

Stepfamily Education Programs: Evaluations and Research

Slide 1: Introduction and Presentation Objectives:

Hello. My name is Sarah Whitton and I am an assistant professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Cincinnati. In this training module, I will provide you with information about **Stepfamily Education Programs, and the evaluation and research** that has been done on them to see how effective they are.

So far, in the other modules, you have learned about the unique challenges that stepfamilies face, as well as about some of the interventions or treatments that experts recommend to help stepfamilies when they are struggling with these challenges. In contrast, this module will focus on **educational programming for stepfamilies**.

Slides 2 and 3: Stepfamily Education Programs

What are Stepfamily Education Programs? They have three important characteristics, which highlight how they tend to be different from treatments or interventions:

First, like most relationship education programs, those created specifically for stepfamilies are **prevention programs**, designed to prevent the development of couple or family relationship problems (rather than treat problems that already exist). A prevention approach may be particularly appropriate for stepfamilies, because many of the risks they face result from challenges inherent in forming a stepfamily, rather than deficits in the family members that need to be treated. Expert stepfamily clinicians have long argued that many couples forming stepfamilies would never reach the point of needing clinical services if they received education about stepfamily dynamics preventatively (Visher & Visher, 1979, 1996).

Second, as their name suggests, Stepfamily Education programs emphasize **educating stepfamilies** about what to expect as they build a stepfamily- about what typical stepfamily development looks like, the challenges that stepfamilies commonly face, and realistic expectations for stepfamily relationships. This education is aimed at preventing problems by preparing stepfamily members for the expectable family stages they may encounter, normalizing their difficult experiences, and informing them about particular ways they can handle stepfamily challenges that are likely to work well.

Third, most stepfamily education programs are offered to **groups**, rather than individual families or couples. This is in part because running groups can be more cost-effective and efficient than seeing individual families. But groups also provide an excellent setting for stepfamilies to see that they are not alone, that other families struggle with similar issues, and that many of their problems are normal reactions to the stresses of forming a stepfamily.

Slide 4: General Relationship Education Programs

Stepfamily education programs find their roots in general relationship, or marriage, education programs for couples. There are many relationship education programs available for couples- a directory that includes most of these programs can be found at www.smartmarriages.com. Several, which tend to focus on teaching couples the skills to communicate effectively with one another and to resolve couple conflict healthily, have been shown by research studies to be effective in improving relationship quality, reducing couple problems, and preventing divorce or relationship dissolution (Hawkins et al., 2008).

Slide 5: Limitations of General Relationship Education Programs for Stepfamilies

However, these programs were overwhelmingly developed for and tested on couples marrying for the first time without any children from previous relationships. Stepfamily scholars, for the past three decades, have repeatedly emphasized the dangers of using programs designed for first-time families with stepfamilies (e.g., Papernow, 2008), for several reasons. First, they do not address stepfamily-specific challenges, such as how to develop stepparent-child relationships or how to co-parent with ex-partners. Second, they do not recognize the fundamentally different processes of marital and family development when children come before the couple relationship rather than vice-versa. Third, through the language and examples they use, as well as the assumptions they tend to make, most general relationship education programs may inadvertently promote unrealistic couple expectations that stepfamilies should look like first-marriage, non-stepfamilies (Whitton, Nicholson et al., 2008)—and we know that when members of stepfamilies have these expectations, it often leads to feeling distressed about how their family does not “fit the mold.”

Slide 6: Stepfamily Education Programs – What is Available?

Based on these problems associated with using general relationship education programs with stepfamilies, it is more advisable to use a relationship education program that has been designed specifically for stepfamilies. Such programs, which have developed much more recently than general marriage education, are far fewer in number. However, there are several programs that are currently available that were explicitly designed for use with stepfamilies. Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham (2004) provide an excellent description of eight such programs, along with information about how to access them and their costs. This article is included in the reference list for this module.

In addition, the smartmarriages website allows you to search by program type. The categories “Stepfamilies and Remarriage” and “Step-parenting Education” each yield a list of several programs available for purchase and use by clinicians as well as information about pricing and how to obtain each program.

