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Emotional Reactions of Children to Remarriage

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

About one-half of marriages in the United States end in divorce, including families with children. Eighty percent of the men and 60 to 75% of women will remarry (Hetherington, 1989; Zill, 1988). Although some adults will remarry shortly after the divorce of the spouse, most will remarry between two and five years after the divorce (Zill, 1988). Garfield (1982) states that 80% of adults remarry after three years of divorce as it takes about two to four years to completely mourn the loss of the marriage. The adults are able to work through their grief, and remarry in order to receive personal fulfillment, and/or to improve their lives. Adults mourn when they divorce, whether or not they initiate the action. They experience anger and will argue with the spouse or blame them for the failed marriage (Garfield, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Sager, C. J., Brown, H. S., Crohn, H., Engel, T., Rodstein, E., & Walker, L., 1983). Some adults are shocked that they are experiencing a divorce and will often try to deny the reality of the situation (Garfield, 1982). Most adults experience depression and sadness over the divorce. Others are able to experience the divorce as a new beginning and

are able to begin dating earlier (Garfield, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Many adults make the decision to improve their lives by remarrying. They may remarry to gain a partner or to have another adult involved with their children.

Children experience loss in the divorce as well, and mourn the loss, but may not complete their mourning in the same manner or at the same rate as their parents. Children may struggle for many years to complete the mourning of the loss of the biological family (Papernow, 1984). When one or both parents remarry, the children may not perceive it as a positive experience or change in their lives. When a parent makes the decision to remarry, they decide on the basis of their own personal well-being, and often with little or no consideration for the children (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989).

Estimates show that 25 to 35% of children will live in a stepfamily of some form (Hetherington, 1989; Brand, E., Clingempeel, W. G., & Bowen-Woodward, K., 1988). The prefix "step" in the original derivation means loss from bereavement (Dukes, 1989; Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985; Herndon & Combs, 1982). When the word stepfamily was first coined, stepfamilies were formed through the death of a parent, usually the mother. Today, stepfamilies are formed from divorce as well as death. The word "stepfamily" brings images of evil stepmothers as in the fairy tales

'Cinderella' and 'Hansel and Gretel' (Poppen & White, 1984). There are other words that have been coined such as remarried families, reconstituted families and blended families to remove some of the negative stigma from stepfamilies and to help them be seen as another family type. The fact that stepfamilies are created mostly from divorce complicates the situation. The parents divorce, but children are unable to emotionally divorce from their parents. Stepfamilies can include both biological parents and/or biological siblings, as well as stepparents and/or stepsiblings.

The challenge of living in a stepfamily for all members is the addition of people to the family, as stepfamilies require that people join with each other to form one unit or family (Hetherington, 1989; Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). Unlike a biological family, stepfamilies do not share previous history, traditions or habits (Schwartzberg, 1987; Poppen & White, 1984; Herndon & Combs, 1982; Miller, 1985). They must negotiate rules and roles, and must work out living arrangements and visitations (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). Living in a stepfamily can often be a positive experience, but initially, it is often a difficult experience.

The research that examines the psychological effect of children living in stepfamilies is conflicting. Ganong and Coleman (1984) conducted a review of the empirical research

on stepfamilies and concluded that most of the literature did not find significant differences in the adjustment of children in stepfamilies when compared to intact nuclear families. They conducted a follow-up review with both empirical and clinical research and found that the two types of research yielded different results (Ganong & Coleman, 1986). The empirical research in the second review also found that stepchildren did not differ significantly from children in intact families. The clinical research was focused on case studies, literature reviews and clinical impressions. The findings seemed to indicate that living in a stepfamily was stressful and caused significant problems for stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1986). Although the review has some flaws, it accurately describes the problems found in research in stepchildren.

The conflicting conclusions in the research may be because of the various aspects of stepfamily living that have been examined. Studies observe school performance and academic performance, acting out behaviors in the home as rated by parents, both the quality and quantity of visitations with non-custodial parents, and effects on the marital relationship. Ganong and Coleman (1986) in their follow-up review stated that research had focused on: psychological adjustment, including effects on self-esteem, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, and loss; family relations, including the relationships with both biological parents and

stepparents, sibling relationships, and conflicts of loyalty; social behavior, including acting out and behavioral problems; cognitive functioning, including academic performance and intelligence testing. Despite the variety of topics studied on stepchildren, no general conclusions can be drawn on the effects of living in a stepfamily.

Although the research is inconclusive, empirical researchers as well as clinicians tend to agree upon the effect of loss in divorce as it relates to a child's psychological adjustment, and relationships with family members. The parental divorce brings on the loss of the nuclear family, and affects the relationship with the noncustodial parent. Divorce can also bring physical changes such as moving and/or attending a new school and financial resources may be lessened.

When one or both parents remarry, children can again experience a sense of loss. Throughout marital separation and divorce, children dream that their biological parents will reunite and remarry. After remarriage, children experience the loss of the dream of reunion. Children may spend significant time living in a single-parent household. Children develop a special bond with single parents that is lost or broken when the parent remarries. Children may also experience a loss of visitation with non-custodial parents. If the stepparent also has children, then relationships with

stepsiblings form, and children can experience loss of birth order, sex ratio, and physical space in the household.

Importance of study

A review of the current research on stepfamilies seems important because of the increase of stepfamilies in society and the increase of stepfamilies that will be seen by clinicians in agencies. Stepfamilies are different from intact nuclear families and will need different interventions or goals for treatment. Clinicians should know the "normal" stages or issues that occur in stepfamilies in order to work with stepfamilies and to serve as consultants in the community and school systems. While the literature on stepfamilies is inconclusive, many researchers agree that all members of stepfamilies experience loss and that this loss must be openly addressed. They also agree that members of stepfamilies enter with different expectations and that therapy can help members to resolve these differences. Stepfamilies can also be more challenging if the divorced biological parents do not cooperate around coparenting issues. Because of these and other issues that are somewhat unique to stepfamilies, this paper attempts to summarize the research in order to help clinicians to understand these characteristics and to develop skills and interventions to work with stepfamilies. A discussion on attachment and loss will begin the paper because in order to understand the loss experienced by

stepfamily members, attachment theory and separation anxiety must be understood. It is the loss of an attachment figure that children experience with the death or divorce of a parent, and these feelings often resurface upon the remarriage of one or both parents. A discussion of children's reactions to divorce will also be included because children often deny the feelings of divorce and these feelings resurface after remarriage.

Procedure

This paper will review the literature on the psychological effects of living in a stepfamily on children and will attempt to describe the affects of loss in children from birth to age eighteen from being in a stepfamily, as it is deemed important by clinicians as well as empirical researchers. Only literature that deals specifically with affects of remarriage, the psychological adjustment of children, and/or relationships with biological and/or stepparents are included from the years 1979-1991. Articles for the review were located on the Psych Lit., Sociofile, and ERIC computer searches. Books were located through the LUIS computer system. An attempt was made to order and collect all articles pertaining to the adjustment of children. Unpublished works were not included in the review. Also, studies that involved self-reports from college students or adults on their lives as stepchildren were excluded from the review.

Outline for paper

The second chapter of this paper will explain the theory of attachment and separation as a precursor for understanding loss. Theories on mourning and grieving over the loss of loved ones to death will also be included. The reactions of children to divorce will be summarized as many children in stepfamilies are forced to face grief from divorce that had been suppressed when the parents remarry.

The third chapter will focus specifically on the reactions of children to remarriage. The first section will review empirical research by age and gender of children. The second section will focus on four areas of loss identified in the literature. These areas are the loss of the dream of reunion, the loss of the role in the single-parent family, the loss of visitation with the non-custodial parent, and the loss of birth order and sex ratios as related to stepsibling relationships.

