WHAT WORKS (and WHAT DOESN'T) for KIDS and ADULTS in "BLENDED FAMILIES"

INTRODUCTION

- After divorce most parents recouple That creates a "blended family" (a stepfamily).
- Stepfamilies are fundamentally different from first-time families.
- We have four-plus decades of research and clinical practice that tell us what works, and what doesn't, to create thriving healthy stepfamilies.
- But what works is often quite different from a first-time family. Nonetheless, very few helping professionals receive any specific training in working with stepfamily dynamics.
- That's a problem!

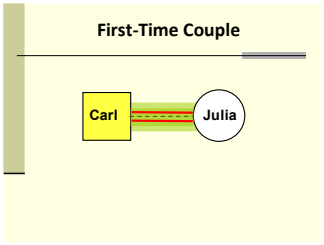
THE NUMBERS

- **42% of American adults have a *close* step relationship (Pew Research Center, 2011).**
- **40% of women will live in a stepfamily at some point in their lives.**
- **1 out of 3 children under 18 lives in a stepfamily.**
- **"Gray divorce" is rising steeply (Brown & Lin, 2012), followed by gray recoupling.**
- **40% of older couples are part of a stepfamily** (stepcouple or their adult kids have recoupled).
- "*Even if you think it's not a stepfamily case, so often, it's a stepfamily case!"* Ann Munson, LICSW

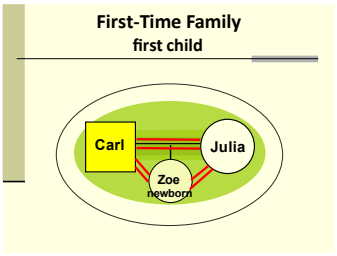
HOW STEPFAMILIES ARE DIFFERENT FROM FIRST-TIME FAMILIES

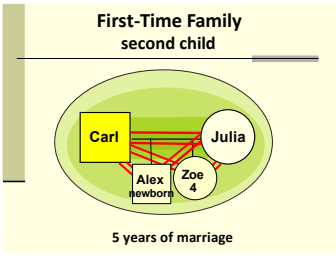
First-time Family Structure

- **New couple in a first-time family:**
  - First-time couples have time alone together to build connection with each other.
  - They have time to begin building shared habits, rituals, and values.

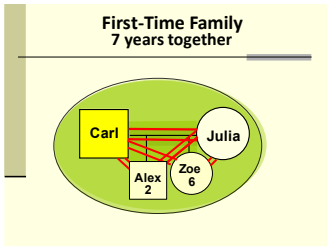


- **Children in a first-time family enter the adult couple's established relationship**.
  - Important for our story, they usually arrive hard-wired for attachment to *both* parents.
  - And vice versa.
  - The next child(ren) enter(s) the family's *already-established* behavioral and emotional connection. They also enter hard-wired for attachment to both parents and vice versa.





- **First-time family: 7 years together.**
  - Attachment bonds have deepened and strengthened.
  - Many understandings about "how we do things" have developed over time. 1000's of details of daily living no longer need discussion.

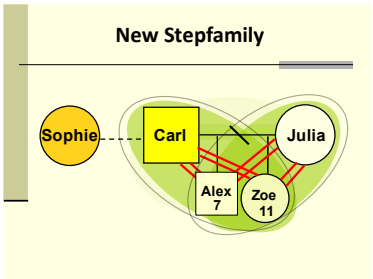


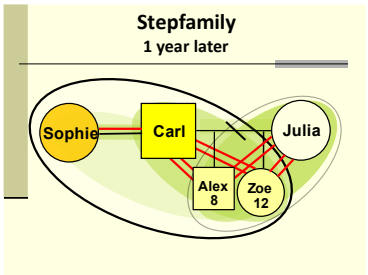
Parental Split and 2 Single-Parent Families

- Children are now part of 2 single-parent families.

