



Module 5*

Marriage Education for "Stepcouples"

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Slide 1 – Introduction

Hello, and welcome to this on-line module entitled, "Marriage Education for Stepouples". I am Francesca Adler-Baeder, Associate Professor in Human Development and Family Science at Auburn University in Alabama and State Extension Specialist in Family Life with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

Slide 2 – Objectives

During this presentation I'd like to provide information from the research on couples in stepfamilies. My goal is that you will come away with:

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

Slide 3 – The Prevalence of Stepouples

The formation of higher-order unions has always been common practice in the United States; however, in our earlier history remarriage mostly followed death of a spouse (Coontz, 2002). That is, the high remarriage rates were due primarily to high rates of death during childbirth and the overall shorter lifespan of both men and women. It is the combination of a high divorce rate and a high remarriage rate that has brought the growing phenomenon of complex stepfamily systems that include members of the new household as well as connections to other family members outside the household, such as, former partners, and children residing with former partners (Coontz, 1992)

Government statistics indicate that seventy-five percent of divorced people remarry within ten years, and serial remarriages are increasingly common (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; National Center for Health Statistics, 1993). Higher-order marriages account for nearly half of all marriages performed in the United States each year (Wilson & Clark, 1992), and the majority of these remarriages (approximately 65%) include children from previous relationships (Chadwick & Heaton, 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Typically, these new marriages are formed quickly. The average divorced individual will remarry within 3-5 years after divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Kreider & Fields, 2001).

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In addition, due to increased rates of nonmarital births (1 in 3), more adults are entering *first marriages* with someone other than the child's other parent and forming stepfamilies as well (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

Slide 4 – The Prevalence of Stepouples

It is also important to consider that the growing number of cohabiting unions form stepfamilies as well. It is estimated that of cohabiting couples with children, half are living in a stepfamily situation (Bumpass & Raley, 1995). In fact, the vast majority of married couples living in a stepfamily report having cohabited prior to marriage. Consistent with these demographic reports is growing evidence from family science research and the marriage initiative work to date that finds that a large proportion, if not majority, of low-income nonmarried couples are dealing with co-parenting and stepparenting relationships. The Fragile Families study found that 43% of nonmarried low-income mothers had children with at least 2 men (Parke, 2004; McLanahan et al., 2003). In our Family Connections in Alabama project which piloted marriage education with low-resource parents, 55% of participants reported living in a stepfamily situation.

Among lower-income individuals, both rates of divorce and rates of remarriage are higher (Ganong & Coleman, 2002). In addition, rates of nonmarried births are higher among low-income individuals (Ooms & Wilson, 2004), suggesting that married stepfamilies (from both first marriages and remarriages) are even more common among low-income groups than in the broad population. In addition nonmarital births are highest among African-Americans, making it comparatively more likely that African-Americans are forming stepfamilies through first marriages. Low-income and ethnic minority adults also have higher rates of cohabitation (Seltzer, 2000). Combined with high nonmarital birth rates, it is likely that much more than half of low-income cohabitators are living as stepfamilies.

Slide 5 - Importance of Specialized Content for Couples in Stepfamilies.

Couples who form stepfamilies are at slightly higher risk for divorce than couples where both are in their first marriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2000).

When considering program content - Although there is no evidence to suggest that factors associated with higher marital quality and stability for non-stepfamily marriages - like, communication skills, empathy, common values and beliefs, and conflict management skills are not also important for stepfamily couples, there is evidence to suggest that stepfamily couples experience unique family developmental patterns and face unique issues that are related to healthy marital functioning (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003).

The general research on marital couples offers an incomplete examination of the full range of factors related to high quality marriages in stepfamilies. Therefore, relying solely on the general couple/marital research to inform our programs for couples in stepfamilies may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet their unique needs. Thus, educators run the risk of leaving out important information and skills (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

Slide 6 - Theoretically-Grounded Approach to Work with “Stepouples”.

It is always good practice for educators to be explicit about the theoretical assumptions guiding their approach and their work (Hughes, 1994).

