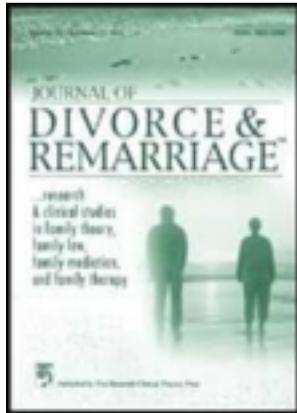


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Stepfathers and Stepfamily Education

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Although stepfamily education is believed to improve family relationships, little is known about how stepfamily education impacts stepfather relationships specifically. Using a systems theory approach, this qualitative study examines the experiences of 14 European American stepfathers who participated in a 12-hour research-based stepfamily education course. Although the majority of men initially needed some encouragement to attend, they all felt the experience was worthwhile. Participants discussed their motivation for attendance, as well as the perceived benefits of taking the course including increased family bonding, relationship skill development, and enhanced fathering practices. The findings support ongoing efforts to help stepfathers be successful in their roles and relationships with their stepchildren. Implications for practice and recommendations for engaging stepfathers are provided.

KEYWORDS *couple and relationship education, family life education, father, parent, remarriage, stepfamily*

Remarriage has become a common occurrence in the United States (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Because children tend to remain with their mothers after parental separation, remarriage and recoupling has resulted in numerous children who are now living in households with a stepfather (Mahoney, 2008). For decades, stepfamily

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education has been suggested to help children and adults adjust to stepfamily living (Messinger, 1976; Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008); however, little is known specifically about stepfathers' experiences in and perceptions of stepfamily education.

STEPFATHER RELATIONSHIPS

Recent estimates indicate that 17% of all children under the age of 18 live in a blended family (Kreider, 2008) and 30% of children in the United States will spend some part of their life in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Owing to the increasing prevalence of stepfamilies, it is important to consider the complexity of experiences that stepfathers face. Specifically, a stepfather must simultaneously navigate relationships with stepchildren, a new spouse, and occasionally biological children as well (Robertson, 2008). Although the couple relationship and parent-child relationships are distinct, one is often influenced by the other. For example, scholars have noted that the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is indirectly related to couple quality and satisfaction (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Consequently, educational programs that promote positive stepparent-stepchild relationships might also facilitate a stronger and more positive couple relationship (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Although in many ways interconnected, these two types of relationships are reviewed separately.

Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

A stepfather's relationship with his stepchildren can be positive and rewarding (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). However, many stepfathers struggle with their new role as a stepparent due to unrealistic expectations, insufficient preparation, and undeveloped cultural norms (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The literature suggests three broad approaches to the stepfather-stepchild relationship. In general, stepfathers will either (a) continuously seek to befriend stepchildren, (b) try to befriend their stepchild during courtship but after marriage quickly shift into a parent role, or (c) limit their friend-seeking behaviors entirely (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The stepfather-stepchild relationship is influenced by both the stepchild's reaction to a stepfather's efforts to bond and the degree to which a stepfather delays disciplining to develop a friendly relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Robertson (2008) reported the relationship quality between stepfathers and stepchildren might also depend on a host of other factors including the child's gender and frequency of contact with the nonresident father. In addition, some have found that stepfather-stepchild relationships tend to be more positive if a child is younger at the time of maternal remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007).

Couple Relationships

Research findings are mixed when it comes to a stepfather's relationship with his partner (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). When compared to first marriage families, couples in remarried relationships have a slightly lower level of marital satisfaction (Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, & Cooper, 1989). However, a separate study, conducted by MacDonald and DeMaris (1995), found that remarriage is not always associated with higher levels of marital conflict. Instead, in some cases, remarriage might actually be associated with less frequent marital conflict. The difference is often explained by the presence or absence of stepchildren and coping approaches to the complexities of stepfamily life (cf. Johnson et al., 2008; Vemer et al., 1989; L. K. White & Booth, 1985).

STEPFAMILY EDUCATION

It has been posited the common challenges and stressors faced by stepfamilies could be prevented with stepfamily education courses (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996). Stepfamily education programs began in the late 1970s and today multiple programs serve stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Messinger, 1976). Although there are many types of programs available, there is evidence that social interventions fail to engage fathers and other male figures (e.g., Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Trotter, 1997). Consequently, there is relatively little known about stepfathers in social interventions, in general, or how stepfathers are impacted by stepfamily education specifically (Parent, Saint-Jacques, Beaudry, & Robitaille, 2007). Ganong and Coleman (2004) insinuated that many stepfathers might struggle to know how to assume appropriate roles and relationships with their stepchildren. If this is true, one potential benefit of stepfamily education is that it provides a research-based learning opportunity (Adler-Baeder, Ericson, & Higginbotham, 2007).

