Smart Steps is a brand-new research-based program developed through a collaboration between Cornell Cooperative Extension in Jefferson County, NY and the Stepfamily Association of America. The program provides a comprehensive educational base that recognizes the complexities and the interdependent nature of relationships within stepfamilies. This 12-hour program is designed to be offered as 6 two-hour sessions held once a week for parents and children ages 6-16 living in stepfamilies. Separate sessions are held concurrently, but participants but come together the last 20 minutes of each session for a family activity/discussion. Lessons are informative and interactive and involve media, discussion and hands-on activities and exercises. They are educational, rather than therapeutic in nature, and can be facilitated by a trained parent educator or a mental health professional with experience in family life education.
Why a program for stepfamilies?

1. Many individuals hold on to the traditional family form as the predominant family structure in the U.S. and do not recognize the trend of increasing family type diversity, particularly the **predominance of stepfamilies**.
   - Almost **half** of marriages each year are remarriages for one or both partners; most involve children.
   - **Half** of Americans today are or will be in a step relationship in their lifetime.

2. **Stepfamilies are more complex** than first families and can operate differently in many ways. Many people are not aware of these differences.

3. Healthy models of stepfamilies are rare in the larger media, and sociocultural **norms do not exist** regarding stepfamily roles; therefore, work is necessary in each newly-formed stepfamily to jointly establish roles and rules that work for that family.

4. **Few** formal **institutional supports exist** regarding stepfamilies and the stepparent-stepchild relationships. Informal institutional supports for stepfamilies are rare as well. Stepfamily members require awareness of these conditions and suggestions for advocating for stepfamily support.

5. The **marital relationship** in a stepfamily is the **newest and most vulnerable** relationship in the family, requiring special attention and skill development. Indications are that dyadic spillover of conflict in other relationships may negatively affect remarriage. Existing “general” family life/parent education programs do not address this phenomenon.

6. Successful **stepparenting** develops **differently** than successful parenting.

7. Most children in stepfamilies have a **parent in another home**. This inter-household relationship is relevant to stepfamily functioning and is not addressed in existing general family life/parent education programs.

8. **Empathy** is a learned behavior and an important element in healthy relationships and is **especially**
important in stepfamilies where individuals have different backgrounds and family histories. This concept is rarely discussed in existing family life/parent education programs.

9. **Children often play an important part** in initiating or exacerbating conflict in stepfamilies. Effective communication and conflict management are important skills for children, and benefit individual and relationship functioning in stepfamilies.

10. Children are creatures of consistency and routine. Children who experience parental marriage/partner transitions need extra support and skills for **dealing with change**.

Never has there been a greater need to offer a program in our communities that provides information and skills necessary for healthy stepfamily functioning. If stepfamilies are served with programming designed for first families, educators run the risk of leaving out important information at best, and at worst, of providing misinformation that could undermine healthy stepfamily functioning.

1 **Objectives**

This program is designed for members of stepfamilies to come away with:

- Improved knowledge of U.S. family trends
- Validation of their experiences in stepfamilies.
- Enhanced skills for adjusting to change
- Improved knowledge of legal and financial issues in stepfamilies
- Strengthened marital relationship
- Greater agreement on family roles
- Improved knowledge of stepparenting skills
- Improved knowledge of child development and positive parenting skills
• An understanding of and skills in the use of empathy and shared meaning

• Enhanced communication skills in the family and in co-parenting relationships

• An understanding of skills in conflict management

• Greater use of healthy and respectful behaviors towards others in the family

About Cornell Cooperative Extension:

Mission
The Cornell Cooperative Extension educational system enables people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and research knowledge to work.

Cornell Cooperative Extension is a partnership involving...

- 400 extension educators located in every county in New York State;
- 250 faculty and staff in Cornell's New York State Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Human Ecology, and Veterinary Medicine;
- 60,000 volunteers participating in both program and organizational leadership;
- 103 land-grant institutions across the United States;
- statewide and community agencies, organizations, and businesses;
- New York State's people.

The Children, Youth, and Families Initiative is one of 5 areas of focus for the Cooperative Extension system. Work in this area is focused on using research-based programming to develop the competence and character of youth and adults in families and communities by building strong families, developing capable, responsible, and caring young people, and promoting healthy, supportive communities.
About the Stepfamily Association of America:

www.saafamilies.org

The Stepfamily Association of America is a national organization dedicated to providing support and guidance to families with children from previous relationships ... stepfamilies.

SAA’s vision is that:

Stepfamilies in the United States will be accepted, supported, and successful.

Mission Statement

SAA provides information, education, support, and advocacy for stepfamilies and those who work with them.

Statement of Purpose

Develop and disseminate research-based information and materials

Design, implement, and evaluate opportunities for support and education;

Evaluate and recommend programs, materials, and standards of practice; and…

Advocate for financial, institutional, political and social changes that support stepfamilies.

The Creators of “Smart Steps”:

Developer

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., CFLE was on the staff of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County during the original program development phase. She is an educator and researcher in the field of child development and family science. She is currently on faculty in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at Auburn University in Alabama. She also serves as State Extension Specialist in the area of Children, Youth and Families for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Her main area of focus is parent-child relationships in the context of marital transitions: post-separation parenting and stepfamily formation. She is a Certified Family Life Educator and has conducted numerous workshops for professionals focusing on
healthy relationships in families. She serves on the New York State Advisory Board on Parent Education for programs targeting divorcing parents. In 1999 she was named to the Board of Directors for the Stepfamily Association of America. In 2000, she was awarded a grant through the Human Development Department at Cornell University to develop “Smart Steps.” Most recently, she was awarded a research grant by the Department of Defense for a study of family structure diversity and stepfamily functioning in the U.S. military.

