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# An overview of stressors common to stepchildren and appropriate counseling interventions

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## Abstract

Despite the recent research on the effects of divorce on adults and children, much less attention has been given to the effects of parental remarriage and stepfamily issues (Prosen & Farmer, 1982). With an estimated one-half million adults becoming stepparents every year and one out of every six American children under the age of eighteen living in a stepfamily, stepfamilies could be more prevalent than nuclear families by 1990 (Prosen & Farmer, 1982; Visher & Visher, 1979).

AN OVERVIEW OF STRESSORS COMMON TO STEPCHILDREN

AND APPROPRIATE COUNSELING INTERVENTIONS


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by

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Despite the recent research on the effects of divorce on adults and children, much less attention has been given to the effects of parental remarriage and stepfamily issues (Prosen & Farmer, 1982). With an estimated one-half million adults becoming stepparents every year and one out of every six American children under the age of eighteen living in a stepfamily, stepfamilies could be more prevalent than nuclear families by 1990 (Prosen & Farmer, 1982; Visher & Visher, 1979).

Although no two stepfamilies are alike, there are some unique stressors common to most stepchildren. Some stepchildren may be adversely affected by these stressors to the degree of needing counseling intervention.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the major stressors stepchildren may encounter in stepfamily life and how they may be addressed in counseling. An additional focus will be the examination of interventions which give support to children in stepfamilies.

Major Stressors

In this paper the following stressors which stepchildren encounter are described: loss, membership in two households, divided loyalties, discipline, perceived discrimination by stepparents, sexuality issues and emotional adjustment. These will subsequently be explained in greater detail.

## Loss

Stepchildren must learn to cope with the loss of a
primary relationship. The term "loss", as defined by Visher
and Visher (1979), means that the child and at least the
biological parent in a stepfamily have experienced the
break-up, or death of the previous family system. Kleinman,
Rosenberg, and Whiteside (1979) asserted that grieving the
loss of the previous family is a necessary step in being able
to establish a new family unit. According to Visher and
Visher (1979), when parents remarry soon after a death or
divorce, there is insufficient grieving time, thus hindering
children's adjustment to their new stepfamily.

According to Bowerman and Irish (1982) in their study of
118 children in stepfamilies, those who had experienced
divorce adapted more readily to a stepparent than did children
whose parent had died. This was attributed to an idealized
fantasy of a deceased parent (Kaplan, 1977; Smith, 1945) thus
making it more difficult to accept a stepparent.

Another facet of loss involves the stress of adjusting to
or coping with a biological parent who is now outside the
family system. This is often difficult for all new family
members because this biological parent still has authority and
influence. This is also true when the parent is deceased
(Poppen & White, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1979).

## Membership in Two Households

Having been socialized by one set of family rules and then needing to adjust to the new rules of a stepfamily also creates stress for stepchildren (Kompara, 1980). Moving back and forth between two different families raises complex questions as evidenced by the issue of inadequate language to describe stepfamily matters. According to Cherlin (1978), the lack of appropriate terms for parents in remarriages can have negative consequences for family functioning. In the case of a child whose parents both remarry and the child alternates between their households under a joint custody arrangement, the questions become "Where is 'home?'" and "Who are members of my 'family?'"

## Divided Loyalties

Because stepchildren are usually members of two households, they also contend with the issue of divided loyalties. According to both Whiteside (1982) and Lutz (1983), divided loyalties felt by children depend upon how much they may have been drawn into marital conflicts in their nuclear family. This makes it difficult for them to become positively involved with both parents simultaneously. In the study by Lutz of 103 stepchildren between the ages of 12 and 18, divided loyalties was seen as the most stressful aspect of stepfamily life, followed closely by the issue of discipline.

