

STEPFAMILIES

FOR PROFESSIONALS:

By Kay Pasley, Ed.D.
Chair, Research Committee

Is Remarriage Good for Mothers and Their Children?

The answer to this question was the focus of findings from a recent study by Thompson, Mosley, Hanson, and McLanahan (2001) published in the May issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family. These scholars used data that had been collected twice from the same respondents over a four-year period as part of the National Survey of Families and Households; data were collected in 1987-1988 and again in 1992-1994. As a result, they were able to examine mothers' behaviors and mother-child relationships before mothers form a new partnership (whether legally remarrying or assuming a live-in relationship). Responses were available from both mothers and a focal child, so perceptions of mothers and children were available to provide a more complete picture of these relationships.

In a prior study (Hanson, McLanahan & Thompson, 1998) that followed another sample of married mothers from this same data set, these scholars were able to examine the effects of divorce, cohabitation, remarriage or a combination thereof on mothers' behaviors. They found that mothers who divorced reported an increase in the frequency of child activities and a decrease in supervision behaviors. Those that went on to remarry reported the same increase in the frequency of child activities but less supervision compared with mothers who remained single. They concluded that remarriage or re-partnering (cohabiting) did not lead to a what they labeled a "recovery" of mothering that was characteristic before divorce.

In this current study, they studied women who were initially single (never-marrieds and divorced) rather than married, and who had remarried or re-partnered by the follow-up interview. Because of the longitudinal nature of these data, the research design also allowed them to examine the effects of the potential selection of different kinds of mothers into new relationships. In other words, they could look to see whether mothers with certain kinds

of mothering behaviors at the first interview were more or less prone to be in a particular kind of new relationship. They limited their study to responses from women whose focal child at the follow-up interview was 10-17 years of age and residing in the mother's home. Of the 417 mothers available for study, about 55% had remained single, 12% had ended a live-in partnership, 6% had married and the marriage had ended, 7% entered and remained in a live-in partnership, and 20% had married and remained married.

These scholars were interested in three aspects of mothering: investments of time and supervision, harsh discipline, and relationship quality. Initial analysis showed no differences between whether the partnership was cohabiting or marital, so they focused their results on the differences between those relationships that had remained intact and those that disrupted.

The key findings from this study suggest that "yes" is the answer to the question, "Is remarriage or re-partnering good for mothers and their children?" However, an affirmative response must be qualified. If mothers' harsh discipline and the quality of the mother-child relationship are of primary concern, then re-partnering is important. For example, mothers report less yelling, spanking, or hitting children when living with a new partner or spouse. Children report having a better relationship with their mother when she is in an intact live-in partnership or she is in an intact remarriage. If supervision is of concern, then remarriage and re-partnering may not be good for children, because supervision was highest in single mothers who remained single. Interestingly, mothers and children saw supervision differently. Mothers whose relationships were disrupted reported supervising children less; however, children perceived their mothers who had remained in relationships as providing less supervision.

Hanson and associates suggest that the findings

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CLINICAL CORNER

By Scott Brown, Ph.D.
Chair, SAA Clinical Committee

Does Anyone Really Understand Me? The Child in the Stepfamily.

When a therapist meets a new stepfamily each member of that stepfamily brings in his or her own story and concern. Most therapists know that we need to assess the functioning of the couple first and try to fit their relationship into the context of the stepfamily. Often we are closely examining the manner in which the stepparent and stepchild get along with each other. One relationship that is often given little attention is that of the child with his or her custodial parent. Our minds are so accustomed to moving through those relationships that do not seem disturbed or in conflict that we may miss that experience of being a child, missing a parent, and wondering where we fit in.

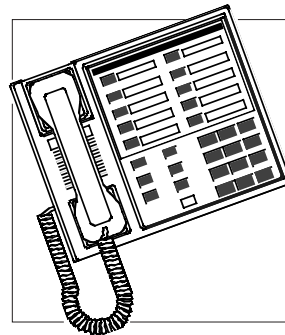
A therapist will often ask a child if they are missing the time they could be alone with their custodial parent, and most children will say "yes" to that question, regardless of age. The therapist has to then assess if the time spent with this child does seem to revolve around the stepfamily or is there some time left over to continue to build the relationship between custodial parent and child. If the couple relationship is strong, and the therapist or parent makes a request to spend parent-child time, that request is often supported. However, if the couple is assessed as being in jeopardy, such a request is tantamount to saying that concentrating on the couple relationship is not important.

It is helpful to talk to the couple about how the child perceives the situation. Find out from the child what he does feel. In my own research I found that children in stepfather families felt as though their own parent, the person that they lived with, did not understand how they felt. Some children report they are trying to "break people up," but most just want to know where they fit and what their current relationship is with their custodial parent. Even though as therapists we know that the building of some relationship between stepparent and stepchild has important benefits, the child may be completely reluctant, especially if she feels that this would take time away from her biological parent.

