Lesson 1
Families Today:
A Focus on Stepfamilies

Prep: Read Introduction, “Research on Stepfamily Stressors” “Facts and Figures”, “FAQs about Stepfamilies”, “Stepfamily Myths”, and “How Stepfamilies are Different”

Lesson at a Glance:
1. Icebreaker – 15 minutes
2. Overview of Program – 10 min.
3. Families Today – 40 min.
   Presentation
   Activities
4. What the Children Have Been Learning – 5 min.
5. Family Activity – 20 min.

Supplies and set-up:
PowerPoint set-up and disk or
Overhead machine and transparencies
TV/VCR set-up
“That’s a Family” video
“StepMom” video
Parent workbooks
Pencils/pens
M&Ms in a bowl/basket

1. THE ICEBREAKER:

Offer a brief welcome and then pass out a bowl full of M&Ms and instruct participants to take some and hold them in their hands. Offer no other instructions.

Go around the circle and have participants share something about themselves – one statement or fact for each M&M they’re holding! (They may eat each one after their statement!)

You might suggest that they include a statement on their goals for the class and/or why they are participating

Great ice-breaker for kids and adults alike!

2. OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM:

Why a program for stepfamilies?
Refer participants to the Rationale in their notebooks
3. FAMILIES TODAY:

We're no longer surprised when we meet this family. Are you this family?!

Let's look at some numbers

Current Statistics
- 52-62% of first marriages end in divorce
- Increased risk: young, African-American, chronic economic stress
- Most at risk the first 7 years
- 65% of couples who divorce have children

Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990; Booth & Edwards, 1992; Norton & Miller, 1992
We are not anti-marriage in this country…

“To marry again represents the triumph of hope over experience”
- Samuel Johnson

Current Statistics

- About 75% remarry; most within 2 years
  - More likely if white, lower income, lower education
- About ½ of marriages in a year are remarriages
- 6% higher chance than first marriages of ending in divorce
- Most at risk the first 5 years
  Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990; Booth & Edwards, 1992; Norton & Wilcox, 1992

The new “norm”!

An often overlooked consideration is that the Census and other sources use marriage to identify a stepfamily; yet we know that the majority of stepfamilies spend time living together/co-habiting prior to a marriage occurring.

Additional Consideration:

Stepfamily Definition:
- A household in which there is an adult couple at least one of whom has a child from a previous relationship

“Well, the children are grown up, married, divorced, and remarried. I guess our job is done.”
Best estimates are that 1 in 10 “single-parent” household is actually a stepfamily – there is an adult partner parenting non-biological children (Bumpass, Raley, Sweet, 1995) (Female-headed SP HHs were approx. 12% of all HHs in 1990 census) and HALF of all cohabiting couples with children in the home are in a stepfamily situation.

Demographers suggest that including these families, 1 out of every 3 children is a stepchild.

(the child in this cartoon is parented by the mother’s boyfriend when he is there…functionally a stepfamily)

Regarding the prevalence of stepfamilies and step relationships:

Is this unprecedented? Let’s test your family history knowledge:
Give Out “FAMILY QUIZ”

Have participants complete the family quiz and then go over the points with them using the overhead:

Projected Statistics

1. 1 out of 3 children are stepchildren
2. 1 out of 3 Americans is now in a step relationship
3. More than 1/3 of Americans today…will be in 1 or more step situations in their lives

Historical Context

1. There were more nuclear families in 1950 than in 1850. True or False
2. Remarriage rates are much higher now than in the 18th and 19th century. True or False
3. In the late 1700’s in the U.S., the average length of marriage was __ years.
4. In the late 1980’s, the average length of time between marriage and divorce was __ years in the U.S.
5. Average life expectancy in 1850 was __ years
6. Average life expectancy in 1990 was __ years
7. The view of “traditional families” is influenced more by false nostalgia than historical fact. True or False

* Source: The Way We Never Were, Coontz, 1992
We need to validate stepfamilies as positive and viable units with unique structures that are not imperfect copies of nuclear families, but rather, complex family systems created from the integration of old loyalties and new ties.

-Emily Visher

What's in a Name?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not recommended</th>
<th>Recommended</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorced families</td>
<td>Stepfamily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken families</td>
<td>Binuclear family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractured families</td>
<td>First family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>Nuclear family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intact families</td>
<td>Natural parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological parent</td>
<td>Parent</td>
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</tbody>
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What does this mean?