## Discipline

Discipline and nurturance are two basic areas in which the newly-formed family is confronted with the need to redefine roles (Ransom, Schlesinger, & Derdeyn, 1979). One of the concerns of both parents and children is the children's acceptance of a stepparent. Another concern is the doubt experienced on all sides about the stepparent's capacity to fulfill a parenting role towards the partner's children (Visher & Visher, 1979). Children of both spouses must come to terms with their new roles and relationships. The acceptance by spouse and child of the stepparent's right to function in these realms is crucial for the development of discipline and nurturance (Ransom, Schlesinger & Derdeyn, 1979). According to Visher and Visher (1979), the problem of discipline is a normal developmental one for adolescents, which is further complicated by a stepchild's need to separate from two stepfamily systems, rather than from one nuclear system. This separation occurs at the same time that parents are trying to make the child a vital part of a newly-formed family (McGoldrick & Carter, 1980).

## Perceived Discrimination by Stepparents

Another identified stress is the perception of stepchildren that their stepparents are more often discriminating against them than are their biological parents.

This is most often felt by children with stepparents of the other sex (Bowerman & Irish, 1962). According to these authors, the relationship of stepchildren to their stepparents is marked by greater levels of uncertainty of feelings, insecurity of position and strain. Some stepchildren believe that biological children receive preferential treatment and less discipline. Still others feel unwanted and perceive that their parents wish they were not in the family (Bowerman & Irish, 1962). Stepchildren of both sexes believe that stepmothers discriminate more than stepfathers (Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Schulman, 1972).

Sexuality Issues

An area which several authors related to a lack of institutionalization of stepfamilies by society is that of incest and sexual taboos (Cherlin, 1978; Fast & Cain, 1966; Kompara, 1980; Kosinski, 1983). As late as 1940 there were 26 states allowing marriage between a stepparent and a stepchild (Smith, 1945). Those unclear boundaries make it difficult for stepchildren to know how to deal with sexual attractions to stepparents or stepsiblings. Another difficulty for adolescent children is accepting the expression of the sexuality of their biological parent (McGoldrick & Carter, 1980).

## Emotional Adjustment

In a 5 year clinical research project of 131 children experiencing divorce, Kelley and Wallerstein (1977) identified symptoms of regression, confusion, irritability, and anxiety on the part of preschool children when adapting to a divorce situation. Elementary age children have difficulty talking about the issues which they have strong feelings about, and this evidences itself in avoidance, defensiveness and silence (Kelley & Wallerstein, 1977). Feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, and anxiety due to the loss of the former familial relationships are experienced by children in the process of adjusting to the loss. These feelings may result in behaviors which hinder emotional and academic growth. When identified the resulting stress may be addressed through appropriate counseling interventions (Kelley & Wallerstein, 1977).

In the preceding paragraphs a number of stressors common to most stepchildren are described. Those identified are loss, membership in two households, divided loyalties, discipline, perceived discrimination by stepparents, sexuality issues and emotional adjustment. Counseling interventions will be discussed in the following section.

Counseling Interventions

Several counseling interventions have been identified in assisting stepchildren in adjusting to the stressors of a changed family situation. These have been summarized under the following major categories: family systems approach, bibliotherapy, group counseling, individual counseling, and adult stepfamily curriculums.

## Family Systems Approach

In discussing the family systems approach, Whiteside (1982) identified the scapegoated stepchild. In a nuclear family experiencing marital discord, the scapegoated child may sacrifice him/herself, but in a stepfamily the child may be sacrificed or blamed for the marital discord (Whiteside, 1982). Upon seeing a symptom bearing stepchild, a counselor should treat the entire family, believing it to be a family systems problem.

## Bibliotherapy

McInnis (1982) presented the use of bibliotherapy as an intervention to assist stepchildren in dealing with their stress. According to Schrank (1982), bibliotherapy is defined as supervised reading specifically designed to assist individuals in gaining insight and finding solutions to their problems through the use of stories.

Using bibliotherapy as an intervention is therapeutic because it assists children to emotionally react and identify with the significant character in the story. As a child identifies with the story, he/she projects his/her own meaning into the motives of the characters and assesses the relationship between the characters. When a child identifies and incorporates the moral into his/her own life, abreaction occurs. By identifying with the story, a child expresses pent-up feelings and catharsis takes place. As children see themselves in the story, they gain insight and integrate those new insights in their own situation (McInnis, 1982).