For work with couples in stepfamilies, it is vital to use an **ecological systems perspective**



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(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The *ecological perspective* recognizes environmental influences on individual behaviors. *Many* factors influence human development and these factors are nested within four ecological levels: the background and characteristics of the individual (ontogenetic level), family relations (microsystem level and mesosystem interactions), family interactions with elements outside the family (community – or mesosystem and exosystem level), and socio-cultural variables at the macrosystem level. In practice, this framework allows for the consideration of such variables as stress management skills, which is an individual characteristic, the co-parenting relationship, the stepparent-stepchild relationship, which are microsystems and mesosystems, the lack of support from in-laws, which is an element of the exosystem, and community bias in favor of first families, which is an element of the macrosystem. All these factors are associated with stepcouple marital quality.

For specific processes, assumptions from *systems theory* are utilized and have been validated in studies of stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2000; White & Klein, 2002). Most importantly there is evidence of *spillover effects* from one relationship in the family to another. So it is this framework that prescribes the targeting of other subsystems, like co-parenting relationships; stepparent-stepchild relationships in marriage education work because of these subsystems' impact on the couple relationship.

Slide 7 – Cognitive Behavioral theory

Assumptions from ***cognitive-behavioral theory*** can also inform work with stepcouples. Very basically, cognitive-behavioral theory maintains that (a) beliefs about how relationships should function and (b) expectations about relational dynamics affect one's behavior in a relationship (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). To the extent that the beliefs and expectations positively affect relationships, the beliefs/expectations are considered functional; to the extent they negatively affect relationships, the beliefs/expectations are considered dysfunctional (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Beliefs can also be realistic or unrealistic based on generally supported "truths" about stepfamily living. These assumptions prescribe the consideration of distinct beliefs and expectations about stepfamily living in program design and content because of their potential impact on the quality and stability of the stepcouple relationship.

Slide 8 – Lifecourse Perspective

Work with stepcouples should also utilize a ***lifecourse perspective***. This perspective takes into account differential effects of events based on the interaction of the individuals' and the family's development. In practice, this means that "it matters when". Different information is relevant for different families based on developmental considerations. For example, it matters when you marry following a divorce/separation (that is, how much time was there between the separation/divorce and remarriage); it matters how long you have been a stepfamily; (was 1 year ago or 5 years ago?) and it matters when in a child's development that they experience divorce and remarriage (did you become a stepfamily when the child was 4 or 14?).

Slide 9 – Family Strengths Perspective

It is also recommended that work with stepcouples utilizes a ***family strengths perspective***. This perspective assumes that all individuals and families have strengths and that focusing on adding to these strengths (rather than focusing on deficits) best facilitates improvements in individual, relational, and family functioning. Strength-building strategies used in programming can include adding to individuals' knowledge base, encouraging awareness of negative cognitive and behavior patterns, and practicing skills that enhance individual and family well-being. Using a strengths perspective in work



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with stepcouples would also include the assumption that despite the increased risks to individual, couple, and family functioning that stepcouples face, building strong stepcouple marriages can result in nurturing home environments within which adults and children thrive.

Slide 10 - Key issues and Learning Objectives for “Stepcouples”.

Now I'll spend some time on the key issues that should be addressed in program content and name specific learning objectives to help guide your educational approach. Note that the following topics have been gleaned from a review of the literature as the most prevalent issues and factors associated with healthy couple functioning in stepfamilies. These are the general categories and most common issues for you to consider. It is not an inclusive or exhaustive list of unique areas to address with stepcouples.

Slide 11 - Addressing the “Incomplete Institution:” Negotiating Roles/Rules.

Lack of norms. Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies, norms about roles and rules (i.e., patterns of functioning) have yet to be developed. Cherlin (1978) described this phenomenon as the “incomplete institution” of stepfamilies and noted the lack of societal prescriptions for how stepfamilies should operate. Stepparents do not have a legal parental relationship with stepchildren, which likely impacts a stepparent's perception of their relationship to their stepchildren. There are no agreed-upon names for stepparents and other step-relationships. Especially relevant for low-income stepcouples is the lack of norms about financial management in stepfamilies.

Slide 12 – Agreement on Roles/Rules

Instead of a prescription for family roles and rules, *agreement* on family and parenting roles between spouses is associated with less couple conflict and greater marital satisfaction (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Palisi, et al., 1991; Pasley et al., 1993). For example, research indicates that agreement about combining separate assets and agreement about the level of support provided to stepchildren and nonresidential biological children is related to healthy stepcouple functioning (e.g. Engel, 1999; Lown, McFadden, and Crossman, 1989). Overall, research indicates that relational quality and stability is associated with congruent beliefs regarding stepfamily member roles. Researchers have observed that well-functioning stepfamilies and couples in their longitudinal studies actively negotiated roles and rules and worked towards consensus (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002).

