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## **Meeting the Needs of Married, Low-income Stepfamily Couples in Marriage Education Services**

### ***Final Report***

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# Executive Summary

A key element of the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) strategy for implementing the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) has been to identify subpopulations that would benefit from specialized program approaches. This report presents a conceptual framework for programs meant to promote stable and healthy marriages among one important subgroup, stepfamilies. Specifically, our charge from ACF was to focus on low-income married couples where one or both spouses have children by other partners. The conceptual framework is based on a review of the research literature on stepfamilies and on an informal study of marriage education programs currently serving stepfamilies.

Stepfamily couples (i.e., "stepcouples") have become common as a result of recent rates of divorces, remarriages, and first marriages following out-of-wedlock births. Stepcouples face a variety of unique challenges which put them at higher risk for dissolution than non-stepfamily couples. These challenges arise in part from complex relationships in the family with stepchildren, former partners, and half- and stepsiblings. Problems stemming from these complexities also put children in stepfamilies at greater risk for negative outcomes than children in nuclear families<sup>1</sup> (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2003). Existing marriage education programs do not address these unique stresses for stepfamilies in depth.

While not all stepfamilies have low income, risks for stepcouples are magnified in the context of lower economic resources. Couples experiencing economic strain face additional stresses arising from financial difficulties and other personal and environmental challenges accompanying limited resources (e.g., (Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999). Therefore, low-income stepcouples are a high-need target population for HMI programs and services.

## Overview of the Conceptual Framework

We conducted a thorough review of existing empirical research on stepfamily dynamics, gleaned relevant information from studies of low-income couples, and reviewed a number of current marriage education programs for stepcouples. Our goal was to develop a conceptual framework to guide practitioners' thinking when targeting this population of married couples.

Figure 1 presents our conceptual framework for marriage education programs for low-income married stepcouples. The framework shows the linkages among conditions affecting stepcouples, the program services, and the intermediate and long-term outcomes. Two intervention components have a key role in the model: (1) the marriage education programs and (2) other services. The marriage education component includes topics related to basic

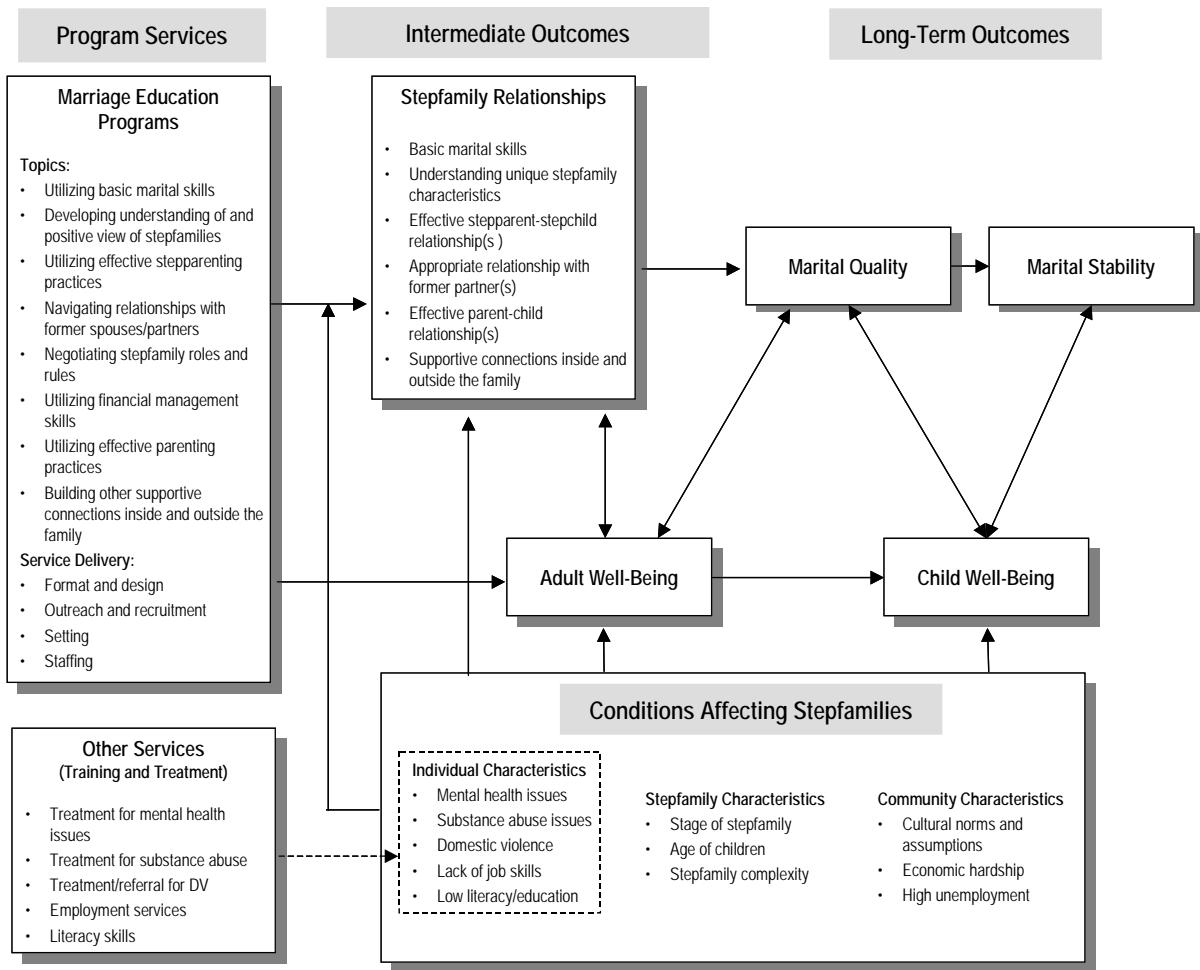
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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we define a "nuclear" family as one that includes only a married man and woman and their children in common.

skills for marital couples, whether in a stepfamily or not, in addition to a number of topics specific to stepcouples. Other services address individual challenges that can place extra stress on stepcouple relationships.

The underlying assumption in this model is that learning about these topics and developing the related skills will contribute to the formation and/or maintenance of strong relationships within the stepfamily and to adult well-being. These intermediate outcomes will in turn further the development of the *long-term outcomes, marital quality and stability* and *child well-being*. An additional assumption is that developing and maintaining high levels of marital quality will buffer the effects of economic hardship and the accompanying stresses among those with lower economic resources. Existing conditions affecting stepcouples include individual, stepfamily, and community characteristics. Figure 1 shows that these conditions both directly affect the intermediate and long-term outcomes and also influence the degree to which the program can support healthy marital relationships. The “other services” (training and treatment) component of the program is targeted at strengthening individual capacities, as shown by broken lines.





**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Marriage Education for Low-income Stepfamilies**

## Study of Programs Serving Stepfamilies

The project team conducted a series of informal telephone interviews with staff from 16 current marriage education programs for stepfamilies. The primary purpose of these interviews was to add practitioners' perspectives on stepcouples' marriage education needs to the conceptual framework. A second objective was to document practical lessons learned by those who have been providing such programs. It was not the goal of this program study to provide a systematic review of current programs for stepfamilies.

For the program review, we conducted an extensive search for *programs whose goal is to support and improve the marriages of low-income stepcouples through direct education*.

We identified about 40 programs that provide educational services to stepfamilies. From these programs we selected 16 to interview that included a range of implementation formats, organizational settings, and target populations. Despite our extensive search, *we found no programs providing marriage education to low-income stepcouples*. The populations served by the programs we identified were predominantly White, middle-class couples.

### Program Outreach and Recruitment Issues

Most programs contacted experienced challenges recruiting stepcouples, as is frequently the case for voluntary programs of all sorts. Consistent with studies of barriers to participation in other specialized community education programs (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 2004), stepcouples may be unaware both that they have special challenges and that many of the issues they face may be addressed through education. In addition, stepcouples also may be reluctant to identify themselves as stepfamilies due to perceived cultural biases against them. Another factor that scholars have noted is that stepfamily couples may be especially attuned to the possibility that bringing up conflictual issues may lead to risk of divorce (Visher & Visher, 1997). Stepcouples may be less likely to voluntarily attend marriage education programs if their family is functioning fairly well. An "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality may be at work. Couples may not want to risk bringing up issues that may lead to conflict, even if these issues need to be discussed (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). It may be necessary to clarify in marketing for programs that classes are intended for both assistance with current issues and maintenance of healthy, happy marriages.

A number of program staff we interviewed also offered helpful suggestions for increasing participation, such as: (1) offering one-session workshops, rather than multi-session series (to accommodate family schedules) and (2) clarifying that these marriage education services include information on successful stepparenting (since many couples realize the strain that challenging stepparent-stepchild relationships put on their marriage and may be looking for strategies to assist in this area).

## **Program Content**

The programs contacted varied in terms of format, setting, staffing, duration, and intensity. There was relatively more consistency in the core topics covered. These topics were highly consistent with the topics identified in the research literature and included in our conceptual framework. All the programs we contacted included these topics:

- The unique characteristics and developmental stages of stepfamilies (e.g., that it can take 3-5 years for stepfamily members to learn to relate comfortably to each other);
- The importance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship for the couple's marital relationship and effective stepparenting practices; and
- Navigating relationships with former spouses/partners, especially the co-parenting relationship.

Most of the programs for stepcouples we contacted did not include basic skills for strengthening the marital relationship (e.g., communication and conflict management skills). However, the longest multi-session programs did include at least communication skills.

## **Observations on Stepfamilies**

Together our review of research literature on stepfamilies and study of programs yielded a number of observations about stepfamilies and raised questions that future research might address.

### **Stepfamilies Have Unique Characteristics**

From the start, stepfamilies differ from non-stepfamilies in important ways:

- The biological parent-child bond predates the couple's relationship;
- A spouse may become an "instant parent" at marriage rather than having children join the family over time;
- One of the children's biological parents most likely lives in a separate household;
- Children may move between two households;
- The vast majority of stepfamily couples will be navigating at least one co-parenting relationship with a former spouse/partner; and
- Members of the family have experienced the loss of a relationship through separation, divorce, or death.

Marriage educators will be most effective in supporting healthy marriages among stepcouples when this unique family context is considered and addressed in program services. We emphasize that the context is likely to be even more complex and challenging among low-income stepcouples because of the higher incidence of multiple-partner fertility, with its multiple co-parenting relationships, extended family relationships, and sibling relationships. For such families, such complexities can create additional stresses even before adding the difficulties that come with limited financial resources. Because of the complexity of relationships present at the onset of stepcouple formation, marriage education services should utilize an inclusive approach to addressing other relationships in the family system.

### **Awareness of Stepfamilies' Unique Characteristics and Prevalence Appears Limited**

The unique relationship complexities in stepfamilies often are not acknowledged and addressed by stepcouples or marriage education programs. Marriage education programs may not distinguish between stepcouples and nuclear family couples. Few general marriage education programs include program content specific to the stepfamily context.

Scholars suggest that the tendency to relegate stepcouples to a “hidden” population owes to societal norms affirming the nuclear family as “ideal” (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). One finds evidence of these norms in the media, fairy tales, and in forms and procedures used by schools and other institutions. Implicit in this treatment are societal pressures for stepcouples to function and develop in the same way as nuclear family couples.

### **Stepfamily Couples Need Realistic Expectations about Stepfamily Development**

Many stepcouples enter marriage with the expectation that their marriage will be “just like” marriages where no stepchildren or former partners are involved. The most predominant unrealistic standards include beliefs about functional equivalency to first-marriage families, quick adjustment, and instant love (Visher & Visher, 1988). It is important that stepcouples recognize that their unique family characteristics will have implications for their marital functioning. For example, it often takes a substantial length of time for stepfamily relationships and routines to gel. The first several years are especially likely to be turbulent for stepcouples. Expectations about family bonding, emotional closeness, and love among all of the members of the stepfamily equally may be unrealistic. The programs we identified all worked to address these expectations.

### **Stepfamily Couples Need Skills in Parenting Stepchildren, Co-Parenting, and Negotiating**

Respondents in the program study consistently indicated that tensions between stepparents and stepchildren were a key focus of their programs and that many families sought out support and education because of these issues. Several respondents told us that couples with

pre-adolescents and adolescents were especially likely to participate in the programs. This self-selection fits with empirical evidence that stepcouples with pre-adolescent and adolescent children report comparatively more adjustment issues and marital difficulties than stepcouples with younger children.

The marital relationship is affected also by the quality of the co-parenting relationship(s) with former spouses/partners. It is important for stepcouples to be able to keep conflict low when co-parenting and protect the boundaries between households that is necessary for healthy marital functioning,

Although negotiation skills are important for all relationships, stepcouples face added challenges in navigating the roles and norms that are not clearly defined in general societal norms. Financial responsibilities also can be more complicated in stepfamilies, and stepcouples must successfully negotiate a shared vision for their financial practices. Although the programs interviewed usually provided information on the topics of stepparenting and negotiating with a former spouse, few programs focused on teaching these specific skills. Because most of the programs we contacted were of short duration, it may be that longer programs could do more to address specific skills.

## **Suggestions for Marriage Education Programs for Stepfamilies**

The program study generated ideas about various ways in which marriage education could be provided to stepfamilies, and especially to low-income stepfamilies.

### **Stepfamilies in General Marriage Education Programs**

One key design question for marriage education programs for stepcouples is whether to develop programs specifically for stepfamilies or to incorporate material on stepfamilies in programs serving both stepfamilies and non-stepfamilies. We are not aware of any research investigating which approach is more effective. Theoretically, both have advantages and disadvantages. Targeted programs can be more fully tailored to stepfamily issues and needs, and participants may benefit from the additional social support and “normalization” from sharing experiences with others in similar circumstances. On the other hand, it may be difficult to identify and recruit participants who are strictly from stepfamilies. Programs for mixed groups are more practical in this regard and can be designed to include material and break-out sessions on stepfamilies. Special effort may need to be made to ensure that recruitment efforts effectively reach stepfamily couples, that program staff identify participants as stepcouples even when they do not self-identify, and that program content provides enough emphasis on the unique circumstances stepfamily couples face.

## **Classes to Prepare Couples for Marriage**

Stepfamily content would also be appropriate to add to marriage preparation classes. Many couples, including stepcouples, are encouraged or required by their religious institutions to attend a marriage preparation class. General marriage preparation classes appear frequently to include participants from a range of socioeconomic groups. Some religious institutions already have created marriage preparation classes specifically for soon-to-be stepfamilies although such programs do not appear to be in widespread use. Participants in marriage preparation programs are likely to include couples who are forming stepfamilies, whether through remarriage or by marrying for the first time but with children from previous relationships. It would be reasonable, therefore, to include general content about the unique characteristics of stepfamilies within these courses to address the needs of this group and to raise awareness of stepfamily issues generally. As was suggested in the context of general marriage education programs, marriage preparation programs could offer additional sessions for those forming stepfamilies to discuss their particular concerns.

## **State-Mandated Classes for Divorcing Parents**

A number of states require divorcing parents to attend classes before they can be granted a divorce,<sup>2</sup> with the intent to reduce the potential negative impact of the divorce on the children. The majority of these divorcing parents will eventually remarry and form stepfamilies. Therefore, pre-divorce classes may be an appropriate context in which to include at least some content on stepfamily issues. Particularly in the states where these classes are required by law, a substantial number of low-income and minority couples are likely to attend. Content could focus on general information about stepfamilies and the implications for future marriages. The facilitator could also provide information on marriage education and other relevant services available in the community. An examination of curricula used in these classes reveals that most already devote about 10 to 15% of the time to issues related to re-partnering and stepfamilies (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998). Unfortunately, the content tends to be very narrow, focused mainly on cautioning parents against forming new relationships too quickly and the potential negative impact on children when they face yet another set of changes.

## **Suggestions for Implementation of Marriage Education Programs for Low-income Stepfamilies**

Research scholars and respondents in our program study provided some suggestions relevant to delivering marriage education services to low-income stepfamilies. In order to reduce the stigma that many stepcouples feel about being in a stepfamily, marriage educators might

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2 Forty-five states have enacted state or local laws authorizing courts to require attendance at a parent education course at the court's discretion; but 9 of these states have enacted a statewide mandate for attendance (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998).

work with community leaders to promote a more positive image of stepfamilies and encourage them to participate in programs. Religious leaders might be especially effective in doing this for members of their congregations. In order to make the experience of marriage education positive for low-income stepfamilies from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, it will be important to recognize potential cultural differences in attitudes regarding family privacy and whether or not one should discuss personal matters with outsiders, including marriage educators. In addition, it will be important to have program materials provided in the participants' preferred language and at literacy levels that are comfortable for members of the group. Another suggestion that marriage educators may want to consider is to include children, especially pre-adolescents and adolescents, in some of the sessions. Such formats may be especially helpful for stepfamilies, because children's behaviors have such an important influence on the marital relationship in these families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

## **Recommendations for Future Research and Evaluation**

Improved information on stepfamilies is seriously needed in fashioning policies and programs. In our report we offer suggestions on several broad areas of needed research, including descriptive studies on stepfamily prevalence (including stepfamilies in low-income and racial- and ethnic-minority groups) and on low-income stepcouples' attitudes and experiences. We also provide recommendations for evaluation research on marriage education programs for stepcouples, suggesting that implementation and participant studies be conducted first. A test of the full conceptual model for work with stepcouples through Healthy Marriage Initiative services, utilizing an experimental longitudinal design, would move the practice field toward an empirically-validated model for best practices with this target population.

