

1993

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Randy O. Morris
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

Statistics show that children of blended families are a rapidly growing population in schools. Some demographers predict that as many as one-third of all children born in the 1980's may live with a stepparent before they are 18 (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1990). School personnel have predominantly related to students' families under the assumption that all two-parent families were nuclear, intact, biological families. There is a need for schools to make adjustments to acknowledge the existence of the growing number of stepchildren and blended families in society (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). 1 Writers differ in their definition of blended families. A definition for blended families, according to Nichols and Schwartz (1991) is, "Separate families united by marriage; stepfamilies" (page 589). A stepchild is defined as a child whose biological parent has married someone other than the child's other biological parent.

SCHOOLS AND THE BLENDED FAMILY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Randy O. Morris

December 1993

Statistics show that children of blended families are a rapidly growing population in schools. Some demographers predict that as many as one-third of all children born in the 1980's may live with a stepparent before they are 18 (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1990). School personnel have predominantly related to students' families under the assumption that all two-parent families were nuclear, intact, biological families. There is a need for schools to make adjustments to acknowledge the existence of the growing number of stepchildren and blended families in society (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989).

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The blended family is a special unit, different from other varieties of family. By comparison with traditional families it has unique structural characteristics. Visher and Visher (1988) offered their definition: "a household in which there is an adult couple at least one of whom has a child from a previous relationship. . .[These are] households in which the children may reside for periods of time varying from none to full time" (page 285).

Blended families include couples who may not be legally married, but who do have a significant commitment to one another. The couple, legally married or not, is the focal point of the blended family, and marital commitment (or lack of

it) will dramatically affect the development of the family unit (Martin & Martin, 1992).

Visher and Visher (1988), who have done extensive study of blended families, found unique conditions that are a source of stress for members of blended families. Some writers (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991) have found characteristics of blended families that could be conflict-producing. The period of time required for successful adjustment for blended families is likely to take several years (Visher & Visher, 1988) and possibly this adjustment may take up to seven years (Martin & Martin, 1992).

The school may well be the single stable environment that can provide a source of nurturance and continuity to support children at times of family disruption (Goldman & King, 1985; Tedder, Scherman, & Wantz, 1987). The school can provide assistance on a regular basis for a major part of the year. Because children are grouped by age, this provides a unique opportunity for small group work and classroom guidance.

The purpose of this research is to review the literature to find what resources are available to help teachers, counselors, and administrators in assisting children of blended families in their successful adjustment to the school environment. The rise in the numbers of children in blended families, the unique issues they encounter, and the amount of time required for successful adjustment are all factors for the school--teachers, counselors, and administrators--to address in meeting the needs of children of blended families.

Research has shown that school-based interventions can help children of blended families (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). The majority of school-based interventions with children of blended families have focused on small, time-limited, structured support groups conducted by counselors (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). However, a preliminary review of the literature found few structured programs designed specifically for children in blended families. The significance of this literature review is that it may increase awareness of the special needs of children of blended families, provide for the development of plans for interventions with school-aged children of blended families, and to identify resources which may be helpful to school teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Demographic Data

Visher (1988) predicted that by the time today's children in the United States reach age 18, 45% will live, at least part of the time, in a divorced family. Glick (1989) reported that 17.4% of households with children under age 18 are blended families, and 12.7% of children under age 18 living in married families are in blended families. Census reports predict that by the year 2000, there will be more blended families than intact biological families (Glick, 1989).

Demographic statistics may underestimate the number of children in blended family networks because they may not include children who have stepparents in the households of their nonresidential parents, children who have stepparent figures who are not legally married to their biological parent, or children in the

first marriage of previously unwed parents (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). Children from these families would presumably have similar needs to those of children contained in blended family households that are included in the census data.

The tremendous increase in the numbers of children in blended families has been caused by an increase in both divorce and remarriage rates. Fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce (Wise, 1986), and a high percentage of these divorces involve children (Barney, 1990). Five of six divorced men remarry, and three of four divorced women remarry; 60% of these have children (Visher & Visher, 1988). The time between the divorce and remarriage of a mother with children averages less than three years, and 15% of children of divorced parents acquired a stepparent within a year (Glick, 1989). Even blended families may not be lasting; second marriages end in divorce at a rate of 60% (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1990). Many of these second marriages end in the first five years. According to Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1989), a sizable number of children will become members of blended families (usually stepfather and biological mother) for a limited time followed by another divorce.

Although 90% of blended families are formed after the divorce of two living biological parents (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989; Glick, 1989), another group of children in blended families is comprised of those who acquire a stepparent after the death of a biological parent. This is a small percentage of children but still significant to the issues of blended families and the school.