Slide 13 - Implications for Program Content.

It is suggested that marriage education program content for stepcouples include explicit discussions of stepcouples' “non-normed” existence. Messages would center on raising awareness of these issues – like the ambiguous legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren, validating feelings of “not fitting in,” and promoting the use of negotiating skills for establishing their family-specific roles and rules. Topics to include would be names they will use for each other (in the household and across households), financial management practices, financial responsibilities to children and stepchildren, parenting strategies, and individual roles (including gender roles) in the family as well as within each dyad. With a lifecourse perspective, program content would also raise awareness of the dynamic nature of these processes. That is, negotiating roles and rules is not a one-time event, but rather, is a continuing, evolving process that incorporates family experiences and developmental changes.



Slide 14 – Learning Objectives

Here are the suggested Learning objectives related to negotiating roles and rules: Participants will:

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.

Slide 15 - Realistic Expectations and Positive Beliefs/Views.

When individuals are open with each other about their expectations and have similar beliefs and expectations, they are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships. This is true for all couples, and especially true for stepcouples.

It is also important to identify whether some expectations are unrealistic. Research indicates that successful couples in stepfamilies have realistic expectations about stepfamily dynamics and development at the onset of stepfamily formation. A key element of appropriate expectations/beliefs is an understanding of the *time* necessary to establish roles and to determine their family’s particular functioning pattern for success (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Visher et al., 2003). Therefore, when expectations of “instant love” among family members and “instant parent-child relationship adjustment” are not held, higher marital quality is more likely to result (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Visher et al., 2003).

Evidence suggests that not only do successful stepfamilies form relationships slowly (3-5 years), but also they form relationships dyadically rather than as a family unit – so expecting “blending” may not be realistic (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). Research also suggests that a cohesive, “blended” stepfamily unit may not be essential for a well-functioning stepcouple and stepfamily. Rather than striving for equally cohesive bonds and feelings of connection between stepfamily members, it is more realistic to expect that levels of connection and attachment will vary between stepfamily members. The more important dimension of healthy stepfamily functioning is the level of *mutual agreement* about the nature of each relationship (i.e., subsystem) within the stepfamily system.

Slide 16 – Implications for Program Content.

Programs should promote the understanding of realistic expectations for stepfamily development. This includes first raising awareness of individual’s beliefs and expectations (i.e., these may not be consciously recognized or actively processed). Open discussions can also be facilitated on the unrealistic expectations regarding: (1) instant love; (2) quick adjustment; (3) equal attachment and bonding among stepfamily members; and (4) first family functioning. In addition, program content can include the use of communication and negotiating skills to facilitate consensus-building among couples regarding their assumptions, beliefs and expectations for their family.



Slide 17 – Learning Objectives

Here are the suggested Learning objectives related to positive beliefs and expectations: Participants will:

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.

Slide 18 - Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships.

A critical and consistent pattern observed in research on couples in stepfamilies is the potential negative impact of poor stepparent-stepchild relationships on the quality and stability of the couple relationship (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984)..

Hetherington & Kelly (2002) noted that :

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. (p. 181)

Slide 19 – Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

Therefore, knowledge and skills that facilitate positive stepparent-stepchild relationships are viewed as marriage strengthening knowledge and skills for stepcouples.

Slice 20 – Implications for Program Content

Program content should include the recommendation that the bio parent should remain the primary disciplinarian for a given time; the stepparent should ease into a parenting role over time.

Information on the developmental differences found among stepchildren (i.e., adolescent stepchildren and younger stepchildren) and their impact on stepparent-stepchild relationships and the potential for bonding should be included. Raising awareness of the potential difficulties with older stepchildren may promote proactive steps on the part of both the biological parent and stepparent to lessen the intensity of the potential conflict. Normalizing the likelihood of developing less of a bond between stepparent and older stepchildren is suggested.

Information on child development and behavior management techniques may be especially helpful for stepparents who are not also biological parents.

Program content should also include information *for children* on healthy stepparent-stepchild interactions and stepfamily development.



Slide 21 – Learning Objectives

Here are the suggested Learning objectives related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship: Participants will:

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; and
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.