## **Summary**

Existing evidence suggests that many married couples in the U.S. are managing stepfamily relationships. Empirical studies of stepfamily dynamics highlight the unique factors inherent in stepfamily marriages that impact their quality and stability, most notably the complexity of multiple relationships that exist at the onset of the marriage. Additional research on low-income populations suggests that economic strain carries with it risks for marital health and stability, as well. Therefore, low-income stepcouples represent a target population for the HMI of high and unique needs for marriage education. A conceptual framework for marriage education for stepcouples derived from research and an informal study with community educators targeting stepfamilies suggests the inclusion of eight core content areas: Utilizing basic marital skills; developing understanding of and positive view of stepfamilies; utilizing effective stepparenting practices; navigating relationships with former spouses/partners; negotiating stepfamily roles and rules; utilizing financial management skills; utilizing effective parenting practices; and building other supportive connections

inside and outside the family. In addition, the framework suggests the consideration of several elements of program service delivery and of conditions that exist at the individual, family, and community levels and influence service needs. It is expected that the implementation of such a program will result in healthy stepfamily relationships and positive individual well-being (i.e., adult and child), and contribute to the overall quality and stability of stepcouple marriages.



# Chapter 1

## A Statistical Portrait of Stepfamilies in the U.S.

A key element of the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) strategy for implementing the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) has been to identify subpopulations that would benefit from specialized program approaches.<sup>1</sup> This report presents a conceptual framework for programs to promote stable and healthy marriage among one important subgroup, stepfamilies. Specifically, our charge from ACF was to focus on low-income married couples where one or both spouses have children by other partners. The conceptual framework is based on a review of the research literature on stepfamilies and on an informal study of marriage education programs currently serving stepfamilies.

There are several reasons to devote special attention to stepfamilies. First, as documented in the next section, stepfamilies are common as a result of divorces, remarriages, and first marriages following out-of-wedlock births. Second, as discussed in the next chapter, stepfamilies face a variety of unique challenges that generally go unaddressed in depth in most existing marriage education curricula but which may put them at higher risk for dissolution than non-stepfamilies. These challenges arise in part from complex relationships with stepchildren, former partners, and half- and stepsiblings. Third, although children can do well in a variety of family forms, it appears that living in a stepfamily is associated with greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes for children when compared to living in a nuclear family (in this paper we define "nuclear" family as one that includes only a married man and a woman and their children in common). On average, children in stepfamilies do worse on measures of social and emotional well-being when compared to children living in nuclear families (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; see Coleman et al., 2000 and Ganong & Coleman, 2004 for reviews).<sup>2</sup>

Our charge from ACF was to focus on services that would benefit especially low-income stepfamilies, in keeping with the special concerns with economically disadvantaged groups in the federal HMI. Research indicates that low-income married couples are comparatively more vulnerable to marital dissolution and that their children are at risk for negative outcomes. The combination of economic strain and stepfamily structure establish low-income stepcouples as an important target population for marriage education.

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<sup>1</sup> Subpopulations receiving special attention in the HMI include: teens and youths, unmarried parents, couples who have experienced incarceration, and African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

<sup>2</sup> This extensive literature and debate over interpretations are not reviewed and presented in this report. It should be noted, however, that observed differences tend to be small, and it remains unclear whether the experience of living in a stepfamily or issues related to dysfunction in the first family and the separation/divorce experience are the cause of poorer child outcomes.

The goals of this project were to review research literature on the demography, needs, and programs for stepfamilies; to review selected existing programs to learn more about the needs of stepfamilies and identify issues related to program development; to develop a conceptual framework for programs based on the literature review and the program study; and to suggest directions for future research. Accordingly, in this first chapter, we summarize the basic demography of stepfamilies. In the second chapter, we present a conceptual framework to guide marriage education programs for low-income stepfamilies. In the third chapter, we summarize our observations of selected marriage education services for stepfamilies. In the last chapter, we present general themes related to stepfamilies and programs that serve them and offer our recommendations for research on stepfamilies and stepfamily marriage education programs.

Although stepfamilies are not generally defined by marriage,<sup>3</sup> in this report, we use the term “stepfamily” to refer to stepfamilies containing only married couples. The term “stepfamily” came into use in an earlier era of family history, to describe how new spouses “stepped into” the role of parenting children, typically through marriage to a widow or widower.<sup>4</sup>

By way of background, this chapter provides a statistical portrait of stepfamilies. We first touch briefly on the changing circumstances underlying the creation of stepfamilies today. We then summarize the evidence on stepfamily prevalence.

## The “New” Stepfamily

In earlier U.S. history (i.e., 1700s to late 1800s), stepfamilies were created primarily when parents remarried after the death of a spouse. Stepfamilies were fairly common, due to lower life expectancy for men and women and high rates of maternal mortality during childbirth (Coontz, 2002).

In the latter half of the 20th century, dramatic increases in life expectancy and divorce rates gave rise to a new type of stepfamily. The new stepfamily is characterized by substantially more complex relationships, as both children and adults must adjust not only to new relationships within the household (e.g., stepparent/stepchild, stepsibling) but also to new relationships with family members outside the household (e.g., former spouses/partners and children residing with former spouses/partners) (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this “traditional vs. revised” definition of stepfamily, see Stewart, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Stepfamilies have been labeled in a variety of ways: *aggregate*, *amalgamated*, *blended*, *combined*, *compound*, *composite*, *consolidated*, *joint*, *merged*, *mixed*, *multimarriage*, *multiparent*, *reconstituted*, *reconstructed*, *recoupled*, *split*, and *step* are some of these terms (Wald, 1981). Most terms paint a picture of a coming together of existing elements. See [www.stepfamilies.info/faqs/faqs.htm#2](http://www.stepfamilies.info/faqs/faqs.htm#2) for a discussion of conceptual reasons for preferring the use of the term “stepfamily”.

In addition, substantial increases in rates of non-marital childbearing in recent decades imply that increasing numbers of first marriages between adults with children from previous relationships are forming stepfamilies (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Approximately 50% of cohabiting couples are stepcouples as well (Seltzer, 2000). In this report, we focus on married stepcouples.

## **Divorce and Remarriage**

Although a slight downward trend has been observed in the divorce rate in recent years,<sup>5</sup> indications are that approximately half of adults who marry will divorce, the majority in their first 10 years of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; 2002). National survey results indicate that economic disadvantage—whether measured by family income, education, or neighborhood poverty—is associated with a higher risk of first marriage disruption. Disruption rates are also higher for African American than for White or Hispanic women. Current estimates for first marriages suggest that 48% of Whites’ marriages, 52% of Hispanics’ marriages, and 63% of African Americans’ marriages end in divorce within the first 20 years of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). First marriage disruption rates are highest for women who marry young, have a child before marrying, are not working at the time of marriage, are less religious, and did not live with both of their parents throughout the period they were growing up (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Most divorced individuals go on to remarry (approximately 75% [Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991]), and the majority of these individuals bring children from the previous relationship (Coleman et al., 2000). Typically, these new unions form quickly: about half of all divorced individuals remarry within five years and three quarters remarry within 10 years (Bramlett, & Mosher, 2002; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Kreider & Fields, 2001). Having low income and living in a poor neighborhood are associated with a lower chance of remarriage, whereas education has little association with remarriage rates. Younger adults are more likely to remarry than older ones. Whites and Hispanics are more likely to remarry than African Americans.<sup>6</sup> Men were found more likely to remarry and to do so more quickly than women (Kreider, 2005). Having children from a previous marriage lowers the probability of remarriage, but more so for women than for men (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Buckle, Gallup, & Rodd, 1996).

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<sup>5</sup> One factor related to this may be the slight downward trend in the marriage rate in recent years.

<sup>6</sup> After 5 years of divorce Whites are most likely to remarry (58%), followed by Hispanics/Latinos (44%). African-Americans are comparatively less likely to remarry (32%) (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). These proportions show a marked downward trend when compared to national samples in 1976, which indicated the probability of remarriage within 5 years of divorce was 73% for Whites and nearly 50% for African-Americans.

Remarriages dissolve at slightly higher and faster rates than first marriages (e.g., Bumpass et al., 1990; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Krieder, 2005). The cumulative probability of first marriage dissolution after 10 years of marriage is 33%, and the probability of second marriage dissolution after 10 years is 39% (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001).<sup>7</sup> Divorce among remarrieds also tends to occur more quickly compared with first marriages. Fifteen percent of remarriages have ended after three years, whereas nearly 25% have ended after five years compared to 12% and 20%, respectively, for first marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Data do not exist for the probability of divorce among first marriages that form stepfamilies.

Although findings from non-representative sample studies have been mixed (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), representative demographic studies indicate that remarriages where children from a prior relationship are present are at even greater risk of dissolution than those without children. After 10 years of remarriage, the probability of disruption is 32% for women with no children at remarriage. For women with children at remarriage, the probability is 40 to 44% (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Another factor associated with the likelihood of re-divorce is race/ethnicity. The remarriages of African American women (as are the first marriages) are more likely to end in separation or divorce, compared to White or Hispanic women (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). After 10 years of marriage, the probability ending a remarriage is 29% for Hispanic women, 39% for White women, and 48% for African American women (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

## **Trends in Stepfamily Prevalence**

Although indications are that living in a stepfamily is an increasingly common experience, efforts to track trends at the population level have not improved over the years. Available statistics do not allow us to establish specific rates of increase or decrease in stepfamily prevalence. To support estimates of stepfamily prevalence, surveys must ascertain at a minimum whether any children in the household are the biological children of only one spouse. The most thorough approach is to determine every existing child's relationship to both spouses, whether a household resident or not. An alternative approach is to include only a summary question asking whether any existing children (i.e., resident or nonresident) are the biological children of only one spouse. It is also important to utilize similar survey questions across time in order to identify trends.

Unfortunately, very few national surveys include questions to accurately identify stepfamilies<sup>8</sup> and the richest of them are somewhat older surveys (e.g., National Survey of

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<sup>7</sup> The analyses rely on the fifth cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth; the full study covers the period from 1973-1995.

<sup>8</sup> Neither of the two longest-running surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census support complete estimation of stepfamilies. Both the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Decennial Census taken in 2000 include questions about each child in the household's relationship to the householder only (who may

Families and Households [NSFH], a longitudinal survey with waves in 1987-88, 1992-94, and 2001-2002) or cover specialized samples (e.g., Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey, covering new parents in large cities, with an emphasis on unwed parents).

The paucity of recent population estimates makes it difficult to establish trends in stepfamily prevalence with precision. Earlier research projected increases in living in stepfamilies for children born in the 1980s, compared with those born in the 1970s (Glick, 1989), estimating that 33% of children born in the 1980s would spend some time in their growing years in a stepfamily, up from 14% born in the 1970s. New analyses conducted with the 1987-1988 NSFH data indicate that 31% of married adults of child-bearing age grew up in a stepfamily (see Appendix A).

More recent evidence on cohort trends in divorce and remarriage suggests that stepfamily prevalence is likely to have increased somewhat in the last decade or so, albeit at a slower rate. For example, Amato, Johnson, Booth, and Rogers (2003) find that the fraction of U.S. married couples in second or later marriages increased from 20 to 29% between 1980 and 2000. Other evidence suggests that although first marriage disruption rates have declined across recent cohorts, dissolution rates for second marriages have trended slightly upwards (Kreider, 2005). These slight increases in remarriage and re-divorce experience, however, still do not provide specific information on trends for stepfamily prevalence.

Information is even more limited for the low-income subgroups of interest to healthy marriage initiatives. There are, however, a few hints that the prevalence of stepfamilies may have continued to increase among more disadvantaged groups. For example, Raley and Bumpass (2003) found that divorce rates increased among married women without a high school diploma while remaining constant among better-educated women first marrying between 1980 and 1994.

It seems possible also that the numbers of first marriages involving children from previous (unmarried) partners increased more rapidly among more disadvantaged groups and minority groups. From 1960 to 1990, the fraction of women having a first child prior to marriage increased dramatically among women with the lowest education levels and among African American women (Ellwood & Jencks, 2001, Tables 5-10). Furthermore, a high fraction of these pre-marital births occurred more than three years prior to marriage, implying that many may be children by former partners.

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be either the husband or wife). These sources therefore do not identify children who are stepchildren of the householder's spouse. They also do not identify stepparents whose stepchildren reside with the other biological parent nor are stepfamilies with only children over the age of 18 identified.

## The Prevalence of Stepfamilies

In this section we note some of the older estimates of stepfamily experience, including new estimates of stepfamily prevalence from the 1987-88 NSFH. A more detailed discussion of these prevalence estimates is found in Appendix A. We then present information from a recent sample of married couples.

Using data from the 1980s and the 1990 Census, Norton and Miller (1992) estimated that 5 million households in the U.S. (approximately 1 in 10) were stepfamily households. Data gathered in the late 1980s showed that 46% of all marriages in a year were remarriages for one or both partners (National Center for Health Statistics, 1993; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, Table 145; Wilson & Clark, 1992).

Drawing on the earlier and more representative NSFH data, among all U.S. married couples of childbearing age (with a wife under age 35) in 1987-88, just over 1 in 10 of these families (11%) were residential stepfamilies. Excluding childless couples, the percentage was slightly higher (12%). In the large majority of stepfamilies (8 of the 11%), only the mother had children from another partner. A similar fraction (9%) of the population had non-resident minor children by former partners. In most (7%) of these instances, only the husband had non-resident children.

More comprehensive measures of stepfamily experience in 1987-1988 from the NSFH indicate that 17% of all married couples of childbearing age had at least one spouse who had had a child with a former partner (resident or nonresident). Again, we note that couples in which the stepchildren were over the age of 18 were not identified.

Recent data from the “Baseline Survey of Attitudes, Beliefs, and Demographics Relating to Marriage and Family Formation” conducted in Florida as part of that state’s healthy marriage initiative (Karney et al., 2003) showed that 18.3% of all Florida households contain a married couple with at least one residential stepchild (Karney et al., 2003, calculated from statistics in Table 5).

In this study, telephone interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 4,508 Florida residents over the age of 18, including oversamples of blacks, Hispanics, low-income households, individuals receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and residents of the four major metropolitan areas in Florida (Jacksonville, Orlando, Miami, and Tampa). In addition, samples of 500 individuals each were collected from randomly selected residents of California, Texas, and New York. Data were weighted in order to achieve the study’s goals of making reliable inferences and ensuring a representative sample of the population from which it was drawn.

Among married couple households with children, 40% answered “yes” to either the question, “Do you have a child from a previous relationship?” or “Does your spouse have a child from

a previous relationship?” (Karney et al., 2003, calculated from statistics presented in Table 5). Among low-income married couples (below 200% poverty level) with children, this corresponding proportion is 49%, compared to 37% for higher income (greater than 400% of poverty). Among White and Hispanic married couple households with children, 39% and 36%, respectively, include at least one spouse who has one or more (resident or non-resident) children from a previous relationship. Among African-American married couple households with children, 55% report a stepparent-stepchild relationship for at least one partner. These questions appear to capture stepparent-stepchild relationships regardless of residence of the child or age of the child.

We emphasize that the Florida population differs from the U.S. population on ethnic minority proportions, and therefore present this information without inferences for the U.S. population proportions. Variations on the percentage of married couples with children who have at least one stepchild in the three other states sampled were 33% for California, 28% for New York, and 37% for Texas (Karney et al., 2003, Table 28).

Another method of examining prevalence of the stepfamily experience is to focus on the child’s experiences. Fields (2001) used the 1996 SIPP to develop estimates of the proportion of children under 18 currently living with stepparents. His statistics (which include both married and cohabiting couples) show that 7% of all children lived with a stepparent in 1996. There was little variation between Hispanic (5%), African American (6%), and non-Hispanic White (8%) children (Fields, 2001, Table 1). Fields also provides estimates of the fraction of children living in any family in which either a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling was present. This expansive definition of stepfamilies included families with two unmarried parents, as well as single-parent families containing a stepsibling or half-sibling from a former partner. Results showed that 17% of all children, 20% of African American children, and 15% of Hispanic, and 16% of non-Hispanic White children lived in stepfamilies, so defined (Fields, 2001; Table 4).

## **Conclusions**

Although existing data do not allow for the identification of specific rates of increase or decrease of stepfamily proportions in the population, we have indications that the stepfamily experience is quite common. Increased life expectancy, divorce rates, nonmarital birth rates, and multiple- partner fertility combine to create a large number of couples in complex family systems.





## Chapter 2

# A Conceptual Framework for Marriage Education for Low-income Stepfamilies

In this chapter, we present a conceptual framework to guide the development of marriage education programs for low-income stepfamilies. Our framework, shown in Figure 1, shows the linkages among the conditions affecting stepfamilies (shown at the bottom of the framework), the program services, and the intermediate and long-term outcomes.