By analyzing qualitative interviews conducted after a stepfamily relationship education program, this article specifically explores stepfathers' experiences associated with program participation. Qualitative studies are recommended when trying to understand the "meanings of experiences" (Coleman et al., 2000, p. 1302). Consequently, this study employed qualitative inquiry to understand the reasons behind stepfathers' attendance and the perceived impact stepfamily education had on their family relationships.

THEORY

A systems theory approach (J. M. White & Klein, 2002) was used to examine stepfathers' perceptions and experiences in a stepfamily education course.

White and Klein (2002) defined a system as “a unit that can be distinguished from and that affects its environment” (p. 124). In this study’s case, the stepfamily unit can be considered a system that consists of various subsystems (i.e., stepfather, stepmother, stepchild, biological child, ex-partner, etc.). Each subsystem is linked with another in an intricate web of interactions. The complex weave of relationships can create convoluted connections that are easily knocked off balance, pulling the family away from a state of equilibrium (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004).

Each stepfamily faces unique challenges. To best help stepfamilies overcome challenges, systems theorists would suggest addressing the family’s patterns of interactions. Systems theory fundamentally focuses on the process of problem solving rather than the problem itself (Ingoldsby et al., 2004). As a stepfamily grows and develops, its challenges also change. Stepfamily education offers family members basic relationship enhancement and conflict resolution skills that can facilitate healthy patterns of interactions and can be applied to other problems that might arise. By participating in stepfamily education, it is theoretically feasible that stepfathers could glean skills and alter expectations that could thereby bring balance to unstable dynamics.

METHOD

This study was part of a larger demonstration project in a Western state (Higginbotham, n.d.). Two hundred and thirty adults and their children, ages 6 to 17, participated in the first cohort. Ten courses were offered via community organizations over a 4-month period. Each course consisted of six 2-hour sessions, which were typically spaced over a 6-week period.

A nationally recognized, research-based program, Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey, was used as the curriculum (Adler-Baeder, 2007). Smart Steps focuses on the unique challenges stepfamilies face including parenting stepchildren, combining families, dealing with ex-spouses, and so on. Additionally, Smart Steps incorporates important general relationship skills such as communication, conflict resolution, parenting, and stress management. The format of the curriculum also incorporates the inclusion of the entire family.

For the first hour and a half of each class session, parents and children were separated into different rooms where they were taught age-appropriate information while children under the age of 5 stayed in an on-site nursery. During the last half-hour of the class, parents and children were brought together for a family strengthening activity. Previous studies, stemming from this project, have addressed a variety of related topics, such as recruitment and retention strategies, facilitation, and the benefits to children (see Higginbotham & Myler, 2010; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010;

Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010; Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010).

This study focuses exclusively on qualitative interviews of European American stepfathers. The sample was drawn from the larger sample of 230 adult participants. Twenty couples (40 individuals) were interviewed separately by program evaluators at the completion of the final Smart Steps course. From a list of all course participants, couples were selected to be interviewed by the project manager, who had no prior knowledge of the participants. Interview questions and protocols were developed by the project evaluators prior to the interviews and approved by an institutional human subjects review board. Questions focused on why participants attended the course, how they heard about the course, and details about their experiences throughout the stepfamily course.

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by program staff. Using qualitative methodology as described by Bogden and Biklen (2003), two researchers read and reread the interviews to gain an understanding of the data. Researchers then developed coding categories describing different themes that emerged from the data. Each researcher independently coded the categories using NVivo 8 qualitative data management software (QSR International, 2008). Reliability analyses were run to ensure consistency between the researchers. Any coding categories identified by the software as having less than 80% agreement between the researchers were reviewed and revised to ensure consistency of the noted themes. When in doubt, the researchers went back to the transcribed interviews to ensure proper interpretation of the data.

Of the 20 male participants interviewed, 14 were European American with step relationships; these men made up the sample for this study. Eleven of the 14 men were married, 2 were cohabiting, and 1 was engaged. Although not living with his partner, the engaged participant was regularly present and actively involved with his soon-to-be stepchildren. The men ranged in age from 22 to 43 years with a mean age of 34 years. The mean education level was 1 year after high school. Income levels varied from \$5,000 per year to \$75,000 per year. The median income was in the range of \$30,000 to \$35,000 per year. Additionally, the number of times married ranged from first marriage to seventh marriage. For the stepfathers, the number of stepchildren in the household ranged from 1 to 5 with an average of 2.14.