The fourth chapter will focus on interventions and techniques for therapists working with stepfamilies. The chapter includes four treatment issues formulated around the issues of loss. The usefulness of individual, group, couples, and family therapy will also be explored. Finally, the chapter will include techniques and exercises useful for stepfamilies. The fifth chapter will serve as a summary and will explore future areas of research for stepfamilies.

CHAPTER II

ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

This chapter will describe Bowlby's theory of attachment and separation anxiety. Bowlby feels that infants and young children need to form attachments to their caregivers in order to form attachments with others. Young children experience separation anxiety but are able to work through it with their parents if the parents are responsive to the children and the children can be assured of the parents presence. The chapter will also include Kubler-Ross's stages of grieving as well as other models of grieving for children. The final section will summarize the reactions of children to divorce.

Attachment

The loss of a loved one is very painful and can cause great psychological harm if the loss is unresolved. The pain of loss can be experienced only if the skills of forming true attachments to people are developed. Attachment behavior has been defined as behavior that has the predictable outcome of keeping an important figure in close proximity (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1982; Maccoby, 1980), and the behavior can be observed in people across the life-span, especially when in emergencies

or in extreme distress (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982). Affectional bonds that form between children and an attachment figure or between two adults are long-lasting, and the partner in the bond is seen as unique and irreplaceable with any other person (Ainsworth, 1989).

The development of attachment and trust in others is the first task for an infant. Infants develop attachments to caretakers by sending signals that alert the caregivers when the infants are distressed, hungry, or want to be held and cuddled. Caretakers respond to the signals, and perform behaviors that further develop the attachment. Mothers respond to infants and engage in baby talk that stimulates the infant to stay attuned to the mother, and both infants and their caretakers engage in eye contact. If an infant is removed from an attachment figure or a pattern of development does not allow the infant to become attached, the infant may be impaired from forming other attachments. It is the healthy formation of attachments in infants and young children that allow adults to form attachments.

Newborns display attachment behaviors by crying when they are distressed (Ainsworth, 1989). When they are first born, they will accept comfort and feeding from anyone. Between four and six months, infants are able to discriminate between people and actively perform behaviors to maintain proximity to the attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969; Maccoby, 1980). At four months, the

infants add smiling to their behaviors when the caregiver returns. At six months, they cry when the attachment figure leaves the room, can turn their heads and follow the person with their eyes, and can reach for and cling to the person (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969). By nine months, they are beginning to crawl and make attempts to follow the caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). Maccoby (1980) states that infants and/or toddlers are attached when they seek to be near a person, show distress upon separation, express joy and relief upon the caregivers return, and become oriented toward the attachment figure by listening for the person's voice, watching his/her movements, and directing behavior towards the attachment figure.

Around three years, children begin to feel comfortable in situations without the caregiver being present (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby 1969). Bowlby (1969) states that in order for children to feel secure in staying with a stranger, they must have become comfortable with the person while the caregiver was around, the children must be healthy, and must know where the caregiver is and that the caregiver will return. Children at this time have cognitive perspective-taking skills, can anticipate movement of the parents and can plan behaviors to maintain proximity (Ainsworth, 1989).

During latency or school age, children display attachment behaviors less frequently, but clinging and

running for safety to caregivers can be observed when children are frightened (Bowlby, 1969). Adolescence brings a shift in the attachment. Some adolescents reject their parents while others maintain a strong attachment bond with their parents (Bowlby, 1969). During this stage, adolescents begin to become interested in the opposite sex and form attachments with people outside of the family. Attachment bonds with parents continue through adulthood, and adults form bonds with significant others as well as with their children (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969).

Separation Anxiety

When the attachment figure is not within close proximity, distress and anxiety are often experienced. Separation anxiety is the fear of losing and/or becoming separated from the attachment figure. The attachment figure does not have to leave the room, or close proximity for anxiety to be invoked. The fear of losing the person can arouse enough anxiety for the person to become distressed because of the increased risk of loss (Bowlby, 1982). Young children, around two to three years, become aware of signs of impending departure of the caregiver. They may notice that the caregiver is getting dressed, or that the baby-sitter has arrived and that will cause them to cry and display attachment behaviors (Bowlby, 1969). Older children often become angry at the threat of separation (Bowlby, 1982). Mourning occurs after the actual loss of an

attachment figure.

Reactions to Loss from Death

Separating is sometimes difficult within normal development, but is often traumatic when the individual is suddenly removed from the individual's life through death. Many studies have examined the psychological effects of death on individuals. Kubler-Ross (1969) studied patients with terminal diseases and their families reaction to the impending death and then developed five stages of grief. The first stage, denial, serves to protect the person from the pain of death, and for the loved one, the pain of separation. The second stage includes anger, rage, resentment, and envy. The anger from the patient can be aimed at doctors, the illness, family members, or others that are healthy. Anger from the family can also be directed at many sources, including themselves for not being able to help. Bargaining occurs in the third stage in which the person enters an agreement that postpones the inevitable, like promising to live better, or to attend church. The family members also try to make arrangements to postpone the death. Depression occurs in the fourth stage as the patient and the family realizes the extent of the illness. The fifth stage is the acceptance of death. The stages do not occur in an exact order, signs of several stages may be present at once, and people may experience each of the stages at several times (Kubler-Ross, 1969).

Jewett (1982) describes three phases of grief for children. In phase one, children experience shock and numbing, alarm, and denial. They go through their daily routine mechanically, are panicky, develop insomnia and phobias, display hyperactivity, or act as if nothing has changed. In phase two the children experience acute grief. They experience yearning and pining, searching for the loved one, disorganization, despair and other strong feelings. Children at this stage pine for the person, try to make arrangements for his/her return, and/or wait impatiently for the return. They have strong feelings of guilt, sadness, anger, and shame. They become disorganized and seem unable to follow their usual daily routine. At the end of this phase, children begin to reorganize. The third phase includes integration of the loss and grief (Jewett, 1982).

About five percent of children in the United States lose one or both parents to death by the age of fifteen (Lehman, Lang, Wortman, & Sorensen, 1989). Children grieve in a manner that is similar to adults, but may express their grief differently (Krupnick & Solomon, 1987). Children's reaction to death also depends on their chronological age and cognitive development (Krupnick & Solomon, 1987; Jewett, 1982). Young children in the preoperational stage believe that they caused the death. They have "magical thinking" and believe that what they think can actually happen. Many express sorrow for the thoughts that killed the loved one.

Children at this stage do not understand that death is irreversible and often engage in behaviors that will return the loved one, like working harder in school or helping around the house (Jewett, 1982; Bowlby, 1969). Children in the concrete stage are better able to understand the death, but take things literally. They believe that sleep causes death or that if a person is killed in an accident that they are destroyed. They often have gruesome and destructive images towards death. Children at this stage also begin to understand that they will die. Once adolescents reach the formal operations stage they can begin to realistically understand death (Jewett, 1982).

Krupnick and Solomon (1987) describe similar reactions of grief in children. The years that cause the highest risk for children experiencing loss is six months to four years and early adolescence (Krupnick & Solomon, 1987). Mishne (1984) states that kids often fantasize about the dead parent. Children who have experienced the death of a parent also may feel inferior to children in intact nuclear families (Mishne, 1984).

One study examined the self-reports of parents on the adjustment and reactions of children to the sudden death of a parent or a sibling (Lehman, et al., 1989). The authors hypothesized that the sudden loss of a parent is difficult to deal with and that sometimes grief can cause long-term problems. The parents reported that the children adjusted

negatively to the death of a parent, and that they displayed signs of depression and anxiety. In fact, almost half of the parents (47%) reported that the children had severe reactions to the death, including suicidal ideations or attempts (Lehman, et al., 1989). Many parents felt that their own grieving was influential for the children and that many times the duration of grief exhibited by the children was a direct response to the parent's grief. The authors indicate that following the death of a parent survivors must deal with their own individual grief as well as grieving as a family unit (Lehman, et al., 1989).