Blended family statistics vary for various racial and ethnic groups. There is little research on blended families among ethnic and racial minorities (Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Each group has its own unique stresses, values, attitudes, customs, and expectations of family members which affect members of blended families. This literature review contains research based primarily on white, middle class families in the United States.

Characteristics of Blended Families

An understanding of the characteristics that are sources of stress for children in blended families is essential for those who desire to help them cope effectively with the changes in their lives (Poppen & White, 1984). Blended families are families under stress (Martin & Martin, 1992). Most blended families start out with a painful history of loss, involving either death or divorce (Barney, 1990). Each blended family member has a different family history and traditions that may be in conflict with another member's ideas of roles, rights, and responsibilities.

The most common combination of adults in blended families is that of the biological mother with a stepfather (Martin & Martin, 1992). This combination appears with such frequency because women are awarded custody of children in 85 to 90 percent of divorces (Glick, 1989). Families with a biological mother and a stepfather tend to have less stress than do blended families having a female stepparent, or those with children from previous marriages of both adults (Martin & Martin, 1992).

In blended families, the adjustment comes primarily after the family is formed (Beer, 1992). Most children in blended families have spent a period of time living with a single parent and this parent-child relationship predates the remarried couple's relationship. This may cause a rivalry between stepparent and the child for the attention and affection of the child's parent.

Incongruities between different developmental stages of the individual members and the evolving marital and family life cycle are another source of stress in the blended family. The idea of stages of family life was first introduced in 1957 by Evelyn Duvall (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991). Carter and McGoldrick (1988) have incorporated this approach into their developmental outline of the phases and issues of family life which occur with divorce, in the post-divorce family, and in the remarried family. In each phase, the family must renegotiate and reorganize before restabilization can take place (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991). Developmental stages influence behavior and goals, and tension is produced when these are not congruent (Martin & Martin, 1992). Blended families may become large and complex through multiple marriages and liaisons; but, regardless of size, the tendency toward instability is always present (Visher & Visher, 1988; Martin & Martin, 1992). There is great variety in the patterns of blended family households. Such issues as boundary setting and role definition are not the same in all blended families and may be very unclear. According to Visher and Visher (1988), "much of this may be caused by stepfamily ambiguity," inherent complexity, and lack of fit with

cultural norms of the "ideal" family (p. 15).

With remarriage, there are changes in roles and functions of the family members which create uncertainty and anxiety for them (Visher & Visher, 1988). A lack of role clarity among the blended family members presents potential for conflict in the family. Conflict may escalate when stepsiblings have to share space, attend a new school, and find new friends. Older siblings may resent having their status or place in the family changed by the addition of new family members (Martin & Martin, 1992).

Perhaps the most difficult interpersonal challenge in blended families lies in developing a constructive relationship between parents and children (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). This includes renegotiating the relationship with the biological custodial parent and establishing a new relationship with the stepparent. The relationship is different between stepparent and the stepchild. Family members experience considerable confusion and ambivalence about what the relationship between these two should be. Research findings suggest that this relationship ambiguity is reflected in such problematic family processes as less cohesiveness, poorer communication and parental discipline, less control and monitoring, and more disengagement on the part of the stepparent (Hetherington, 1988, 1989; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

The child's age at the time of remarriage influences how relationships are formed. Children under five and those over eighteen assimilate into remarriage

more easily than do children between those ages according to Sager (Sager, Brown, Crohn, Engel, Rodstein, and Walkder, 1983). In a study by Hetherington (1985), children aged 9-15 were found to do the poorest in adapting to new family settings. Stepdaughters between the age of 10 and 18 seem to have more difficulty with parental remarriage than do stepsons (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989; Visher & Visher, 1988).

The preceding review of literature about blended family characteristics shows that there is potential for multiple problems for stepchildren, with some relating to unresolved difficulties of the past and others concerning the new family structure. The extent to which children have worked through their losses and the nature of their adaptation to change in the family will influence their acceptance of remarriage and the new challenges it brings (Beer, 1992). This adaptation to change will also influence the success these children will attain in school.

Stereotyping of Children in the Schools

Blended, step, reconstituted, binuclear, remarried-- these labels for blended families illustrate fact that most school districts' registration forms do not include space for stepparents' names, phone number and that the law is unclear concerning the parental authority in a blended family (Barney, 1990).

Research on the stereotyping of children by Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence Ganong (1987) concluded that, in four different studies focusing on the stereotyping of blended families, respondents (including college students,

nurses, and professional helpers as counselors) viewed stepparents, stepchildren, and the blended family in general as less loving, less stable, more problematic, and less well-cared-for than nuclear families. Other researchers (Barney, 1990; Beer, 1992; Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989) indicated society attempts to avoid dealing with these new families in the same manner as intact families.

School textbooks scatter a few images about single-parent families but noticeably fail to mention blended or stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). Until recently, schools have not taken a position of requesting that publishers expand family images and texts to include blended or stepfamilies.