Slide 22 - Navigating Relationships with Children's Other Parents (i.e., ex-partners).

Because the majority of stepfamilies are formed after separation or divorce from a partner, rather than death, we can assume that co-parenting relationships with ex-partners exist. For low-income parents, this may be multiple co-parenting relationship (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The quality of co-parenting relationships is shown to impact relationship quality of the new couple (e.g., Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Knox & Zusman, 2001). Another critical element in marriage education with stepcouples, therefore, is the inclusion of information on successful co-parenting strategies.

Substantial empirical evidence shows that both a highly negative and a highly involved relationship with a former spouse negatively affects the new couple's relationship quality (e.g. Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Knox & Zusman, 2001). Emotionally divorcing and establishing appropriate boundaries with a former spouse or partner are essential for healthy remarriages (Weston & Macklin, 1990). High-conflict co-parenting relationships also negatively affect children and may result in children's negative behaviors (Amato, 2000). Therefore, children's negative behaviors are just as likely to be attributable to post-separation/divorce adjustment issues and conflict between parents as they are to stepfamily adjustment issues. As previously noted, children's negative behaviors can negatively impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship, which in turn, negatively impacts the marital relationship.

Slide 23 - Navigating Relationships with Children's Other Parents (i.e., ex-partners).

Research on co-parenting relationships indicates that the quality of the relationship is enhanced when individuals communicate unemotionally, in a "business-like" manner; when they utilize neutral mediators; when they use supportive language; when they honor agreements; when they utilize written communication; when they maintain privacy regarding other aspects of their lives; and when they actively support their child's connection to the other parent.

Slide 24 - Implications for Program content.

It is critical that program content in marriage education for stepcouples include information and skill-building that promote a cooperative, business-like relationship with a former spouse or partner in order to prevent or alter the negative impact of an unhealthy former partner relationship on the current couple relationship. This may include practices in nondefensive listening and nonconfrontational communication, strategies for having "business" meetings regarding the children's schedules, needs, etc., and awareness of "pitfalls" or "games" that may lead to co-parenting conflict. Educators should also be prepared to acknowledge the experience of having multiple co-parents in the stepfamily system



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as this situation appears to be quite prevalent among lower-income families (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Recommendations for how to navigate these relationships and promote positive co-parenting relationships are the same regardless of whether an individual has one co-parenting relationship or five.

Slide 25 – Learning Objectives

Here are the suggested Learning objectives for addressing co-parenting relationships: Participants will:

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.

Slide 26 - Minority or Immigrant ‘Stepcouples’.

Immigrant Stepcoouples. Because empirical studies to date have not focused on diverse samples of stepfamilies, information is provided from clinical observations and qualitative interviews with ethnically diverse stepcouples (Berger, 1998). Among immigrant families, those from a country of origin that have similar levels of divorce and Western norms (as in Israel) function similarly to predominant culture Americans in stepfamilies. When country of origin norms emphasize conventionalism and traditionalism (as in China), immigrant stepfamilies may be much more likely to disguise their stepfamily status and impose first family roles on stepfamily members (Berger, 1998). When the country of origin is highly religious (Ireland, Latin American countries, most Middle East countries) stepfamily status is also stigmatizing. In these situations, educators may have difficulty with recruitment of and/or identification of “invisible” stepcouples. If identified, these stepcouples may have the most difficulty with altering negative views about stepfamilies, understanding that stepfamilies can operate differently than first families – and be successful. In addition, some of these stepcouples from more traditional countries of origin may not prescribe to the idea that nonresidential biological parents should remain involved with their children and that stepparents should ease into a parenting role. Because of cultural pressures, the biological parent may abdicate his (i.e., in most cases, the father) parental role and the stepparent may assume a primary parental role very quickly. Educators should be sensitive to these cultural norms.

Slide 27 – African-American Stepfamilies

Scholars also assert that when working with African-American stepcouples, educators should consider both socio-historical context and current family practices. In general, it appears that acceptance of the stepfamily structure may be comparatively less of a strain for African-American stepcouples. Black families bring with them a legacy of a communal-oriented philosophy, permeability of external boundaries, informal adoption, and role flexibility (Berger, 1998).