- A large number of stepfamilies in this country is NOT a new phenomenon.
- 7 year average length of marriage due to short life-span (many women died in childbirth).
- Some interesting relationships between the numbers then and now when marriages ended:
  - Some have joked that divorce has become a “necessary substitute for death”.
  - The 1950's were an unusual time in our history; many social supports were in place to promote the nuclear family.
  - Bottom line: Stepfamilies are really not a new phenomenon;
  - It is the combination of divorce leading to remarriage is unprecedented.

We think we know stepfamilies…

(Click to bring in red circle)

But few of our stepfamilies today have much in common with the Brady’s; they were really the old model of stepfamilies – joining 2 families after the adults are both widowed.

Post-divorce stepfamilies are much more complicated.

We should also address terminology:

Main points:

- Families don’t divorce; couples do
- Families reorganize – they don’t “fracture” or “break” (think of a child's perspective here)
- Blended may set a stepfamily up for failure, thinking they must meld and become this one cohesive unit – unrealistic, particularly in the early years – it also excludes the children’s nonresidential parent
- The opposite of intact – is “not intact; broken”
- A stepparent is “unnatural?”; Parent may be an adoptive parent and therefore would not be biological

An important quote from Emily Visher:

"We need to validate stepfamilies as positive and viable units with unique structures that are not imperfect copies of nuclear families, but rather, complex family systems created from the integration of old loyalties and new ties."

-Emily Visher
ASK FOR A VOLUNTEER TO RESPOND TO EACH STATEMENT – TRUE OR FALSE. ALLOW PARTICIPANT TO EXPLAIN ANSWER – SUPPLEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION AS NEEDED. GUIDE BRIEF RESPONSES – ALL ARE INTROS TO TOPICS THAT WILL BE DISCUSSED IN MORE DETAIL LATER IN THE PROGRAM.

1. Attachment between stepparent and stepchildren needs to occur quickly.
   - FALSE

2. Children, ages 9 to 15 usually have the most difficult time adjusting to the new stepfamily.
   - TRUE

3. Children of divorce and remarriage are forever damaged.
   - FALSE

4. The stories and myths about wicked stepmothers do not affect today’s stepfamilies.
   - FALSE

5. It is not unusual for a stepfamily to take at least four years or more to feel like a solid family unit.
   - TRUE

6. It helps stepfamily adjustment if the nonresidential parent withdraws.
   - FALSE

SHOW THE VIDEO CLIP from “Stepmom – giving the dog” – notice developmentally different responses

3. It is important to know that most children (more than 80%) do well. There is lots of variation – and there is a lot that families and communities can do to support children’s development – that’s what this course is for!
   - If available - Show segment from “That’s a Family” Video – little girl describing post-divorce family

4. Stereotypes have an effect on everyday life – What is your children’s frame of reference for stepparents? Fairy tales – How are stepparents portrayed?
   - This needs to be discussed
   - Stepmothers may try to overcompensate

5. “Instant” love; instant blending does not exist – unrealistic expectation. Again – may occur more quickly in some subcultures where parental substitutes are normal and accepted.

6. When a child has no contact with parent, they may build fantasies about that other parent. Unless there is abuse, a child benefits from contact with both parents.
1. There is no such thing as instant love.
2. Stepfamilies are not like first families; require more flexibility.
3. A stepfamily is born of loss.
4. Negotiation and conflict are normal and expected.

Discuss:

- What myths have you held?
- What are some common “truths” about stepfamilies?
- This is an important exercise; it’s not meant to emphasize the negatives – but it’s meant to “normalize” these experiences for you – in case any of these are issues for you. Sometimes it’s helpful – as a first step – to recognize that patterns or issues are similar in other families like yours.
- Let’s summarize with this list of “Realities”:

1. Should not be an expectation.
2. Do not have expectations for family to function in roles identical to first families – there are no established norms for stepfamily roles.
3. Family members may need time for grieving loss –
   - what are some of the losses that are experienced by divorce (for adults and children)? List responses
4. This is an important concept for all relationships – conflict is normal.
   - Skills should be learned in conflict management – not eliminating conflict.
   - This will be the topic of a session in this series.

Stepfamily Quiz: Myth or Reality?