More obvious bias toward children of blended families was found in a study of the attitudes of counselors and social workers (Bryan, Ganong, Coleman, & Bryan, 1985). Presented with written descriptions of family members (in which family structure was identified as either intact family or stepfamily), subjects rated stepchildren and stepparents more negatively than they rated children and parents from intact families.

Through hard work and courage, blended families have established themselves as strong and thriving family units (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). It was believed by some researchers that a significant number of school teachers, counselors, and administrators consistently made negative comparisons between the blended family and the "real" family (Barney, 1990; Glick, 1989). The common characteristics of families are caring for children and the love between

adults (Barney, 1990). It was pointed out by many authors, including Barney (1990), Beer (1992), Glick (1989), and Visher and Visher (1988) that it was important to understand that blended families and nuclear families are different. This did not mean that blended families were any less viable, but that they had their own history, their own unique composition, and their own peculiar challenges and that schools should recognize this difference. It was reported that awareness of the issues of the blended family by the school faculty and staff relieved many of the previously mentioned stresses on children of blended families. Schools have the responsibility not only of reflecting the society in which they operate but also of changing it when necessary to insure the fair treatment of all (Barney, 1990). Educators have initiated this change by dealing with their own negative stereotyping of blended families.

Stepchildren's Self-Concepts and Behavior

Family dynamics have been consistently identified in the research as important factors in the academic and behavioral adjustment of children and adolescents (Nicoll, 1992). Research by Nicoll has demonstrated the relationship between adolescent academic achievement and the affection, communication, and power structure patterns existing within the family system. Other researchers (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989; Featherstone, Cundick, & Jensen, 1992; Parish & Parish, 1992) have summarized the research on student achievement by stating that most studies indicate family variables affect achievement more than do school-related variables.

Some researchers prior to 1985 (Bernard & Nesbitt, 1981; Blechman, 1982) believed that being raised by one parent did not put a child at risk for psychological maladjustment. Both of these sources suggested that there was no evidence to support the view that children of blended families were hampered more emotionally than were children from intact families. Contrary to these findings, recent studies by researchers (Featherstone, Cundick, & Jensen, 1992) have found that students from intact families scored more positively on all the dependent variables (grade point average, absences, tardies, and citizenship) than did those from both the blended and single-parent families. Research has shown that individuals from intact families fare better academically than do those from families that have experienced the loss of a parent (Parish & Parish, 1991).

Few studies were found comparing the adjustment of children in blended families with those in first marriage families. Research by Fine and Kurdek (1992) found that students living with stepfathers had higher self-esteem and fewer reported social problems than those living with stepmothers. They also found that girls had higher grades and more health problems than boys. Studies (Coleman & Ganong, 1990) comparing the adjustment of children in blended families with those in first-marriage families were limited in accuracy because of potentially important differences between types of blended families and the fact that these studies have not addressed the processes within blended families that influence children's adjustment.

The preceding review of the literature about self-esteem and behavior was limited due to the lack of research in this area of the blended family. The research (Featherstone, Cundick, and Jensen, 1992) did indicate that students from intact two-parent families had fewer absences and tardies, higher grade point averages, and a higher self-concept than did those from blended and single-parent families.

Resources for Educators

During the 1980s, school systems across the country attempted interventions for children whose parents had divorced (Visher & Visher, 1988). These interventions ranged from informal "rap" groups to more formal structured programs. Most interventions were aimed at easing the stress children were going through and improving their self-concepts.

The focus of school-based interventions has been on small, time-limited, structured support groups conducted by counselors, social workers, or psychologists for children experiencing family change (Stepfamily Association of America, 1990). While researchers continue to develop effective group formats and curricula for these groups, studies have already documented that they can help children cope with family restructuring by modifying beliefs and attitudes about family change, teaching coping behaviors, reducing anxiety, reducing depression, and improving self-concept (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989).

The growing numbers of non-traditional families suggest that all children need to be sensitized to different family forms. Barney (1990) suggested that

instruction about types of family configurations and discussions of feelings about divorce and remarriage were appropriate preventive work for whole classrooms. Crosbie-Burnett and Pulvino (1990) have prepared a program for classroom guidance lessons about children in non-traditional families.

Nicoll (1992) suggested a need for increased understanding of the principles of family systems theory and family counseling intervention strategies for school counselors. He also stressed a need for familiarity with current family-based research including interventions with non-traditional family structures. Crosbie-Burnett and Skyles (1989) emphasized the importance of school counselors being knowledgeable about blended family issues and appropriate intervention strategies. An important function of the school counselor is knowing and using appropriate community resources for consultation, support services, and referrals (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989).