Most of these existing stepfamily education programs provide content on at least some of the specific areas of challenge that stepfamilies face, such as having realistic expectations about family development, developing relationships between stepparents and stepchildren, and relationships with former partners.

Slide 7: Research and Evaluations of Stepfamily Education Programs: Overview

Given that there are stepfamily education programs available, the next question becomes, are they effective? Do they produce positive changes in the couple or family relationships, parenting and stepparenting, adult well-being, and/or child outcomes? To answer this question, I have conducted a thorough review of the literature, searching for evaluations of any program or intervention for stepfamilies. A paper by Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008, which details an early version of this review is included in this module’s reference section.

Unfortunately, this search revealed that there is strikingly little research evaluating the effectiveness of stepfamily programs: Only 21 education programs were identified that had any reported evaluation, and only 15 of these were published (so the other 6 are generally not accessible to anyone other than hard-core researchers). In addition, the program evaluations as a whole suffered from some weaknesses that limit what they tell us about how well the stepfamily education programs worked. For example, only 2 of these published studies compared the effectiveness of the program to a control group, who did

not get the program. Use of a control group is considered to be an important feature of studies that evaluate programs, because it helps determine whether any changes seen in the program participants really can be attributed to the program. Other limitations of the studies included very small samples, lack of randomization, and inconsistent use of standardized measures of the important outcomes such as couple relationship quality and family distress.

Slides 8 and 9: Research and Evaluations of Stepfamily Education Programs: Positive Points

However, it should be noted that the research on the effectiveness of stepfamily programs has been growing and improving in recent years. The first evaluations, conducted in the late 70s and early 80s, were primarily simple ratings of satisfaction with the programs. In contrast, in the last three years, two studies have been published that used fairly large samples and compared the stepfamily education program to a control group (Nicholson et al., 2008; Gelatt et al., 2010). These studies showed that the SEP was effective, in comparison to controls, in improving certain parenting skills and in reducing unrealistic beliefs about stepfamilies.

In addition, one of the most commonly delivered SEPs, SmartSteps, has recently collected data on over 300 participants to examine changes in important variables over the course of the program (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008, 2010; Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). Although there is no comparison to a control group, by comparing participants' reports before and after going through the SmartSteps program, the researchers have found that the program is associated with many positive outcomes, including (1) increased knowledge about stepfamily issues, parenting and stepparenting strategies, (2) improved abilities to recognize unhealthy stepfamily myths, communicate

about financial issues, identify sources of conflict, and identify family strengths, (3) increased agreement between partners on finances, dealing with ex-partners, and co-parenting, and (4) increased relationship commitment.

In addition, when looked at altogether, the studies that have been done to evaluate stepfamily education programs do provide preliminary information on the effectiveness of different program content areas. In the next few slides, I will describe what the group of these studies says about the effectiveness of 5 particular content areas commonly included in SEPs. Lets go through them one by one:

Slide 10: Education about Stepfamilies

First, nearly all SEPs evaluated included *education about stepfamilies*, presenting information on typical stepfamily development and common challenges that stepfamilies face, aimed at normalizing the stepfamily experience and helping families have realistic expectations for stepfamily life. How well does this education work?

Three studies found that, compared to couples in control groups, those who attended educational groups reported greater stepfamily knowledge following treatment (Cuddeby, 1984; Gellat et al., 2010; Higbie, 1994). Moreover, one of these controlled studies also showed that the program was effective in reducing family members' unrealistic beliefs about stepfamily adjustment (Gellat et al., 2010) – which is important because holding such unrealistic beliefs is associated with family dissatisfaction and distress. In fact, one educational program that consisted solely of viewing an educational video on normative stepfamily development was associated with improved family adjustment in comparison to controls who received no intervention (Trone, 2002). This is

strong evidence that by providing education about expected stepfamily dynamics, programs can help stepfamily members develop healthier perceptions of their own families.

These results are consistent with more subjective evidence from other program evaluations, which has shown that couples receiving educational material on stepfamily life report perceived improvements in their understanding of the stepfamily experience (Messinger et al., 1978; Michaels, 2000), more realistic expectations (Pill, 1981), greater hopes for creating a successful stepfamily (Mandell & Birenzweig, 1990) and improvements in stepfamily satisfaction and harmony (Gelatt et al., 2010).

