



Stepfamily Education through the Lens of Low-Income and Latino Families



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Abstract

This qualitative study documents the effectiveness of a nationally recognized remarriage education program* with ethnically and economically diverse families. Forty participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule to determine the benefits of attending the 12-hour course.

The interviewees reported benefiting from the interaction with other stepfamilies, improved relationships with their children, improved couple relationships, and becoming more unified as a family. Implications of these findings for remarriage and stepfamily education, including low-income Latino and European American stepfamilies, are provided.

*The program used the *Smart Steps* curriculum which consisted of six sessions addressing stepfamilies. *Smart Steps* was developed by Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University.



Procedures

The sample was drawn from participants in a federally funded healthy marriage demonstration grant that served 230 adults and 222 children. Qualitative interviews were conducted with forty participants (57% female, 43% male) from 22 to 47 years of age. Thirty were from English speaking classes, and 10 were from Spanish-speaking classes. Answers were recorded, transcribed, and coded by three researchers.

Participant Quotes

1. "For me, the best part was the interaction between the other participants, getting other peoples' input, and [hearing about] their prior experiences."
2. "I try to talk to my girls . . . and we really talk about things. I try to have a really good relationship with them, but [taking this course together] gave them an opportunity to express themselves in ways I don't think they otherwise would have."
3. "I'll listen to my wife more, you know, work together as a team and not against each other."
- 4a. "Having all four of us able to attend helped us out so much more because we were all getting the same information. We were all getting the same opportunities to learn."
- 4b. "I think [the kids] were really excited about what they learned in the class, and to go home and kind of talk about it. I think it really made them feel important, like they're part of this. We're willing to listen to their input as far as decisions that we make as a family."

Implications for Practice

Based upon the findings in this qualitative study of low-income Latino and European American participants in a stepfamily course, it appears that:

- it is important to take a combined program approach that includes education and support
- interaction with other couples should be planned and purposeful, with ample time for discussion
- marriage and relationship education should involve the entire family
- communication skills are important in improving parent/child and couple relationships and in developing a more unified stepfamily

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Findings

1. Interaction with other Couples
Help from others- One of the most important benefits of taking the stepfamily course with other couples was the help, suggestions, and advice they received from other participants.
Social support- Couples felt part of a collective group of families who understood the struggles and challenges of stepfamily life.
Couples helping couples- Many individuals found satisfaction and felt empowered by sharing their experiences and helping others.
2. Improved Relationships with Children
Empathy- Learning to see things from their children's points of view was cited most often as contributing to improved relationships with children.
Parenting- Participants were able to be more effective parents by evaluating their expectations, and by learning appropriate and effective disciplinary roles.
Communication- Learning communication skills was a crucial part of improving relationships between parents and children.
3. Improved Couple Relationship
Communication- Developing skills to communicate positively and effectively helped partners open up with each other.
Nurture the couple relationship- Couples learned the importance of having a strong relationship with each other in order to have a successful stepfamily.
4. Unified Stepfamilies
Everyone was involved- The course offered classes for children, and at the end of each session there was a scheduled time for parents and children together.
Communication- Participants found that learning and applying communication skills also helped improve family relationships.
Time together- Many families made an effort to spend more quality time together, which helped them grow closer.