**Co-developer**, children’s program

**Tracy Sanford**, Parent Educator, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County (bio follows)

**Special Acknowledgements:**
TBD
Session Topics:

Adults:

Session 1: Families Today
- Historical context of stepfamilies
- Myths about stepfamilies
- Realistic expectations for stepfamilies

Session 2: Changes in You and Your Family
- Changing roles and expectations
- Legal issues for stepfamilies
- Finances and stepfamilies

Session 3: Where Are You Coming From?
- Empathy and Shared Meaning
- Parenting and Stepparenting tools & techniques for managing behavior
- Children and Adolescents – why do they behave the way they do?

Session 4: Strengthening the Couple Relationship
- Recognizing negative patterns
- Strategies for marital strength

Session 5: Connections
- Children and marital transitions
- Co-parenting strategies

Session 6: Building Strong Family Relationships
- Stress management
- Focusing on the positives
- Putting knowledge into practice
- What have the children learned?
  Special presentation

Children:

Session 1: Families Today
- Myths
- Self-definition
- Difference between family and household
- Every family is different; different is ok
- What makes a family strong/safe?

Session 2: Changes in You and Your Family
- Individual change; events that lead to family change
- Feelings associated with change

Session 3: Where Are You Coming From?
- Differences
- Understanding empathy
- Understanding shared meaning

Session 4: Managing Conflict
- Understanding conflict
  managing conflict

Session 5: Connections
- Communication is a 2-way street
- Breaking down barriers

Session 6: What Have We Learned? Survivor Challenge
- Have You “Survived” Step Class?
- A Review of Skills Learned

SmartSteps
Successful Stepfamilies:

Rate your family strengths:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs lots of work</th>
<th>doing great!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Are creative and flexible
2. Are more honest
3. Are good communicators
4. Less unrealistic/more practical
5. Have shared perception/mutual agreement about rules and roles
6. Have a strong couple relationship
7. Stepparent is secondary parent for a while with possible movement to parental status
8. Are self-defined
9. Have good communication across households
10. Have community supports:
    - Schools
    - Church
    - Community
    - Extended family
    - Education/Counseling opportunities

1.1 TOTAL__________

Rate your relationships:

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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>In-Laws</td>
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</table>

1.2 TOTAL__________
My Family

Complete the following phrases and discuss it with your family.

1. List your family members and one thing you like to do with each one:

   ________________  __________________
   __________________
   __________________
   __________________
   __________________
   __________________
   __________________

2. One thing our family fights about is __________________

3. One thing I like that no one else likes is __________________

4. I'm proud of my family because __________________

5. One thing I'd like to see changed in my family is ________

6. What is one thing about you that no one in your family knows? ____________________________

______________________________

SmartSteps
True or False:
1. The people in most households in America all have the same last name.  
   T or F

2. Most children in America will spend some of their growing up years in a single-parent household.  
   T or F

3. You can’t control what you do with your emotions.  
   T or F

4. Conflict is always a bad thing.  
   T or F

5. A family is made up of people living in the same household.  
   T or F

   T or F

7. Empathy means trying to see the other person’s perspective (putting yourself in their “shoes”).  
   T or F

8. There is usually instant love between members of stepfamilies.  
   T or F

9. If children care for their stepparent, then they are being disloyal to their parent.  
   T or F

10. Certain kinds of families are better than others.  
    T or F
FACILITATOR’S POINTS:

True or False:

1. The people in most households in America all have the same last name.
   FALSE
   • There is a wide variety of family types. Can you name some?
   • Name some circumstances where household members would have different last names.
   • By the year 2010, stepfamilies will be the most common family form – usually at least 2 members have different last names.

2. Most children in America will spend some of their growing up years in a single-parent household.
   TRUE
   • Parent could never have married
   • Could be after a divorce
   • Could be after a parent dies
   • Could be when a child goes to live with a grandparent or relative when a parent cannot take care of them.

3. You can’t control what you do with your emotions.
   FALSE
   • Emotions – what you are feeling – are never wrong or bad.
   • What you do with your emotions – your behavior – can be wrong or bad.
   • You can have control over your actions and your words.

4. Conflict is always a bad thing.
   FALSE
   • Conflict is a normal part of human relationships
   • You can learn a lot about yourself and others through conflict
   • Learning to control your actions and words will help you manage conflict in your life
   • We will learn about conflict management in an upcoming lesson.

5. A family is made up of people living in the same household.
   FALSE
   • The definitions are now different: A family is made up of your important relationships; A household is made up of family members who live together in the same house.
   TRUE  
   • What stories include stepparent characters?  
   • How are they portrayed?  
   • Why might these stories affect actions in real families?  

7. Empathy means trying to see the other person’s perspective (putting yourself in their “shoes”).  
   TRUE  
   • This is an important idea to understand in families – especially stepfamilies  
   • We will learn more about empathy in an upcoming lesson.  

8. There is usually instant love between members of stepfamilies.  
   FALSE  
   • It can take a while to feel love for someone.  
   • In many stepfamilies, members care for each other, but may not love each other – and that’s ok – that can still be a strong stepfamily.  
   • Respectful attitudes and behaviors are most important in a healthy family or group.  

9. If children care for their stepparent, then they are being disloyal to their parent.  
   FALSE  
   • We can care deeply for more than 2 adults in our life.  
   • A parent doesn’t love their first 2 children any less, if they have a 3rd or 4th child.  

10. Certain kinds of families are better than others.  
    FALSE  
    • No type of family is “right” or “wrong”  
    • Discuss: What makes a healthy, strong family?  
      List their ideas.  
      Try to hit on:  
      • Appreciation/Caring/Respect for other members  
      • Democratic decision-making  
      • Flexibility and Openness to change  
      • Communication skills  
      • Shared values  
      • Quality time together and in pairs  
      • Connections with others outside the family