Reactions to divorce

Children, especially school age and adolescents, respond to the separation and divorce of their parents and grieve as if a parent had died (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Divorce may be more difficult for children because they are still psychologically attached and involved with the parents (Mishne, 1984).

Children experience loss in the divorce. They experience the loss of time with the noncustodial parent. Children will often experience the loss of time with the custodial parent who may be busy with his/her own adjustment to the divorce (Jacobson & Jacobson, 1987). The experience of divorce causes the primitive fear of separation and abandonment from both parents. Jacobson and Jacobson (1987) point out that often the parents response to divorce affects

the children. Often one parent will be caught by surprise in the request for divorce from their partner and may show some ambivalence to the divorce which is often confusing to young children. If the conflict between parents is high, children will have problems with loyalty (Jacobson & Jacobson, 1987).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) conducted a longitudinal study of children in divorced families and followed them from the time of the original divorce or separation for ten years. The authors were the first to categorize the reactions of children to divorce by age groups. They interviewed children and parents to determine the adjustment of each family member to divorce.

Preschool children often regress, they cling to the custodial parent (usually the mother in this sample) and fear abandonment. Regression behaviors include bedwetting, thumb sucking, and the use of security blankets. The children often create gruesome fantasies to explain the absence of one parent, and fantasize about the reunion of the parents. They become irritable and blame themselves for the loss (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Young school-age children, ages six to eight years, display their grief through intense sadness and crying. They also have a fear of abandonment which extends to personal objects and food being removed from them. These children display an intense longing for the absent parent

and often idealize them. The anger they feel is toward the custodial parent for driving away the other parent. Young school-age children participate actively in the parental arguments. Young school-age children also blame themselves for the divorce. Older school-age children, ages nine to twelve, have strong feelings of shame. As opposed to the younger children getting involved in the arguments, older school-age children work actively to reconcile the parents. Older school-age children often have somatic symptoms, complaining of headaches and stomach aches (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

It is unclear as to whether the response of adolescents is a reaction to the divorce itself or is simply part of the developmental stage of adolescents as some adolescents follow a regular pattern of development and others grow up too quickly and/or become parentified. They worry about the future and financial matters. Adolescents report feeling empty, sad and tearful, have difficulty concentrating, and sometimes feel fatigued. They are also more concerned with sexuality as they see their parents as sexual beings when the parents begin dating. Adolescents seem to have more coping skills for dealing with the divorce than younger children. They are able to remain out of the conflicts between parents, and can spend more time away from the family with peers (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Hetherington (1989) looked at the literature on

divorce and concluded that divorce affects boys greatly. They show more antisocial and acting out behavior, and coercive and noncompliant behavior. They have difficulties with peers and have poor school achievement. She also concludes that older children are more affected by divorce (Hetherington, 1989). Boys may have more difficulty adjusting to the divorce or may be able to express angry feelings around the divorce more easily than girls because parents expose boys more to arguing and/or open conflict. Girls experience depression when their parents divorce. Adolescent girls often become sexually active after a divorce, as they are dealing with their parents open sexuality when the single parents begin dating (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988).

Summary

The healthy development of attachment in infants and children allow adults to form attachments. Attachment behaviors allows one to keep an individuals in close proximity, and these behaviors can frequently be seen in infants and small children, and they are displayed by older children and adults in times of stress. The threat of separation or separation from the attachment figure can cause anxiety and sadness.

The actual loss of an attachment figure from death or divorce causes great distress in adults and children. Children show signs of anxiety, guilt, depression, and

anger. Stages of grief include denial, anger and rage, depression, bargaining, and acceptance, and are seen in children suffering loss from death or divorce. Depending on their age, children of divorce feel guilty about the divorce and/or try to reunite their parents. Boys tend to have stronger negative reactions to divorce, and school age children seem most effected.

CHAPTER III

REACTIONS TO REMARRIAGE

When one and/or both biological parents make the decision to remarry, they feel that they are making positive changes for their lives. The parents are often excited and eager for the children to have another adult in their life. Most children do not share in the happiness of the parent. In fact, the remarriage adds to the loss that the children experienced during the divorce of the biological parents and causes some children to face the loss of the divorce that had previously been denied.

Children in stepfamilies often experience grief over the breakup of their original family (Papernow, 1984; Herndon & Combs, 1982). Most children of divorced families long for and even try to arrange for the biological parents to reunite, and this dream of reuniting the family extends well into the remarriage and beginning stages of the stepfamily (Stanton, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Visher & Visher, 1979). During the divorce, the dream for reconciliation helps ease the pain of the divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children convince themselves that the divorce is a mistake and that their parents will realize their mistake and remarry.

In single parent homes, the child experiences the loss of attention from the parent as the parent is focusing energy into the new marriage. The children will also experience the loss of the role that they had in the single-parent family. With non-custodial parents, children may experience loss or reduction of visitation when the parent remarries. When the stepparent has children that they bring to the new marriage, the picture gets more complicated. The children will experience loss of birth order and changes in the sex ratio of the family (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985).

Clinicians tend to recognize the effects of mourning and grieving on the stepfamily more than empirical researchers. The researchers do not specifically test for loss or grieving despite the fact that many indicate the importance of allowing the child to express feelings of grief. This chapter will describe the four areas of loss for children in stepfamilies: dream of reunion; loss of role in single-parent family; loss of visitation and changes in relationship with non-custodial parents; loss of birth order, and difficulty with stepsiblings. The chapter will also include the psychological adjustment of stepchildren as reported in the research literature.

Reactions to Remarriage by Age

The empirical research done on stepchildren often focuses on specific age groups, and therefore the reactions

of children to remarriage can be categorized similarly to reactions to divorce. Gender differences can also be made. Generally, girls seem to have more difficulty adjusting to remarriage than boys, especially when living with stepmothers (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988). School-age children have more difficulties than younger children and adolescents. Young children, especially preschool age, seem to adjust quickly to remarriage and enjoy having the attention from another adult. Adolescents have stronger peer relationships outside of the house and can escape from the pressures of living in a stepfamily.

Preschool Age

There are few studies that focus on preschool children as the target age, perhaps because if the parents divorce while the child is an infant or preschool age, the child will be school age at the time that the parent remarries. The literature on preschoolers is clinical in nature. Preschool children have guilt feelings because they feel that they caused the first divorce (Visher & Visher, 1979; Hetherington, et al., 1989). Custody battles are difficult for preschoolers, but if parents can be civil, then the preschooler will easily accept the stepparent (Visher & Visher, 1979).

School-Age Children

School-age children, ages five to ten, find it easier to express anger and hostility than other age groups, and

may openly resent the stepparent. Parents report that there are more behavioral problems in this age group (Bray, 1988). The school-age children also experience guilt over the first divorce and believe that they can cause a second divorce. They are upset with having a new set of rules to follow in the household (Visher & Visher, 1979).

School-age boys.

Although school-age boys have difficulty adjusting to the stepfamily initially, parents report that their behavior improves over time (Hetherington, 1989). Boys have more difficulty with stepfathers because they feel that they must compete with them for the mother's attention. However, they are very receptive to stepmothers (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Some studies focus on the self-concept of children in remarried families. Parish (1987) found that boys in stepfamilies rated themselves significantly lower in self-concept than boys in intact families. Boys do not seem to have many difficulties in school. On the WISC-R, boys in stepfamilies scored lower in the verbal measure than boys in intact families, but had the highest overall scores of any group (Bray, 1988).