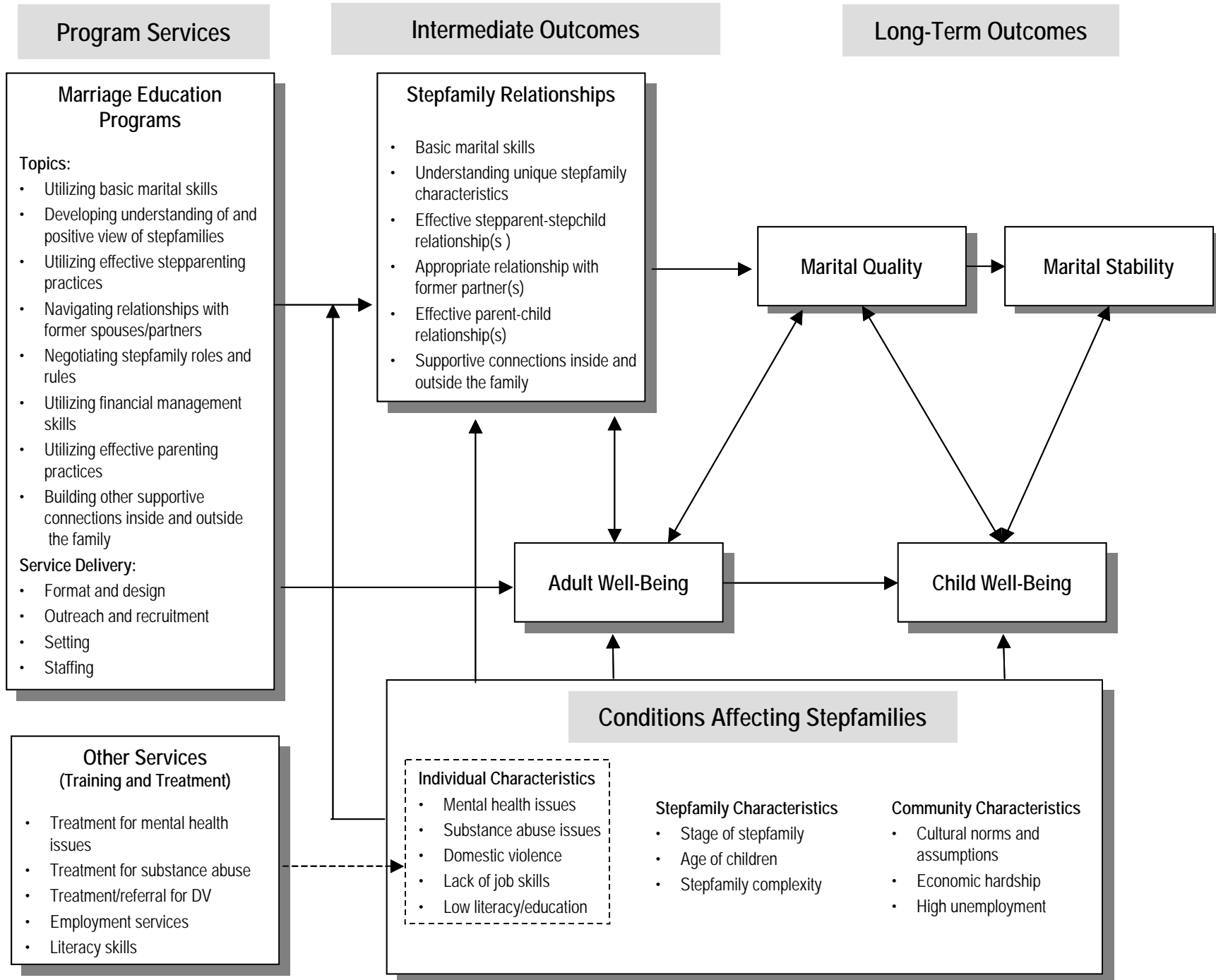
The discussion of the conceptual model in this chapter is based on an extensive review of the research literature on stepfamilies and on the relationships of low-income and ethnic minority couples in the U.S. generally. The next chapter discusses the framework in terms of the study of programs. The literature review builds on previous stepfamily reviews (two decade reviews in *Journal of Marriage and Family*,<sup>1</sup> Ganong & Coleman, 2004) and on other recent reviews of stepfamily research and the implications for marriage education (e.g., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), as well as recent annotated bibliographies, updated through an extensive search of major on-line bibliographic databases.<sup>2</sup>

In the next section, we provide an overview of the major components of our conceptual framework. We then discuss in some detail each of the eight principal topics in the marriage education program that forms the core of the program services, and, last, describe the conditions that may influence the effect of the marriage education program.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Journal of Marriage and Family* is considered the top academic journal in the field of Family Science. Each decade, a special issue is produced with invited reviews of the state of research in many important areas of family science.

<sup>2</sup> Members of the project's Advisory Panel (see Appendix B) provided further guidance in identifying important studies and recommended researchers to contact for unpublished research. A reference list was compiled that includes the studies examined for the published literature reviews and annotated bibliographies maintained by Advisory Panel members and the Principal Investigator, Francesca Adler-Baeder, as well as the studies examined based on our current review of the relevant literature. This list of over 2000 publications is available from the authors.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Marriage Education for Low-income Stepfamilies**

## Overview of the Conceptual Framework

We utilize a pictorial conceptual framework to organize the research information about stepfamily marital functioning and considerations for implementing stepfamily marriage education programs. This type of conceptual framework is a heuristic and attempts have been made to be comprehensive and inclusive of information. It is not intended to be an empirical model positing testable hypotheses; although, certainly, such empirical models can be derived from this framework.

The objectives guiding our conceptual framework for stepfamily programs are to provide education intended to maintain and strengthen healthy relationships between the spouses in the stepfamily and between spouses and children, thereby promoting the *long-term outcomes* of *marital quality*, *marital stability*, and *child well-being* (shown at the far right of the framework). The definition of marital quality or healthy marriage we use includes the couple's commitment to one another, the ability to communicate and resolve conflicts effectively, lack of domestic violence, fidelity, time together, intimacy, and social support. Our view of adult and child well-being includes health and safety, positive socioemotional functioning, and age-level cognitive and educational attainment among other characteristics (Moore et al. 2004).

At the heart of our framework are the *intermediate outcomes*, specific aspects of *stepfamily relationships* that the literature suggests are crucial to healthy marriages in stepfamilies. These relationships are viewed as being influenced by the marriage education program and, in turn, contributing to the long-term outcomes. These relationships encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to distinctive challenges facing stepcouples, as well as aspects of marital relations common to all couples. The *adult well-being* of the stepfamily spouses, also considered an intermediate outcome, is viewed as both influencing the stepfamily relationships and being influenced by them. *Conditions affecting stepfamilies* at the individual, family, and community level affect multiple components of the framework and may also influence the effect of the marriage education program for specific stepcouples. Because the training and treatment services, listed as *other services*, will likely directly influence only individuals and not couples or families, the link between them is indicated by the broken lines.

Within this framework, we adopt a strength-based *normative-adaptive* perspective in developing services for stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Early research on stepfamilies primarily used a *deficit-comparison perspective* and looked for ways that stepfamilies were deficient as compared to nuclear families (reviewed in Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In contrast, the normative-adaptive perspective is a strength-based approach that pursues strategies that work with the unique aspects of stepfamily functioning.

Our research review suggests that comprehensive marriage education programs for stepcouples should include (a) insights and skills directly useful in addressing unique aspects

of stepfamily functioning and (b) basic relationship skills that can benefit all types of couples. Our conceptual framework identifies the principal topics such programs should cover and the key issues involved in implementing strong programs.

Conditions affecting stepfamilies constitute an important component of the framework. These conditions originate in the strengths and vulnerabilities each spouse brings to the relationship and in the social and economic contexts surrounding families in general. Although the individual and community conditions may be present in any family, acknowledging these conditions is especially crucial for understanding and designing programs for low-income couples. Due to their financial circumstances, such couples typically experience more difficulties and stresses that can make it difficult to sustain healthy relationships and marriages (e.g., Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Negative conditions affecting some stepcouples, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and low literacy skills, can be addressed by the proposed program model, whereas other conditions (e.g., ages of children, stepfamily complexity ) are either unchangeable or beyond the scope of the program to address. For the former set of conditions, a comprehensive program would include the relevant services or provide referrals to them. In either case, the program may help couples to better understand and manage the effects of these factors on relationships.

As depicted in our framework, conditions enter the picture in several ways. In addition to directly influencing intermediate and long-term outcomes, the conditions are also seen as influencing how the program affects stepfamily relationships, indicated by the arrow connecting “Conditions” to the arrow linking “Marriage Education Programs” to “Stepfamily Relationships”. For example, spouses with serious mental health or substance abuse issues may not be in a position to benefit from a marriage education program without first addressing the individual problem.

In the following sections, we describe each of the eight core topic areas the research suggests should be covered in marriage education programs for stepfamilies. Next, we identify and discuss some of the principal conditions likely to affect low-income stepcouples. Aspects of the marriage education’s service delivery are discussed in the next chapter, in the context of the programs interviewed.

## **Core Recommended Topics in Marriage Education Programs for Couples in Stepfamilies**

Based on our review of the research literature, our conceptual model includes both topics specific to stepfamilies and topics found in most marriage education programs (i.e., those related to basic marital skills). Research suggests that stepcouples will benefit from both types of content, especially the prior, since stepfamily couples experience unique issues and

family development patterns (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Scholars concur that appropriate interventions for stepcouples should include the consideration of the impact of other family relationships (e.g., children, former partners) on marital functioning and ways to navigate complex family systems (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Relying solely on the general marital research to inform practice with couples in stepfamilies may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet stepfamilies' unique needs (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). In the following section, we examine each core topic suggested in the marriage education component of the framework, specify the research support for including this topic in the framework, and summarize the objectives programs may want to address.

## 1. Utilizing Basic Marital Skills

We expect that stepfamily couples' interactions have the same causes and consequences as non-stepfamily couples and, thus, will benefit similarly from basic relationship insights and skills training. Although these basic skills have been summarized in a variety of ways, the core elements that appear to emerge across all summaries of research on healthy marriages are *communication skills, conflict management skills, effective anger and stress management, emotion regulation, and friendship-building skills* (i.e., caring, nurturing, expressing affection, showing empathy, attempts to connect) (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Adler-Baeder & Futris, 2005; Moore et al., 2004).

It appears that learning these skills may be especially important for low-income stepfamily couples, because low-income adults are more likely to have experienced their own parents' relationship disruption and re-partnering (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Amato, 2000). The experience of parental marital disruption is associated with a greater likelihood of children engaging later in life in such problematic interpersonal behaviors with their own spouses as anger, jealousy, negative communication, and infidelity (Amato, 1996; Amato et al., 2003). Similarly, their own children, the next generation, also are less likely to learn effective relationship skills from their parents.

In addition, for stepcouples, individuals' own relationship history — i.e., previous break-up(s) and divorce(s) — may be due in part to poor interpersonal skills (Farrell & Markman, 1986; Bray, Berger, Silverblatt, & Hollier, 1987). These findings suggest that stepfamily couples may be more likely than other couples to have witnessed and been a part of negative models of marital functioning and may be less likely to have a clear picture of interactional patterns in a healthy marital relationship.

We do not mean to suggest that all couples in stepfamilies have poor relationship skills. Research clearly identifies stepcouples in healthy marriages, with strong communication

skills, who engage in frequent, open talk, spend time together, engage in family problem-solving, and openly discuss their perceptions of problems and seek consistency in these perceptions (Anderson & White, 1986; Bray & Kelly, 1998; Golish, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The importance of having strong *conflict management skills* is magnified in stepfamily situations. Stepfamily couples face crucial issues at the onset of their relationships (Prado & Markman, 1999), whereas for nuclear family couples, issues that create conflict are more likely to evolve over time. In addition, because of the complexity of stepfamilies, stepfamily couples may be faced with managing not only their own conflicts, but conflicts with and between other stepfamily members. Irrespective of the amount of conflict, it appears that it is the method of conflict management that is most important. A recent study using interviews with stepfamily couples suggests that among these couples, it is not the extent of difficulties and challenges that are predictive of marital satisfaction, but the ability to communicate using effective conflict management and caring behaviors that predict marital satisfaction (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004). In other research using interviews, findings indicate that in stepfamilies where wives use negative methods of conflict management (i.e., strong confrontation) their marital relationships were negatively affected, as were both their stepparent-stepchild and parent-child relationships (DeLongis & Preece, 2002).

The research on low-income couples also suggests that they may be most in need of skills associated with managing stressful situations and managing aggressive behaviors (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Halford et al., 2003). Studies of low-income populations and parenting show that low-income adults are less likely than higher-resource adults to have learned emotion regulation techniques from their interactions with caregivers (e.g., Gottman, Fainsilber-Katz, & Hooven, 1996). Research suggests that low-income individuals also are less likely to have learned effective emotional expressivity and cognitive reappraisal strategies that assist with managing stressful situations and negative emotional arousal (e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1995; Labouvie-Viet & Medler, 2002; Shaw, Keenan, Vondra, Delliquadri, & Giovannelli, 1997). An important assumption, therefore, is that adults in low-income stepfamily couples will benefit from learning *emotion regulation skills* in relationships and in *individual stress and anger management*.

Another important general relationship emphasis is to foster *skills and practices that promote friendship and intimacy* in the marital relationship, such as caring, nurturing, verbalizing affection and appreciation, and disclosing intimate information (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). This is a critical buffer for couples when they face challenges (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and is particularly important for stepfamily couples, as their relationship is one of the newest and potentially the most vulnerable in the stepfamily system (Visher & Visher, 1996). It is noted that this focus on creating a strong, intimate marital bond is important to establish in the minds of the couple, as well as in the minds of the children

(Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). When children view the new couple as a solidified team, they may be less likely to attempt to undermine the relationship (Cissna et al., 1990; Visher & Visher, 1996).

**Summary points.** Research suggests that interactive skills training approaches are effective in teaching these critical areas related to *utilizing basic marital skills*. Program objectives should focus on:

1. Knowledge and skills related to effective communication and conflict management strategies
2. Knowledge and skills related to effective management of individual stress responses and negative emotions (e.g., anger)
3. Knowledge and skills related to friendship building and maintenance (e.g., emotional expressivity and disclosure, expression of affection and appreciation, the use of empathy, and eliciting partner disclosure)
4. Awareness of the importance of marital intimacy and bonding as a buffer in meeting stepfamily challenges

## **2. Understanding Stepfamilies' Unique Characteristics and Developing a Positive View Towards Stepfamilies**

It is important for stepfamily couples to recognize that stepfamilies have unique characteristics and that they differ in basic ways from nuclear families. For example, in stepfamilies, the biological parent-child bond predates the couple relationship, whereas in non-stepfamilies, the couple relationship predates the parent-child relationship. There appears to be no “honeymoon period” for new stepfamily couples, which is probably related to the presence of children from the beginning. Understanding the ways that stepfamilies are unique and having *realistic expectations* for stepfamily development and stepfamily relationships are critical to healthy stepfamily functioning.

A key element of appropriate expectations/beliefs is an understanding of the substantial length of *time* necessary to establish roles and to determine a stepfamily's particular pattern of successful functioning (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). The initial stages of development in a new stepfamily are not typically smooth. There is consistent evidence from both clinical (couples in counseling) and nonclinical samples that the first several years can be turbulent for stepfamilies (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998), and remarriages are at greatest risk for divorce in the first five years (Clarke & Wilson, 1994). Research shows a general pattern of 1-2 years of disorganization and turbulence and 1-3 years of stabilization for stepfamily development (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Most scholars are in agreement that successful stepfamilies form effective/healthy relationships slowly over the course of several years. Researchers also observe that, comparatively, stepcouples with older children adjust at slower rates than stepcouples with younger children (Bray & Kelly, 1998). In addition to the unrealistic belief of *quick adjustment*, couples may also have unrealistic beliefs about *functional equivalency to first-marriage families* and *instant love* - “the nuclear family myth” (Visher & Visher, 1988). “Functional equivalence” refers to a stepfamily member’s expectation that stepfamily relationships will be just like nuclear family relationships.

Not only do healthy stepfamily relationships develop slowly, but it is also noted that more successful stepfamilies tend to form relationships dyadically (i.e., one-on-one) rather than as a family unit (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). Also, it is common for some members to take longer to adjust and feel comfortable in the new family form than others. Research also suggests that striving for equally cohesive bonds and feelings of connection and love between stepfamily members may not be a realistic goal for most stepfamilies—and may not be essential for well-functioning marital and stepfamily relationships (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukop, & Turman, 2001). Rather than all family members in the stepfamily feeling equally close, it is more realistic to expect that levels of connection and attachment will vary between stepfamily members. For example, a stepparent may develop a strong and loving connection with a younger stepchild and may develop a respectful, caring relationship with his/her older stepchild. The more important dimension of healthy stepfamily functioning is the *level of mutual agreement about the nature of each relationship* (e.g., parent-child bond, friendship) within the stepfamily system.

Without an understanding of the ways that stepfamilies differ from nuclear families and appropriate skills to develop and maintain healthy marriages, stepcouples may be overly influenced by negative images of stepfamilies in society. Individuals who divorce are often represented as failed, and those that form stepfamilies are thought to be entering a deficient family form (Coontz, 1997; Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Media (from fairy tales to college textbooks to motion pictures) reinforce negative portrayals of stepfamilies (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich, 1985; Coleman, Ganong, & Goodwin, 1994; Leon & Angst, 2005). Even the language in our culture implicitly conveys the message that stepfamily members are unnatural, abnormal, or irregular, because nuclear family members/parents are often described as natural, normal, real, or regular (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). It is important for marriage education programs to address norms about stepfamilies in the wider culture, because they play a large role in determining the cognitive context in which individuals evaluate their situation, conduct themselves, and expect to be regarded by others (for a detailed discussion on this topic see Dallos, 1991).

