DO I HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO SUPPORT MY STEPCHILDREN?

Dr. Margorie Engel, Ph.D., ©2000*

Confusion about stepparent financial responsibility for stepchildren permeates American society. From our political institutions to our legal codes to the actions and attitudes of individual family members, questions abound with regard to the appropriate and necessary role stepparents should play in the fiscal support of stepchildren. With respect to financial responsibility for children, no uniform treatment of the stepparent-child relationship exists among the states. Marriage to a child's parent would seem to create a legal relationship but, to date, this "step" relationship does not typically create rights and obligations between the parties.

Common Law and Stepchild Support

According to common law, stepparents do not have a direct financial responsibility for the health, education, or welfare of their stepchildren. However, if the remarriage ends in divorce, the court notes two possible exceptions for direct financial responsibility to stepchildren by the stepparent in the custodial household: (1) in loco parentis and (2) the "estoppel doctrine."

Typically, in loco parentis is a voluntarily assumed obligation. It is a Latin phrase which means "in lieu of a parent." Teachers, camp counselors, stepparents, and others who take responsibility for children have a duty to act in loco parentis. This means they have the same power and authority over the children as do the parents, at least during the time that the children are under their control.

Millions of stepparents voluntarily provide financial resources for their stepchildren. According to common law, they have a right to be reimbursed by the children's biological father. (I don't know of a case where this has been ordered by the court.) Realistically, time and money bestowed on a stepchild is a gift — of love, or necessity. And if the parent and stepparent later divorce, the stepparent is seldom legally required to provide child support except under specific circumstances.

The Estoppel Doctrine prevents a stepparent from taking a different position or going back on a promise if the child would be financially harmed by the change. It is based on fairness when three conditions exist. The first condition is Representation, as indicated when the stepparent assumes the role of the child's parent — including providing financial support. The second condition is Detriment, describing the stepparent who interferes with the child's relationship with the biological parent and destroys the possibility
of obtaining financial support from that parent. The third condition is Reliance, whereby the child relies upon the love and financial support of the stepparent. If these three conditions exist and a divorce occurs, the court may rule that the stepparent is responsible for child support.

By all means, do give love and financial support to your stepchildren. Just don't create a problem for yourself by aggressively interfering with the child's relationship with the biological parent and developing a pattern of paying for a child's necessary expenses when the biological parent is willing and able to do it.

Statutory Law and Financial Support of Stepchildren: State Law of General Applicability

In this usage, state law of "general applicability" refers to a stepparent's obligation to support stepchildren that is equated with the biological parent's obligation to support biological children — support obligations of stepparent and biological parent are coextensive. Some states do include the residential stepparent as a source of support in specified situations; some may even impose criminal penalties upon stepparents who do not fulfill the statutory duty of supporting their stepchildren. Where states have a statute providing that a stepparent has a financial responsibility to support a stepchild, it appears to be based upon the in loco parentis doctrine. Nevertheless, most stepchildren cannot legally claim support from their residential stepparents as few states have enacted statutes to enforce child support obligations on stepparents. (Twenty states do have a statute imposing a financial responsibility on the stepparent while the stepchild is living in the household: DE, HA, IA, KY, ME, MO, NJ, NY, NC, ND, OK, OR, SD, UT, VT, WA.)

Yours, Mine, and Ours: Support of Biological Children and Stepchildren

A stepparent might be in the position of supporting both biological children and stepchildren. This seems most likely to happen if the stepchildren do not receive adequate support payments from the non-custodial parent. Different views about stepchild support exist. Some scholars believe it is only common sense for parents to give priority to the children with whom they live, regardless of whether they are biological children or stepchildren. Court rulings are inconsistent. Some states claim that biological parents cannot reduce child support obligations because of remarriage expenses while others have determined that modification is appropriate.