School-age girls.

School-age girls have more difficulty than boys in living in a stepfamily. Girls lose attention from the non-custodial father and compete with the stepmothers for attention. They also compete with the biological mother for

attention from stepfathers (Visher & Visher, 1979; Hetherington, 1989). Parents report that daughters display behavioral problems and acting out behaviors. Girls in stepfamilies tend to be more demanding, hostile, and display coercive behaviors. They also show less warmth to both the biological parents and the stepparents (Hetherington, 1989).

Girls also score lower on the verbal measure of the WISC-R (Bray, 1988). They also rate themselves lower on self-concept scales than girls in intact families (Parish, 1987). Girls in stepfamilies report high levels of stress from living in a stepfamily (Bray, 1988).

Early adolescents

Early adolescents, ages ten to thirteen, report feeling anxious, lonely, and insecure (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988). They are also vocal and able to express anger at both parents for the divorce and remarriage. Girls at this age are more behavioral problems for parents (Hetherington, 1989). Stepchildren at this age perceive both their stepfathers and their biological fathers less positively than children in intact families perceive their biological fathers (Halperin & Smith, 1983).

Early adolescent boys.

Boys at this age begin to have difficulty in school. They have problems with grades, and are retained in the same grade more often than boys in intact families. Boys in stepfamilies also have a higher drop-out rate in school

(Hetherington & Anderson, 1988). Peer relationships become increasingly more important for boys at this age (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1979).

Studies have focused on the relationships between boys and stepparents and the behaviors of boys. Clingempeel and Segal (1986) found that the proportion of positive behaviors towards stepmothers was negatively correlated with displays of aggression and inhibition as rated by the stepparents. In fact the total time in the stepfamily household for boys was negatively correlated with inhibition. Establishing a positive relationship with the stepparents may help boys to display less acting out behaviors in early adolescence (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986).

Early adolescent girls.

Girls have difficulties in stepfamilies during early adolescence because of issues around sexuality (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988). Early adolescent girls respond to the remarriage sometimes by becoming sexually active. They do not accept either stepmothers or stepfathers because of the openness of sexuality in the households. It is difficult for girls to experience either biological parent as a sexual being (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988).

Girls in early adolescence have difficulties with their stepmothers (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). If the marital relationship between the biological father and the stepmother is positive, then the

relationship between the stepmothers and stepdaughters is negative. The stepdaughters will also have lower psychological adjustment (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987). Girls seem to have loyalty conflicts between the stepmother and the non-custodial biological mother. If the daughters visit frequently with the biological mother, then the relationship with the stepmother is less positive, and the girls have lower self-concepts (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). Also, if visitation with the biological mother is frequent, girls perceive less love from the stepmothers (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986).

Adolescents

Adolescents appear to be the least affected by living in a stepfamily. This is because it is not clear if adolescents are undergoing regular adolescent transitions or are reacting to the remarriage. Adolescents react by withdrawing from the family (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Adolescents may have their own special reactions, however. Schwartzberg (1987) found that his clinical patients in remarried families experience loss, jealousy, competition with the stepparents, and loyalty conflicts. They also have confusion about household boundaries and roles and expectations placed on them by both the biological and stepparent. They are resentful of discipline instilled by the stepparents (Schwartzberg, 1987).

Lutz (1983) found similar results to Schwartzberg in

her clinical study. She asked adolescents in stepfamilies to rank order the stressors in their lives formed by stepfamilies, and conflicts in loyalty was found to be the most stressful. Adolescents feel that they are placed in the middle and must choose between the biological parents. A close second was discipline by the stepparents, especially the establishment and enforcement of rules. Adolescents are resentful of disciplining by stepparents because they are struggling to gain independence. Discipline by any parent is difficult for an adolescent in a stepfamily because they have grown more independent than their peers while living in a single parent home (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988). Social attitudes towards stepfamilies was least stressful for these adolescents. Adolescents with stepsiblings find living in a stepfamily stressful, and girls find living in a stepfamily more stressful than boys (Lutz, 1983). This may be because they are still struggling with issues of sexuality from early adolescence (Visher & Visher, 1979).

In a similar study, Strother and Jacobs (1984) asked a group of adolescents to rate stressors from living in a stepfamily. They found that the overall stress experienced by adolescents was not high. Adolescents in this study rated discipline as the highest stressor. The second stressor was the lack of visitation with the non-custodial parent. As in the Lutz study, social issues was least stressful (Strother & Jacobs, 1984).

When compared to children in intact families, children in stepfamilies feel that their stepfathers showed less adaptability, lower regard for the stepchildren, and less unconditionality. Stepdaughters seemed to feel the least amount of regard (Pink & Wampler, 1985).

Self-concept research has also been conducted on adolescents. Johnson and Hutchinson (1989) examined adolescents in intact nuclear families, divorced non-remarried families, and remarried families, and found that the adolescents did not rate their self-concept differently. However, adolescents in remarried families tended to attribute negative adjectives to themselves more often, such as lazy, mean and dumb (Johnson & Hutchinson, 1989).

Loss in Stepfamilies

Although there are some similarities and differences in the responses of children to stepfamilies across age groups, a sense of loss is universally felt (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Brand, et al., 1988; Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Fausel, 1986; Hetherington & Anderson, 1988; Hetherington, et al., 1989; Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985; Schwartzberg, 1987; Stanton, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979). Some of the loss that children experience from the previous marital dissolution is carried into the stepfamily as the remarriage accentuates the separation of the biological parents. Loss from remarriage occurs around the dream for

reunion, the loss of the single-parent home, loss of visitation, and changes from the addition of stepsiblings.

Dream for Reunion

Many clinicians state that children in divorce and remarriage live with the dream that their biological parents will remarry and that they will be a family (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Hetherington, et al., 1988; Visher & Visher, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Lewis, 1985; Stern, 1984). Following the divorce or even the marital separation, children begin to dream that their parents will get back together.

Visher and Visher (1979) explain that children have this fantasy because they do not understand the reasons for the parents divorce. Some parents go out of their way to avoid open conflict in front of the children. When this occurs, children feel very confused about the divorce. Their family does not seem like other families that are divorcing in which the parents scream and yell frequently. They have no reason to understand that the parents have chosen not to live together anymore and are often not reassured of the fact that the parents can still love them. These children feel extreme guilt over the divorce and feel that their behavior or an aspect of their personality caused the divorce. They dream of reunion in order to ease the guilt feelings and to help with the pain.

Younger children, who may lack the cognitive abilities

to understand divorce, long for reconciliation and work to get the parents together (Hetherington, et al., 1989). They will try to be "good" children, cooperate and follow household rules, may suddenly became helpers around the house and are well-behaved at school. When the parents remarry, the children may feel that they have failed in getting the parents together and may become depressed. Some children may instantly reject the stepparent and/or stepsiblings and hope that if they simply ignore them they will disappear. Other children worry that their behavior and/or actions will cause a second divorce after the parent remarries and try to remain uninvolved with the stepparent (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Children who lived with open conflict and violent situations often long for the reconciliation of the parents, although the divorce was easy to understand (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). These children are often frightened about the uncertainty of their future and long for the intact family because it is familiar. They may compare themselves to children in intact families and feel jealous (Mishne, 1984). These children may openly express their anger at one or both parents for not being able to keep the family together.

When the parents remarry, the children view the stepparents as trying to replace the previous parents and issues of divided loyalty arise (Visher & Visher, 1979; Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Schwartzberg, 1987; Ganong &

coleman, 1986; Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). Children often idealize the absent parent and compare the stepparent with the idealization (Kosinski, 1983). Children are likely to openly argue with their stepparents and refuse to follow their directions. These children may actively work towards breaking up the marriage of their biological parents and stepparents. In order for children to work through their loyalty issues, they must maintain a relationship with their biological parent while beginning a relationship with the stepparent (Visher & Visher, 1979).