It appears that some issues salient to higher-resource, White couples – such as difficulties with norming the practice of parenting someone else’s child or the parenting of a nonresidential child – may not be as relevant among African-American couples since kinship ties not necessarily dictated by bloodlines, movement of children from one household to another, and shared parenting responsibility among multiple parents are common, having been built on coping strategies developed in the context of conditions of slavery (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Skolnick & Skolnick, 1992). Program content, therefore,



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would not assume difficulties with the concept of multiple parents, difficulties with parenting nonresidential children, or a negative view of complex families, and would instead focus on affirming and/or enhancing strategies for effective co-parenting among multiple parents, involvement in parenting nonresidential children, and reinforcing positive views of complex families.

Another consideration, though, is that because of these readily accepted norms of parenting nonbiological children, it may be that African-American stepparents move more quickly (or immediately) into primary parental status. It is not clear whether this is functional or dysfunctional, as empirical studies have not documented comparisons of approaches in African-American stepfamilies. Without clear empirical guidance, it would still seem that the recommendation to ease into a primary parental role could be utilized until further studies indicate otherwise. Clinicians note that, in general, the recommendations derived from empirical studies of stepfamilies are useful for African-American stepfamilies as well (Berger, 1998).

Slide 28 - Implementation Suggestions/Considerations.

The following are some suggestions for issues to consider when targeting stepcouples in family life education.

Slide 29 - Recruitment of Participants.

Despite the prevalence of couples in stepfamilies, many may not willingly or knowingly self-identify as stepfamily couples (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996). It may be because of the negative stigma attached to stepfamilies that still persists in our culture or it may be that couples simply don't think of themselves as any different from first family couples (Coleman & Ganong, 1994). Educators may need to actively elicit information that identifies a couple as a stepcouple. Potential participants may be asked, "does either of you have children from a previous relationship either living in the household or living in another household?"

Slide 30 - "Like" Facilitators.

Indications are that potential participants in family life education programs feel most comfortable with others like them. This may be especially true for couples in stepfamilies due to the negative stigma associated with them. Although program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, effectiveness will likely be enhanced if couples forming stepfamilies participant in a homogeneous group. Similarly, it may be useful for at least one facilitator (if co-facilitators are used) to have experience in a stepfamily.

Slide 31 – Supplemental Marriage Education.

Offering curricula that address the unique needs of couples in stepfamilies need not serve as a substitute for general marriage education curricula. Indications are that couples in stepfamilies need both. Remember, no evidence suggests that processes involved in healthy first marriages are unimportant in remarriages. It is probably best to think of stepcouples as having "compounded needs." These can be addressed by educators either by having stepcouples participate in a group together or by having stepcouples attend general marriage education sessions with a mixed group of couples, and then break out in later sessions to address stepcouple-specific topics with other stepcouples.



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Slide 32 - Involve children/teens in education programs.

Because children, especially teens, play a vital role in the overall functioning of the stepfamily, we can assume that couple functioning is enhanced in stepfamilies when preadolescents and adolescents learn about stepfamily development and common issues, as well as learn effective communication skills, anger management, and conflict de-escalation strategies. This is consistent with the family systemic approaches often used in therapy (see Nichols & Swartz, 2001). Educators should consider methods for delivering educational services to children in stepfamilies, either via their parents (e.g., take-home information) or through participation in a parallel educational program. Marriage educators may want to partner with experienced youth development leaders in these efforts.

Slide 33 - Conclusion.

Couples in stepfamilies could be a significant portion – if not the majority of the population served by marriage educators. Indications are that these couples face unique issues not addressed by general marriage education curricula. The functioning of couples in stepfamilies is inextricably tied to the overall functioning and development of the stepfamily. We have research-based program content areas that address the skills and attitudes observed among successful couples in stepfamilies. This information is best used preventively. I invite you to examine the Family Relations article on the implications of research on remarriage and stepfamilies for marriage education (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). In it we list several curricula currently available for educational work with stepfamilies, including Smart Steps for Stepfamilies – a 12-hour curriculum for adults and children in stepfamilies available through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County and the Stepfamily Association of America.

Slide 34. Conclusion (cont.)

Pioneers in the field of intervention with couples in stepfamilies, John and Emily Visher (1996) found education to be the highest need for couples in stepfamilies and suggested that many couples would not reach the level of clinical need if education on stepfamily dynamics and development were provided preventively. Marriage educators can provide a valuable service to couples forming stepfamilies by distinguishing them from non-stepfamily couples and offering additional program content specific to their needs.



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