Group counseling was perceived as the most practical, efficient, and effective treatment mode for children of divorce (Yauman, 1991). Counseling groups helped reduce the feeling of isolation and shame that so many children experience and can provide valuable peer support. Such groups provided an opportunity for much needed and desired peer validation, as well as peer modeling of appropriate behavior and alternative ways of thinking and feeling.

Another effective resource for counselors to use in working with children in blended families are books concerning children's issues. Coleman and Ganong (1989) reviewed, rated, and annotated a list of self-help books for children in

blended families. The Stepfamily Association of America (1990) and Visher and Visher (1988) also provided book lists of recommended reading for blended family members. Bibliotherapy was a highly recommended form of intervention with children because it is often necessary to deal with the issues surrounding divorce or family stresses in an indirect manner (Yauman, 1991).

Working as a consultant to parents is another vital role of the school counselor. Interventions focus directly on helping parents stabilize the children's environments and communicate more effectively with their youngsters. Identifying local counselors, psychologists, and therapists who have training in blended family issues for purposes of referral and consultation was cited as a need (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989).

Crosbie-Burnett and Skyles (1989) recommended that counselors identify the significant parental figures of an individual student and include those figures in the assessment of the student's problem and in the intervention. They also recommended that counselors facilitate discussion groups for parental figures on school-related issues.

Teachers also can be important resources in preventive work with children in blended families. Researchers have emphasized the importance of educating faculty and staff to increase awareness of the critical issues of children in blended families (Barney, 1990; Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989).

It was found that teachers should work in the classroom to normalize the idea of the blended family (Barney, 1990). All kinds of families must be talked

about: traditional, those with parents living apart, single-parent, those with custodial grandparents, foster families, adoptive families, and blended families. Books were found to help children feel comfortable with these concepts. It was suggested by Barney (1990) that the school librarian set up a display during "Family Week" or create an area in which children can find these books and materials.

It was cited that all communications, especially from teachers, recognize the diversity of students' family situations (Barney, 1990). Invitations to special events and projects intended for parents should, as a matter of course, be phrased and distributed in a way that takes into account all kinds of parental roles- so that, for example, duplicates are provided for children with several sets of parents.

Another essential task cited by Barney (1990) was to train teachers to become aware of the dynamics of forming a new family. This is important because a child may experience various reactions to the remarriage of a parent. Therapists advise teachers that the classroom is the one place a child who is exhibiting stress linked with changes in the family may feel secure in his or her relationship to an adult (Barney, 1990; Beer, 1992; Crosbie-Burnett & Pulvine, 1990).

The involvement of administrators is essential to lend support to counseling programs for children of blended families, to ensure participation by teachers, and to encourage the school-involvement of parents. Crosbie-Burnett and Skyles

(1989) listed a number of ways in which administrators can affect school policies regarding student data forms, school-to-home communications, report cards, parent conferences, access to school records, and inclusion of non-residential parents and/or stepparents in school events. Administrators can also play a role in the selection of curriculum materials which include all family structures (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). Another intervention was to discourage use of negative language like "broken home," reconstituted family," "real mothers," and "having no father." Teachers and other school personnel are powerful models for children regarding how to perceive the world. A means of presenting this information was to make workshops on family structure available to all school personnel and to provide incentives for them to attend.

Summary

This paper has provided a review of the literature regarding children of blended families in the schools and has identified resources and interventions to assist the teachers, counselors, and administrators in establishing an effective program for children of blended families. Children enter another stage of family life when parental remarriage occurs, when an unmarried parent marries, or when a parent marries someone other than the child's biological parent. Even though a child may have received counseling services during the divorce or grief process, there are new issues of concern when a parent remarries. Researchers have identified many issues, have dealt with a significant number of children, and have developed a skeleton as a beginning for a comprehensive model for school

counseling services for children of blended families. The review of this literature has provided a need for awareness to the issues facing children of blended families in schools and the importance for the development of strategies essential to the success of these children in the school setting.

The issues of blended families occur within the contexts of the family system and the school setting. Therefore, an effective model would include collaboration among school teachers, counselors, administrators, and parental figures. Educational programs concerning blended families may be presented to faculty and staff to educate and promote awareness of these important issues. These programs would include awareness of stereotyping, special needs, and interventions for blended families. The support of the school administration is essential to developing specific school policies and programs which are void of bias toward non-traditional families.

Resources were identified to assist teachers, counselor, and administrators in developing a program and plan of action which addresses the many issues of children who live in non-traditional families. Research has shown that schools can have a powerful effect on children. Second only to the family, schools are the most influential institution in the lives of children. Policies and practices that demean or ignore the unique aspects of blended families have an adverse impact on a growing proportion of students-- stepchildren. Research indicates that new policies need to be developed to provide an environment of acceptance and inclusion for children of blended families within the educational community.

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