IRS Exemption

The IRS exemption usually goes to the parent who has physical custody for the greater part of the year — no matter how little either of you actually contribute toward the child's financial support. The IRS recognizes an exception when the custodial parent waives this right. You use IRS Form
8332 to notify the IRS of this waiver. A new form must be completed each year that you want to use the waiver. It must be signed by both parents and filed by the non-custodial parent claiming the exemption.

If you have court ordered joint physical custody, the separation agreement will probably specify which parent is to claim the exemption. Even so, you and your ex may agree to one or more "waiver" years without going back to court for a change in your agreement. The operative word is agree. If the court order is silent on the topic of exemption, it automatically goes to the custodial parent. Or, the agreement may specify who will take the exemption. In either case, you and your ex have an opportunity to agree to "exception" years. If there is a tax savings to you as the non-custodial parent, negotiate sharing the savings with your ex spouse.

Medical Expenses

A child is treated as the dependent of both biological parents, regardless of remarriage status, for purposes of their individual contributions toward medical expenses and reimbursements. Provisions of insurance coverage for children in other households or for residential stepchildren is a gray area. Insurance policies may cover residential stepchildren if they are the income tax dependents of the remarried couple. Read the fine print about limitations, especially if the children are cared for in a joint physical custody arrangement.

Stepfamilies in the Real World

Stepparents are already an important emotional and financial resource for children. Census Bureau projections indicate that more than one-half of today's young people in the United States will become stepsons or stepdaughters in the near future. With so many citizens involved, it seems likely that our states and federal government will need to develop new and specific policies related to stepfamilies. Until a basic social issue has been resolved — nature versus nurture with regard to the care of and responsibility for children — little hope exists of consistent and easily understood family laws and policies or financial security for children.

The courts have had difficulty accepting the possibility that it might be in the child's best interest to have more than two legal parents. However, during a period of high divorce rates, unwed parenthood, couples living together without benefit of a legal document, and recognition that almost half of all marriages are remarriages, it appears that we all are helping to rear each other's children.

As stepparents are already assuming or being given financial responsibility for stepchildren, we must address the issue of specified stepparent custodial rights. Using the doctrine of in loco parentis, this approach recognizes that the natural parent is typically alive and sometimes active as a parent — so a
child could officially benefit from two moms and/or two dads who are involved in day-to-day parenting. In this respect, children can, and often do, have more than one mother or father. Whether by law or happenstance, stepparents already have some financial responsibility for stepchildren — what they don't seem to have, however, are rights.

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MANAGING STEPFAMILY MONEY:
YOURS, MINE, AND OURS
by Dr. Margorie Engel, ©2000

Money does not have a neutral connotation in stepfamilies. Money will always be a major issue for remarried couples because trust, commitment, and the guarantee of permanence are the underlying issues. As a result, it is hard to put together the perfect money management package. However, because of previous life experiences, these couples are typically ready to search for creative solutions to new challenges. Stepfamilies often have a combination of three money pots — yours, mine, and ours.

Labeling the Money
Some remarried couples cannot fathom pooling together all of their financial resources while other couples can't imagine not doing it. Each side is convinced their philosophy is the secret stepfamily strategy to a happy financial relationship. And, it seems that both sides may be right.

Informal studies show that couples who favor pooling their money into an “ours pot” are no more or less satisfied with their money management than those who keep money separate. In either case, the legal realities of marriage are binding enough that pooling is not necessary to make the couple financially linked and interdependent.

Separate Accounts: “Yours” and “Mine”
Husbands and wives may be embarrassed to initiate a discussion about ways to keep stepfamily finances separate. Feeling the need for separate money seems to evolve from circumstance as much as temperament. When couples desire separate finances, they are acknowledging that they have separate or different interests and that they want to make certain financial choices as an adult without needing to ask “permission.”

Even though they love each other deeply, the effort to "avoid potential hassles” prompts many remarried couples to keep their money as separate as possible. "Avoiding dependency" is another reason for choosing to keep separate stepfamily money. Divorce laws have sent a clear message to all married women that financial dependency is not, and will not be, rewarded. Stepfamily couples may deliberately arrange their finances to preserve individual autonomy in routine money matters, even though most of them have not negotiated a formal financial contract.