Stepfamily

- The powerful hard-wired, deeply established attachment bonds lie in the *parent-child subsystems*.
- Understandings about "how we do things" also lie in *parent-child & ex-spouse relationships*. Not in the stepcouple and not between stepparents and stepchildren.
- The ex-spouse co-parenting relationship is a permanent part of the family.
- Stepparents enter as "stuck outsiders" to all of these relationships.



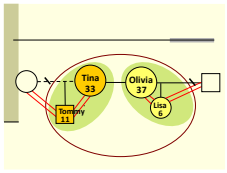


STEPFAMILY STRUCTURE CREATES 5 MAJOR CHALLENGES to intimate relationships:

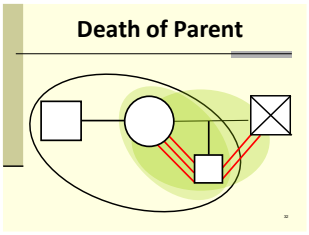
1. **Children** struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and the pace of change.
2. **Insider/outsider** positions are intense. And the structure keeps them stuck.
3. **Parenting and stepparenting are very different.** Both are important for kids wellbeing.
4. A new **family culture** must be built, while respecting existing cultures.
5. **At least one parent, dead or alive is a permanent part of every stepfamily.**
   And for the other, ex-spouse parent, a stepparent is now a permanent part of their kids' family.

STEPFAMILIES COME IN MANY FORMS

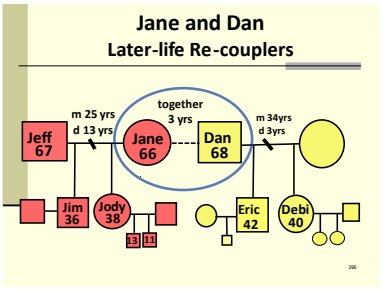
- **Single ("simple") stepfamily:** One parent-child unit and an adult without children (Carl & Sophie)
- **Double ("complex") stepfamily:** 2 parent-child units

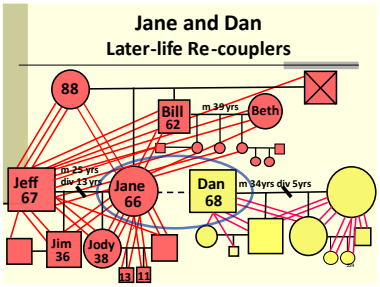


- **Stepfamilies may be headed by couples who are gay/straight/bi/trans/queer.**
  Currently, most families headed by LGBTQ parents are stepfamilies. The age of coming out is dropping, so this will change. Right now, though, most LGBTQ folks have their kids in a heterosexual cis-gender relationship, and then come out and recouple.
- **Families, including stepfamilies, are increasingly headed by unmarried cohabiting couples.**
- **The couple may be "living apart together" in a committed relationship (L.A.T.).**
  LAT can be a good solution for vulnerable kids. LAT rates triple in stepcouples over 50.
- **When a parent has died: Same basic structure. With some additional challenges.**
  - Sometimes children lose their remaining parent in his or her grief.
  - For some children, grief shows up as anger and extra rejection of stepparent.
  - Things go best if the adults don't expect stepparents to replace the missing parent. Parent-child attachment is forever.



- **Later-life recoupling is increasing dramatically,**
  - The divorce rate in the US is at a 40-year low. *Except* among those over 50, where rates of divorce (and recoupling) are rising steeply.
  - The fantasy for later life recouplers is, "*The dog is dead. The kids are out of the house. It's just us*." The reality is often quite different.





- Later-life recouplers face stunningly similar challenges, often intensified by decades-long parent-child, ex-spouse, and social relationships. (And I only filled in Jane's side!)
- Rates of L.A.T. (Living Apart together) triple over age 55, for lots of good reasons.
- **The percent of the population over 65 is growing faster than all others, world-wide.**
- **40% of older couples live in a stepfamily!**
- **We are increasingly seeing older stepfamilies, both gray recouplers and longtime stepfamilies struggling w elder care, inheritance.**
- See **Handouts C & D**

All of these families have in common that

at least one parent-child unit precedes the adult couple.