A number of factors may contribute to the generalized negative view of remarriage and stepfamilies. The early research on stepfamilies (i.e., 1980s and early 1990s) may have



inadvertently contributed to this cultural context by focusing primarily on clinical stepfamilies who had sought counseling and by highlighting problems, dysfunctions, and the ways in which stepfamilies differed from nuclear families (i.e., deficit comparisons). Presenting information from only studies of stepfamilies having problems can lead to the assumption that all stepfamilies are substantially problem-laden. Another source of negative views about stepfamilies may come from the individual's family of origin if parents or others instilled beliefs that divorce constitutes a failure and remarriage is undesirable (Epstein, Schlesinger, & Dryden, 1988). The experience of living in a stepfamily can create, affirm, or dissuade negative views about stepfamilies. Beliefs and views can be informed and altered in response to positive or negative interactions in the stepfamily.

Prevailing cultural beliefs about stepfamilies can often influence the ways that stepcouples perceive themselves and expect to be perceived (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Malia, 2005). Over several decades, family scholars have identified at least two primary perspectives concerning how societies have come to view stepfamilies: as the “incomplete institution” that lacks clear norms and institutional supports (Cherlin, 1978) and as stereotyped and stigmatized groups that are less adequate compared to nuclear-marriage families (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Multiple studies have documented both stepfamily members' and non-stepfamily members' negative views of stepfamilies as compared to nuclear families (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990). This generalized negative cultural context can contribute to an individual's belief that stepfamilies are doomed to failure—and that all stepfamily relationships will be unfulfilling. And these kinds of negative beliefs and expectations can have a negative impact on actual behaviors in relationships.

In addition to the potential negative impact of unrealistic expectations on marital quality, *incongruent beliefs* between partners may put a marriage at risk (e.g., Ahrons & Rogers, 1987; Kaplan & Hennon, 1992). “Regardless of whether each family member holds unrealistic beliefs about remarried family life, conflict may occur when there is incompatibility among members' beliefs” (Leslie & Epstein, 1988, p. 159). Expectations among stepfamily members should be actively discussed and negotiated and should become more congruent over time. Dysfunctional stepcouples have changes in the opposite direction (i.e., less congruence) (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Researchers also note that couples forming stepfamilies with nonresident children (i.e., the child(ren) of one or both spouses live with the other parent) should anticipate that these arrangements may shift over time (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Quite often, pre-adolescents and adolescents, particularly boys, request to change residence and live with their other parent (usually the father; rarely occurs in stepfather families) (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Therefore, a stepmother who never expects to be a residential stepparent may find herself in a new role, and this can lead to conflict in the marriage. Understanding the potential for this

situation at the onset of marriage could assist with the adjustment if this transition occurs in later years.

**Summary points.** Programs should seek to promote both *realistic expectations and positive views of stepfamilies*. Program objectives should focus on the provision of information to:

1. Increase knowledge of how stepfamily experiences and development are different from nuclear family experiences
2. Increase knowledge of sources of views and expectations
3. Increase ability to recognize common “myths” or unrealistic expectations for stepfamily living and common realities of stepfamily living
4. Develop positive expectations for the possibility of healthy stepfamily functioning
5. Increase ability to articulate marital consensus regarding their views and expectations for their family

We recognize that these program content suggestions center on cognitions—expectations, attitudes, knowledge—rather than behavioral skills. While, typically, marriage education programs that are skill-based tend to demonstrate desirable outcomes among participants (Carroll & Doherty, 2003), it is also clear from research on marital quality that several dimensions of individuals’ “thinking” are important predictors of actual behaviors in relationships and powerful predictors of marital quality (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Scholars working with the HMI have emphasized the critical need to provide opportunities for participants in marriage education programs to assess and discuss cognitions related to healthy marriages (e.g., Bradbury, personal communication, 2005).

### **3. Utilizing Effective Stepparenting Practices**

Bringing children into a new marital relationship can influence several dynamics of the relationship and overall family functioning. Some studies have indicated that remarriages are more unstable mostly due to conflicts revolving around stepparenting and stepchildren (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Knox & Zusman, 2001; Pasley, Koch, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). This is an area of conflict unique to stepfamilies and can pose challenges for many stepcouples that must be managed in an effective manner, if strong stepfamily and marital relationships are to be forged.

A critical and consistent pattern observed in research on couples in stepfamilies is the spillover of negative stepparent-stepchild relationships onto the quality and stability of the marital relationship (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984).

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) explain:

In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of happy family life, leading to more effective parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed. Establishing some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren...may be the key to a happy second marriage and to successful functioning in stepfamilies. (p. 181)

Therefore, it follows that factors related to stepparent-stepchild quality are indirectly related to the enhancement of marital functioning. The research consistently finds that stepparents who serve as *secondary or supportive parents* initially (i.e., they do not immediately assume a disciplinarian role, but are warm and supportive with their stepchild and support their spouse in their discipline role) are more satisfied in their stepparent-stepchild relationships (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This research suggests this is a particularly important approach when adolescent stepchildren are involved. The new couple can work together to establish agreed-upon rules and parenting approaches; however, the parent should serve in the primary disciplinarian role, and stepparents can adopt an authority position as a neutral “enforcer of the rules,” particularly in the early years. For example, a stepparent can remind children of the house rule for bedtime and initiate the “getting ready for bed” routine at a given time. In the case of misbehavior or infraction of the rules, if there are no established consequences, then it is best for the biological parent to take the lead in responding with disciplinary consequences. Parents should be careful if initiating new rules and altering discipline strategies immediately following stepfamily formation. Although the biological parent may present the new house rules and regulations, children, particularly adolescents, may interpret that the stepparent has initiated the changes. They will be as resentful as if the stepparent were the person presenting them (Coleman & Ganong, 2004).

Stepparents who continually use caring behaviors in an attempt to acquire a stepchild’s love tend to develop more effective relationships with their stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999). When stepparents disengage and interact very little with their stepchildren or when they use coercive, punitive disciplinary behaviors, the stepparent-stepchild relationship is negatively affected (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Cohen & Fowers, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Research also suggests that the biological parent and children play a key role in the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., O’Connor, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1997; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). The biological mother, often feeling caught in the middle, is the one who ultimately has the power to support or not support the creation of bonds between the child(ren) and stepfather. For example, a formerly single mother, accustomed to being protective of her child, may hesitate to trust a new husband to establish a bond with “her” child.

On the other hand, children, particularly preadolescents and adolescents (ages 10–15), often are the initiators of conflict with stepparents or are not responsive to stepparents' steps towards closeness (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), even when stepparents use recommended stepparenting strategies. These behaviors may be the result of negative views of stepparents and stepfamilies, lack of negotiated consensus in the stepfamily on the stepparent role, loyalty conflicts with the “parallel” nonresident parent (e.g., “If I get along with my stepfather, I’ll be disloyal to my dad.”) (Crosbie-Burnett, 1992), or simply resistance to changes inherent in adjusting to stepfamily life. It can be helpful for the stepparent to use *empathy* and *constructive conflict management skills* with stepchildren. It can also be helpful if older children learn skills in empathy and conflict management as well. It is also vitally important to use good parental monitoring, particularly with older children and adolescents. This aspect of parenting is strongly associated with better child adjustment and behavior.

Because the likelihood is high that adults in stepcouple relationships were themselves stepchildren, their own experiences as stepchildren are likely to provide a natural “knowledge base” on which programs can profitably build. This empathy for children’s experiences should be affirmed by program workers and used in discussions of establishing positive stepparent practices and building healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Research suggests that useful program content would include information and practice in strategies to build effective stepparent-stepchild relationships, such as having the original parent remain the primary disciplinarian for a substantial amount of time (longer than the parent is likely to expect), with the stepparent easing into a parenting role over time. Information on *child development* and *behavior management techniques* may be especially helpful for stepparents who are not also biological parents. Information on the developmental differences found among stepchildren (e.g., adolescent stepchildren and younger stepchildren) and their impact on stepparent-stepchild relationships and the potential for bonding should be included. Raising awareness of the potential difficulties with older stepchildren may promote proactive steps on the part of both the biological parent and stepparent to lessen the intensity of the potential conflict. Normalizing the likelihood of developing less of a bond between stepparent and older stepchildren is suggested. It may also be important for stepparents to anticipate that there may be a delay over time before stepchildren acknowledge their stepparent’s positive efforts. Program content may also include information for children on healthy stepparent-stepchild interactions, stepfamily development, and conflict and anger management strategies.

**Summary points.** Program objectives for *utilizing effective stepparenting practices* should focus on:

1. Knowledge of the importance to marital relationship of working on and facilitating effective stepparent-stepchild relationships

2. Knowledge of how the age of the child impacts the recommended processes and goals for the stepparent-stepchild relationship
3. Development of the parenting skills and use of recommended strategies that build effective stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., kind behaviors to gain stepchild's love; monitoring child's behavior) and that promote positive child outcomes
4. Knowledge of normative child/adolescent development

#### **4. Navigating Relationships with Former Partners**

Because the majority of stepfamilies are formed after separation or divorce from a partner rather than death, we can assume that co-parenting relationships with former partners exist. (In this report we define “co-parenting” as joint parenting between one of the spouses in the stepcouple and his or her former spouse/partner who is the parent of one or more of his/her children.) In some cases, this may include multiple co-parenting relationships (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The quality of co-parenting relationships among former partners/spouses has been shown to impact the relationship quality of the new marriage (e.g., Buunk & Matsuers, 1999; Knox & Zusman, 2001). Thus, another critical element in marriage education with stepcouples is the inclusion of skill-building on *successful co-parenting strategies* for use with former partners/spouses.

Substantial empirical evidence shows that both a highly negative and a highly involved relationship with a former spouse negatively affect the new marital relationship quality (e.g. Buunk & Matsuers, 1999; Knox & Zusman, 2001). Emotionally divorcing and *establishing appropriate boundaries and relationships* with a former spouse or partner are essential for healthy remarriages (Cissna et al., 1990; Weston & Macklin, 1990). Former partners should be cooperative in their co-parenting, but if they are too close and friendly, this can be detrimental to the new marital relationship and be confusing for the children (Ahrns, 1994). The “psychological presence” of a former partner can be intrusive in a new marital relationship (Boss, 1980).

Research on co-parenting relationships indicates that the quality of the relationship is enhanced when individuals communicate unemotionally (i.e., in a “business-like” manner); use supportive language; honor agreements; use written communication; maintain privacy regarding other aspects of their lives; and actively support their child's connection to the other parent (e.g., Ahrns, 1994; Golish, 2003). In addition, it appears that co-parenting relationships are best managed directly or with a neutral person, rather than through the child or through communication between the former partner and the current partner. Research also indicates that when a stepfamily uses a “multi-parental model,” tensions between parents are lessened (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). That is, accepting that a new partner can serve as another parent or caring adult in the child's life, rather than as a replacement for the other parent, is helpful for the overall functioning of the family and for the well-being of the child.

A poor co-parenting relationship is related to less involvement of nonresident parents with their children, in part due to the resident parent's active interference in the nonresident parent-child relationship (Braver & Griffin, 2000). High-conflict co-parenting relationships negatively affect children and may result in children's negative behaviors (Amato, 2000). Children's negative behaviors, often ascribed to stepfamily adjustment issues, may be more a result of post-separation/divorce adjustment issues and conflict between parents (Clingempeel & Brand-Clingempeel, 2004).

In low-income families, nonresident parents (primarily fathers) tend to be less involved with their children compared to nonresident parents in higher-income families (e.g., Cooksey & Craig, 1998). Among low-income nonresident fathers, African-American fathers are comparatively more involved with their children (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). Prior research has shown that the level of parental conflict influences the involvement of low-income fathers in their children's lives and the payment of child support. Mothers at all income levels occasionally restrict the contact between fathers and their children if fathers are unable to provide child support payments (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Coley & Morris, 2002; Nelson, Edin, & Clampet-Lundquist, 1999). Non-payment of child support can also be a point of conflict for the marital couple because of the added financial strain to the household. Facilitating the child's connection to the other parent (except in cases of domestic violence and abuse) can positively impact the co-parenting relationship, child support compliance and the well-being of the child.

Conflict between co-parents is shown to impact negatively the development of stepfamily relationships. Using NSFH (1987-88 data), MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) found that high levels of conflict between the stepchild's biological parents hindered the quality of the stepchild-stepfather relationship.

Importantly, repartnering and remarrying appear to trigger conflict and negatively affect the relationships children have with their nonresident parent. Manning and Smock (2000) found that when nonresident fathers remarry, they tend to disengage from their nonresident children and transfer paternal attention to new stepchildren and children born to the new marriage. Nonresident fathers also tend to disengage from their nonresident children when the mother remarries. Some fathers express that they do not want to interfere in the new family (Dudley, 1991). Co-parenting conflict tends to peak in the first two years post remarriage, but such conflict appears to decline over time either because of disengagement or management of the conflict (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Although disengagement by the nonresident parent might feel preferable to some new stepfamily couples, the potential for negative impact on the children who experience loss in their relationship with their nonresident parents is an important factor to consider. Depending on how children respond to the loss (usually internalizing and or externalizing behaviors), the

new stepfamily relationships can be negatively affected (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Therefore, efforts to build appropriately engaged relationships with co-parents are recommended for children's well-being and for healthy marital and parenting relationships in stepfamilies, except in cases where former partners are highly conflictual and abusive with each other and/or the children.

**Summary points.** Program objectives for *navigating relationships with former spouses/partners* should focus on:

1. Knowledge of the importance of appropriate co-parenting relationships for the stepcouple relationship and the well-being of children
2. Development and use of co-parenting skills that maintain privacy between households; support a non-emotional, “business-like” connection between co-parents; enhance nonconflictual communication; and support the child's relationship with each parent

## **5. Negotiating Stepfamily Roles and Rules**

Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies and the fact that stepfamilies have been a focus for researchers and clinicians for at least two decades, *clear societal norms about roles and relationships (i.e., positive patterns of functioning) have not yet developed*. Cherlin first described the “incomplete institution” of stepfamilies in 1978, pointing to the lack of societal prescriptions for how stepfamilies should operate, and the situation does not seem to have changed substantially. For example, stepparents do not automatically have a legal parental relationship<sup>3</sup> with stepchildren, which likely impacts a stepparent's perception of his or her relationship to the stepchildren (Mason, 1994), nor are there norms for what stepchildren call stepparents. Some relationships in stepfamilies are named (e.g., stepsiblings, co-parents, stepparent/stepchild, stepgrandparent/stepgrandchild), and some are unnamed (e.g., former spouse/current spouse, former spouse/former spouse, former spouse/new child). Although there are no agreed-upon names for stepfamily members to call each other, perhaps the best solution is for each stepfamily to decide on the names, roles, and rules that serve their family best.

In general, strong stepfamily couples recognize that accepted norms for roles and stepfamily functioning are nearly nonexistent. They proactively work to negotiate mutually acceptable roles and rules within the stepfamily and with those connected to the stepfamily. They determine together the best ways to manage the unique financial issues inherent in stepfamilies, and they exhibit an understanding of the importance of being flexible and

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<sup>3</sup> Certain parental rights can be granted to stepparents (such as access to school records, authority for decision-making in medical emergencies), but require legal action to initiate. No state, however, considers a stepparent a legal guardian/parent of a stepchild at the point of marriage.

patient with the dynamic process of these negotiations (e.g., Golish, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Visher & Visher, 1996). Bray and Kelly (1998) and Hetherington and Kelly (2002) both observed that well-functioning stepfamilies and couples in their longitudinal studies actively negotiated roles and rules and worked towards consensus. Similarly, clinical observation supports these skills as helpful and related to better marital functioning (Visher & Visher, 1996).

Because there are so few prescriptions for how individual roles and relationships should be defined or for what the rules that govern stepfamily households should be, it is imperative that stepfamily members be open to change and new ideas and concepts. In other words, it is important for stepfamily members to be *flexible* as individuals and as a family. It is also important for stepfamily members to be *patient* in the context of these developmental negotiations (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996; Cissna et al., 1990).

We note that there are implications for gender roles in stepcouple relationships that may differ from first marital relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). For women who move into subsequent unions, there is a pattern of seeking more power and control than they had in first marriages. Consequently, low-conflict remarriages are more likely to be those in which more egalitarian relationships are established across gender lines.

It is suggested that marriage education programs for stepcouples include explicit discussions of stepfamilies' "non-normed" existence. Messages would center on negotiating skills for establishing their family-specific roles and rules. Topics to include could be names they will use for each other (in the household and across households), financial management practices, parenting strategies, and individual roles (including gender roles) in the family and within each dyad. Programs can also emphasize the dynamic nature of these processes. That is, negotiating roles and rules is not a one-time event, but rather it is a continuing, evolving process that incorporates family experiences and developmental changes.

**Summary points.** Program objectives for helping couples to *successfully negotiate stepfamily roles and rules* should focus on:

1. Knowledge of the importance of reaching consensus on family roles and rules (i.e., understand that there is no "prescription")
2. The use of negotiating skills for reaching marital consensus in several important areas of family functioning (e.g., balance of family responsibilities, financial management practices, etc.)