We tend to create two separate families living under the same roof when each remarried parent pays for herself or himself and her/his children’s expenses. These “separate pot” couples strongly believe that each partner must contribute an equal share toward stepfamily
household expenses, which is seldom fair.

Most wives do not earn as much as their husbands and incoming child-support payments don’t often make up the difference. Therefore, her 50% will be a much larger percentage of her income than her husband’s 50% share of the expenses. When this equal concept doesn’t work out, the wife winds up feeling dependent and the husband feels he is paying too much. The old model of men providing all financial support for the family doesn’t fit for stepfamilies; neither does the newer idea of a 50/50 split.

A completely separate system also tends to fall apart in a stepfamily financial crisis. There are two particularly decisive moments: a can't-turn-down career opportunity for one partner and a corporate down-sizing causing job loss. Out of necessity, these couples find themselves financially merged — at least until the crisis is resolved.

Real-world situations call for a new philosophy. Even when remarried couples begin a relationship with the intention of keeping money separate, they tend to drift into at least some pooling of funds.

Mixed Accounts: “Yours,” “Mine,” and “Ours”

Because they are married, couples cannot legally escape responsibility for one another's economic decisions. From a practical standpoint, individual preferences for separate stepfamily accounts often begin to take a back seat to convenience.

It appears that the best of all worlds for many remarried couples may be one of two variations on the "three pots — yours, mine, ours" system:

♦ Small separate accounts and a large joint account
♦ Large separate accounts and a minimal joint account

Joint accounts are funded equally or, more often, in proportion to each spouse’s wherewithal. Stepfamily couples seem to compromise on issues that are joint financial responsibilities and handle their own accounts independently.

For many stepfamily couples, each spouse comes to the remarriage with a credit history, credit cards, and individual bank and brokerage accounts. They typically continue to maintain their own accounts.

Remarried couples often agree to pay for ordinary expenses related to their biological children (residential and child support payments), insurance premiums, repairs and maintenance of property individually owned (cars, rental property), and personal expenses for clothing, business costs, medical expenses, hobbies, and gifts.

Joint expenses such as rent or mortgage, cleaning, groceries, entertainment, and family/couple vacations are paid for in a flexible manner according to ability to pay. Most remarried couples also struggle valiantly to accumulate savings for emergency funds and
Financial advisors suggest keeping cash flow separate from investments. It is preferable to fund joint accounts for children and household with the income stream from employment and/or child support collection. This avoids the typical situation wherein wives spend most of their money for consumables (family food, clothing, vacations, treats for the children) and husbands put most of their money into appreciable assets (mortgage, stocks, retirement funds).

One Big "Ours" Account

Stepfamilies often find themselves easing into pooling their finances. This pool drift frequently starts by establishing a joint vacation fund, purchasing a replacement household appliance, or having an "ours" child. Sometimes there's a purely psychological transition.

When all of the money is put into a common pot, couple decision-making is critical to successful money management. Confrontation may arise regarding one spouse dominating financial decisions or non-recognition of the pooling — and that is usually what the remarried couple is trying to avoid.

It is important to make basic decisions about management of stepfamily money in the common pot. These include:

♦️ A record-keeping system (running totals or monthly tally).
♦️ Who's going to be responsible for bill paying from the account.
♦️ What will be paid for out of the joint account.
♦️ How much each spouse can withdraw without discussing it with the other.

The joint bank account needs to be set up at a branch where it is convenient for each spouse to deposit and withdraw money. As with most team efforts, husbands and wives typically handle different financial activities according to their ability to get the job done. Sometimes, especially after a bad financial book-keeping experience in a prior marriage, couples need to earn each other's trust.

However Money is Handled...

Stepfamily money — separate accounts, pooled accounts, or a "his"/"hers"/"ours" accounts system. There’s no right or wrong way to handle the finances in a remarriage. The comfortable balance will change with the amount of money available, the length of the marriage, and evolving needs. The initial stepfamily money management system needs to be flexible, not carved in stone.