FINDINGS

In the semistructured interviews, the 14 stepfathers described various aspects of their experience in attending the stepfamily course. They talked about the course providing information that contributed to family bonding, which

was facilitated by their learning to be more empathetic and improving communication skills. They also indicated their stepfathering skills improved and they learned how to more effectively interact with their stepchildren. An additional finding highlighted why they attended the course in the first place. The majority of these stepfathers attended because they were invited or encouraged by their partner or they had some other external motivation.

Family Bonding

Stepfathers in the study noted increased unity in their families. Of the 14 participants, 12 spoke of improved family bonding. One participant described what he felt were the most positive impacts of the course: “The bonding we did, between me and my wife, and learning about some difficult things and how to deal with them.” Another stepfather experienced a positive change in his interactions with his wife and his family as a whole. He commented, “I think there is a greater camaraderie within the family, especially with the children, and I think the classes helped break down some of the defensiveness between my wife and I that was starting to build up.”

For stepfathers, attending the course helped them become more involved and to have a better sense of their roles. One stepfather said, “This program has gotten me more involved with the family.” Another participant stated:

Me and my wife have been able to go out on dates with each other, which is good for us. We’ve started to have a better relationship by taking the kids to parks, movies, and out to eat, [where they are] not running around causing problems. It has helped us a lot.

There were two skills that stepfathers specifically talked about that seemed to contribute to family bonding—being able to be empathetic with other family members and improving communication.

IMPROVED EMPATHY

Stepfathers indicated that because of the course they became more aware of the feelings of their children and the stresses they were experiencing. The following quotes from stepfathers illustrated this awareness:

Today they talked about stress and I can’t imagine an 8-year-old experiencing stress. I remember my childhood and it seemed blissful and stress-free, but there are a lot of issues that I had to put up with back then, and I need to understand that my kids are going through that now.

[The] best part was getting more of an understanding of the children . . . and the problems that they perceive in the family and how they react to

it. I kind of always worry about myself, and what's going on in my world. I figure kids are kids. I didn't realize how much impact my coming into the picture potentially played in their reactions and acceptance.

In talking about the positive effects the course had on his family, one participant indicated, "We understand each other a little bit more." Another stepfather noted that his greater understanding of family members had led to an increase in patience. He stated:

I think we're becoming a closer family because of [the course]. I'm not as hard as I was on the kids. I'm learning more patience with my wife. Without this class I wouldn't have known a lot of this stuff.

Participants reported positive feelings and outcomes as the result of their increased empathy for others. One man stated, "It's also nice to know that I can even consider other family members' feelings, and that's one thing that I haven't done very well." Another participant described his newfound empathy with his ex-spouse: "With my ex-wife and her husband, it's helped my wife and I understand their points of view better and to be able to get along with them better as well."

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

For many participants, attending the course opened communication between family members. One participant reported:

The best part [of the course] for me was the fact that just coming to the class . . . opened up dialogue in our own home. . . . I just think it opened a door for us that we hadn't been able to crack open before.

Participants felt they had learned to communicate with their spouse and children more effectively. Talking about his wife, one participant stated, "We sit down and we take an hour every night, just her and I, and talk about the kids and the day and stuff like that." When asked about improvements in his couple relationship as a result of taking the course, one participant said, "We can communicate better." Another participant illustrated how communication with his wife had improved when he said:

The wife and I, we're communicating with each other instead of taking it as belittling or criticism. [Now] it's more of, these are her feelings, these are my feelings, let's see if we can meet in the middle. So in the last 2 weeks it's about 100% better.

Participants described a similar improvement in communication with their children. For example, one participant reported, "There were times

that we didn't have a lot of communication. They came, we came, [and now] we're starting to communicate better and starting to do stuff more as a family rather than people going in five different directions." Another stepfather indicated, "We now sit down and talk about what we learned here [in the course], and try and work things out."

Stepfathering Practices

Eleven of the 14 participants described how the course helped them improve their parenting skills. Some noticed a greater level of patience, whereas others learned more effective discipline methods. Receiving basic parenting information was particularly helpful for stepfathers who had no prior parenting experience. One participant said:

They're giving the information that most biological parents understand . . . but being a stepparent you don't have that information. You don't have what they clung to when they were trying to learn to walk; you don't have what was the first thing they fell on. So having that information . . . from the course is just, I don't know how to explain it, it's just amazing.

