their findings regarding the differential health care expenditure on children in stepmother families.

My intention here is to address some of the limitations of their work in general, using the finding from their study of household allocations for food consumption, because I believe it is important to remember that even well-respected scholars do work that can misrepresent life in stepfamilies. As consumers of research and, for many of us, scholars ourselves, we must be ever vigilant to the ways in which our own biases result in certain interpretations that can be misinterpreted by the popular press. Because few of us have the time to search out the original citation and read the paper in its entirety, flaws in interpretation remain hidden.

Let me begin by telling you something about their study of household allocation for food consumption. They used data from a highly respected data source (Panel Study of Income Dynamics, PSID) that followed about 8500 families starting in 1968. The PSID contains information on a nationally representative sample. In their study of allocation for food consumption, they included only families followed from 1973 to 1985. It was not until 1972 that careful notations were made about family structure. Thus, the information drawn represents stepfamilies 15 years ago, and only 5% of the two-parent families in the sample consisted of a parent and stepparent. They report that stepmothers were about 5 years younger than mothers, worked 1/3 more hours annually than did mothers, and the household income in stepmother families was about 17% higher in 1982 than that of two-parent biological families.

Using sophisticated statistical procedures, they found that having a stepchild was associated with a reduction

of \$274 allocated for household food consumption per year on average, or 6-7% of the household's food budget. However, one must look closely to realize that the information reported is only about *food for home consumption*, rather than all expenditures for food whether it is consumed at home or elsewhere.

Granted these scholars do a good job statistically exploring these data. They attempted to determine whether such differences could be explained by the amount of time the mother/stepmother worked outside the home. They anticipated that those who work more hours would allocate less for household food and more for eating out. They found that the difference in allocation remained when they compared mothers and stepmothers who worked the same amount of time. They also anticipated questions regarding the potential influence of household income, such that those with more income would allocate more, and they test to determine whether the differences hold between bio-mother families and stepmother families. Thus, I commend them for anticipating and testing to see whether alternative influences beyond family structure might affect allocation.

What I fault them for is the interpretation of their findings. They use ideas from evolutionary biology to suggest that the reason for the reduced expenditure is due to the stepmother not being tied biologically to the stepchild. They reason, therefore, that she is less invested in the stepchild's welfare. They recognize that stepchildren may have some of their meals with their nonresident mother. However, they excuse this alternative reason because they did not find the same pattern of reduced allocation in stepfather families where children also might have some meals with a nonresident father. Here they ignore other research that shows that children who reside with stepmothers have more contact with their nonresident mothers compared to children who reside with stepfathers. This greater contact could account for at least some of the difference.

Most importantly, they conclude, "biological children

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are better fed” (p. 238) because of the differential allocation for food for household consumption. Such conclusions are absolutely NOT supported by their findings, and I believe it is irresponsible to make such statements without clear evidence. It may well be that these stepmother families had fewer resources to allocate because of their spouse’s responsibilities of payment of child support and/or alimony, and the authors acknowledge this possibility. It also may be that these stepmothers shopped more carefully than did mothers, and in doing so reduced their spending without reducing either the amount or quality of the food available to the children – an alternative explanation they fail to acknowledge. To say that stepchildren in stepmother families are not fed as well as children in biological families simply does not reflect their findings. Clearly, greater care is warranted for those who write about research and those who consume what is written.

For the full text of the original article discussed here:

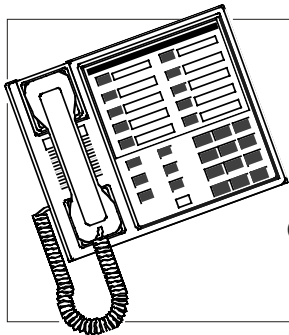
Case, A., Lin, I., McLanahan, S. (1999). Household resource allocation in stepfamilies: Darwin reflects on the plight of Cinderella. *Child Welfare*, 89, 234-238.

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Building Closeness Through Play

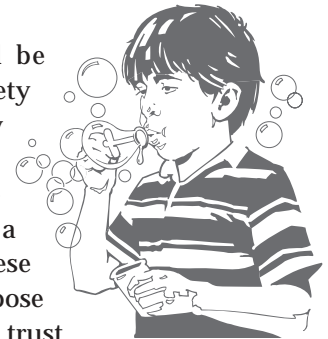
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further if the stepparent allows the child to lead. It is amazing what an adult can learn about a child through the experience of play. Successful play experiences build trust and intimacy.

In some therapy programs, Family Play Therapy is utilized to encourage these experiences. A family play therapist may design an activity to increase communication through the language of children (play), to help the stepparent learn this language, or to build trust for the child-stepparent relationship.

The following is an example of a Family Play Therapy activity. A therapist may ask the youngest member of the stepfamily to select a puppet for each family member. The family would then be asked to tell a story using their puppet describing the best day this family has had so far. Each member can add to the story from his/her perspective.

Another example would be blowing soap bubbles in a variety of ways to play. This activity could include bubble pass, bubble smash, bubble waterfalls, or the task of making up a new game using bubbles. These are each designed with a purpose of enhancing communication, trust and playfulness.



By enjoying playful experience together, a stepfamily can get to know each other in amusing ways. These activities make use of the intimacies of problem solving, communication, play and humor. With these experiences as part of the new family history, the more serious challenges can be tackled in a less threatening way.

Certainly there are many other parts of developing closeness in a stepfamily including building the parenting team, developing traditions, deciding the rules of the household, and sorting out power issues. Family Play Therapy is another part of helping a stepfamily develop intimacy and bonding.

John Morse, M.S., LMFT, RPT/S is in private practice in Fort Collins, Colorado at the Rocky Mountain Marriage and Family Center where he works extensively with families, couples, and children. He is an AAMFT Approved Supervisor and a supervisor of Play Therapy (RPT/S). He has presented at numerous conferences on Family Play Therapy.



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