Talk about each of the options. During this discussion, consider how you will treat each other if the initial choice proves wrong after a trial period. Once the hearth of your new financial system has been laid, schedule regular review periods of your temporary solutions for permanent problems. Ask yourself:

♦️ "Is it broken?"
♦️ "Should we fix it?"
Something is always working and something is always failing. Keep the choices that are working well and replace the duds with new options. It's an ongoing process that requires compromise and renegotiation. And remember, it doesn't seem to matter which financial system is chosen as long as stepfamilies meet needs for both of the adults and the children.

**GOOD REASONS TO SHARE FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT:**

- **It's fair.**
  A lifestyle is determined by spending decisions so both partners deserve a voice in making decisions.

- **It's effective.**
  Sharing makes for better decisions and actions.

- **It's successful.**
  People who share in decisions have a reason for making them work.

**STEPFAMILY DECISIONS:**

**When money is separate:**

- What money is to be separate? (checking/savings/brokerage accounts)
- How much will each partner contribute to the household?

**When money is pooled:**

- What money, if any, is to be personal?
- What money is to be shared?
- What expense categories are most important?

- Will yearly expense plans be created?
  - By whom?
  - How closely will they be followed?
- Who will manage the books?
  - How will they be kept?
  - How often: weekly or monthly?
  - How accurately?
- How much discussion is appropriate (and whose opinion prevails) when purchases are made?

**Whether money is kept separate or shared:**

- How will financial emergencies and unexpected expenses be handled?
- When will credit be used?

**KEY POINTS:**

- For couples to share the relationship spirit, each partner needs to have a reasonable amount of money to use at personal discretion to meet personal needs.
- All wives must have credit in their own name. It is too important a commodity in our society not to be protected.
- It's very important for each spouse to keep some readily available money for emergencies.
- Marriages need nurturing. All couples need financial plans that provide money for private time and enjoyment together. One of the essential elements of any healthy financial plan is
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Stepparent’s Parental Status as a Central Theme in Stepfamily Living*

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This paper will introduce the construct of Parental Status and discuss the application of the construct in education settings. Parental Status is defined as a social cognition that addresses the degree to which the stepparent is perceived as a parent by the stepchild, residential parents, and the stepparent. Many authors have stated that the research literature on family processes is based heavily on the norm of the nuclear family model (Ganong & Coleman, 1994a; Gamache, 1997a; Grotevent, 1997; Levin, 1990). As the stepfamily remains “uninstitutionalized” (Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994) appropriate social structures are not in place to validate and support it and the nuclear family model remains the cultural standard by default. Continued use of the “nuclear family map” (Ganong & Coleman. 1994a; Levin, 1993) masks the unique characteristics of the stepfamily and encourages misrepresentation of the stepfamily in the stepfamily literature. One of the implicit definitions of the nuclear family model is that it includes two parents: two adults who are jointly and equally responsible for the parenting practices that socialize children. However, research practices that consider stepparents to be identical to biological parents are not useful for increasing our understanding of stepfamily processes. It is well documented, in both parent and child reports, that children and adolescents do not perceive their stepparents as identical to their biological parents (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Fine, Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Kurdek & Fine. 1993).

How are stepfamilies organized? Studies attempting to answer this question have found that stepfamilies can organize around different themes. Levin (1990) and Burgoyne and Clark (1984) found stepfamilies to use the goal of attempting to recreate the nuclear family, to consciously avoid it, or to wait and see what happened without a conscious effort to either replicate or avoid the nuclear family. However, even though the theme of attraction, aversion, or indifference of the nuclear family model was articulated, it appeared that one way in which this theme was expressed was by the type of stepparent-stepchild relationship that existed or was desired specifically, whether or not, or to what degree the stepparent acted as a parent to the children.