## **6. Utilizing Financial Management Skills**

Especially relevant for stepcouples is the lack of norms about *financial management* in stepfamilies and the influential role money plays in stepfamilies. Unpublished research



suggests that financial issues should be emphasized and financial management skills should be included in programs for stepfamilies. The subject of money seems to be toxic for stepfamilies regardless of family income and may be especially contentious for stepfamilies with limited resources (Coleman, personal communication, 2006). For many women, financial stability is an important motivation for remarrying, but in one study this researcher found that few women had discussed finances in much detail with their partner before remarrying.

Instead of a prescription for managing complex financial relationships between biologically related and unrelated persons in the family system, it appears that most important for healthy stepcouple functioning is agreement about the level of support provided to resident and nonresident children and stepchildren (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, & Weaver, 2001; Engel, 1999; Lown, McFadden, & Crossman, 1989). Although it has been observed that, over time, most stepcouples adopt a “one pot” style of financial organization, research also indicates that it is *agreement* about the way that a couple organizes their money (e.g., separate accounts; one “pot”) that is most important rather than the actual organizational style (Bray & Kelly, 1998).

**Summary points.** Program objectives for helping couples to *utilize financial management skills* should focus on:

1. Encouraging stepcouples to discuss financial management practices, financial responsibilities to children and stepchildren, attitudes towards money
2. Financial management skills (e.g., budgeting, saving, etc.)

## **7. Utilizing Effective Parenting Practices**

In stepfamily research, and subsequently in program content focused on stepfamilies, typically more attention is given to the stepparent-stepchild relationship(s) and the impact on marital functioning than to the relationship between original parents and their children. There is, however, research that indicates that parents and biological/adopted children also face unique relationship challenges in stepfamilies.

Resident parent-child relationships (typically, mother-child) frequently change during single-parent living and after remarriage. Some studies find that post-divorce mothers become more authoritarian (i.e., punitive, controlling) (Bray & Kelly, 1998), and some find post-divorce mothers become more disengaged and permissive (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Thomson et al., 2001). These parents then tend to again alter their parenting style after remarriage (e.g., a more permissive mother may become more strict following remarriage), creating difficulties in the parent-child relationship, particularly in the first few years (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; O’Connor & Insabella, 1999).

There is also evidence that children may perceive a shift in their family roles and access to their resident parent after remarriage, and this can result in conflict and negative family relationships (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Children may feel displaced or replaced by the new spouse (Visher & Visher, 1996).

**Empathizing** with a child's experience during a parent's partner transitions can be helpful. In addition, attention to providing a **consistent, predictable parenting environment** is critical for children's well-being and ultimately for family functioning. When parents actively **monitor** their child's behaviors and display warmth and support for their child, over time well-being is enhanced (e.g., Baumrind, 1989).

**Summary points.** Programs should be prepared to address *utilizing effective parenting practices* in the stepfamily system. Program objectives should focus on:

1. Knowledge of and empathy for children's experiences with potential shifts in family roles and perceived connection to parents
2. Positive parenting skills that incorporate a balance of consistent and appropriate monitoring and nurturance

## **8. Building Other Supportive Connections Inside and Outside Stepfamilies**

There has been little research on sibling relationships in stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Older statistics suggest that a high fraction of children in stepfamilies have biological siblings and stepsiblings. For example, Bumpass (1984) found that in the early 1980s one-third of children living in a stepfamily had a half sibling and two-thirds of children in stepfamilies had stepsiblings either in the home or in the home of their other parent. Sweet (1991) reported that one in 15 stepfamily households were complex stepfamilies in which stepsiblings resided together.

Research on relationships among children in stepfamilies for some time has recognized that difficulties in these relationships can "bubble up" and create stresses between stepparents, a phenomenon that has been called the "percolator effect" (Rosenberg & Hajfal, 1985, in Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Clinical studies indicate that biological/adopted children are especially reactive to perceived inequities in how parents treat them compared to stepsiblings and half-siblings. Implications for practice are that helping stepparents to treat children in the household consistently can enhance family functioning. Research also indicates that stepsiblings can have good relationships without high levels of emotional attachment (Anderson, 1999). Therefore, another implication for practice is to help parents to foster realistic expectations among stepsiblings for the quality of their relationships. For example, as in relationships between stepparents and stepchildren, parents can help stepsiblings negotiate levels of emotional closeness that are comfortable for them and provide assurances that feeling closer to one stepsibling in comparison to another is not a problem.

Beyond immediate family members, there is evidence that fostering stronger relationships with wider family and non-family networks can be beneficial, and that compared with nuclear families, stepfamilies tend to have weaker external family linkages (DeLongis, Capreol, Holtzman, O'Brien, & Campbell, 2004) and weaker ties to community institutions such as schools and churches (Deal, 2002; Visher et al., 2003). A perceived lack of social support is thought to impact negatively the marriage and stepfamily members (Dainton, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Community institutions, however, often do not support and may inadvertently undermine stepfamilies. For example, schools routinely send report cards and other information home to only one parent's household, make room for information on only two parents on forms, and omit stepmothers and stepfathers from cards and gifts made at school for holidays. Although some experts believe the situation gradually is improving (Bainbridge, personal communication, 2006), institutional accommodations for stepfamilies and the practice of providing specific resources for stepfamilies among community organizations and faith-based organizations is not considered widespread (Deal, 2002).

Discussions of *proactive support-seeking* should be part of program content in marriage education for stepfamily couples. Feeling supported and validated can have a positive impact on marital and family functioning (Visher, 2001). Research on low-income families suggests that, comparatively, low-income families both provide and receive outside support in many forms more so than do high-resource families (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Because research on stepfamilies indicates that stepfamilies are comparatively less likely to receive external family support than nuclear families, the tendency for help-seeking and offering among low-income families could be viewed as a strength among low-income stepfamilies.

Marriage education programs for low-income couples that help couples understand the importance of and acquire skills to strengthen their social support networks are important. The foregoing suggests that such skills may be especially valuable for stepfamilies, and that programs should include material focused on strategies appropriate to the issues facing such families. For example, couples could learn to form support groups and advocate for school policies and practices and religious institution and community programs that recognize stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Crosbie-Burnett, 1995). In addition, approaches aimed at strengthening supports from extended family networks also would be helpful.

**Summary points.** Program objectives for *building other supportive connections inside and outside the family* should focus on:

1. Knowledge of children's tendencies to notice any parental favoritism in stepfamilies

2. Skills in negotiating equitable treatment and similarity of developmentally appropriate parenting styles used with children in the stepfamily
3. Knowledge of realistic expectations for stepsibling relationships (e.g., may be less emotionally close, but still positive)
4. Skills in seeking support from extra-familial sources (both community and extended family)

## **Conditions Affecting Stepfamilies**

It is important that programs for low-income stepfamilies recognize and respond to the significant individual, family, and community characteristics that can affect stepcouple relationships. This special need arises in part because stepfamilies face a series of unique challenges, and because low-income stepfamilies face additional stressors arising from their financial situations.

In general, programs can address these conditions in two ways: (a) by providing or referring couples for services and (b) by teaching skills that help couples respond to challenges presented by these factors and make use of available resources. If programs are not able to provide services directly, they may make referrals to appropriate sources that will be able to provide the additional services stepcouples may need. With regard to coping skills, programs may choose to focus on specific issues (e.g., the way schools communicate with stepfamilies), or they may impart insights and skills relevant to broader classes of concerns (e.g., situations that cause stress).

In this section, we describe and note implications for programs for three categories of conditions that may affect stepfamilies:

1. Individual characteristics (e.g., mental health issues, substance abuse issues, lack of job skills)
2. Stepfamily characteristics (stage of development, age of children, complexity of stepfamily membership)
3. Community characteristics (cultural norms and assumptions, economic hardship, and high unemployment)

As is indicated in the conceptual model (Figure 1), the conditions can affect outcomes either directly or by influencing the impact of the marriage education program that is indicated by the arrow connecting “Conditions” to the arrow linking “Marriage Education Programs” to “Stepfamily Relationships.”

## Individual Characteristics

In a decade review of the research literature related to families in poverty, Seccombe (2000) reviewed numerous studies that point to higher levels of mental health and substance abuse issues and lower levels of education among those who live in poverty. Although the target population for this project is married stepfamilies with limited resources, not specifically impoverished stepfamilies, the research on families in poverty has some relevance. Other studies indicate that women who receive public assistance experience higher rates of partner violence (see Tolman & Raphael, 2000, for a review). In their longitudinal work with rural families, Conger and Elder (1994) also found that decreases in family income led to feelings of financial pressure, anxiety, and depression among both spouses. This feeling of financial pressure, in turn, increased the number of hostile exchanges between husbands and wives, which led to declines in marital satisfaction for both spouses over time. Ooms and Wilson (2004) also write, “Regardless of race or cultural background, being poor or near poor brings with it a host of factors—chronic shortage of money; accumulating debts; low levels of literacy; high rates of unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, depression, and domestic violence; poor housing, unsafe neighborhoods, multiple-partner fertility—that place enormous stress on relationships in ways that scholars are only beginning to explore” (p. 441).

Because the prevalence of a variety of challenges or risk factors has been shown to be higher among low-income adults, programs for low-income families and stepfamilies should be prepared to respond to problems such as:

- mental health issues;
- substance abuse issues;
- exposure to domestic violence and/or physical aggression in past/current relationships;
- lack of job skills; and
- low levels of literacy/education.

A number of leading educators and scholars have argued that marriage education programs for low-income couples should provide assistance for those individuals who face the challenges listed above and related issues (e.g., Coatsworth et al., 2006; Halford et al., 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Screening and services can be provided up-front, as well as at various points in the program. Marriage education content also can deal with these issues by helping couples to recognize how personal challenges can affect their interaction, and, for some problems, by teaching skills for coping as individuals and couples. It is also suggested that these special issues be addressed in the program as a *primary need*—particularly in the case of domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The more serious of these issues will most likely need to be addressed before the

individual or couple will be able to benefit from a marriage education program. Regarding domestic violence, it is the ACF HMI's policy that marriage education programs screen for domestic violence and take steps to ensure the safety of persons participating in programs.

### **Stepfamily Characteristics**

**Stage of stepfamily development.** Turning to characteristics of the stepfamily unit itself, one important factor is how long couples have been together at the point they participate in a marriage education program.<sup>4</sup> New couples are likely to need the most help in adjusting to realities of stepfamily life that differ from their initial expectations (some of the key issues in expectations concerning marital and parenting relationships were discussed earlier in the chapter). The early stages of the relationship also are important as a time when commitment has not solidified, and material exploring long-term views of relationships may be especially helpful.

More specifically, program content for new stepfamily couples should cover information on the unique characteristics of stepfamilies and the skills needed to discuss and negotiate family roles and rules, resulting in a clearer shared view of the family and smoother transitions into the new family structure (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Another important topic is co-parenting relationships with former partners/spouses, helping couples to develop a positive, low-conflict co-parenting relationship and support each other's role as parent or stepparent. These are keys to how children fare in the transition.

At later stages of stepfamily development, programs are likely to encounter with some stepcouples some of the longer-term consequences of poor stepparent-stepchild relationships and marital dissatisfaction arising from these and other adjustment problems (Visher & Visher, 1996). If problems exist, they have had longer to develop, they may have become more serious and more challenging to resolve. Thus, marriage educators should be alert to couples who may need counseling or therapy, either as an alternative to or in conjunction with educational services. If possible, programs should identify and maintain a referral list of therapists who are skillful at working with stepfamilies (Browning, 1994).

**Age of children.** Couples who start stepfamilies may have children of varying ages at the start of the relationship, and children's ages can have a profound effect on the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and, in turn, the stepcouple's relationship. When children are younger, there is a greater likelihood that new stepparents will "claim" the stepchild and that the stepchild will accept the stepparent (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998;

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<sup>4</sup> We emphasize that it is the length of the relationship, rather than duration of marriage, that matters, because the most consequential adjustment challenges arise when the couple starts seeing each other and particularly when they begin living together. Statistics suggest that approximately two-thirds of married stepfamily couples cohabit prior to marriage, thus only the minority of newly-married stepcouples are newly-coupled (Brown & Booth, 1996; Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994).

Marsiglio, 2004). Adolescents tend to have the most difficulty adjusting to their parents' remarriage and new relationships with stepparents (Bray & Berger, 1993). Part of this problem may stem from difficulties many teens have in coming to terms with their parents' divorce, an adjustment that may be even more difficult due to the independence granted during single parenting and the normal challenges characteristic of adolescence.

In light of these challenges, one way in which education programs may be able to help is by helping couples with adolescents to develop and impart to their children realistic expectations for stepparent-stepchild relationships. In addition, curricula should stress that the stepparent need not achieve the same level of a parent-child bond as a biological parent to be successful as a stepparent (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Another strategy is to offer special sessions for adolescents as part of marriage education programs. Such sessions might involve both adolescents and adults, or be designed for adolescents alone. Material would provide insights into stepfamily dynamics and teach skills related to empathy, anger, and conflict management.

Even for children who joined a stepfamily at a young age, the pre-adolescent and adolescent years can cause changes and difficulties. It is not unusual for adolescents who have had no contact with their absent parent to want to contact him/her and to fantasize about how wonderful living with him/her might be (Coleman & Ganong, 2004; Visser & Visser, 1997). The adolescent's questions and new ways of looking at the stepfamily situation may throw the family into an unexpected crisis. Therefore, a focus on stepparent-stepchild relationships is likely to be beneficial for all stepfamily couples regardless of the ages of the children or the stage of stepfamily development.

**Stepfamily complexity.** Stepfamily relationships grow more complicated as consideration moves from families where only one spouse has children from a previous relationship (i.e., a "simple" stepfamily) to those where *both* spouses have children from a previous relationship (i.e., a "complex" stepfamily). Further complexity arises when the children of one or both spouses are from more than one previous relationship. What makes such situations more complex is the existence of multiple co-parenting relationships and a variety of stepsibling and half-sibling relationships within households and across households. Stepfamily complexity is increased in situations that include grandparents who have also played parental roles with their grandchildren.

In simple stepfamilies, in addition to establishing a healthy couple relationship, the main needs are for information on building healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships and on normative child development and positive parenting strategies. Although couples may have had a biological child together, the stepchild(ren) often will be older—hence, information on a variety of stages of child development can help stepparents to relate better to behaviors they may not have encountered yet in their own biological children. For couples in complex stepfamilies, more emphasis on building positive relationships among stepsiblings is likely to

be helpful. Finally, general material on co-parenting skills is likely to be relevant regardless of whether couples are navigating one or multiple co-parenting relationships.

## **Community Characteristics**

Community factors can both strengthen and cause difficulties in maintaining positive relationships in families, including stepfamilies. We did not identify any studies specifically focusing on these factors for stepfamilies. Research on community, culture and family relationships more generally allows us to offer some suggestions for working with stepfamilies from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Clinicians have noted that immigrants from countries with more traditional cultures may have negative views of stepfamilies. When they form stepfamilies themselves, they may be more likely to disguise their stepfamily status and impose nuclear family roles on stepfamily members (Berger, 1998).

For their part, marriage education programs need to be sensitive to existing values and not pressure couples into accepting new images of stepfamilies too quickly. Furthermore, as Halford (2000) noted, some cultures may have different norms about relationships that are functional. He stressed that the communication that is culturally appropriate between partners varies greatly by culture. For example, eye contact that is seen as active engagement in one culture can be felt as rude and aggressive in another culture. One way program staff can be sensitive to these cultural norms is to acknowledge that there are many different ideas about families (including stepfamilies); welcome discussion of these differences; explain the research and reasoning underlying the approach in their curriculum; and openly acknowledge that the research-based information presented may be counter to established norms for stepcouples in other cultures.

Although some cultures may be resistant to characteristics of stepfamilies, they may seem more familiar in other cultures. There is some evidence that African Americans, by virtue of their unique legacy—of a communal-oriented philosophy, permeability of external family boundaries, informal adoption, and role flexibility—have such a culture (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Skolnick & Skolnick, 1992). However, assumptions that stepfamily adjustment may be comparatively easier among African Americans remains speculation. There are no empirical studies that have ascertained even indications of this potential difference.

Marriage education curricula should recognize and simply allow room for discussion of potential variation in norms about stepfamilies and acceptance of stepparents. The focus would be on affirming and/or enhancing strategies for effective co-parenting among multiple parents, involvement in parenting nonresident children, and reinforcing positive views of complex families.



In an earlier section, we emphasized the potential benefits of helping stepfamily couples to strengthen social support networks, noting that stepfamilies tend to have weaker networks than nuclear families (Curran, McLanahan, & Knab, 2003). As we speculated is the case for low-resource stepfamilies, it also may be that relatively stronger extended family ties among some ethnic groups may compensate somewhat for greater social isolation generally. Empirical research shows that extended family members are more likely to be involved in the daily lives of African American and Latino/Hispanic families, and that instrumental and emotional support is an important component of these relationships (Murry et al., 2004; Umana-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006). On the other hand, special circumstances may interrupt otherwise strong family networks, as has been observed for first-generation immigrants from Latin America (Umana-Taylor et al., 2006). It is important that marriage education programs for stepfamilies recognize and build on strengths and address the problems of the specific couples with whom they are working, rather than simply assume uniform deficiencies across groups.