Slide 11: Strengthening and Protecting the Couple Relationship

About half of the SEPS that have been evaluated included a component specifically focused on *strengthening or protecting the couple relationship*, which is particularly important for stepfamily couples, whose relationship is newer than preexisting parent-child relationships and who may have little unplanned time alone together without children (e.g., Papernow, 1984). As a whole, the results suggest that couples entering the programs were eager to get help with maintaining their relationships; they ranked couple health as very important and rated sessions on building a successful marriage very helpful (e.g., Michaels, 2000). Noncontrolled studies indicated that participants in programs that include content on how to protect and enhance the couple relationship in a stepfamily tend to perceive improvements in their couple relationship (Ellis, 1984; Gibbard, 1998; Henderson, 2001; Webber et al., 1988; Michaels 2000, 2006) and relationship commitment (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). The limited available

results of controlled studies seem to indicate that participants learn the skills to protect their relationship, but that the effects of doing so on their global relationship quality may take longer to emerge. For example, one comparison of an SEP to a control group on couple satisfaction found that, at the end of the program, there was a significant treatment effect on the amount of time spent alone as a couple but not on couple satisfaction (Higbie, 1994). Another showed that a brief education program was associated with improvement in couple intentions to coparent, couple self-efficacy, and difficulties, but not in perceptions of marital quality.

Slide 12: Couple Communication and conflict resolution skills

Over half of the programs included content focused on building *communication and conflict resolution skills*. These components are likely crucial to intervention effectiveness, given the strong associations between couple communication patterns and couple health and stability in remarriages (e.g., Allen et al., 2001). Compared to controls, participants in two programs with communication skills training demonstrated improvements in self-rated family communication (Nelson & Levant, 1991) and conflict (Cuddeby, 1984).

Unfortunately, no controlled studies specifically assessed *couple* communication skills. In noncontrolled analyses, stepfamily couples who attended an SEP with a strong focus on improving communication skills reported reduced couple conflict about parenting the children in their families (Nicholson et al, 2008). Another SEP that included an emphasis on healthy communication patterns increased participants' knowledge in this area (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). It should also be noted that consumer satisfaction with communication skills training tends to be very high. For example, stepfamily couples have

rated the program units on couple conflict resolution and communication as the most helpful program content (Michaels, 2000).

Slide 13: Parenting and Stepparenting

The vast majority of stepfamily education programs include content focused on *parenting and stepparenting*, typically providing information on appropriate methods of child discipline and guidelines for stepparenting, such as recommendations to slowly involve the stepparent in discipline after a warm stepparent-stepchild relationship has been established (e.g., Gibbard, 1998; Pill, 1981). The evidence regarding the effectiveness of SEPS in improving parenting and stepparenting in the stepfamily context is preliminary, but promising. Compared to a waitlist control group, one SEP was associated with improved parenting intentions and decreased over-reactive parenting, but was not associated with positive changes on other parenting measures (Gellat, 2010). Another showed program effects on parent-child communication but not on ineffective parenting practices (Nelson & Levant, 1991). Other findings, which were not made in comparison to a control group, indicate that couples perceive improvement in their coparenting abilities (Michaels, 2000) and that the SEP was associated with reductions in coercive parenting by biological and stepparents, reduced coparenting conflict, and improved parenting efficacy for parents but not stepparents (Nicholson et al., 2008).

Slide 14: Co-parenting with children's other parents

Dealing with ex-partners, who are children's other parents, was addressed in several programs, typically by providing strategies for creating a nonhostile, businesslike coparenting relationship and for resolving custody or visitation issues, such as difficult child transitions between households. How effective are these units? Unfortunately, only

two studies evaluated treatment effects on relations with ex-partners. One of the two that did find no improvements in those relations (Webber et al., 1988), while the other found increased agreement between partners on dealing with ex-partners (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). The difference between these two results may be due to that the latter program, SmartSteps, included a much more explicit focus on providing couples in stepfamilies with specific guidelines for how to co-parent with ex-partners in ways that will protect children and not threaten the new couple relationship. It should also be noted that consumer satisfaction was high for sessions on dealing with noncustodial parents, and participants informally reported increased understanding of how maintaining positive relations with their ex-spouse can benefit the children (Michaels, 2000).

