Stepfamily Relationship Education: From Research to Practice
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Objectives

- Participants will learn about the prevalence of remarriage.
- Participants will learn recommended topics for stepfamily education curricula.
- Participants will learn recruitment and implementation strategies.
- Participants will learn about the impact of stepfamily education for different groups of participants.

Utah Marriages U.S. Marriages Utah Divorces U.S. Divorces


The States Where Second (and Third) Marriages Are Most Common

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box Elder</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
“We are trying to blend two families with children ranging in years from 15 down to two 5-year olds. Wow! We have looked at family therapy, however, the out-of-pocket cost is so much we are unable to attend. We are desperate for information, support, anything to help our family survive.”

- Relationship Education (RE) = efforts to help individuals gain greater access to research and resources that will enable them to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy relationship.

- Stepfamily RE generally targets couples with step-relationships.

- A couple with a step-relationship = a committed relationship between two adults where at least one of the adults has a child(ren) from a previous relationship(s).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utah Stepfamily Education</th>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Total Served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>1056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>1139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>739</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>1373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>1074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>1455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>1121</td>
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<td>2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>5830</td>
<td>5199</td>
<td>11,029</td>
</tr>
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Stepfamily RE rationale

- Normative relationship challenges.
- Stepfamily specific challenges.
- Many of the challenges stem from preventable or modifiable factors, not individual psychopathology.

Curriculum

- Should address both common and unique stressors.
- Research supported content:
  - the importance of social support
  - validating the stepfamily experience
  - developing realistic expectations
  - navigating (step)parent-(step)child relationships
  - prioritizing the couple relationship
  - managing relationships with former partners

Audiences

- Marital Status
  - Mixed groups can have an additive benefit.
    - "We were in there with stepfamilies who had been stepfamilies for long periods of time... and it really helped because a lot of the problems that we were going through, they're already experienced, and they would share with us what worked for them and what didn't."

- Marital Status
  - As long as participants are experiencing stepfamily related issues, participants benefit fairly equitably.
  - Married participants may consider the educational opportunity as "remarriage enrichment."
  - Unmarried participants may see it as "marriage preparation" or "relationship education."

- Marital Status
  - Normalizing and social support.
    - "Everyone kept telling me, 'But he has kids!'... I thought that I was the only case, but now I realize that there are many people who are in our situation, ... After taking this class, my life changed. It doesn't bother me that he already had kids."
Marital Status

- Cohabitation is a "teachable moment."
- Increasingly, it appears cohabitation is to remarry what engagement is for first marriage.

Lesbian Stepfamilies

- Their experiences echoed findings from heterosexual participants.
- The fact that the other couples in the class, who were heterosexual, experienced many of the same challenges was reaffirming and empowering.

Stepfathers

- Stepfathers may be less inclined to attend.
  - "Because stepfathers have no rights or obligations to stepchildren outside of their romantic relationship with the children's mother, mothers might exert even more control over stepfather-stepchild relationships than they do over relationships between biological fathers and children."

Stepfathers

- Stigma or historical "brushing off."
- Involvement of the biological father.
- Advertising of RE course might appeal more strongly to women in stepfamilies.
- An already busy work or family schedule.

Children

- Practitioners should consider the participants' children.
- The defining feature of stepfamilies is the presence of a child from a previous relationship.

Children

- Increased parental awareness of common stepfamily issues for children, structured family time, and skill development help adults to be more sensitive and engaged.
- Youth develop and refine their own set of skills (e.g., empathy, communication, and anger management skills).
Cultural Considerations

- Facilitators should understand the cultural values of those they are teaching.
- Participants may express frustration with Spanish terms for "stepfamily".
- Consider using an array of terms that capture linguistic and cultural diversity.
- Media that 'pokes fun' of stepfamilies can unintentionally be offensive.

Professional and Training Issues

Facilitator Characteristics

- Membership group similarities = biological or physical commonalities between the professional and client.
  - ethnicity, gender, age
- Experience similarities = similar life experiences or styles.
  - remarried, grew up in a stepfamily
- Characteristics of the facilitation.
  - facilitator's ability to get people to participate, explain the course material, manage time, etc.

Facilitator Characteristics

- Membership group attributes accounted for relatively little of the variance in outcomes.
- Facilitators' stepfamily experiences had differential effects.

Facilitator Characteristics

- Stepfamily experience does appear to be an important facilitator characteristic.
- The type of experience, and most likely the quality of that experience, need to be explored.
- Only currently living in a stepfamily was consistently and positively related to the dependent variables.

Facilitator Characteristics

- When facilitation characteristics were added, the predictive ability of the models more than tripled.
- The implication is a reexamination of the emphasis some RE scholars have placed on specific demographic characteristics and life experiences of facilitators.
Facilitator Characteristics

• Participants can, and do, positively rate stepfamily RE even when the facilitators differ from them on demographic and life experiences.
• Focus on cultivating quality facilitation.
  • People skills, facilitation skills, and basic elements of humanism, classroom management, etc.

Recruitment and Retention

• Partner with community and partnering agencies
• Look “in-house”
• Providing child care and dinner
• Cultivate a trusting facilitator/family
• Encourage former participants to invite friends
• Advertise the common stepfamily challenges and the promise of helpful tips and solutions
• Advertise in the language of the target population and in localized areas where the target population gathers for other familial functions

Recruitment and Retention

• RE providers do not need large recruitment and retention resources.
• Make incentives meaningful to the adults and the children.
  • Peanut butter and Jelly
• Incentives make it attractive; but it is the experience that keeps them coming back.
Closing thought

"We need to validate stepfamilies as positive and viable units with unique structures that are not immortal copies of nuclear families, but rather, complex family systems created from the integration of old loyalties and new ties."

- Emily Visser

References