When a parent abandons the family by deserting them, the children long for the parent and often idealize them (Mishne, 1984). Because they have no explanation for the abandonment, the children believe that the parent can return at any time. When the parents divorce, it is usually done quietly, with overt or covert hostility by the remaining parent. Because there is no explanation of the abandonment or the divorce, the children expect the family to reunite. In spite of the fact that the remaining parent (usually the mother) is distraught and depressed, the children may think that the remaining parent will gladly accept the deserting parent back into the household.

After remarriage occurs, the children will feel hurt and angry at the parents for abandoning the deserting parent and ruining the dream for reconciliation. The children will express their anger to the stepparents and try to drive them

from the family so that the deserting parent can return. They act out, do not follow rules or directions. These children often experience the loyalty conflicts also.

Loss of Single-parent Family

The average parent remarries after three years of divorce. This leaves the child living in a single-parent household for a number of years. The role of the child can change significantly when living with a single parent (Jacobson & Jacobson, 1987; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Hetherington & Anderson, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1979; Herndon & Combs, 1982). Parents following marital separation will confide in their children or seek comfort from them.

All children, but especially older children, assume more adult-like responsibilities around the house. They may cook, do more housecleaning, and older children may be left in charge of younger children (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The change in roles for the children is sometimes enjoyable for older children who can deal with their grief by becoming close friends with the custodial parent and/or protecting the younger children. The close bond between parents and children often forms because the children fear abandonment from the custodial parent (Hetherington, et al., 1989).

When the custodial parent remarries, children lose the special bond with the parent (Brand, et al., 1988;

Hetherington & Anderson, 1988; Visher, 1985; Schwartzberg, 1987; Sager, et al., 1983; Visher & Visher, 1979). Children in full custody with the mothers resent the loss of attention that is given their stepfather (Kosinski, 1983). The children may feel that they are in competition with the stepparent for attention given by the parent, for the role of confidant, and for responsibilities around the house (Coleman & Ganong, 1987a; Schwartzberg, 1987). The children feel threatened by the stepparent and may experience the fear of abandonment by the biological parent that had previously been repressed (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Gardner, 1984). The remarried adults may spend more time with the stepparents in order to have more solid marriages. The remarried parents may share some of the emotions and/or joy of being remarried with children, but may more appropriately share more intimate parts of their lives with their partner as opposed to their children. This may serve as a real loss to the children who were able to grow closer to the custodial parent by sharing their grief and emotions (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The stepparents also apply pressure to the biological parent to spend more time with them and exclude the children (Sager, et al., 1983).

Stepparents also may take responsibility for raising and disciplining the children (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987). Older children will lose their responsibility for looking

after the younger children. Older children will resent being disciplined by the stepparent and will resent having the responsibility taken away from them (Schwartzberg, 1987; Lutz, 1983; Strother & Jacobs, 1984; Stern, 1984).

Visitation

In optimal situations, children of divorce are able to have relationships with both parents and are able to visit with the non-custodial parent. In divorced families in which the parents are bitter, the children may be caught in intense custody battles, and visits with the non-custodial parent may be irregular. Most children wish to spend as much time with non-custodial parents as possible (Visher & Visher, 1979).

When either the custodial or non-custodial parent remarries, the relationship between the children and the non-custodial parent changes (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Brand, et al., 1988). Children often experience loss of visitation with the non-custodial stepparent. This can occur for different reasons. The biological parents may be unable to cooperate in order to arrange a visitation schedule (Strother & Jacobs, 1984). If the custodial parent remarries, they may request that the children spend more time in the stepfamily and less time visiting with the non-custodial parent in order to allow the stepfamily to bond. The non-custodial parent may decide to eliminate visitation because of the awkwardness in the situation

(Brand, et al., 1988). They may feel that the children are experiencing loyalty conflicts, or the non-custodial parent may be hurt and feel that the child prefers the stepparent.

If the non-custodial parent remarries, the visitations may cease. Studies show that the most difficulties occur in stepfamilies with visiting stepchildren as opposed to live-in stepchildren (Ambert, 1986; Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Hobart, 1989). Ambert (1986) found that over half of the stepparents with visiting stepchildren in her study reported that their marriages would be happier without the stepchildren. The biological parent may decide with the stepparent to limit the visitation in order to preserve the marriage (Brand, et al., 1988).

If stepsiblings are involved, the situation grows more complicated. In some families, the man may have natural children who live with the biological mother and he may marry a woman with children. The natural children may become resentful of the relationship developing between their father and stepsiblings, especially if the stepsiblings live with the father. Non-custodial stepparents may feel that their own natural children are jealous of the stepsiblings, there may be frequent fighting in the home, and the non-custodial parents may lessen visitation time to ease the conflicts. The non-custodial parent may feel that the children will benefit by decreased visitation (Visher & Visher, 1982). The natural children

will see this as a rejection and experience loss. A similar situation would occur with a non-custodial mother who marries a man with custody of his children.

Stepsibling Relationships

Stepfamilies are difficult for children and the relationship with parents can change significantly if a parent marries another divorced adult with children. There is often a great deal of stress found in stepsibling relationships, especially with boys who develop rivalries with stepsiblings and engage in arguments more frequently (Lutz, 1983; Hetherington, 1989; Kosinski, 1983). The addition of siblings with any family causes difficulties as children must adjust roles and birth order positions. The change in biological families is seen as natural and families can slowly adjust. The addition of stepsiblings is often abrupt and children will have to adjust to changes in birth order, sex ratio in families, and physical space in houses (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1979; Gardner, 1984; Wood & Poole, 1983).

Rosenberg and Hajal (1985) conducted an extensive study of stepsibling relationships. They found that when the parents remarry, the children in stepsibling relationships are expected to instantaneously get along with each other, in spite of having little time to adjust. The children will have a natural rivalry as they fight over the attention of their own biological parent and struggle with

issues of divided loyalties. The children will have to rework roles in the families as well as responsibilities and rights. This may be difficult if the two original families had extremely different rules and guidelines.

The children in stepfamilies with siblings experience a change or shift in birth order (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1979; Lewis, 1985). An only child will gain siblings and either become the oldest, the youngest, or fall in the middle. The youngest child in one family may become the older sibling of several stepsiblings and may gain responsibility in taking care of the siblings. The oldest child in a family may lose his position if the parent marries a person with older siblings. First-borns that lose their status as the oldest are likely to develop problems in the early stages of remarriage due to the loss of status and the youngest child will experience difficulties after the birth of a half-sibling (Lewis, 1985). Birth order affects personality and responsibilities in families and it may be difficult for children to adjust to their new responsibilities.

Stepsiblings will also have the same affect on the sex ratio in families (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). The only girl in the family will lose her status if her parent marries an adult with several girls. The single girl may have been treated as a princess or had a special role that would be lost with the addition of other girls. The only

boy may also gain male stepsiblings and lose his role in the family. Boys may serve as surrogate husbands to single mothers and this role would be lost with the remarriage and also if there were other male siblings added to the family.

Summary

The reactions that children have to remarriage can be categorized by age. No literature has been published on the reactions of preschoolers, but clinicians report that preschoolers are able to easily adjust if their biological parents can cooperate. School-age children react with anger and hostility, feel guilty over the first divorce and worry about causing a second divorce. Early adolescents feel anxious after the remarriage. The boys have problems with acting out in school and lowered academic performance, and the girls have difficulty with the open sexuality of the parents. Adolescents have a variety of reactions, including resentment of discipline and confusion over roles and expectations. Adolescents can escape by spending time with peers.

