

Marriage Education for “Stepcouples”

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Objectives

- Provide educators with a better understanding of the unique needs of stepcouples in marriage education
- Equip educators with an understanding of appropriate theoretical approaches to work with stepcouples
- Equip educators with program content ideas and specific learning objectives for work with stepcouples
- Equip educators with implementation ideas for work with stepcouples.

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The Prevalence of “Stepcouples”

- Married
 - 75% of divorced people remarry.
 - Nearly ½ of all marriages each year is a remarriage for one or both partners.
 - The average divorced individual will remarry within 3-5 years after divorce.
 - An increasing number of first marriages form stepfamilies.

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The Prevalence of “Stepcouples”

- Nonmarried
 - Approximately ½ of cohabiting couples live in a stepfamily.
 - The majority of married couples, living in a stepfamily reported having cohabitated prior to marriage.
- Higher proportions of stepfamilies are found among lower-resource families.

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The Importance of Specialized Content for Couples in Stepfamilies

- Greater risk of dissolution
- Unique issues and developmental patterns not discussed in “general” marriage education may be major contributors to marital well-being for stepcouples .
- Current marital education for stepcouples may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet their unique needs.

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A Theoretically-Grounded Approach to Work with “Stepcouples”

- An *ecological systems approach* is vital.
 - Considers the context in which the couple is embedded.
 - Considers “spillover” from other family relationships to the couple relationship (e.g., stepparent-stepchild relationship impact on couple relationship).
 - The factors that an ecological systems approach examines, are all related to marital stability.

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A Theoretically-Grounded Approach to Work with “Stepcouples” cont.

- A *cognitive-behavioral approach* provides the rationale for assessing and working on the couples’ *thinking*.
 - Positive expectations/beliefs are functional, while negative expectations/beliefs can be dysfunctional.
 - Beliefs can be realistic or unrealistic based on general “truths” people attribute to stepfamilies.

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A Theoretically-Grounded Approach to Work with “Stepcouples” cont.

- A *lifecourse perspective* is valuable for assessing what information may be most valuable for a couple, based on where they are in the lifecourse (individually and as a family).
 - In practice, this means that “it matters when” (e.g., it matters when you marry following a divorce/separation).

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A Theoretically-Grounded Approach to Work with “Stepcouples” cont.

- A *family strengths perspective* is vital.
 - Simply raising awareness of potential problems and focusing on differences between first families and stepfamilies is using a *deficit approach* and is not helpful.
 - Recognize the strengths that the couple has already and focus on building strengths that successful *stepfamilies* demonstrate.

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Key Issues and Learning Objectives for “Stepcouples”

- Key issues that should be addressed in program content
- Specific learning objectives to help guide your educational approach
- Prevalent issues and factors associated with healthy couple functioning in stepfamilies

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Addressing the “Incomplete Institution”: Negotiating Roles and Rules

- There is a lack of norms for this “incomplete institution.”
- Therefore, there is no consensus on how stepfamilies should operate (e.g., what is the role of stepparents in their stepchildren’s lives).

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Addressing the “Incomplete Institution”: Negotiating Roles and Rules

- *Agreement* on roles/rules is key (i.e., there is no *prescription* for stepfamilies).
 - Agreement is also associated with less conflict and greater marital satisfaction than prescription.
- Research indicates that relational quality and stability is associated with congruent beliefs about family roles.

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Implications for Program Content

- Discuss the “non-normed” existence of stepfamilies.
- Negotiate family roles and rules (e.g., names they will use for each other, parenting strategies, financial management).
- Negotiation of roles/rules will NOT be a one event, but an evolving process that incorporates family experiences and developmental changes.

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Learning Objectives:

1. feel validated in their experiences in a non-institutionalized family structure;
2. have an increased understanding of the importance of reaching consensus on roles and rules (i.e., understand that there is no “prescription”);
3. be able to articulate their couple consensus in several important areas of family functioning (e.g., balance of family responsibilities, financial management practices, names for stepfamily members, etc.); and
4. be able to identify their strengths as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

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Realistic Expectations and Positive Beliefs/Views

- Research indicates that successful couples in stepfamilies have realistic expectations about stepfamily dynamics and development at the onset of family formation. Some of the realistic beliefs are:
 - Stepfamilies take time to develop
 - Relationships take time to develop
 - Stepfamilies don’t necessarily “blend.”

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Implications for Program Content

- Tap into expectations and beliefs; examine consensus among family members.
- Examine expectations for “instant love,” and “blending” that may be unrealistic.
- Program content can also include the use of communication and negotiating skills to facilitate consensus-building among couples regarding their assumptions, beliefs, and expectations for their family.