Paper presented at the First Annual Ohio State University Extension Family Life Electronic In-
The importance of parental status of stepparents is further demonstrated in a study by Gross (1987). This study explored the extent to which 16 – 18 year olds constructed their relationships with the adults in their family according to the parental status of the stepparent, residential biological parent, and the nonresidential parent. Fully 58% of the adolescents did not consider their residential stepparent as a parent. On the other hand, 41% of the adolescents in this study did consider their stepparent as a parent. This study suggests that neither assumption is appropriate. More recently, Fine, Coleman & Ganong (1998, 1999) further explored the perceptions stepfamily members hold of stepparents using the multidimensional, cognitive-developmental model described by Fine and Kurdek (1994). Forty stepfamilies completed self-report questionnaires relations their perceptions of the stepparent role. When describing the role they see their stepparent actually play, 28% of children chose ‘parent’, and another 28% chose ‘stepparent’. Together these two groups make up 56% of the sample. ‘Friend’ was chosen by 25% and ‘other’ was chosen by 19%. This research supports the earlier work by Gross (1987) in that roughly half of the children considered the stepparent to be a parent or ‘stepparent’ and the other half did not include the stepparent in the parent category. In summary, the research to date has delineated a number of important issues. First, the nuclear family model may be insufficient for understanding the stepfamily. Second, the relationship between the stepparent and stepchildren may be a central theme in organizing stepfamily life. Third, perceptions of the stepparent-stepchild relationship may or may not fall within the parent category.

The Construct of Parental Status
Recent stepfamily research has utilized social cognition theory to further our understanding of relationships in stepparent-stepchild relationships (Fine et al., 1998, 1999). From this theoretical perspective, a new construct, parental status, can be defined that may assist us to better understand the stepfamily environment. Parental status is defined as a social cognition that addresses the degree to which the stepparent is perceived as a parent by the stepchild, residential parent, and the stepparent. Parental status is a social cognition that may organize information in the social environment of the stepfamily. From the perspective of social cognition theory, Heppner and Frazier (1992) describe the process of human inference, suggesting that cognitive structures and processes influence how we perceive our social environment. These processes assist us to decide which information to collect and to collect that information, combining and integrating the information to make necessary judgments (Heppner & Frazier, 1992). Within this category, a heuristic can act as a ‘short-cut’ which can simplify a complex situation. These authors describe heuristics as “quick and useful ways of reducing the vast amount of available data to manageable size” (p. 162). From their perspective, parental status acts as a heuristic that reduces that amount of information in the stepfamily environment to a manageable size.

More specifically, parental status allows stepfamily members to compare the stepparent’s behavior to the category of parents in general.

Construction of the Parental Status Inventory (PSI)
The first step in developing the inventory was to generate a series of possible items. Four
sources were examined; (a) pre-existing items from the research literature were identified, (b) the qualitative literature on stepfamilies was reviewed for topics that stepfamily members reported as relevant to parental status, (c) other items were generated by the author as a result of professional experience as a family therapist and experience growing up in a stepfamily, and (d) experts who evaluated the list of potential items suggested additional items.

The final 14-item scale (see Appendix 1) was found to have good reliability (N=159, Cronbach’s alpha .97). The PSI also was found to be moderately associated with attachment and closeness to the stepparent but was not associated with peer relationships. Further, the age of the child at the beginning of the stepfamily was hypothesized to be associated with parental status. Thus, additional support for the PSI was provided by the moderate inverse correlations between the PSI and the age of the respondent at the beginning of the stepfamily (r=.44, p<.001). Children who were younger at the beginning of the stepfamily reported higher parental status. In addition, the PSI was used in a second study of young adults in stepfather families (N=156) with very similar results. The Cronbach’s alpha was similar at .95. Again, a moderate inverse correlation was found between the age of the child at the beginning of the stepfamily and parental status (r=.42, p<.001). Thus, as predicted, parental status is higher in relationships that began when the respondent was younger.