Four areas of loss are experienced by children in stepfamilies. The first is the loss of the dream of the reunion of the biological parents. This dream, which extends through the divorce and remarriage may help the children to deny the reality of the divorce and to escape the pain of the divorce. The second dream is the loss of the role in the single-parent household. Children grow

closer to the single parent and may become the confidant to the parent, take-on adult-like responsibilities, and older children may assume parenting responsibilities with younger siblings. The stepparent may take over all of these roles, displacing the child. The third area of loss is the loss of visitation from the non-custodial parent. Loyalty conflicts become an issue with visitation and because the biological parents cannot cooperate or the non-custodial parent feels awkward, visitations may become less frequent. The fourth area is the loss of birth order or the change in sex ratio in the stepfamily with stepsiblings.

CHAPTER IV

THERAPY WITH STEPFAMILIES

Treatment for stepfamilies can be beneficial as the divorce rate for remarried couples is even greater than for first married couples (Fausel, 1986; Gardner, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1982). This may be because they view divorce as easier than trying to resolve conflicts. The divorced adults may also realize that they had not made an emotional divorce from their ex-spouse and that the remarriage had been a mistake (Sager, et al., 1983). The divorce in the remarriage may cause children to feel guilty again, especially if they believe that they purposefully set out to ruin the remarriage in order for the biological parents to remarry (Visher & Visher, 1979; Kosinski, 1983).

This chapter will discuss four major treatment issues for stepfamilies. The first issue is mourning the loss of the original nuclear family. The second issue is the relationship of the remarried couple. Therapy should strengthen the bond between the couple and help them present a united front for the children. Because each member has different expectations, the third issue for therapy is helping the stepfamily define the expectations, roles, and rules for the custodial and visiting households. The fourth

issue is the relationship between the divorced couple. The divorced couple must achieve an emotional divorce and should learn to cooperate over parenting issues.

The second section of the chapter will include various interventions that can be used for treating stepfamilies. The remarried couple could undergo couples therapy, or the entire family could receive family therapy. Individual therapy can be useful for members mourning the loss of the original family. Group therapy for the couples can be helpful before or after remarriage. The final section of the chapter gives a variety of techniques that are useful in working with stepfamilies.

Treatment Issues

Mourning Loss

Mourning the loss of the original family is the first step in treating stepfamilies (Fausel, 1986; Kosinski, 1983; Sager, et al., 1983; Visher, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1990; Stern, 1984). Adolescents must mourn the loss of the family as well as facing the loss of childhood status (Schwartzberg, 1987). Most feel that the stepfamily cannot bond until the mourning process is completed. For children and adolescents, the "most important issue is the adequate acknowledgment of grief and the opportunity to express feelings related to that grief" (Wood & Poole, 1983, 743).

All members must openly acknowledge their loss. Stepparents may find it difficult and threatening to hear

discussions about the ex-spouse, but children should be allowed to express their feelings (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Fausel, 1986; Wood & Poole, 1988; Halperin & Smith, 1983; Sager, et al., 1983). Children will need to explore feelings of sadness or depression, anger, guilt, and insecurities. They will also need to be allowed to express their anxiety, loyalty conflicts, as well as confusion of roles in the stepfamily (Wood & Poole, 1983; Miller, 1985). Members of stepfamilies must not only mourn the dissolution of the biological family, but the children must also mourn the single-parent family (Fausel, 1986).

Fausel (1986) outlines tasks to help children mourn the loss of the biological family. The first task calls for the acceptance of the reality of loss. Parents should answer any questions that the children may have about the divorce. They should also encourage the children to express their feelings and parents should give them support. Children must also hear that they are not alone, that the parents suffered a loss, and should receive reassurance that the parents will not abandon them (Fausel, 1986).

Children must experience the pain of grief as the second task. Parents should allow the children to express longing for the absent parent. They should be allowed to speak positively about the absent parent. Parents, while being tolerant of the children's longings, should not however give the impression that the biological family will

reunite. The third task involves adjusting to the new environment. Families need to discuss new roles and rules. The fourth task involves resolving loyalty conflicts (Fausel, 1986).

Remarried Couple

One characteristic of stepfamilies is that the parent-child bond predates the couple bond (Poppen & White, 1984; Visher, 1985; Kosinski, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1990; Stern, 1984; Miller, 1985). The remarried couple does not have time to develop intimacy and closeness that other couples have if they have children for which they are responsible (Kaslow, 1988). Therapy for the remarried couple can help strengthen the couple bond which is important for the survival of the stepfamily (Kosinski, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1990; Mills, 1984; Visher, 1985; Kaslow, 1988; Herndon & Combs, 1982). The divorced spouse will have to mourn the loss of the first marriage and explore expectations of the remarried spouse (Sager, et al., 1983; Halperin & Smith, 1983; Lewis, 1985).

Models of development for stepfamilies also emphasize the importance of a strong couple bond. Mills (1984) states that it is important for the marital couple to be in charge. The couple together should decide on the long-term goal for the structure for the family. They should also decide on discipline for the children. He suggests that the biological parent should do most of the disciplining until

the stepparent and children have had time to form a bond (Mills, 1984). Papernow (1984) suggests that the couple should explore their original fantasies and expectations and decide on the structure for the family.

Clarifying expectations

Once the members of the stepfamily have successfully resolved issues of loss, and the parents have formed a strong bond, the issue of expectations, roles, and rules must be resolved. This should be done for both the live-in and visiting households, and children should understand that there may be differences in the rules, but that the rules must be respected in both households (Fausel, 1986; Gardner, 1984; Kosinski, 1983; Miller, 1985; Poppen & White, 1984; Schwartzberg, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1979; Wood & Poole, 1983; Sager, et al., 1983; Mills, 1984; Pink & Wampler, 1985; Herndon & Combs, 1982; Visher & Visher, 1990).

The family should feel comfortable in discussing their feelings and expectations, and should respect the feelings of each member. Members of stepfamilies have the expectation of instant love (Visher & Visher, 1990; Lewis, 1985). Other myths and expectations include the myth that only biological parents can parent, that children should remain loyal to their biological parents, and that the stepfamily should compensate for the breakup of the first family or be the same as the biological family (Lewis, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1982). Parents may have dreamt that the

Divorced couple

Unless the stepfamily was formed from death, there is another adult that remains important to the children, the non-custodial parent. Most children of divorce in this country spend time in both households, and this can bring about a variety of problems. If the biological parents have not emotionally divorced, they may not be able to cooperate around parenting issues for the children (Sager, et al., 1983). They may use the children in their battles with each other (Wood & Poole, 1983). When one or both parents remarry, the tension may increase. The parent who was not able to emotionally divorce may feel abandoned and hurt by the remarriage. If children are sensitive to their parents feelings, they will feel extremely guilty if they develop positive feelings for the stepparent which will cause loyalty conflicts. The negative feelings of children towards the stepparent may be a projection of the parents negative feelings (Halperin & Smith, 1983).

Non-custodial parents should be included in therapy in order to increase the cooperation between the biological parents and to reduce the loyalty conflicts amongst the children (Fausel, 1986; Poppen & White, 1984; Schwartzberg, 1987; Visher, 1985; Sager, et al., 1983; Herndon & Combs, 1982; Strother & Jacobs, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1990). If parents can learn to cooperate, children can have a better relationship with their stepparents. In their study, Pink

and Wampler (1985) found that the highest ratings for stepparents were from stepchildren who had the highest amount of contact with the non-custodial parent. They had assumed that frequent contact with the non-custodial parent would cause more loyalty conflicts. The high contact may, however, reflect the degree that the biological parents can cooperate to arrange for visitation. Of course, the children must learn that is not appropriate to manipulate the parents (Kosinski, 1983).