Participants found the course helped them to develop more patience. One stepfather stated:

I think we've all been more patient with each other and maybe thought about things for a half-second more before we throw a temper tantrum. I say "we" collectively because adults do that, and so I think we pause a little better.

Participants in the study reported learning about discipline. Specifically, they learned that it required time to build the type of relationships with their stepchildren that would allow them to play a role in the discipline. One participant commented, "The best part was the disciplinary actions toward the children and learning that I can't just step in and say this is how it's supposed to be. It's got to take time." Others discussed the importance of knowing how their spouse disciplines before they step in and begin disciplining the children. Several participants spoke about disciplining in collaboration with their partner. This improvement in their ability to cooperatively parent is illustrated by the following:

I know [my fiancée] and I have gotten closer together . . . we talk a lot more and made a list of our top five discipline things. Then we defined the consequences for the top five things. They say pick your battles, so we pick five battles together and say, "Okay, these are the things that we

are not going to tolerate.” Because before we didn’t really know how to handle them, because this is all new for the kids—they’ve never been through this before, she’s never been through this before.

The experience in the course, including listening to the ideas of the other participants, helped stepfathers learn and use alternative discipline techniques (cf. Skogrand, Torres, et al., 2010). One stepfather indicated:

The spanking and all that, that’s kind of decreased because we’ve been doing what they taught in the class and the kids are starting to respond. There is hardly any spanking in the house, mostly [we use] time-out or take things away from them. They seemed to have really responded to that.

Other Findings

There was one additional finding from the data that touched on why stepfathers attended stepfamily education in the first place. Ten of the 14 participants were encouraged to attend by their partners. When stepfathers were asked why they decided to attend the stepfamily course their responses included the following:

- “My wife heard about it and said, ‘Let’s take it, it can’t hurt.’”
- “My wife took it once before already, so they [her and someone from the agency] said it would be good to come.”
- “My wife recommended that I come.”
- “My wife said, ‘You know, it would probably be good for us, too.’”

These responses indicate that for many of the stepfathers, it is their wives or partners who initiated the discussion about attending and the stepfathers responded by coming along.

Two of the 10 who were encouraged to attend by their wife or partner reported being somewhat hesitant or resistant to attending. In response to the question of why he attended the course, one man said, “My wife decided for me.” He went on to say:

Just overall I didn’t want to come here. . . . My busy season at work starts in the fall, basically with the school season, and this class started right around that time. I didn’t want to come. I thought, “I just want to stay home,” I didn’t want to do anything and I had a really pessimistic attitude, even though months before I’d agreed with my wife. As the class got closer I was sort of blaming her for the fact that we had to come to the class.

This stepfather later concluded that the course was useful and shared how over time he started to look forward to each class session. A second man said, "Actually, my wife wanted me to [attend], so I was taken along." For the remaining four stepfathers, three appeared to take the lead in coming to the course. Their comments included, "It was actually my idea," and, "We finally heard about this and I thought that we should definitely take part." One of the stepfathers indicated his motivation to attend was based on legal issues. He said, "I thought it would help with family and look good for a court case."

DISCUSSION

Although the methodological design of this study limits causal conclusions, these findings suggest a number of positive benefits for stepfathers attending educational courses. Family systems' theorists believe each relationship in the family influences the others. The extant literature on stepfamily relationships supports this assumption and suggests the stepparent-stepchild relationship is a pivotal component for the stability and satisfaction of the stepfamily (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The stepfathers' interviews in this study support this supposition and suggest that through stepfamily education stepparent-stepchild relationships can be improved.

From a systems perspective, it is believed the "whole is greater than the sum of the parts" (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p. 168). Therefore, teaching all family members relationship skills makes the stepfamily unit stronger than if certain individuals were left out. Because the Smart Steps course involved the entire family, stepfathers and stepchildren had the opportunity to learn simultaneously and work toward improved family relationships together. The positive comments from the participating stepfathers corroborate best practice recommendations that children should be included in stepfamily education (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

The reasons and mechanisms by which stepfathers' attendance impacts family relationships needs future study. It is possible that a stepfather's participation in the course demonstrates to the stepchildren, and his spouse, that the stepfather considers his relationships with them to be important. Additionally, in conjunction with course participation there was an increase in communication and interaction between stepfathers and their family members. This increase in interaction might also lend to a sense of mattering for the stepchild and the spouse. According to Schenck et al. (2009), an increase in a child's sense of mattering to a stepfather might reduce the child's externalizing behavior and increase the child's self-esteem. In addition to the literature on mattering, there is a substantial body of evidence supporting the importance of the parent-child relationship and its effect on child mental

health (Amato & Keith, 1991; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). Additional research should further examine the ways in which stepfamily education impacts the fathering role and parenting techniques of stepfathers.