Listen carefully to the children and give them plenty of clinical time, if they will use it. See them



individually for a couple of sessions in order to really get their perspective. Remember to note those positive feelings that are held about a stepparent. The stepparent may not believe it, but often, positive feelings do exist. It is just that children may be more consumed with seeing how they rate with their own parent first. Find out explicitly, "Do they need more one-on-one time with their parent?" If "yes," help make it happen, but offset it with some date time for the couple. You are working with two combined families, one supra family and a series of dyads. Don't forget anyone.



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APPLES and ORANGES

By Carri Taylor

Attending the Smartmarriages Conference in Orlando this past June was overall a wonderful experience. I enjoyed seeing the enthusiasm and capturing the energy from people mobilizing to strengthen and preserve one of our foundational institutions – marriage. I'm deeply encouraged by a number of things: 1) the many programs and people dedicated to understanding marriage and designing specific assessments and tools (skills) for couples to strengthen their relationship; 2) the effort on the part of legislators to implement marriage preparation and restoration; 3) the fact that there were workshops included for stepfamilies. The discouraging part was my belief that there is a lack of understanding regarding remarriage. I attended most all of the workshops offered for stepfamilies which confirmed and supported what I already knew about the difficulty of putting these families together. I've been in a stepfamily now for 15 years. We brought five children to the marriage - four are now married, and we have seven grandchildren, with two more on the way. In addition, we are raising my biological granddaughter who is 10 and has been with us since birth. Even though the stepfamily was addressed through workshops, it still seemed like a "stepchild" to the Smartmarriages Conference.

First marriages begin all about *us*. The children come along one by one and we grow to know one another. Second marriages begin all about *them* - the kids, the ex-spouses, the new in-laws and the "out-laws" (former in-laws). Unfortunately, most stepcouples impose the fantasy on their new union that it will be all about "us." Treating the remarried couple like a first married couple encourages this concept.

First marriages are "apples" and remarriages are "oranges." It's surprising when we bite into something we thought would be hard, crunchy and familiar and instead we end up with something soft, squishy and squirts all over our face.

In my own joy of loving, being loved and wanting my youngest daughter to have a positive male role model to make up for all her losses, I was oblivious to her pain. She was actually positive about my remarriage and "approved," yet on our wedding day, I started to see her pain. That pain caused her to act out within the first month of our marriage.

Later she explained to me that her Dad had his new wife (he married shortly after the divorce five years previous and hadn't been around consistently since); her

grandparents (my parents, who had functioned in a very supportive role after the divorce) had pulled away since the remarriage; and I had my new husband. So, her friends were now her family since she didn't have one. I don't think I need to describe the friends she turned to. Any thoughts of the "us" were gone and focused on "her."

On my husband's side, two of the three boys were "launched" and on their own. The third "launching" was motivated when my husband sold his home so he could join me in my condo until we were able to purchase an "ours." The boys couldn't believe he was able to get rid of their home of 22 years. They were sure I was the cause, even though they all acknowledged later that their dad had discussed plans with them to sell the home. This home represented the stability they had lost. Now the focus on "us" was definitely on "all of them."

Any remarriage will shake the entire family system, affecting ex-spouses, in-laws and "out-laws." Everyone wonders how things are going to change. Their guard is up. The stepparent is usually the "lightning rod" and blamed for the changes that take place.

Focusing on my marriage relationship, as most typical marriage programs emphasize would NOT have helped us. Our relationship became one of strategizing, educating ourselves, and momentous efforts to understand and save relationships with our children. This has been a continuing process. We did grow together, but through adversity and the commitment to work on solutions to the problems that were confronting us. I don't think I had a clue about the depth of pain children suffer in divorce and remarriage.

I think it's important for the "marriage movement" to embrace remarriage realities. We've come into marriage by the backdoor with a lot of losses and pre-existing relationships that need nurturing and stabilizing. Yes, we have to also nurture our marriage, take time for it and be skillfull in it. It can definitely work, but not overnight. After 15 years we have a lot of war stories and victories.... and I'm here to stay!

Carri Taylor is a Certified Communication Skills Trainer and Personal/Executive Coach. She is married to Gordon Taylor, who is a licensed M.F.T. in California. They speak nationally on "Stepfamily Issues & Development" as well as other relational topics. For more information visit their website at www.cgaylor.com.



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Is Remarriage Good for Mothers and Their Children?

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regarding harsh discipline are the most robust and concluded that it is “the presence of a partner rather than the process of forming or dissolving of relationships that inhibits harsh discipline” (p. 379). What these authors are unable to determine is how the presence of a partner exerts this effect. It may be that for single mothers who partner, the additional witness may reduce the inclination to yelling, spanking, and hitting. If this is the case, then it also may be that the additional witness need not be a partner, and other adults could serve this purpose. Or perhaps it is the economic contribution or the provision of assistance with childcare and other household tasks that the mother’s partner provides that reduces her stress. In turn, this reduced stress lessens her use of harsh punishment. If this is the case, then providing alternative economic support and other forms of assistance may be a way to intervene.

References:

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Thompson, E., Mosley, J., Hanson, T. L., & McLanahan, S. S. (2001). Remarriage, cohabitation and changes in mothering behavior. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63, 370-380.