## **Program Service Delivery**

Although our literature review did not identify evaluation studies of aspects of service delivery in the context of marriage education programs for low-income stepfamilies, we did find studies relevant to our work that examine implementation of programs for low-income populations generally or for marriage education generally. Here we review research relevant to recruiting and retaining low-income stepcouples in marriage education programs. Specifically, we discuss issues related to mixing economically and culturally diverse participants in a program, the need to have materials suitable for participants with low literacy skills, potential barriers to recruitment, and the involvement of children in marriage education services. Additional aspects of program implementation specific to our conceptual framework for marriage education for low-income stepcouples will be presented in the next chapter in the context of the study of programs.

### **Providing Services to Economically and Culturally Diverse Participants**

Marriage educators will want to be sensitive to participants' level of comfort in group settings with couples from diverse backgrounds. Low-income couples may be uncomfortable discussing financial stresses they are facing together in a group that also contains non-disadvantaged couples. Coatsworth et al. (2006) stressed the importance of promoting positive relationships within groups of low-income participants: “[Social] networks [for] low-income families are often built on trust, on the understanding and sympathy regarding daily needs, and on clear expectations of reciprocity. If low-SES participants [feel] that their new relationships with other members of the group do not contain these elements, they may [be] less willing to continue attending (p. 249).”

Also, low-income participants are less likely to have had positive experiences in previous educational settings. Recruitment materials can address some related concerns by explaining clearly how programs differ from traditional school approaches and provide “accurate, advance information about what [the program] will require from them and what they can expect to gain from it” (Duncan & Brown, 1992, p.157). Use of “motivational interviewing” during pre-program screenings to explain the program’s methods and benefits has been suggested to be especially helpful in promoting participation of low-income ethnic minority groups in family life programs (Coatsworth et al., 2006).

Scholars note that cultural influences may contribute to participants’ discomfort with participating in a community education group. In many cultures, marriage and relationships are seen as private, and attending group programs may be viewed as intrusive on family privacy (Halford, 2000). For many individuals, attending relationship education is not viewed as socially normative, but for some indigenous and culturally diverse ethnic groups the idea of attending relationship education programs is particularly “alien.” In some cultures, the extended family would expect to be involved in the education process for young couples, and the notion that “outsiders” are providing education on marital relationships may be viewed as inappropriate. Recruiting from these populations will be especially challenging, and care should be taken not to impose other cultural values even in a well-meaning effort to provide education. Scholars studying ethnic minority populations suggest “do no harm” implementation policies for programs, and expand the concept of “doing no harm” to cultural beliefs (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2005; Skogrand, personal communication, 2006).

There is also some suggestion from clinicians and practitioners (e.g., Bray, personal communication, 2006) who work with low-income, ethnic minority couples in stepfamilies that they may not identify with the term “stepfamily.” This may be considered a White, middle-class term. Program planners can assess through needs assessments or focus groups whether there exists a term that may be more culturally appropriate and may help with recruitment.

An additional concern noted by Coatsworth and colleagues (2006) is the importance of ensuring that materials and lectures be conveyed at reading and vocabulary levels that are comfortable for all members of the group. They recommended also that, where possible, program materials be provided in participants’ preferred language and that programs limit the use of written materials and assignments in and between classes. They also suggested that programs consider giving participants some choice in the topics covered in the program and the order in which topics are addressed.

## **Outreach and Recruitment**

A number of key challenges may arise in recruiting low-income couples, whether stepcouples or not, for marriage education programs. In this section we discuss the potential barriers to involvement in marriage education posed by low-income couples’ limited

flexibility in their schedules and stepfamilies' reluctance to identify themselves as stepfamilies.

Low-income couples may find it more difficult than more advantaged families to make time for both partners to attend relationship education classes. Many low-income couples work two jobs, are less likely to have discretion concerning when and how much they work, often work long hours, and are more likely to work nonstandard shifts (evenings, nights, rotating, and weekends). Thus, they may have less overlapping time to spend together as a couple (Shipler, 2004). In addition to making it more difficult to attend relationship education classes, time pressures may make it more difficult for couples to apply what they learn at home and otherwise focus on building and maintaining their relationship. As a result, many emerging HMI programs are using formats that adapt to these constraints, such as offering programs at times participants identify as most convenient, offering repeat sessions, and having program staff make home visits.

As mentioned earlier, some stepfamily couples may feel a stigma attached to their stepfamily status and “disguise” their stepfamily status. One response is for marriage education programs to work with community leaders to promote a positive image of stepfamilies and encourage them to participate in programs. For example, programs may work with religious leaders to speak about the fact that many families in a congregation are stepfamilies, and offer information about a helpful educational resource that is available to build strengths in these couples' relationships. Such support can help to persuade “invisible” stepfamily couples to volunteer in educational programs (Deal, 2002; Deal, personal communication, 2006). Another approach is to add stepfamily content to general marriage education programs since the participants are likely to include a number of stepfamilies already.

### **Involving Children in Marriage Education Programs**

Marriage educators may consider adding sessions that include children, especially adolescents and pre-adolescents. Such formats may be especially helpful in programs for stepfamilies, because children's behaviors have such an important influence on the marital relationship in these families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; O'Connor et al., 1997). Material appropriate for adolescents and pre-adolescents includes basic insights into aspects of, and common problems in, stepfamily development, and skill-building in the areas of communication, anger management, and conflict de-escalation and management. Such recommendations fit within a tradition of family systems approaches often used in family therapy (see Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). A variety of formats are possible, including parallel classes just for children, classes including children and parents, and providing parents materials and exercises to share with their children. Marriage educators should consider partnering with experienced youth development leaders in implementing such approaches.



## Chapter 3

# Study of Programs Serving Stepfamilies

The project team conducted a series of informal telephone interviews with 16 current marriage education programs directed at stepfamilies. The primary purpose of these interviews was to add practitioners' perspectives on stepfamilies' needs to the development of the conceptual framework. A second objective was to document practical lessons learned by those who have been providing marriage education programs to stepfamilies. Specifically, we sought to identify the range of approaches, methods, and content used in selected programs for stepfamily couples and to understand common program goals and challenges. We did not intend our study of selected programs for stepfamilies to provide a systematic review of current programs.

This chapter starts with a description of the approach we used to identify and review marriage education programs targeting stepfamilies. Next comes a discussion of the programs' service delivery approaches and primary content. Then we describe programs that seek to provide information about stepfamilies to professionals who work with them. Last, we discuss how stepfamilies might be approached in healthy marriage programs directed at the general population and in organizations addressing a range of other needs of low-income families.

### Program Study Approach

The goal in our search for marriage education programs for stepfamilies was to identify a range of types of programs, rather than conduct an exhaustive survey of all programs or types of programs. We looked in particular for *programs whose goal is to support and improve the marriages of low-income stepfamily couples through direct education*. Our primary interest was in educational, rather than therapeutic, services, and in services provided in-person or over the telephone, rather than only through written materials. Given our emphasis on services for stepcouples, we did not study programs that primarily address the needs of children in stepfamilies, although we did ask programs whether they provided special services for children. We were especially interested in identifying programs that worked with low-income stepcouples from diverse racial/ethnic communities. We expected that people with different backgrounds would have different concepts of marriage, gender roles, and the appropriate relationship of the stepfamily to the broader extended family and to the community—and that these concepts would play a part in stepfamily relationships.

Although not intended to be comprehensive, our search for stepfamily programs nonetheless was extensive. We used a variety of approaches to identify relevant programs. These included “top-down” approaches, such as contacting curriculum developers, experts in the stepfamily and general marriage education fields, and representatives of “umbrella” and membership organizations likely to know of programs for stepfamilies (e.g., Stepfamily Association of America; Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Services; Coalition for Marriage,

Family, and Couples; and the Office of the Military Community and Family Policy, and individual military branch family service programs). We also used “bottom-up” approaches such as Internet searches using relevant key words, and contacting organizations that focus on the needs of low-income families (e.g., public housing authorities and community action agencies). Realizing that there were unlikely to be many programs specifically targeting low-income couples, we broadened our search to include educational programs for higher-income stepfamilies. We included faith-based and secular organizations in our search for stepcouple programs.

Locating programs targeting stepcouples was more challenging than we had expected. Despite considerable effort and over 200 telephone calls, we identified approximately 40 programs serving stepfamilies. *None of these programs was targeted specifically to economically disadvantaged stepfamilies.* We repeatedly found that contacts we expected to lead us to programs did not know of any programs for stepfamilies at any income level. For example, we expected to locate programs through developers of curricula for stepfamilies. Although we identified nine curricula developed specifically for stepfamilies (eight of them are reviewed in Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), we found programs using only three of these curricula (and one is in use only in Canada). Many of the programs we contacted that focus on *low-income* families were not aware of any services targeting stepfamilies. Although many of our calls did not lead to stepfamily programs, they were nonetheless useful for learning more about logistical and other aspects of serving low-income and diverse families.

From the identified programs, we selected for interviewing 16 that in our judgment represented well the range of implementation formats and organizational settings of the programs we had identified. Our telephone conversations with program staff typically lasted 30 to 45 minutes. The conversations were exploratory, open-ended discussions of key aspects of the programs, including program content, design and format, and outreach efforts. We also visited one program that provided a four-hour single-session workshop for stepparents. This program provided an opportunity to observe the presentation of a number of core stepfamily topics in a single session.

Although we found a small number of programs targeting stepfamilies and none specifically for economically disadvantaged stepfamilies, we did find a large amount of written material on stepfamilies, including books, pamphlets, and information on websites. Some of the websites and downloadable publications were available in simple language and easy-to-read formats. Given that low-income groups have less access to the Internet, it is unlikely that low-income stepfamilies are accessing these materials in large numbers.

## **Service Delivery of Marriage Education Programs for Stepfamilies**

Here we describe findings on several key service delivery elements of the conceptual framework’s marriage education program. The program study was especially useful for this

aspect of the conceptual framework, because the research literature provides no evaluation studies of service delivery aspects of programs. This section focuses on a number of aspects of service delivery, including format and design, outreach and recruitment, setting, and staffing, indicating some of the variety of marriage education services currently available to stepfamilies.

## **Format and Design**

To capture the variety of types of programs offered to stepfamilies, we selected programs exemplifying several different formats. Among the 16 programs contacted, the most common format was the workshop, including both multi-session (six examples) and single-session (four examples) workshop programs. The remaining programs included four support groups with marriage education content and two examples of distance coaching (individual telephone or email sessions).

**Workshops.** The multi-session workshops typically offered instruction weekly in 2 to 2½-hour sessions for a 6- to 12-week period, although one program had nine monthly sessions. Single-session workshops varied from 90 minutes to 4 hours. The longer of the single-session workshops were intended as complete programs, whereas the 90-minute workshops, typically presented by a stepfamily expert visiting a community, were used to introduce stepcouples to ongoing support groups or other services in the community.

The program respondents touched on some of the considerations underlying their workshop schedules. Attendance was one important consideration. For example, a program that provides a single 4-hour session for stepcouples every other month decided on this format after finding that a multi-session format was difficult for their participants to attend regularly, due to conflicting work and family schedules.

The number and length of multi-session workshops affected program content. For programs in which building social support among the participants was a goal, 10 sessions was seen as the minimum needed to allow participants to develop sufficient trust to build supportive friendships. Longer multi-session workshops were more likely to include the teaching of basic marital skills, such as communication and conflict management, in addition to informing couples about stepfamily-specific content. Shorter and single-session workshops tended to focus only on content specifically relevant to stepfamilies, such as their unique characteristics and the challenges of stepparenting. Although our conceptual model suggests that programs should teach skills relevant to stepfamilies (e.g., stepparenting, negotiating), the programs contacted reported most often focusing only on providing information about stepfamilies.

**Support groups.** We spoke with two faith-based and two secular support groups. One of the faith-based groups meets once a month for 2 hours, spending the first hour presenting material about stepfamilies from a commercial stepfamily curriculum and the second hour in discussion and social support. The second faith-based support group is organized as a series of small group meetings held weekly in the families' homes. The groups are considered part of the church's

family ministry and led by couples who are stepcouples themselves. One of the secular support groups is held monthly in a public library, organized and facilitated by a leader who was unable to find a support group when she became a stepmother. Most of the couples in this support group include stepmothers without children of their own who are having difficulties with their stepchildren, a situation which can negatively affect the marital relationship. The second secular support group is exclusively for stepmothers. It meets monthly on an on-going basis and was started years ago by a social worker who is herself a stepmother.

**Coaching approaches.** Coaching consists of communication between the coach and a single stepcouple or member of a stepcouple, either by telephone or email. The emphasis is on providing general information about stepfamilies and then helping couples deal with their particular challenges. In an individualized context such as coaching, it is often possible to cover more topics than in a group setting. One of the informants said she views teaching conflict resolution and communication skills as “cornerstones” to her approach with stepfamilies. One of our coaching respondents has directed an organization serving stepfamilies for over 30 years. The leaders of this organization coach stepfamilies directly and teach others to do stepfamily coaching by telephone. The telephone coaching sessions run 60 to 90 minutes, and a couple usually has from 6 to 10 coaching sessions, most often 6.

**Involvement of children.** Although the literature review suggested benefits from including children in programs for stepfamilies, very few of the programs we contacted included children. None of the programs included any educational content on stepfamilies for children, and very few programs provided child care during the workshop. This gap partly may reflect our sampling approach, which concentrated on marital relationships. Services for children may be found more often in stand-alone programs that specifically target children of divorce and remarriage. One of the programs we contacted only involved children by holding a quarterly social gathering for stepcouples and their children, sponsored by a church-based network of support groups and, in the case of a telephone coach, talking with stepchildren if requested by the parents.

### **Outreach and Recruitment**

We found that recruiting stepcouple participants was a challenge for many of the programs contacted. A number of factors may have contributed to this. For example, many stepcouples may be unaware both that stepfamilies have unique characteristics and that many of the issues and challenges they face can be addressed through education. One program facilitator works in a community-based program serving families with disabled children. She said that when she made home visits to stepfamilies, she would point out to them that their being a stepfamily could be the primary reason their family dynamics felt “different” from those in other families. She said this was usually a new idea for the families.

Stepcouples may be reluctant to identify themselves as such due to a perceived cultural bias against them. However, we do not have sufficient information to determine whether these potential factors make recruiting couples in stepfamilies significantly more difficult than



recruiting couples in nuclear families for similar services. With regard to finding ways to attract participants to marriage education for stepcouples, program providers may have to be flexible and respond to what they find works within their community, realizing there may be trade-offs between different elements of the program. For example, one-session workshops may attract more attendees but may not allow time for coverage of all the content viewed as important. Spacing multiple sessions over time may make it easier for participants to attend, but there may be concern about retention of knowledge and skills between sessions.

**Outreach approaches.** The stepfamily programs we contacted used a variety of outreach and recruitment approaches. Programs sponsored by churches and other organizations typically advertised programs through the organization's mailings. Church-based program leaders said that many couples did not attend church-sponsored programs because of the stigma they felt about having been divorced. These leaders also mentioned the power a pastor has in encouraging participation in stepfamily programs and in making stepfamilies feel welcome in the congregation. Several secular programs commented that most of their outreach is done through their own websites and the website of the Stepfamily Association of America. Given that many low-income families lack access to the Internet, this is not likely to be highly effective for this group. Several other means of outreach were used to target stepfamilies, including word-of-mouth, brochures, newspaper advertising, and public service announcements.

**Program participants.** The participants attending the programs we contacted were almost exclusively White, European-American, middle- and upper-middle-class stepcouples. One exception to this was a six-session workshop serving South American immigrant stepfamilies (primarily from Colombia, Argentina, and Venezuela) in Spanish.

All of the stepfamily programs we examined included both unmarried and married stepcouples. Program contacts did not think marital status had fundamental implications for content. They also welcomed stepcouples in varying types of relationships, dating, cohabiting, or married. Two of the programs interviewed focused on preparation for remarriage and typically included stepcouples who were already married.

Most of the participants in programs for stepfamilies were described as either being "in crisis" or at least "uncomfortable," suggesting that attending a stepfamily program to *prevent* problems may be rare. An exception to this pattern was found in the faith-based programs, which estimated that some stepcouples, but still less than half, attended when not in crisis. This situation may not be unique to stepfamilies, though, because most couples and families may find it difficult to include more activities in their family schedules unless driven to do so by a crisis. This apparently high number of couples in problematic situations may not be uncommon for other preventive, voluntary programs. Even so, the observation suggests that specific marketing efforts may be needed so programs are seen as intended for stepcouples in healthy, happy marriages as well as for those seeking assistance.

## Setting

**Sponsoring agencies.** We interviewed programs with and without sponsoring agencies. Organizational type and whether or not a program was sponsored by a parent organization is likely to have an impact on multiple aspects of the program, including the approach to outreach and recruitment, the target participants, the program leaders, and the cost to participants.

About one third of the programs we contacted were created and led by individuals without any organizational backing. They typically organized the program to provide a service that they believed was lacking when they looked for help with their own stepfamily experiences. Among the programs with organizational backing, about half were sponsored by churches, one by a large public school district, and the rest by community agencies. Of the community agencies, several provided a range of social services for economically disadvantaged families and one was formed specifically to provide educational and support services for separating and divorcing families.