Slide 15: Summary of Preliminary Data

In summary, stepfamily education programs are available, and there is much clinical and theoretical evidence to support their use with stepfamilies, particularly newly-forming ones, in order to help prevent the development of problems caused by unrealistic expectations for family development or lack of knowledge of how to appropriately develop complex relationships, like those between step-parent and child or between ex-partners.

By looking at the entire body of evaluation studies that have been done on SEPs, as we have done during this module, we can see that there is preliminary evidence in support of the effectiveness of family and relationship education programs tailored specifically to meet the unique needs of stepfamilies. Individuals and couples who attend these programs tend to report improvement in important domains, such as realistic stepfamily expectations, knowledge about healthy ways to parent and stepparent, couple agreement on parenting and dealing with ex-partners, and family satisfaction.

Slide 16: APA Guidelines

However, research evaluating the effectiveness of SEPs is still in its infancy-- few studies exist to shed light on how effective stepfamily interventions are, and many of the studies that have been done are limited in what they can tell us by problems in their methods—for example, their small sample sizes or lack of a control group comparison. To give a sense of where the field currently stands, it may be useful to consider the American Psychological Association's guidelines for understanding the sort of research support that is needed to be confident an intervention program is effective (Chambless & Hollon, 1998). There are three different levels of research support for treatment: well-established treatments, probably efficacious treatments, and possibly efficacious treatments.

Well-established treatments are those that have demonstrated (a) better outcomes than a group who received a placebo (typically a group who received attention but none of the key aspects of intervention thought to cause positive change) in two or more studies conducted by two different research teams, OR (b) similar outcomes to a well-established treatment in several good studies. Interventions that don't quite meet the criteria for well-established treatments but have shown in two studies that they work better than no treatment at all (i.e., a control group), or that have shown in one study that they work better than placebo but have not been studied by two different research teams, are called *Probably Efficacious Treatments*.

Slide 17: APA continued:

The last category is *Possibly Efficacious Treatments*; those who have one good study with a control group demonstrating that they are effective and no evidence indicating they are not.

If you would like to learn more about evidence based practice and empirically supported interventions, there are several helpful websites, including one provided by the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT):

<http://www.abct.org/Professionals/?m=mPro&fa=WhatIsEBP>

And another NIH-sponsored site on evidence based behavioral practice:

<http://www.ebbp.org/>

Slide 18: Stepfamily Education Program Evaluation: Where we stand

At this point in time, there are no well-researched stepfamily education programs that have the type of strong and compelling research support that would designate them as “efficacious,” “probably efficacious,” or even “possibly efficacious” according to the APA guidelines. Although several programs have published data suggesting that participants improve on many important outcomes over the course of the program, they have not shown that the program is more effective than control or alternative programs. In addition, one recent study that did compare an interactive, web-based stepfamily education programs to a waitlist control group (Gelatt et al., 2010) yielded mixed findings, showing that stepfamily members in the program improved more than stepfamilies on a waitlist on two of five parenting skills, but not on the other three. Another recent study evaluating a 12 hour group-based relationship education program for couples in stepfamilies called StepPREP similarly showed that while it did improve parenting and coparenting skills, it was not more effective in doing so than a comparison, self-directed program.

Slide 19: Stepfamily Education Program Evaluation: Where we need to go:

In closing, the field is in clear need of additional, well-designed and conducted studies evaluating the effectiveness of stepfamily specific interventions. There does exist

preliminary evidence that SEPS may be effective in improving important stepfamily outcomes, such as parenting and stepparenting skills, knowledge about normal stepfamily development, and family relationships. However, we still need studies using large samples that randomly assign participants to either the SEP or a control condition, and assess for program effects not only immediately after the program, but also several months or even years later. By conducting these studies, we can increase our confidence about what the best practices for work with stepfamilies are.