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Using Focus Group Interviews to Identify Needs for Stepfamily Education

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Using Focus Group Interviews to Identify Needs for Stepfamily Education

Abstract

This article describes information on perceptions about stepfamily living uncovered in several focus groups in Ohio. Focus group participants were asked seven questions about their stepfamily experiences. Results provide insight for development of educational programming in an area in which there are few available resources.

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Introduction

While many family forms exist today, experts predict that by 2010 the family of norm will be the stepfamily (Visher & Visher, 1993). In the past, most stepfamilies were formed following the death of a spouse; today, most stepfamilies follow a divorce. The stepfamily is a unique type of family with special opportunities, strengths, obstacles, and stresses. Myths and unrealistic expectations associated with the stepfamily may lead to inappropriate behaviors and foster feelings of inadequacy among stepfamily members. Stepfamily myths include "instant love," "wicked stepmother," and rapid adjustment to stepfamily life (Stepfamily Association of America).

Research shows couples in a remarriage report lower relationship quality, experience greater conflict, and exhibit less positive problem-solving skills than couples in first marriages (Pasley, 1993). There are many programs for families experiencing divorce; however, few community resources or programs are available for stepfamilies. Studies have shown that it takes many months for stepfamilies to successfully integrate (Papernow, 1998). Most families take several years (Bray & Kelly, 1998) to get to know each other and create positive relationships. Stepfamilies often try to recreate their new families to resemble their former family, thus causing stress. Understanding the differences of stepfamilies can help them understand their feelings.

Focus group interviews are commonly used "to gain information about a specific or focused issue." (Marczak & Sewell, 2003). The intent of a focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants on subjects participants find difficult to discuss. The focus group will uncover information on human perceptions, opinions, and thoughts that might not be disclosed on a written survey or questionnaire. Focus groups are an economical method to gather information. To determine the specific educational needs of this diverse, specialized, and often at-risk stepfamily audience, focus group interviews were conducted in one urban and two rural counties in Ohio.

Objectives

The objectives of the focus group interviews were to:

- Acquire information relative to stepfamily living,
- Develop relevant educational materials for local audiences,
- Design and format educational components that best meet the needs of these stepfamilies, and
- Determine how stepfamilies would like to receive information.

Sample

Accurate information on the current number of stepfamilies in individual counties is unavailable from the United States Census Bureau because this data is ambiguous and difficult to collect. A preconceived stratified sample is not possible because of the lack of United States Census Bureau data on stepfamilies. As a result, a sample of convenience was used to identify focus group participants. These voluntary participants received no compensation for their involvement in this study.

Stepfamilies in this study included individuals who were stepparents or had lived in a stepfamily. Methods of participant recruitment included promotional news articles and newsletters throughout three counties, contacts through social service agencies, and community members known to be in stepfamily relationships. Focus group questions were mailed to individuals who wanted to participate but were unable to attend. Focus groups were held evenings to accommodate the working schedules of the participants in the three counties.

A total of 28 individuals participated in the discussions; four individuals responded to mail surveys. Two individuals had previously lived in a stepfamily relationship. Eleven couples and four individuals were stepparents. Focus group composition included families with preschoolers, families with school-age children, families with teenagers, and current "empty nesters" with grown stepchildren. Families came from a mixture of socio-economic strata, including limited resource (25%) and middle income (75%). Families' place of residence included rural, non-rural, and urban. Participants were from stepfamilies formed for less than a year through 20 years.

Focus Group Questions

After reviewing stepfamily literature, agents identified common themes and devised questions to meet their objectives. A Family Life specialist reviewed and critiqued the questions. Agents refined, selected, and developed a list of seven open-ended questions. The Family Life specialist then validated these questions before using with the focus groups.

Following are the questions that were developed and validated.

1. Tell what it is like to be part of a stepfamily.
2. What has been your biggest reward?
3. What has been your biggest challenge?
4. What issues do stepfamilies face?
5. If you were looking for information to help you as a stepparent, what would be helpful?
6. What is something you wish you had known before you became part of a stepfamily?
7. What piece of advice would you give someone just starting out as a stepfamily?

Method

Focus groups were held on three separate evenings to accommodate employment schedules. The focus group team consisted of three Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agents; one served as moderator, one as recorder, and one as technical operator. Each focus group was asked the seven open-ended questions in the same sequential order. A tape recorder was used to collect the data. The recorder took notes. Tapes were transcribed. At the conclusion of each discussion, the agents reconstructed the discussions by reviewing the recordings and notes.

A written summary was prepared following each session, and a content analysis was prepared on the transcribed manuscripts. The Extension researchers individually read the manuscript transcripts to identify and validate common themes related to stepfamily living. They met as a group to compare analyses. As a team, they identified primary constructs for developing relevant educational materials, designing and formatting educational components, and determining

delivery methods for these audiences.

Results

Primary constructs emerging from the focus group interviews were 1) new family themes, 2) children's issues, 3) issues dealing with former spouses, and 4) communication issues. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Primary Constructs

New Family Themes	Children's Issues	Former Spouse Issues	Communication Issues
Making the new marriage work	Differences between raising boys and girls	Support vs. non-support	Keeping communication open
Understanding different backgrounds coming together to form new households	Age differences	Understanding	Communication without blame
Time necessary for the family to blend	Raising someone else's child	Resentment	Expectations
Accepting each person as an individual	Establishing rules		
Holidays and relatives	Different rules in each household		
	Both parents and stepparents affect children's behaviors		
	Naming the new stepparents		
	Discipline		
	Transitions from one house to another		
	Legal and medical issues		

Focus group participants identified preferred methods for receiving stepfamily information. They wanted information delivered in a form that could be quickly processed and used. Suggestions were made for both adults and children and data was classified into face-face contacts and independent learning. Table 2 summarizes findings.

Table 2.
Delivery Methods

Children	Adults
Face-to-face contacts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support group • Workshop/class series for children living in a stepfamily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Discussion groups • Web chat groups • Workshops • Professional speakers & panel of experienced stepfamily members • Good counseling • Crisis hotline
Independent learning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workbook/journal for children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Books at library

living in or planning to live in a stepfamily

- Written guide for stepfamilies
- Newsletter
- Stepparenting information for stepmothers and stepfathers

Implementation and Evaluation

Using focus group findings, Extension agents developed community-based resources for stepfamilies. The development and implementation of asset-building resources for parents and children was fundamental in this process. Resources developed included:

- *Blending Families* newsletter,
- *My Families and Me* program and scrapbook for stepchildren,
- *Women and Stepfamilies* workshop,
- Essay contest for children in stepfamilies, and
- *Stepping Stones* workshop for parents.

These resources were the basis of implementation for stepfamily programming.

As a result of programming efforts, children changed their perceptions of stepfamilies and gained a greater understanding of their own individual situations. Newsletter usage evaluation surveys indicated participants gained parenting skills and knowledge about living in a stepfamily and became more sensitive to stepfamily issues. Participants ranked the *Blending Families* newsletter as the most useful source of stepfamily information above books, magazines, newspapers, friends, and family. Discussions in parent workshops dispelled myths, increased positive feelings, and encourage open communication among stepfamily members.

Conclusions

The issues revealed in the focus group interviews provided necessary insight into possibilities for needed educational components for both stepparents and stepchildren. Much of the focus group discussion issues paralleled the available stepfamily research findings. Programming must address the specific concerns and needs of stepfamilies and should include both children and parents. It is apparent that people want to make their new families work and that they are searching for helpful resources.

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