Modes of Therapy

Individual, couples, group, and family therapy are all appropriate for working with stepfamilies (Sager, et al., 1983; Fausel, 1986; Schwartzberg, 1987). Therapy with stepfamilies or members of stepfamilies should have a systemic framework. The number of members in a stepfamily can be great. A stepfamily formed from divorce can include the remarried couple, the non-custodial parent, siblings and stepsiblings, grandparents and stepgrandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. Grandparents or other extended family members often become important to the children during the single-parent phase (Sager, et al., 1983). Children may also lose contact with the custodial parent's in-laws.

Family Therapy

Family therapy may be helpful in the beginning stages of treatment. Therapists should include the non-custodial parents in the first session and the initial stages of

treatment, stressing that the therapy will relate to issues around the children and not issues from the former marriage (Sager, et al., 1983; Gardner, 1984). Important extended family members must also be invited to participate in the therapy when needed. Sager and his colleagues have suggested multiple family or network therapy in working with extended family (Sager et al., 1983). Sessions could be held with the stepfamily, the non-custodial family, and grandparents or other extended family members with separate therapists. After the alliances are built and problems are outlined, then the therapists can hold a joint session with the different systems (Sager, et al., 1983).

Couples and Group Therapy

Couples therapy is appropriate for building a strong bond for the remarried couple and for resolving problems in the remarriage. Group therapy for couples can also be helpful, either before or after the remarriage occurs. Couples therapy can also have an educational focus, teaching common issues for stepfamilies and ways to deal with them. Parenting classes can be offered to the remarried couple to deal with discipline.

Nadler (1983) developed a six-session workshop for remarried couples. The first session explains the workshop and allows parents to discuss problems with stepchildren as many blame the problems in the marriage on the children. The second session analyzes loyalty conflicts in families

and helps the parents talk about their loss as well as learning ways to help children express their loss and how feelings of loss relate to loyalty conflicts. The third session begins to deal with the marriage more specifically. Couples, especially the stepparents, work on communicating their feelings on living in a stepfamily. The fourth session addresses discipline of the children and each parents' role in the disciplining. Because it is assumed that conflict over children will have been resolved, the fifth session works on building intimacy in the marriage, open communication, and support for partners. The sixth session is devoted to visitation and relationships with ex-spouses (Nadler, 1983).

Brady and Ambler (1982) developed and tested a four session couples group to help stepfamilies. Thirty-three couples participated in a structured interview and were given the Family Environment Scale (FES) to determine the differences between the ideal and real situations for the stepfamily and then conducted an educational group therapy for half of the couples.

The first session was explained the purposes of the group and addressed typical issues for stepfamilies. The second session concentrated on issues for stepchildren, including losses that children face. The third session was devoted to topics that members of the group felt needed to be addressed. In the fourth session, results for the FES

were discussed as well as issues in the remarriage. Results showed that the both the couples that received the group instruction and the control group improved in family functioning and had more positive relations between the ideal and the real situations, and the couples in the group had more positive relations although the difference was not significant. Changes may have occurred in the control group because discussing issues in the structured interview allowed the couples to discuss issues at home while waiting to join a group. The study showed that couples therapy (through the structured interview) and group therapy can be beneficial (Brady & Ambler, 1982).

Mandell and Birenzweig (1990) developed a group therapy model for both parents and stepparents and children. The groups lasted for six sessions. For adults, the first session focused on differences between first and second marriages. The second session included losses that children had experienced from divorce and remarriage. The third session dealt with the clarification of goals. The fourth session dealt with the marital relationship, and focused on communication and roles. The fifth session focused on future issues for stepfamilies.

For the children, the first session focused on the differences in the biological family and the stepfamily. The second session helped children explore areas of loss and to become aware of personal feelings. The third session

focused on roles and expectations. The children were asked to plan a future party. The fourth session focused on the relationship with parents and stepparents. The fifth session focused on problem-solving skills for future issues. The children and the adults met together for the sixth session to discuss issues and the parents presented a play for the children on living in stepfamilies. All members who participated in the groups reported better cohesion and communication in the stepfamily (Mandell & Birenzweig, 1990).

Individual Therapy

Individual therapy can be most beneficial to members needing to mourn the loss of the original family. Children may benefit from play therapy. The playroom should be equipped with a lot of toys, should include enough dolls to represent both biological and stepfamily members, and should have two dollhouses to represent the live-in and visiting households (Sager, et al., 1983).

Techniques for Stepfamilies

Exercises for family therapy have been useful in working with stepfamilies. Family sculpting allows members to express their feelings about their roles in families and can highlight loyalty conflicts. The families can draw up a formal contract listing responsibilities and expectations for members (Sager, et al., 1983; Mills, 1984).

Pino (1986) suggests two imagery exercises. In the

first exercise, the family is asked to describe their favorite photographs from the family photo album. This can be a useful method for incorporating the family's past history and allowing members to explain special times. Children benefit from this by being allowed to openly express feelings and to acknowledge positive memories from the past. The technique can also help stepparents see an area that may be special to the children and their biological parent. The second exercise is the future fantasy trip. In this exercise, family members are asked to discuss a future activity that they would like to do with the stepfamily and to explore their fantasies or expectations in having a positive experience (Pino, 1986).

Other techniques can be used with individual members and children. Children can be encouraged to create stories about family situations (Poppen & White, 1984). Bibliotherapy is a technique useful for children and adolescents (Coleman & Ganong, 1987b). The literature selected for bibliotherapy should not only help children work through problems but should emphasize strengths in stepfamilies (Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich, 1985). Common strengths found in the literature include being able to relate to new people, being exposed to a positive adult relationship or marriage, having more adults available for the children, seeing the biological parent happier, and becoming more flexible and adaptable. Fiction may be

preferable with adolescents as fiction teaches adolescents not to take on other people's responsibility, to accept that they can only change their behavior, to learn how to deal with people in the same role and with people who dislike each other, to develop problem-solving skills, to learn to negotiate, and to learn positive coping skills (Coleman, et al., 1985).

Summary

There are four treatment issues for stepfamilies. The first issue involves mourning the loss of the biological nuclear family. The second issues is the development of a close bond with the remarried couple. The third issue includes the clarification of roles and expectations for stepfamily members. The fourth issue is the cooperation of the divorced couple around co-parenting.

Individual, couples, group, and family therapy can be utilized with stepfamilies. Individual therapy is helpful to members needing to mourn the loss of the biological family. Couples therapy and group therapy can be useful in developing a close bond with the remarried couple. Family therapy can be helpful in defining roles and expectations, and in helping the divorced couple to cooperate around issues with the children.

A variety of techniques are useful with stepfamilies. Family sculpting, future family trip, the family snapshot, and bibliotherapy are examples of the techniques.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The literature indicates that living in stepfamilies can be difficult for children and that all members need time to adjust to the new family. The children and adults need to mourn the loss of the attachments with the biological family, and the children may mourn at a different rate than the adults. After each member has mourned losses and expectations among members have become clear, the stepfamily experience can be positive. This chapter will summarize the the paper and outline implications for therapists and areas of future research.

Attachment and Loss

Theories on attachment, separation, and loss can help explain some of the difficulties that occur in stepfamilies. Attachment behavior is behavior that allows the individual to keep a loved one in close proximity. The healthy development of attachment and trust with the caregiver allows the individual to form attachments with others. Adults are able to form attachments to their original partner, and when the attachment is broken, it is at the relationship level as opposed to breaking an attachment to the spouse (Garfield, 1982). Children, however, form

attachments to their biological parents and this attachment is broken and disrupted when the parents divorce (Poppen & White, 1984). The threat or fear of loss of attachment can send a person into distress or separation anxiety. When a person is faced with the loss of an attachment figure, they become anxious, angry, and depressed and the person must successfully mourn the loss of the attachment figure before new attachments must be formed.