Relationship education scholars have encouraged sensitivity to the developmental differences between couples in first marriages and those who are remarried or have children from previous relationships (e.g., Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). All relationships encounter stressors that can impact interpersonal functioning and create family disequilibrium. Couples in stepfamilies, however, are not only confronted with the common stressors of family life (e.g., time, intimacy, money), but also deal with unique issues, such as navigating a stepparent role, financial arrangements between two households, and the involvement (or lack thereof) of nonresidential ex-partners (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Because of the immediacy of these stepfamily issues, attention to and the enhancement of the couple relationship is often put on the back burner, which can, unintentionally, lead to increased conflict (Schultz, Schultz, & Olson, 1991). Because most couples who remarry also form stepfamilies, and in light of the added complexities associated with stepfamily living, it has been recommended that remarriage education “should address factors that are unique to stepfamilies, as well as factors that are common to all couples” (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004, p. 448). Learning specific skills such as communication, understanding, and parental discipline appears to have helped participants to be better stepfathers to the children in the home and better partners to their new spouse.

Some of the stepfathers’ comments suggested initial resistance to attending the course. Trepidation to attend is consistent with Ganong and Coleman’s (1989) finding that women were more likely to engage in remarriage preparation than men and more likely to see it as helpful. More recent studies have suggested that women are still more likely to be interested in remarriage preparation and might be the driving force behind males’ attendance (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009). Although women are more likely to be interested in remarriage preparation, this study found that stepfathers, after encouragement to attend by their significant other, will attend and can learn from the experience. Although a handful of stepfathers were the impetus behind their family’s attendance, it was more common that they needed a push or pull. This hesitancy might be due to the moderating nature of the couple relationship on the stepfather–stepchild relationship. “Because stepfathers have no rights or obligations to stepchildren outside of their romantic relationship with the children’s mother, mothers might exert even more control over stepfather–stepchild relationships than they do over relationships between biological fathers and children” (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007, p. 142). It could also be due to the stigma or historical “brushing off” that men have received from social interventions (e.g., Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Parent et al., 2007). This combination of maternal

gatekeeping, unclear expectations, stigma, and few social norms might lead to hesitancy on the part of the stepfather to participate in a family-oriented activity.

The ongoing level of involvement of the biological father of the children might also affect a stepfather's motivation to attend stepfamily education courses. The complexity of the stepfather situation was captured by Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007), who said, "Stepfathers must learn to coordinate their involvement in a pre-existing family dance in which women have established relationships and a family culture with their children and, in most cases, the children's biological father(s)" (p. 845). Stepfather hesitancy might simply be due to a characteristic of males in general to avoid seeking formal relationship advice, or perhaps the advertising of this course might have appealed more strongly to women in stepfamilies. Or, as was the case with one of the participants in this study, lack of attendance could be due to an already busy work or family schedule. In any case, future practitioners should keep in mind that stepfathers might not participate in a family intervention without being encouraged, invited, and welcomed. Recruitment may be more efficient if efforts were aimed toward mothers in stepfamilies who were then encouraged to bring their spouses along (cf. Higginbotham et al., 2009).

Future research is still needed to better understand any resulting long-term benefits from stepfather participation in these courses. As longitudinal data on remarriage education participation are virtually nonexistent (see Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Whitton et al., 2008), attention to the long-term effects of program participation is needed to assess whether the benefits of marriage education are retained over time. The focus in future studies should not be limited to just marital stability and satisfaction, but should also explore stepparent-stepchild dynamics and the interplay between subsystems.

CONCLUSION

More and more men are experiencing stepfamily relationships either through remarriage or cohabitation. At the same time, research across disciplines continues to document the potential impacts of male involvement on youth development (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). The results of this study highlight potential benefits of involving stepfathers in relationship education courses. Specifically, stepfather participants perceived the course to be instrumental in helping them improve communication, enhance their patience and understanding of their stepchildren, and create a greater sense of family bonding. These findings support ongoing efforts to help men in stepfamilies understand and be successful in their roles and relationships with their stepchildren.

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