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## Understanding Stepfamilies: Family Life Education for Community Professionals

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## Understanding Stepfamilies: Family Life Education for Community Professionals

### Abstract

The author describes the rationale and the process for developing an educational seminar based on the current research on stepfamilies for professionals who work with children and families. Receptiveness to this program model for "second-tier" family life education is demonstrated.

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### Introduction

Extension educators can broaden efforts to positively affect family's experiences and children's development by delivering programs on relevant and recent family life research to community professionals. This represents a "second tier" of family life education and fits within an ecological perspective on human development. This theoretical framework recognizes multi-level environmental influences on human development.

Specifically, community professionals represent factors outside the family that can affect family functioning. "Understanding Stepfamilies: Information and Strategies" is a 4-hour research update seminar for professionals who work with children and families. Responses to the program indicate receptiveness to similar Extension programs targeting professionals.

### Rationale for the Program on Stepfamilies

Rationale for developing a professional seminar on stepfamilies centers on the following.

#### The Predominance of Stepfamilies

Many individuals, even those who work with children and families, 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 (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Approximately half of marriages each year are remarriages for one or both partners; approximately 65% of these involve children (Cherlin, 1992). Overall, estimates are that half of Americans today are or will be in a step relationship in their lifetime (Larson, 1992; Pasley, 2001).

#### Negative Attitudes Towards Stepfamilies Continue to Exist

Biases in favor of first families persist. Specifically, teachers, counselors, and peers hold negative stereotypes of stepfamilies (e.g., Crosbie-Burnett, 1995). Ganong and Coleman (1997) posit that societal views (i.e., stereotypes, myths) indirectly impact relationships in families by influencing the social support stepfamilies receive. Low social support is associated with poor family functioning. Children, especially, feel distress when they feel they "don't fit in" (i.e., low social acceptance).

#### Community Practices Fail to Acknowledge Stepfamily Structure

Stepfamilies are an "undeveloped institution" without established norms that prescribe roles and rules or institutional support for its structure. This is evident in programs, services, and

organizations that work with families. For example, most forms regarding the child do not provide a structure that allows inclusion of stepparent information or more than one household address (Bainbridge, 2000). Stepparents have unclear legal relationships and financial obligations to stepchildren. In general, most institutions and organizations continue to assume a nuclear family model in attitude and practice.

### **The Relative Newness of the Research**

Research on stepfamilies is a comparatively new area of investigation in the social sciences, with the majority of current knowledge about stepfamilies coming from the last decade and a half of research (Pasley, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that professionals working with families (e.g., teachers, social workers, childcare providers, counselors, attorneys) may not have a solid working knowledge of the research on stepfamily experiences, due to the likelihood that their program of study did not include information on the study of stepfamilies.

### **Developing the Program**

Given these factors, stepfamily functioning is an important topic for a family life education seminar for professionals and an opportunity for meaningful outreach. Greater community support, understanding, and validation of stepfamily members' experiences can provide much in the way of healthy child and family development.

The Understanding Stepfamilies program resulted from an interdisciplinary review of the research literature on stepfamilies. The structure of the seminar consists of three parts:

1. **The rationale for the program topic** (i.e., why should professionals spend time learning about stepfamilies?) (approximately 1 hour).
2. **A summary of recent findings from studies of stepfamilies** (what themes from research exist that provide insight into family members' experiences in stepfamilies?) (approximately 2 hours).  
Among the topics are:
  - a. Stepfamilies are more complex than first families and operate differently.
  - b. Inter-household relationships (i.e., post-divorce) are relevant to stepfamily functioning.
  - c. Empathy is especially important in stepfamilies where individuals have different family histories and must negotiate roles and rules where no societal norms exist.
  - d. Children often play an important part in initiating or exacerbating conflict in stepfamilies.
  - e. Children who experience parental marriage/partner transitions need extra support and skills for dealing with multiple changes.
  - f. Relationships evolve slowly and most often dyadically, rather than as a family unit.
  - g. The first 3-5 years are the most difficult. Successful navigation of these early years leads to individual and family stabilization.
3. **Application of the information** (i.e., what does this mean for you? how can this information be put to work that might positively impact members of stepfamilies?) (approximately 1 hour). The program provides specific recommendations; however, the most effective practice is using these suggestions as supplemental to small groups' discussions and reports of suggestions for application of the information. The exercise of processing the knowledge and determining for themselves what impact this should have on their work is invaluable to the effectiveness of the program.

Additionally, the program development incorporated ideas for effective adult learning (Johnson, 1991) by balancing didactic delivery with experiential activities, small and large group discussions, and the use of different media (e.g., PowerPoint, video).

### **Response to the Program**

Data are from 127 participants across six 4-hour seminars conducted during the period of March-December 2000 (69% return rate from the 183 attendees). Respondents were:

- 63% teachers
- 7% other school personnel
- 18% social workers/family services personnel
- 9% counselors/psychologists
- 3% attorneys.

Participants rated aspects of the program using a 5-point Likert scale (1-5; poor to excellent). Table 1 shows the mean scores on each factor.

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive Statistics of Program Responses (N = 127)

Item	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Content	4.0	5.0	4.87	.3331
Materials	4.0	5.0	4.79	.4051
Presenter	4.0	5.0	4.90	.2937
Overall Quality	4.0	5.0	4.83	.3730

Following the program, participants rated their level of knowledge about stepfamilies before and after the program on a 5-point Likert scale, using a post pre/post pair of questions (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). After the workshop, they rated their level of knowledge of stepfamily functioning prior to attending the workshop and after the program. A paired-samples t-test showed a significant change in this global measure item from an average of 1.4 before the workshop to 4.3 after the workshop ( $t=54.56$ ;  $p \leq .0001$ ).

Qualitative comments included the following.

**About the program design and delivery:**

- "The variety of media, group, partners, individual contributions, and the presenter's group facilitation and teaching skills made this a wonderful program on important information."
- "The format kept everyone involved."
- "Easy to follow--even the statistics!"

**About the relevance of the information:**

- "Offered me a new way to view my kids in stepfamilies and their households and how to work with them."
- "The information was relevant to me as a classroom teacher. Excellent!"

**Summary**

Various factors support an increased emphasis on stepfamily research for Family Life Educators. Additionally, targeting community professionals who work with families is warranted (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 1997) and represents a second tier of education the potential for a broader range of impact. A description of "Understanding Stepfamilies" professional education workshop is offered for replication for agents and specialists. Participants responded positively to the program's structure and content, and indicated improved knowledge of stepfamily dynamics on a global measure. Follow-up evaluation will determine the extent to which program participation impacts participants' work with families.

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