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Learning Objectives:

1. identify their individual beliefs and expectations about stepfamily living;
2. identify how stepfamily experiences and development are different from (not better or worse than) first family experiences;
3. recognize common “myths” of stepfamily living and common realities of stepfamily living;
4. hold positive expectations for the possibility of healthy stepfamily functioning;
5. be able to articulate their couple consensus regarding their beliefs and expectations for their family; and
6. be able to identify their strengths as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

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Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

- Stepparent-stepchild relationship quality “spills over” into the couple relationship.
In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of happy family life, leading to more positive parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed. Establishing some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren...may be the key to a happy second marriage and to successful functioning in stepfamilies. (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 181)

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Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

- Efforts to strengthen the stepparent-stepchild relationship can strengthen the couple relationship

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Implications for Program Content

- Discuss the “spillover” effect
- Focus on strategies for building healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships
 - Ease into disciplinarian role
 - Be accepting of a different parental role with older stepchildren
 - Study normative child development
 - Teach children communication and conflict management skills

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Learning Objectives:

1. understand the importance to their couple relationship of working on healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships;
2. understand and utilize recommended strategies that build positive stepparent-stepchild relationships;
3. understand how age of the child impacts the recommended processes and goals for the stepparent-stepchild relationship;
4. understand normative child/adolescent development;
5. be able to identify their strengths as individuals and as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

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Navigating Relationships with Children’s Other Parent(s)

- The majority of stepfamilies have connections to other co-parents
- Quality of the co-parenting relationship impacts the quality of the couple relationship
- Highly negative or highly positive co-parenting relationship can be damaging
- Highly negative co-parenting relationship can directly affect children, which can impact the new stepfamily relationships

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Navigating Relationships with Children’s Other Parent(s)

- Quality co-parenting relationships:
 - Are non-emotional and businesslike
 - Are supportive
 - Are honor agreements
 - Maintain and respect privacy between households
 - Openly support child’s relationship with the other parent

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Implications for Program Content

- Discuss aspects of healthy co-parenting relationships (i.e., business-like, unemotional).
- Teach strategies for successful, cooperative co-parenting.

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Learning Objectives:

1. understand the importance of positive co-parenting relationships for the well-being of their children and their marriage;
2. understand and utilize co-parenting strategies that maintain privacy between households, support a non-emotional, "business-like" connection between co-parents, enhance nonconflictual communication, and that support the child's relationship with each parent; and
3. be able to identify their strengths as individuals and as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

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Minority and Immigrant "Stepcouples"

- Immigrant couples in stepfamilies from "traditional" or religious countries of origin may have the most difficulty accepting norms of family functioning that differ from first family norms.
- Ethnic minority couples from cultural contexts that support multi-parental models may have less difficulty with some issues found in studies of ethnic majority couples.
- Large research gap – few studies of ethnic minority and low-resource couples in stepfamilies.

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African-American Stepouples

- May be more adaptive to complexity of stepfamily structure
- Multi-parental model history and norm may enhance the development and acceptance of stepparent-stepchild relationships
- May still be best to recommend "take your time" with assumption of full parental role

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Implementation Suggestions/Considerations

- The following slides offer suggestions for issues to consider when targeting "stepcouples" in family life education.

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Recruitment

- May be difficult to "find" stepcouples.
- Screen with:
Is one of you parenting the other's child from a previous relationship?

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"Like" Facilitators

- Participants often feel most comfortable with others "like" them.
 - Effectiveness of the program may be enhanced in the participants are in a homogenous group with other stepfamilies.
- Consider utilizing a co-facilitator with personal stepfamily experience.

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Supplemental Marriage Education

- Blend this information with “general” marriage education.
 - Research indicates that couples in stepfamilies need benefit from both types of curricula.
- Not meant as a substitute.
 - Although general marriage education may be useful, stepfamilies have compounded needs that should be addressed.

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Include Children/Teens

- Consider involving children, particularly teens in parallel family life education programs for skills training and awareness-raising of stepfamily development

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Conclusion

- Stepouples are highly prevalent
- Stepouples have unique needs in marriage education
- Cannot disentangle stepfamily development from couple relationship
- Utilize existing stepfamily education programs
 - See Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004, *Family Relations*
 - *Smart Steps for Stepfamilies* available from Cornell Cooperative Extension Jefferson County and the Stepfamily Association of America.

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Conclusion

- Education that raises awareness of stepfamily development and facilitates the learning of strategies used by successful stepfamilies can build stable couple relationships and families that lead to positive outcomes for adults and children in these families.

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