- 7. Stepfamilies formed after a parent dies are easier.
  - FALSE
- 8. Part-time stepparenting is easier.
  - FALSE
- 9. A strong couple relationship is an important part in forming a strong stepfamily.
  - TRUE
- 10. A stepparent living with a stepchild has the same legal rights as the parent.
  - FALSE
5. There may be no “right” way to do things – there are probably different ways, based on family history –
   • Is this often a point of conflict for you?
6. Inter-household conflict can permeate a stepfamily and a new marital relationship
7. These are complicated issues and we will be discussing co-parenting
   • Physically absent, psychologically absent – this is difficult for children to deal with
   • No matter what the circumstances, children usually desire a continued relationship with biological parents
   • Any efforts to substitute will be met with resistance
8. Very important concept – secondary parenting: “the babysitter posture” –
   • Can be very difficult for stepparent – seems to grant power to child
   • In successful stepfamilies, this method consistently works the best
   • Note: There is very little information on culturally diverse stepfamilies. There are some indications that “multiparent” models are more accepted among African American families. Children in these families may accept another adult in a parental role more easily.
9. Expectation for difficulty with older children is helpful (you’re not alone!)

The goal of this program is to help you and your children to find the strengths that you have and to give you ideas about positive characteristics in yourselves and your family that you’d like to strengthen. Let’s look at this list of strengths found among stepfamilies that are working well:

An important point here – is that it is very helpful, particularly for children to feel accepted and supported
It may be necessary to educate others; seek out support – particularly for the children’s sake:
Advocate for the children’s family type and teach children to advocate for themselves

Realities of Stepfamilies
1. Individuals in stepfamilies have different personal histories
2. Children are often members of two or more households
3. There is an absent biological parent
4. Authority role for stepparent takes time; secondary parent
5. Generally, the older the children, the more difficult the transitions and the acceptance of stepparent

Family Strengths Model
Successful Stepfamilies:
• Are creative; flexible
• Are more honest
• Are better communicators
• Less unrealistic; more practical
• Have shared perception/mutual agreement
• Have strong couple relationship
• Stepparent is secondary parent, with possible movement to parental status
• Are self-defined
• Have good communication across households

Successful Stepfamilies:
• Have community supports
   • Schools
   • Churches
   • Education and counseling opps
A large number of children do not “fit” into the normed model. Support for stepfamilies is an “undeveloped institution” –

Discuss:
- What are ways that you have felt unsupported – or simply unrecognized in your communities?
- What are some ways that schools can address binuclear and stepfamily needs?
- What are some ways to encourage support of binuclear and stepfamilies in the community?
- How can we prepare our children to advocate for themselves?

What does this mean for children?
This was a placemat a child received at a local food court. For a large percentage of children, their family structure would not “fit” into this model.

Hand-out “Family Strengths” rating sheet
Allow time for them to fill out.
“What would you rate your best strength right now?” “What deserves the most attention?” Have participants share with the group or take a moment to share with their partner their thoughts on that. Ask them to keep these rating sheets in their notebook for use later in the program.

4. WHAT THE CHILDREN LEARNED:
- Drawings of their family – encouraged to self-define; new definition of family as “your important relationships”
- “The Family Quiz” (give out copies)
  1. With the Family Quiz they discussed: family type diversity; preview of concepts to be discussed like conflict management, dealing with change, understanding stereotypes, respectful behaviors, communication strategies in the house and across houses
- “That’s a Family” video and discussion
- Ask to see their work at home

5. FAMILY ACTIVITY (allow 30 minutes for prep and discussion)
- Complete “My Family” activity sheet
- Explain the “rules”:
  - Family members sit facing each other
  - Each takes a turn reading off what they answered.
  - Family members can comment on what is shared:
    - What is the same?
    - What is surprising? “I didn’t know you thought that”
    - Emphasize a supportive response to answers; no comments like, “that’s not right”, “you can’t think/feel that!”
- A simple exercise – But something not many families would do on their own. This can open communication paths if members become comfortable with discussing the family – and their feelings about the family.
NOTE: for those without family members in the program – have them take copies of the activity sheet home and initiate completing the sheets and then having a discussion. Assign as “homework”. Remember to ask them about their experiences at the start of the next session.

6. Process activity:
   a. Why is this a good activity?
   b. Are these discussions you’ve had before? Learn anything new?
   c. Next week we’ll be talking about the changes that stepfamilies experience and how to establish roles and rules that everyone can agree on.