**Location of services.** The programs we contacted that conducted marriage education face-to-face with stepcouples were held in variety of settings. These included religious institutions, libraries, schools, and space provided in public agency buildings.

**Cost to participants/financial support.** The costs of participation in the programs contacted varied widely. In some programs, the cost was entirely covered by the sponsoring agency. Fees in programs that did charge participants ranged from \$15 for the book used in one multi-session program to \$189 for a 10-session program. One coach reported charging \$75 an hour for telephone coaching and \$20 per month for email support. A number of programs charging fees offered financial assistance to couples that needed it.

## Staffing

**Program leaders.** The programs we looked at tended to have two kinds of leaders. One type was the leader who created programs for stepfamilies after realizing that there were no programs available to help them with their own stepfamily challenges. Most of these program leaders started their programs within the past 10 years and most did not initially have training in social work or a related field. A second group was composed of professionals with training in social work or related fields. This second group tended to be running programs that had been in place for 16 to 30 years.

Although leaders of support groups tended not to have professional degrees, workshop leaders represented a variety of professions (e.g., licensed clinical social workers, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, personal coaches, family life ministers, and school counselors). Nearly all the leaders of programs we examined had personal experience in stepfamilies, and at least one program required stepfamily experience of its leaders. Programs contacted were split about equally in terms of whether they were led by an individual or a team of two. If led by two people, they were most often a man and a woman.

**Teaching techniques.** The teaching approach used in marriage education programs for stepfamilies will have a strong impact both on retention of participants in the program and on their retention of the content taught. An interactive, engaging teaching style is most likely important in order to retain couples. Program leaders mentioned a number of specific teaching techniques they found useful, including diagrams of family structure, role-plays, video clips, and readings. Informants who use structural diagrams to illustrate the complexity of stepfamily membership reported that these were effective in highlighting the ways a stepfamily's structure differs from that of a non-stepfamily.

In the one workshop we visited, the male and female leaders effectively used scripts to illustrate key stepfamily relationships. For example, they acted out short scenes variously involving the biological parent living in the stepfamily, the stepparent, the nonresident biological parent, and the child. After each role-play, the facilitators asked participants to list some of the emotions the particular individual might feel. The emotions participants cited included feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, and frustration. The purpose of this exercise was to increase empathy for different members of a stepfamily.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, stepfamilies may feel socially isolated because of their differences from non-stepfamilies and may have limited opportunity to socialize with other stepfamilies. To address this problem, one program we contacted is structured to give couples time to get to know one another. The program leader asks couples to take turns bringing refreshments for the start of each session, and encourages them to arrive early and socialize. She also encourages them to talk with each other during a mid-session break.

## **Topics in Marriage Education Programs for Stepfamilies**

### **Top-Priority Topics**

The topics included in the conceptual framework are drawn from both the literature review and from what we learned from programs. We found that the top-priority topics identified by program staff were the same as several of the stepfamily-specific topics suggested by the literature review. The literature review, though, identified a number of additional topics that were not described by program staff. This suggests that current programs would need to add content in order to be as comprehensive as the program represented by the conceptual framework.

Whereas we found the programs varied widely in terms of service delivery, we found much more consistency in the topics presented to stepfamilies. Key topics included the following:

- *Developing understanding of stepfamilies' unique characteristics and how they differ from nuclear families.* There was strong agreement among program contacts that an understanding of the degree to which stepfamilies differ from nuclear families could

help to reduce the stress stepfamilies may experience. A key theme was that curriculum should stress that it can take a number of years to adjust to relationships in stepfamilies.

- *Understanding the importance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship for the couple's marital relationship and how to build an effective stepparent-stepchild relationship.* Programs emphasized the impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship has on the stepcouple's marital relationship; encouraged stepparents to have realistic ideas of how long it usually takes to form a bond with a stepchild; and normalized the fact that stepparent-stepchild relationships are typically not as close as parent-child relationships.
- *Navigating relationships with former partners.* The main emphasis here was on the fact that appropriate, civil relationships with former partners are essential for children's well-being. It also is important to note that in some instances—such as when a prior relationship involved domestic violence—the most appropriate relationship with a former partner might be having no relationship at all.

In addition to these three topics, program contacts also identified a number of other important topics. They emphasized helping parents see their children's and stepchildren's points of view. Although parents may view remarriage as a positive event, often children feel more ambivalent, if not wholly negative, about it. Other program leaders stressed the importance of encouraging parents to take charge of the family early on and develop a set of family rules. Such "authoritative parenting" helps to respond to the fact that children in stepfamilies may try to manipulate their parents in various ways, frequently with negative impact on the marital relationship. Other high-priority themes included: handling family finances and overcoming guilt associated with divorce.

Although the marriage education programs we contacted presented a variety of topics, they were not as comprehensive as the program represented by the conceptual framework. It represents *all* the elements thought to be necessary to sustain healthy marriage among low-income stepfamilies. For example, the framework's marriage education program includes those basic marital skills that have been shown to be associated with healthy marriage and are included in most general marriage education curricula. Foremost among these are communication and conflict management skills. A few of the programs we talked with did include a focus on good couple communication, but most often this was only found in the longer stepfamily programs.

The programs reviewed also did not mention including the treatment and training services included in the framework (e.g., employment services, treatment for substance abuse) to address the potential specific needs of some individual participants. In developing a framework for comprehensive services for low-income stepcouples, these specific services would be included as well as marriage education services. We did not hear about programs with either a formal referral system or ancillary supports for specific individual concerns.

The program described by the conceptual framework aims to provide stepcouples with both knowledge and skills to improve their relationships with each other and with other key relations in the stepfamily system. The programs contacted appeared to focus more on presenting content rather than on teaching skills that might be specifically relevant to stepcouples, such as stepparenting practices or negotiation strategies to use with former spouses/partners. It seems likely that only longer-duration programs would have sufficient time to teach these skills.

### **Program Resources**

Program staff reported using a variety of resource materials. In many of the programs leaders developed the core content based on their own experiences and from reading and attending stepfamily workshops. Lay leaders of some faith-based support groups reported sometimes having the group read a book on a stepfamily topic and then discuss it, instead of using a formal educational curriculum. Several respondents reported using a commercial “curriculum in a box” which includes DVDs and is intended to be quite easy to use even for inexperienced facilitators.

### **Programs Providing Education on Stepfamilies to Professionals Working with Families**

Programs seeking to teach professionals who work with families about stepfamilies seem promising for two reasons. First, many existing family programs do not currently address stepfamily issues although the participants most likely include stepfamilies. Second, as discussed in Chapter 4, incorporating more emphasis on stepfamilies in general marriage education services is likely to be a promising strategy for reaching stepfamilies.

We spoke with individuals engaged in this type of educational outreach to professionals. They sought to reach the following types of individuals: pastors (especially those specializing in family ministry); lay people working with families in churches; therapists and counselors; attorneys and others working in the legal system; social service workers; family life educators; and school teachers. Our contacts stressed the importance of targeting groups like these who were in frequent contact with stepfamily couples but may be unaware of how stepfamilies differ from nuclear families.

Religious institutions or community agencies sometimes sponsored such training. An example is one program that consisted of a Friday evening workshop for community stepfamilies followed by an all-day Saturday workshop for professionals on the special needs and characteristics of stepfamilies. The visiting stepfamily expert may also advise the sponsoring organization on how to expand services for stepfamilies.

Professional training workshops stressed the same topics as curricula for stepfamilies (i.e., stepfamilies’ unique characteristics; stepparent-stepchild relationships; and navigating the relationship with the former spouse). It may be especially important in religious settings to

address guilt about divorce and remarriage. One respondent who worked with clergy said that the guilt that many religious remarried couples feel about their divorces makes it difficult for them to acknowledge strains in their stepfamily and to seek help.

The providers of these services for professionals did not indicate a great deal of experience working with low-income or diverse racial/ethnic groups. However, when workshops are provided to individuals working in organizations that serve low-income families (e.g., Head Start, religious institutions), it is likely that some low-income stepfamilies will benefit from the professionals' increased understanding of the unique needs of stepfamilies.

## **Organizations Serving Low-income Families**

After investigating existing marriage education programs for stepfamilies, we broadened our search to include organizations whose primary mission is to provide a range of other services to low-income populations. We interviewed a variety of organizations with connections to low-income families to learn about their awareness of the needs of stepfamilies and whether they were addressing these needs. We spoke with representatives of four types of organizations:

1. ***Organizations whose primary mission is to serve and support low-income populations.*** These organizations included community action agencies, public housing authorities, and charitable foundations.
2. ***Organizations that serve and support families for a particular employer.*** We interviewed representatives from several large employee assistance programs (EAPs), as well as representatives responsible for supporting families of the U.S. Armed Forces and the U.S. Air Force.
3. ***Organizations that serve and support families through the transition of marriage and divorce.*** These organizations included faith-based institutions and the divorce court system. We interviewed directors of marriage ministries from a variety of faith-based institutions based in low-income communities. We also interviewed a leader of a state-mandated Divorce Class required of all individuals seeking a divorce who have children under the age of 18.
4. ***Organizations available to serve and support all families in a community.*** These organizations included schools/school counselors, pediatricians, and libraries. We interviewed local organizations based in low-income communities, as well as the associations that represent these organizations collectively.

We spoke with representatives of nearly 40 organizations that serve low-income families. Though a small fraction of all such organizations, these findings give a useful sense of the level of awareness, interest, and support for stepfamilies in programs serving low-income families.

The staff of these organizations are strongly interested in supporting their clients in any way possible, including addressing the needs of stepfamilies. Moreover, many of these organizations are well positioned within their communities to serve economically disadvantaged stepcouples, because they are geographically based in low-income communities and residents are familiar with and trusting of these organizations. However, although many of the organizations we interviewed appear to be aware of the challenges faced by stepcouples and are open to the idea of education and support for them, none that we contacted were providing any services to specifically address their needs. Until the recent advent of funding for marriage education programs, these organizations provided only other services, such as housing, energy assistance, job training, and remedial education. Although none of the individuals we spoke with had or were planning to apply for grants under the Healthy Marriage Initiative, some were aware of other agencies within their organizations that did plan to apply.

In contrast, employee advisory programs were more likely to offer programs that support healthy relationships and parenting. Their underlying assumption is that worker productivity is improved when employees and their families function well and have access to good support networks. Representatives from these organizations acknowledged the large number of stepfamilies in the businesses they serve, but they seem to believe that their general-population marriage education programs are adequate for stepfamilies even though they do not specifically address stepfamily concerns.

Organizations such as faith-based institutions are already working with families through their marriage preparation or counseling ministries. Our respondents from these sorts of organizations reported that they are starting to recognize that stepfamilies are different and complex and expressed a wish to offer their clients more direct services in this area. One representative reported talking briefly about the challenges faced by stepfamilies in a marriage preparation class even though that topic is not part of the curriculum.

Finally, respondents from organizations that serve or support families in communities, such as schools/school counselors, pediatricians, and libraries, often make public service information available on a variety of topics. None of the respondents from organizations we interviewed in this category currently offer information on stepfamilies, but most said they would be willing to display information if it were made available.





# Chapter 4

## General Themes and Recommendations

In this chapter we present a number of general themes that emerged from our review of the research literature and of selected programs for stepfamilies. We follow this with a discussion of additional possible settings for delivering marriage education to stepfamilies and offer recommendations for future research on low-income stepfamilies and marriage education programs targeting them.

### Observations on Stepfamilies

Together our review of research literature on stepfamilies and study of programs yielded a number of observations about stepfamilies and raised questions that future research might address.

#### Stepfamilies Have Unique Characteristics

From the start, stepfamilies differ from non-stepfamilies in important ways:

- The biological parent-child bond predates the couple's relationship;
- A spouse may become an "instant parent" at marriage rather than having children join the family over time;
- One of the children's biological parents most likely lives in a separate household;
- Children may move between two households;
- The vast majority of stepfamily couples will be navigating at least one co-parenting relationship with a former spouse/partner; and
- Members of the family have experienced the loss of a relationship through separation, divorce, or death.

Marriage educators will be most effective in supporting healthy marriages among stepcouples when this unique family context is considered and addressed in program services. We emphasize that the context is likely to be even more complex and challenging among low-income stepcouples because of the higher incidence of multiple-partner fertility, with its multiple co-parenting relationships, extended family relationships, and sibling relationships. Such complexities can create additional stresses even before adding the difficulties that come with limited financial resources. Because of the complexity of relationships present at the onset of stepcouple formation, marriage education services should utilize an inclusive approach to addressing other relationships in the family system. Research

indicates these relationships (e.g., stepparent-stepchild, parent-former spouse/partner) influence the quality and stability of the marital relationship.

### **Awareness of Stepfamilies' Unique Characteristics and Prevalence Appears Limited**

The unique relationship complexities in stepfamilies often are not acknowledged and addressed by stepcouples or marriage education programs. Marriage education programs may not distinguish between stepcouples and nuclear family couples. Few general marriage education programs include program content specific to the stepfamily context.

Scholars suggest that the tendency to relegate stepcouples to a “hidden” population owes to societal norms affirming the nuclear family as “ideal” (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). One finds evidence of these norms in the media, fairy tales, and in forms and procedures used by schools and other institutions. Implicit in this treatment are societal pressures for stepcouples to function and develop in the same way as nuclear family couples.

### **Stepfamily Couples Need Realistic Expectations about Stepfamily Development**

Many stepcouples enter marriage with the expectation that their marriage will be “just like” marriages where no stepchildren or former partners are involved. The most predominant unrealistic standards include beliefs about functional equivalency to first-marriage families, quick adjustment, and instant love (Visher & Visher, 1988). It is important that stepcouples recognize that their unique family characteristics will have implications for their marital functioning. For example, it often takes a substantial length of time for stepfamily relationships and routines to gel. The first several years are especially likely to be turbulent for stepcouples. Expectations about family bonding, emotional closeness, and love among all of the members of the stepfamily equally may be unrealistic. The programs we identified all worked to address these expectations.

### **Stepfamily Couples Need Skills in Parenting Stepchildren, Co-Parenting, and Negotiating**

Respondents in the program study consistently indicated that tensions between stepparents and stepchildren were a key focus of their programs and that many families sought out support and education because of these issues. Several respondents told us that couples with pre-adolescents and adolescents were especially likely to participate in the programs. This self-selection fits with empirical evidence that stepcouples with pre-adolescent and adolescent children report comparatively more adjustment issues and marital difficulties than stepcouples with younger children.

The marital relationship is affected also by the quality of the co-parenting relationship(s) with former spouses/partners. It is critically important for stepcouples to be able to keep

conflict low when co-parenting and to protect the boundaries between households that are necessary for healthy marital functioning,

Although negotiation skills are important for all relationships, stepcouples face added challenges in navigating the roles and norms that are not clearly defined in general societal norms. Financial responsibilities also can be more complicated in stepfamilies, and stepcouples must successfully negotiate a shared vision for their financial practices. Although the programs interviewed usually provided information on the topics of stepparenting and negotiating with a former spouse, we did not find programs that focused on teaching these specific skills. Because most of the programs we contacted were of short duration, it may be that longer programs could do more to address specific skills.

## **Suggestions for Marriage Education Programs for Stepfamilies**

The interviews we conducted as part of the program study suggested various settings in which marriage education (although probably not the comprehensive program depicted by the conceptual framework) could be provided to stepfamilies, especially low-income stepfamilies. These include general marriage education classes, programs for couples planning to marry, and classes for parents divorcing.

### **Serving Stepouples in General Marriage Education Programs or Separately**

One design question when considering how best to provide stepcouples with the comprehensive range of topics included in the conceptual framework is whether to develop programs specifically for stepcouples or to incorporate stepfamily-specific material in general marriage education programs serving both stepfamilies and non-stepfamilies.

We are not aware of any research on which of the two approaches is more effective. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Targeted programs can be more fully tailored to stepfamily issues and needs, and participants may benefit from the additional social support and “normalization” from sharing experiences with others in similar circumstances. On the other hand, it may be difficult to identify and recruit participants who are strictly from stepfamilies. Programs for mixed groups are more practical, as a substantial number of the current participants in general marriage education programs are likely to be in stepfamilies, and thus a new outreach effort would not be needed. Furthermore, if stepcouples tend to avoid programs that single them out, they may be more likely to participate in a general program. Another possible benefit may be in raising awareness of stepfamily issues among non-stepfamilies.

General marriage education content and stepfamily-specific content might be combined using a number of approaches. For instance, content on stepfamilies, emphasizing their unique characteristics and developmental stages and other high priority topics, could first be presented to all the participants in general marriage education programs. Then more specific

content on stepfamilies could be addressed in separate breakout sessions for stepcouples. Such sessions also would provide them with an opportunity to build social support among the stepfamilies.

### **Classes to Prepare Couples for Marriage**

Stepfamily content would also be appropriate to add to marriage preparation classes. Many couples, including stepcouples, are encouraged or required by their religious institutions to attend a marriage preparation class. General marriage preparation classes appear frequently to include participants from a range of socioeconomic groups. Some religious institutions already have created marriage preparation classes specifically for soon-to-be stepfamilies although such programs do not appear to be in widespread use. Participants in marriage preparation programs are likely to include couples who are forming stepfamilies, whether through remarriage or by marrying for the first time but with children from previous relationships. It would be reasonable, therefore, to include general content about the unique characteristics of stepfamilies within these courses to address the needs of this group and to raise awareness of stepfamily issues generally. As was suggested in the context of general marriage education programs, marriage preparation programs could offer additional sessions for those forming stepfamilies to discuss their particular concerns.