**Implications for Family Life Educators**

Family life educators can benefit from the parental status construct. Discussions of appropriate stepparent parenting behaviors are numerous within the clinical literature on stepfamilies (Berger, 1998; Bray & Kelly, 1998; Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1988; Whiteside, 1989). Informal discussions of parental status can clarify the ways in which stepfamily members view the stepparent role. Similarly, stepfamily members can easily use this construct as a way of thinking and communicating about their experiences in their stepfamily.

The construct of parental status can assist family life educators to communicate clearly with their client’s about roles and expectations in the stepfamily. Clinical experience of the author and others familiar with the parental construct (Buirs, personal communication, 2000; Grigg, personal communication, 1999) through local publications (Gamache, 1997b, 1998, 1999) suggest that stepfamily members quickly understand parental status and can identify the aspects of stepfamily living that are sensitive to it. For example, in one new stepmother family, discussions of parental status and consequent power and responsibility for child-rearing resulted in the new stepmother realizing that it was unreasonable for her to automatically know how to act as primary parent for her husband’s 8-yearold. Her experience was one of immense relief. In another stepfamily, this time with a stepfather, one
15-year-old felt that kids in stepfamilies should always get the bad news (i.e., discipline) from their biological parent. Clearly the stepfather in this family was not perceived by the adolescent as having sufficient parental status to engage in parental behavioral regulation. This is consistent with Ganong and Coleman (1994b), who suggest that stepchildren generally prefer that their biological parents do most of the disciplining, perhaps because of their shared history.

Once parental status has been introduced and discussed by the family life educator, expectations for the stepparent-stepchild relationship can be explored in light of the parental status held by the stepparent. Mills (1984) suggested that it is the precipitous assumption of parental authority by the stepparent that begins destructive cycles of conflict in the stepfamily. Fine et al. (1998, 1999) provided empirical support for the contention that ambiguities and confusions about the stepparent role are related to adjustment in stepfamilies. Given that the parental status is an idea that can be quickly understood, it has the potential to offer family life educators a tool for gathering information from all stepfamily members about the perceived level of parental status of the stepparent as a means of addressing issues of authority and discipline in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. For example, if the parent attributes a higher level of parental status to the stepparent than does the stepparent, the parent likely has expectations of greater participation in daily parenting for the stepparent, encouraging the stepparent to “jump in.” The stepparent’s effort to resist such participation may be perceived as rejection of the child or lack of support for the parent. Clarifying family members’ perceptions of parental status can help family members’ understanding of each other and lead to refinement of expectations. When a stepparent assumes he/she has high parental status, but this perception is not shared by the parent or children, efforts to “jump in” may interfere with the ongoing parenting by the biological parent. Conflict can result as children reject the stepparent’s interference in the parent-child relationship. Parents can feel inadequate under the scrutiny of their partner and parent less effectively. Consensus around the stepparent’s parental status allows stepfamily members to organize family life in a way that respects both the stepparent’s role and that of the on-going parent-child relationships.

Family life educators working with stepfamilies must recognize that the parenting unit in stepfamilies operates differently from that found in first-marriage families. For example, Browning (1994) suggests that the decision to bring all family members in to the consultation session may be useful in working with biological families but may not serve the stepfamily well. If the inclusion of the stepfather low in parental status is experienced by the children as interfering with their relationship with their mother, efforts to work with the family unit may fail or may further exacerbate the problems that brought them into therapy. Conversely, if the parent and children wish to exclude a stepfather who has been in the family for the majority of the children’s lives, this may signal that parental status has not developed within family. Family life educators must find ways to work with stepfamilies that create inclusion while respecting the differences between the biological parent-child relationship and the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Parental status can be expected to develop over time, and clinicians should be alert to situations in which this has not occurred.
These research findings support the clinical recommendations of Pasley, Dollahite and Ihinger-Tallman (1993). These authors provide recommendations for therapists that are consistent with the extant research literature on stepfamilies. Many of these recommendations are also useful for family life educators. First they suggest that clinicians normalize the realities of stepfamily living for clients. Discussion of the construct of parental status can help stepfamily members normalize their experience. Stepfamily members can be reassured that there are stepparents of all levels of parental status. Perhaps most importantly, in one aspect of this study not reported here, there was no association found between parental status and adjustment. Correlations between parental status and adaptive and problem behaviors for both males and females were generally not significant. Therefore, stepfamily members also can be reassured that their family can provide a positive environment for child development with varying levels of parental status.