Children mourn when they lose a parent through death. They initially respond to the death with shock, alarm, and denial. Then the children move into despair. They long for the absent parent and often idealize them. The children feel guilty, anxious, and depressed. The next stage of grieving for the children is to accept the loss and to reorganize their lives. Children's mourning closely follows the stages of adult grieving which include denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and finally acceptance.

Children and adults also mourn when a divorce occurs. Reactions to divorce are similar to reactions to death. Young children regress and fear abandonment. School-age children experience sadness and depression, and openly blame the custodial parent for the divorce. They express their anger easily and involve themselves in their parents arguments. Older school-age children feel shame over the divorce and try actively to reconcile their parents. Adolescents worry about the future and finances. They are

likely to escape from the situation with a strong peer network.

Reactions to Remarriage

Children often experience loss when one or both parents remarry. The children react with anger, anxiety, depression, insecurity, guilt, disappointment, stress, and grief. School-age children from five to ten are angry with the parents for remarrying and resent the stepparents. Children at this age compete with the stepparents for the attention of the biological parents. Parents report that these children display more acting out behaviors and that girls in this age can be hostile and demanding. Early adolescents feel anxious and insecure. They display anger towards the biological parents. Early adolescent boys develop difficulties in school and early adolescent girls begin to act out sexually. Adolescents often have difficulty because they are beginning to separate while the stepfamily is trying to join. They resent discipline from the stepparents and have loyalty conflicts. Adolescents can escape to their peer relationships.

There are four areas of loss that children in stepfamilies face. All children dream that their biological parents will reunite and this dream lasts throughout the remarriage. For many, this dream serves as a denial of the divorce. When the parents remarry, the children are forced to face the finality of the divorce. Children resent the

stepparents for ruining the dream for reunion, and experience loyalty conflicts when they experience positive feelings for stepparents.

Children may spend several years living in a single-parent family. The children often serve as companions and confidants for their parents. They also take on additional responsibilities in the household and older children may help with the younger children. Building a closer relationship with the biological parents may help the parents and the children to ease the pain of the divorce. When the parents remarry, children lose the roles and responsibilities from the single-parent family. They will resent the presence of a stepparent, resent the removal of the responsibilities, and resent discipline instilled by stepparents. Children may lose time with the custodial parent who is concentrating on the new marriage.

Additionally, children may lose time with the non-custodial parent after remarriage. The biological parents may not be able to agree on a visitation schedule. The non-custodial parent may want to have less visitation time in order to work on the new marriage. Stepparents report more difficulties with visiting stepchildren as opposed to live-in stepchildren and they may request to spend less time with the stepchildren. Most stepparents report that their marriages would be happier without the presence of stepchildren.

Relationships with stepsiblings complicate stepfamilies. When the biological parent marries an adult with children, then stepsibling relationships are formed. Often, children will experience the loss of the birth order or sex ratio. The oldest child may become the youngest, the youngest may become one of the oldest, and only children will lose their status. The only girl in a family may be joined by stepsisters, and the only boy may gain stepbrothers.

Therapy with Stepfamilies

There can be difficulties in a stepfamily in the beginning. Many join with the expectation that they will bond and form loving relationships like the Brady Bunch. The children may react differently than the parents expected, and if the child acts out against the stepparent, difficulties in the marriage may occur. Stepfamilies may seek therapy because the children may act out at school, argue with the stepparents, or the marriage may have difficulty.

There are four issues in treatment that correspond to the loss experienced in stepfamilies. The first issue is the loss of the biological family. Parents in remarried situations must allow the children to successfully mourn the divorce and loss of the original family before expecting the children to bond with the stepparent. Many parents feel that the children have mourned because they seem to have

adjusted to the divorce. They are unaware that the children dream of the reunion of the parents and this can last through the remarriage. The children must be encouraged to mourn the loss even after the remarriage has occurred.

The second issue for treatment is the development of a strong couple bond. Because children and the single parent have developed a strong bond during the single-parent family stage, it is often difficult for the stepparent to find a place in the family. Therapy can help the adults to form a bond and to provide a united front with the children. Developing the bond can include helping the divorced spouse mourn the loss of the first marriage, and improving communication between the couple.

The third issue for treatment is the clarification of expectations, roles, and responsibilities in the stepfamily. The adults enter the family with the myth of instant love. Children may resent the stepparent and wish to ruin the marriage. The children should be allowed to form a relationship with the stepparent that is comfortable for them. The stepparent may serve as a friend, confidant, or as a parent. Rules and discipline should be established. In the early stages of the stepfamily, it may be easier for the biological parent to conduct the disciplining of the children.

The fourth issue for treatment is the relationship with the non-custodial parent. If both biological parents

have achieved an emotional divorce, then they should be able to cooperate over parenting issues for the children. Parents and stepparents should realize the importance of a continuing positive relationship between the children and the non-custodial parents. Loyalty conflicts will be reduced for the children if the biological parents can cooperate and if children can express their feelings around the non-custodial parent.

Individual, couples, family, and group therapy can be useful with stepfamilies. Individual therapy can be beneficial to members needing to mourn the loss of the biological parent. Couples therapy can be useful in developing the strong couple bond as well as group therapy with other remarried couples. Family therapy is useful for outlining expectations, roles, and rules for the family. Non-custodial parents and other important extended family should be included.

Practitioners should offer educational programs for stepfamilies to alert them to issues faced by stepfamilies. Classes could be held at schools for parents and children. Support groups can be offered at schools for children living in stepfamilies. Couples groups can be helpful for people contemplating remarriage.

Bibliotherapy is a useful technique for children in stepfamilies. Literature chosen should offer problem-solving techniques and positive aspects of living in

a stepfamily. Imagery techniques can be helpful. Family members can link the past to the stepfamily by explaining their favorite family snapshot. They can also explain a fantasy trip, which would help explain expectations. Family sculpting can highlight loyalty conflicts.

Future research

Stepfamilies can be complex with multiple members and various relationships. The complexity of stepfamilies often makes them difficult to study. Most research included in this review included reports by parents and stepparents, and some survey research with children. Clinicians have reported cases but no field research has been conducted with stepfamilies.

There are a number of areas that have received little attention in the work on stepfamilies. More studies should be done examining stepsibling relationships. These studies should examine differences and similarities, difficulties and/or conflicts, and loyalty conflicts between stepsiblings that share a household or stepsibling relationships between visiting children.

A growing number of people are living together before they remarry. No research reviewed in this study had examined the relationship between divorced adults, their children, and the live-in companion. Loyalty conflicts in this situation would occur, and may affect the relationship between the adults who may be less committed to the

relationship.

Many divorce after an extra-marital affair and subsequently remarry the person in the affair. The divorced spouse may blame the person for breaking up the marriage and the children may hear negative statements about the new spouse. This may create additional loyalty conflicts.

Practitioners can be helpful to stepfamilies and children involved by developing preventive programming. This may include educational programs, support groups for adults, support groups in schools with children, workshops with educators on stepfamily issues, premarital counseling, and family therapy. The programs need to encourage open communication and expression of feelings. Research should be conducted on the effectiveness of preventive programs.

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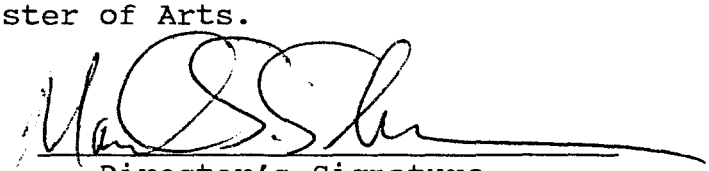
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