### **State-Mandated Classes for Divorcing Parents**

A number of states require divorcing parents to attend classes before they can be granted a divorce,<sup>1</sup> with the intent to reduce the potential negative impact of the divorce on the children. The majority of these divorcing parents will eventually remarry and form stepfamilies. Therefore, pre-divorce classes may be an appropriate context in which to include at least some content on stepfamily issues. Particularly in the states where these classes are required by law, a substantial number of low-income and minority couples are likely to attend. Content could focus on general information about stepfamilies and the implications for future marriages. The facilitator could also provide information on marriage education and other relevant services available in the community. An examination of curricula used in these classes reveals that most already devote about 10 to 15% of the time to issues related to re-partnering and stepfamilies (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998). Unfortunately, the content tends to be very narrow, focused mainly on cautioning parents against forming new relationships too quickly and the potential negative impact on children when they face yet another set of changes.

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<sup>1</sup> Forty-five states have enacted state or local laws authorizing courts to require attendance at a parent education course at the court's discretion; but 9 of these states have enacted a statewide mandate for attendance (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998).

## **Increasing Awareness of Stepfamilies**

Our interviews identified a general lack of awareness about stepfamily issues. One promising approach to increasing awareness among professionals working with families is for stepfamily experts to provide workshops to professionals in a community. To reach stepcouples directly, efforts to work with institutions that serve communities such as schools, medical clinics, and libraries to distribute information about stepfamilies and marriage education services might be helpful. Marriage License Bureaus could distribute brochures and other information to newly forming stepfamilies.

## **Recommendations For Future Research and Evaluation**

Improved information on stepfamilies is a serious need in fashioning policies and programs. Here, we offer suggestions on several broad areas of needed research, both descriptive studies and evaluation research studies.

### **Descriptive Research on Stepfamily Prevalence**

It is difficult to assess potential demand for stepfamily programming without current information on the prevalence of stepfamilies in the United States today. For the Healthy Marriage Initiative, more detailed statistics on low-income and racial/ethnic minority populations are needed especially. Analysis of large surveys, such as the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the 1996 and 2001 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) could provide more current estimates of stepfamily formation, stability, and prevalence. Tracking trends would become possible if questions were added to the March Supplement of the Current Population Survey to identify the presence of stepchildren in the household.

### **Descriptive Studies on Economically Disadvantaged Stepouples' Attitudes and Experiences**

We know almost nothing about the attitudes and experiences of economically disadvantaged stepcouples or of stepcouples who are racial and ethnic minorities. In order to more effectively reach out to minority and economically disadvantaged stepcouples and address their perceived needs, it would be beneficial to know more about how they view themselves; the extent to which they understand the differences between stepfamilies and non-stepfamilies; their attitudes and beliefs about stepfamilies; and developmental and relational patterns of successful stepfamily couples. Differences across racial and ethnic groups are also important to establish: for example, how much do ethnic differences in relations with extended family influence the stepfamily experience? It would also be useful to investigate what aspects of marriage education are most and least attractive to low-income stepcouples and ethnic/minority stepcouples.

## **Evaluation Research on Strategies to Provide Information to Stepfamilies and the General Public**

There is substantial evidence that many stepfamilies have romanticized or overly unrealistic views about family functioning and may not know that it often takes several years before a stepfamily develops comfortable relationships and routines. It would be useful to investigate ways of increasing stepcouple's realistic views of the challenges they face. It would also be of interest to investigate how to increase the general public's awareness of stepfamilies' characteristics and how to encourage more positive societal views of stepfamilies.

## **Research on Influences on Stepfamily Formation and Outcomes**

Our conceptual framework depicts the conditions affecting stepfamilies as influencing intermediate and long-term outcomes both directly and by influencing the effects of the program. A number of research questions could be directed at better understanding how conditions (e.g., individual, stepfamily, and community characteristics) affect outcomes such as quality of marriage and parenting relationships and the stability of marriages over time. These questions include:

- What societal norms, neighborhood contexts, family of origin experiences, aspects of childbearing/children and individual characteristics of mental and physical health, etc. affect stepfamily formation, quality and stability and other possible outcomes? Which factors, comparatively, are more predictive of outcomes?
- Through what relationship processes do these conditions operate on stepfamily outcomes? What are the interrelationships among factors in the conceptual model?
- How do the above differ for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged stepcouples?

## **Evaluation Research on Marriage Education Programs for Stepfamilies**

Although some issues facing low-income stepcouples will be the same as the issues facing non-disadvantaged stepcouples, additional stresses caused by economic disadvantage may make these issues more salient and/or more extreme. Furthermore, although low-income stepcouples may need marriage education as much as or more than their middle-class counterparts, low-income couples may find it more difficult to participate in marriage education because of logistical barriers such as complicated work schedules, lack of child care and transportation.

Given the paucity of information about economically disadvantaged stepcouples and the apparent lack of programs serving them, it would seem reasonable to start with research on implementation studies and on studies of participants' experiences in marriage education

programs for low-income stepcouples and only later turn to investigating the potential impact of such programs. Here we briefly introduce suggestions for implementation research, describe the possibility of a subgroup analysis of stepfamilies within the SHM demonstration project, and make suggestions for a longitudinal impact study.

We believe that the development and study of pilot programs that serve stepcouples in low-income and racial/ethnic minority populations would help identify potentially promising practices. These practices could then be further studied. For instance, it would be useful to know whether low-income and middle- or higher-income stepcouples would take advantage of programs sponsored by institutions serving the general population, such as public schools and hospitals. It would also be useful to learn how teaching techniques and written information make the marriage education content most useful and relevant to program participants. A more systematic study of programs addressing stepfamily needs might contribute to the understanding of best practices for serving this population.

Another important study topic is whether the unique needs of stepfamilies can be addressed effectively within the format of general marriage education programs. It is likely that some of the initiatives supported by the Healthy Marriage Initiative, including the Building Strong Families and Supporting Healthy Marriage projects, will include stepcouples. Substudies within these initiatives particularly SHM, because it serves married couples, could potentially shed light on some of these implementation issues.

Research on the experiences of stepfamilies participating in both general and stand-alone marriage education programs would be valuable. What factors drove stepcouples to volunteer for the programs? What factors contributed to retention? What aspects of the programs did they find most and least relevant? Essential first steps in an evaluation of marriage education for stepcouples are to identify and document strong, research-based approaches and to learn more about how to implement them with fidelity to the particular program approach.

A second level of research relates to investigating the impacts of marriage education programs directed at strengthening stepcouple marriages. Research on effectiveness should use rigorous study designs (i.e. experimental) and follow stepcouples for several years or more.

In the near future, the SHM project will provide opportunities to do subgroup analysis with low-income stepcouples. This demonstration focuses on low-income married couples, many of whom are likely to be stepfamilies, and the curricula as now planned will include some stepfamily-specific content.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The SHM Background Information Form includes a question identifying stepfamilies that will allow subgroup analysis.

If indications from pilots of more comprehensive programs for stepfamilies seem promising, rigorous tests of such programs also could be valuable. Such programs would be designed to incorporate all key elements of our conceptual model. An empirically-validated model of best practices for marriage education for low-income couples could make a significant contribution towards increasing the numbers of stepcouples experiencing healthy marriages, thus promoting their greater marital stability and the increased likelihood of positive child outcomes.



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# Appendix A:

## New Analyses of Stepfamily Prevalence Using the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH)

In this Appendix we present new estimates of stepfamily prevalence based on the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a longitudinal survey started in 1987-88.

**Stepfamilies in the NSFH.** Detailed information on the biological parentage of each spouse's children in the NSFH supports a full analysis of stepfamily experience of married couples. Here, we provide new estimates of the fraction of married couples living in stepfamilies, the fraction with nonresident children by previous partners, and a summary index reflecting also whether either spouse spent time in a stepfamily growing up.<sup>1</sup> Estimates are based on weighted data and represent all U.S. married couples in 1987-88 who were living with at least one child under age 18 or were not living with a child but had a wife under age 35.<sup>2</sup> We look first at detailed measures for the general population of married couples, and then look at economically disadvantaged and racial-ethnic minority couples.

Among all U.S. married couples of childbearing age, just over one in ten of these families (11 percent) were stepfamilies (sum of rows 3-5 in the first column of Exhibit 1). Excluding childless couples, the percentage (12 percent) was slightly higher (second column). In the large majority of stepfamilies (8 of the 11 percent), only the mother had children from another partner (second panel of Exhibit 1). A similar fraction (9 percent) of the population had nonresident minor children by former partners. In most (7 percent) of these instances, only the husband had nonresident children.

Not surprisingly, stepfamilies are far more prevalent among couples in which one or both spouses have been previously married than among couples where both spouses are in their first marriage. Among the former, over one third (36 percent) of households include resident stepchildren, and a quarter have a partner with at least one nonresident child (not shown in exhibit). The corresponding statistics are just 1 percent for couples where both spouses are in their first marriages. Thus, as of the late 1980s, stepfamilies due to out-of-wedlock childbearing with other partners prior to first marriages were relatively rare in the population at large.

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart (2001) uses 1987-88 NSFH data to estimate fractions of main respondents in married and unmarried couple households who have resident or nonresident stepchildren. These are person-level estimates and do not provide an indication of the prevalence of stepfamilies among households.

<sup>2</sup> We included childless couples of childbearing age because the broader investigation is focused on correlates of marital outcomes potentially affecting child well-being. An additional restriction was that couples had to have had at least one spouse successfully re-interviewed in Wave II of the NSFH, which occurred approximately five years later. A total of 3,711 couples met these criteria.

**Variation in prevalence.** We look now at differences in several measures of exposure to stepfamily life for selected income, education, and race-ethnicity groups. Specifically, we examine differences in rates for three outcomes: (1) whether either or both spouses has any *resident* children by a former partner; (2) whether either or both spouses has any *resident or nonresident* child by a former partner; and (3) whether either or both spouses has any *resident or nonresident* child by a former partner or themselves *had spent some time in a stepfamily* by age 15. This more comprehensive approach to exposure to stepfamily life provides a better basis for gauging the extent to which married couples in marriage education programs may find material on stepfamilies relevant.

Looking first at resident stepfamilies (first bar in each set in Exhibit 2), married couples who are economically disadvantaged—whether measured by household poverty level or husband’s education—are more likely than the average married couple to be living with at least one child from a former partner. African American married couples are even more likely to be in stepfamilies (19 percent) than economically disadvantaged couples generally, whereas the fraction of Hispanic couples in stepfamilies is only slightly greater (12 percent) than the fraction for the general population (11 percent).<sup>3</sup>

Although stepparenting is rare among couples in their first marriages, the fractions bringing children from former partners into first marriages are somewhat higher for economically disadvantaged and African American couples. NSFH tabulations (not shown in exhibit) reveal that about three percent of economically disadvantaged couples and seven percent of African American couples in first marriages have children from previous (non-marital) relationships.

More comprehensive measures of stepfamily experience indicate that 17 percent of all married couples of childbearing age had at least one spouse who has had a child with a former partner (second bar of each set in Exhibit 2). When we include growing up in a stepfamily in measuring overall stepfamily exposure, the figure climbs to 31 percent (third bar in each set).

Differences across economic and race-ethnicity groups also appear in these more comprehensive measures. Economically disadvantaged couples and, especially, African Americans have substantially greater exposure to stepfamilies than the average couple.

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<sup>3</sup> Chi-square tests show statistically significant differences across income ( $p < .05$ ), education ( $p < .01$ ), and race-ethnicity ( $p < .01$ ) categories (the overall chi-square for race-ethnicity reflects differences between African Americans and whites and Hispanics). Whites and Hispanics do not differ statistically at the 10 percent confidence level.

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**Exhibit 1****Stepfamily Prevalence and Fractions Remarried Among U.S. Married Couples of Childbearing Age in 1987-88**

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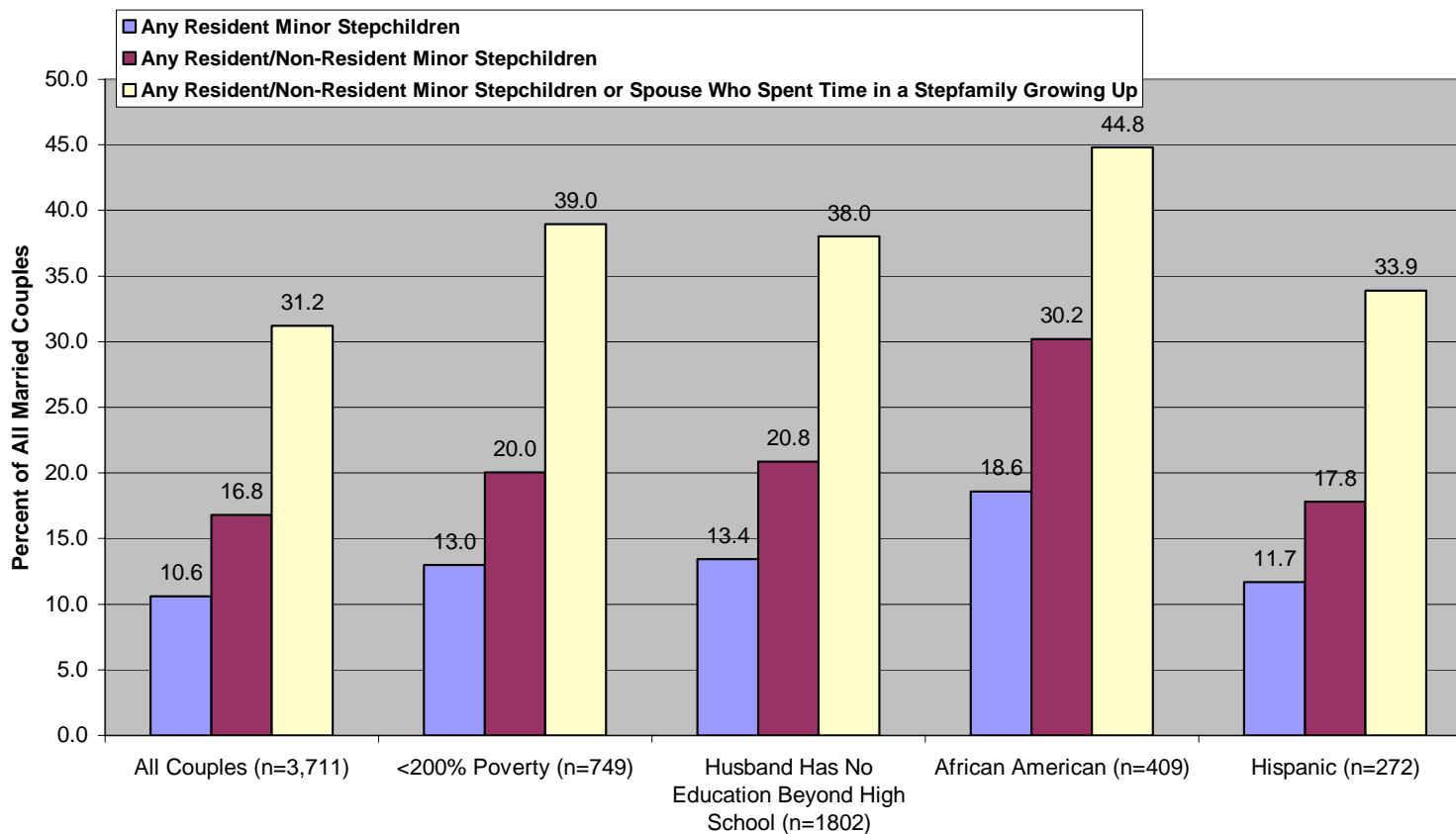
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>All Married Couples</b>	<b>Couples Living with at Least One Own Child</b>
Any Biological Children <18 of Either Spouse in Household?		
No	14.4%	—
Yes-All are bio kids of both spouses	75.0%	87.6%
Yes-Mother only had 1+ of children w/ another partner	8.4%	9.8%
Yes-Father only had 1+ of children w/ another partner	1.4%	1.6%
Yes-Both spouses had 1+ of children w/ another partner	0.8%	0.9%
<b>N</b>	<b>3711</b>	<b>3047</b>
Does Either Spouse Have Any Biological/Adopted Children <=18 <u>not</u> Living in Household?		
No	90.9%	
Yes, wife does only	1.4%	
Yes, husband does only	6.6%	
Yes, both do	1.2%	
Has Either Spouse Previously Been Married?		
No	73.6%	
Yes, wife only	7.5%	
Yes, husband only	9.9%	
Yes, both	9.1%	
<b>N</b>	<b>3176</b>	

*Note:* Statistics apply to married couples living with children or with wife under age 35 in 1987-88. Sample sizes vary due to varying amounts of missing data

*Source:* Unpublished tabulations from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households

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**Exhibit 2. Percent of U.S. Married Couples with Varying Experiences in Stepfamilies: 1987-1988**



Note: Estimates apply to married couples that either were living with at least one child or had wife under age 35.  
 Source: Unpublished tabulations from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households.

## **Appendix B: Advisory Panel Members**

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