Second, Pasley et al. (1993) pointed out that the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship can effect the quality of the marital relationship and that the quality of the marital relationship can effect child adjustment. Informal teaching about parental status can assist the couple to communicate effectively about this fundamental aspect of stepfamily life. Accurate communication in the couple can lead to better management of parenting responsibilities so as to increase the likelihood that positive relationships develop between stepparent and stepchildren, there by enhancing the couple relationship, which in turn can encourage child adjustment.

These authors further suggest that the development of a close couple relationship may be more difficult when the stepparent does not have previous experience as a parent. In such situations, understanding the role of the stepparent may be more critical. Family life educators can discuss parental status so new stepparents understand their developing role with the children. The stepparent can be encouraged to see that they are valuable members of the family whatever their level of parental status.

Further, the parents’ experience of stages of child development can serve as a teaching tool for the new stepparent without previous parenting experience. Thus, an educational approach that includes parental status and aspects of child development that are relevant to the clients’ situation can be developed to bring the new stepparent without previous parenting experience “on board” without compromising the fundamental connection between parent and child. This can facilitate appropriate expectations in the couple and can serve to strengthen their relationship. Third, these authors suggest that clinicians can help stepfamilies by teaching stepparents how to support and assist the parent in the parental role. They suggest that new stepparents begin by assisting in the monitoring of stepchildren and supporting the parent who is directly involved in any limit setting and discipline. Understanding parental status facilitates this process. Once new stepparents understand that they usually begin low in parental status, taking on parental responsibilities that are consistent with full parental status can be understood as hazardous to positive
stepfamily development. They are then in a better position to support the existing parenting of the biological parent and to take on aspects of parenting that are conducive to positive stepfamily development (i.e. monitoring).

Lastly, Pasley et al. (1993) encourage clinicians to focus on increasing family flexibility more than family cohesion early in the development of the stepfamily. They suggest that clinicians may erroneously chose to facilitate cohesion first, thereby attempting to make relationships between stepfamily members more like those found in a cohesive, first-marriage family.

Family life educators teaching stepfamily members about parental status and accurately assessing the various perspectives of parental status of family members can assist in their process in two ways. First, teaching about parental status quickly differentiates stepfamilies from first-marriage families. This helps to develop the couple’s flexibility because it requires that they explore and evaluate their current assumptions about parenting. Although some assumptions may carry over into the stepfamily environment, others may have to be substantially modified and still other new assumptions integrated into stepfamily life. Second, the actual level of the stepparent’s parental status in a family can act as a guide when choosing which elements of parenting are appropriate, which may be appropriate in the future, and which are not reasonable to expect at any time given the current situation. Thus, parental status becomes a way for educators to initiate opportunities for flexibility in child-rearing and provides a guide to crafting unique solutions for each stepfamily environment.

Once the appropriate family environment has been designed and implemented, positive experiences are more likely to occur, thereby developing the cohesion found in all successful families.

Facilitating positive experiences for stepfamilies may contribute to what Papernow (1993) has defined as “middle ground.” Middle ground is defined as “areas of shared experience, shared values, and easy cooperative functioning created over time” (p. 39). Once roles for child-rearing are clearly understood and expectations of the couple are mutual, the experiences and opportunities can bring stepfamily members into contact with each other in such a way as to gradually increase cohesion and lead to enhanced overall well being in the family.

The construct or parental status can assist family life educators to help stepfamilies be the best they can be. By clarifying assumptions and roles in the stepfamily, the family life educator can us the construct of parental status to facilitate positive stepfamily development.

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