Group Counseling

Peer group counseling has been used to assist elementary students in dealing with death, divorce and stepfamily issues (Sonnenshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980). Peer groups are effective because the empathy expressed is based on common experience. In addition, peers serve as validation that children can and do survive difficult experiences. Such groups offer a blend of therapeutic group process and peer support.

Specific techniques which can be used in group counseling as described by Sonnenshein-Schneider and Baird (1980) include drawings, brainstorming, role playing, role rehearsal, slide tapes, movies, and puppets. Poppen and White (1984) suggested

the use of direct questions such as, "Other kids have felt...,
is it like that for you?" or "I am wondering if you ever....?"
Indirect methods of questioning, such as sharing a story or a
dream, and then asking the stepchild what that might mean for
the child in the example is another technique useful in group
counseling intervention (Poppen & White, 1984). Doing a
timeline with a stepchild is helpful in clarifying the
relationships within stepfamilies for both stepchildren and
the counselor (Poppen & White, 1984).

Individual Counseling

Prosen and Farmer (1982) proposed several ways that
counselors could intervene with stepchildren in their
transition into a new family system. They made three
assumptions about stepchildren: that these were normal
children reflecting a high stress environment, that the
approach to working with these children should be one of
problem solving, focusing on feelings, communications, and
interaction processes, and that the emphasis in counseling is
on reality issues.

Three intentional interventions by the counselor were
recommended by Prosen and Farmer (1982). Alerting the school
staff to situations unique to stepfamilies and adapting to
those needs by making certain that notices of conferences and
invitations to school events were given to children for all

parents, is one kind of intervention. Another focus is on the child, such as encouraging teachers to include discussions of stepfamilies in social studies units or meeting the child's needs through small group counseling sessions (Kaplan, 1977). The third intervention can be carried out with stepparents. By forming educational outreach programs, it is hoped that stepparents will also become aware of the complex issues and develop coping skills for stepfamily living. These programs are preventative and informative, as well as remedial in nature (Prosen & Farmer, 1982).

Stepfamily Curriculums

Designed to provide a framework for counselors in working with stepfamilies to clarify expectations, understand the problems they may be experiencing and learn new skills to enhance their family life, Currier developed a useful stepfamily curriculum. Prosen and Farmer (1982) believed that school counselors implementing curriculum of this nature for stepparents would not only strengthen remarriages, but decrease the anxieties of stepchildren. Two adult curriculums for stepfamilies are: Learning to step together: A course for stepfamily adults prepared for the Stepfamily Association of America by Currier (1982) and Stepfamilies: A guide to working with stepparents and stepchildren by Visher and Visher (1979).

Conclusions

From this review of literature it is evident that stepchildren do encounter unique stressors. They are categorized in a number of areas as described in this paper. Experiencing loss is common to stepchildren. Some stepchildren have problems coping with being members of two households and experiencing divided loyalties. Seeing themselves as being discriminated against by stepparents is a common perception. Accepting discipline and nurturance from a stepparent is another common difficulty. Stepchildren also encounter unique sexuality issues and face emotional adjustments.

There are a variety of counseling interventions available for counselors to use in assisting stepchildren to adjust to their changed family situations. Included in this paper are various individual and group interventions to be used directly with the stepchild or on his behalf with teachers, parents, and stepparents.

While stepchildren have ben identified as having some unique stressors, there is no indication that stepfamilies are worse or better than nuclear families. They are just different (Strother & Jacobs, 1984). A stepchild who makes a successful adjustment in a stepfamily may benefit by becoming more adaptable and flexible (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Burchinal (1964) stated that benefits would be derived from studying healthy stepfamilies. Twenty years later there have been few research studies concerned with stepfamilies, fewer with stepchildren's issues, and almost none which evaluate counseling interventions and their effectiveness with stepchildren's issues. The myths of stepfamilies must be dispelled and educators must be cautious not to blame normal, developmental difficulties of growing up on the type of family in which a child lives (Strother & Jacobs, 1984).

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