It is this structure that creates those 5 challenges.

TODAY:

Five Challenges

Three Levels of Clinical Work

I. Psychoeducational

What's normal

What works and what doesn't

II. Interpersonal

Teach Core Skills

In session, actively step in to lower conflict and shape connection.

III. Intrapsychic/Family of Origin

Heal old bruises that may be driving reactivity.

"Papernow's Bruise Theory of Feelings":

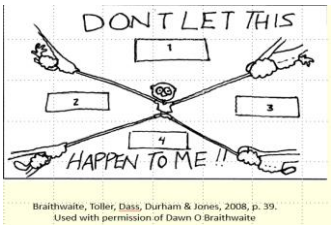
If I hit my arm in a place where the flesh is healthy, it hurts. If I hit my arm where it's bruised, it hurts a whole different way. If it's a deep bruise, even a light touch may trigger a trauma response: Fight, flight, freeze.

FIRST CHALLENGE: CHILDREN IN STEPFAMILIES OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH LOSSES, LOYALTY BINDS, AND TOO MUCH CHANGE.

What's Normal for Kids in Stepfamilies

- Adults may describe children as "resistant" or "not adjusting."
- **Losses:**
  We often need to help adults to understand that what is a gain for adults often makes (yet more) losses for children. In addition to the losses of divorce, study after study tells us that when adults recouple, kids lose time and attention with their parents (Cartwright, 2008).
- **Loyalty binds:**
  Recoupling can intensify (or create) *loyalty binds* for children. "If I care for my stepmom (stepdad) I'm disloyal to my mom (dad). The other ex-spouse parent may get anxious about losing their kids when their former partner recouples.

  When adults are badmouthing or undermining each other, loyalty binds become unbearable for children.



Braithwaite, Toller, Dass, Durham & Jones, 2008, p. 39.
Used with permission of Dawn O Braithwaite

  Even with no badmouthing at all, a child who is close to their other parent (often an oldest daughter) will have a stronger, longer-lasting loyalty bind.
- **Change:**
  - For many children, adjustment to a stepfamily is harder and takes longer than adjusting to divorce (Hetherington & Jodl. 1994).
  - As the amount of *change* goes up, children's wellbeing goes down (Jeynes, 2007). Adults are thrilled and often want to move way (way) faster than kids can manage.
- **Decades of research: Age and gender make a big difference**.
  - Stepfamilies are easier for children 8 and under and for boys.
  - Stepfamilies are harder for girls and especially for early adolescent girls (Jensen & Howard (2015). Adult daughters of later-life recoupling dads have many of the same feelings (Papernow, 2018).
- **Time makes a big difference.**
  Becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event. As is developing stepparent-stepchild relationships (Papernow, 2013).

What Works for Kids in Stepfamilies

- When adults say a child in a stepfamily is "resistant" or "not adapting" it's very important to help adults get what's happening for kids and teach them about what works (and what doesn't):
- **Carving out regular reliable parent-child time meets children's attachment needs.**
- **Help the adults to sloooow down.** But remember that the adults are excited and eager.

- Lead with empathy: "*You both are so eager to make a new family. That makes so much sense. It turns out that children often need much more time than adults wish. You'll be more successful if you can slow way down. What's that like to hear from me*?"
- Chapter 5 in *The Stepfamily Handbook* has some very concrete step by step suggestions: Maybe start by running into each other in the park or at a community gathering. Make early get-togethers very low key. Partner goes home -- does *not* stay the night. *While together with new partner and children, parents focus on* parenting*, not new partner*.
- Some children need to go MUCH more slowly than others: Children on the spectrum, with intense loyalty binds, etc. These children will need less "family time," more 1:1 time with Mom or Dad. L.A.T. (Living Apart Together) for longer may work better.

- **Kids often need lots more warning than adults often them for changes in routine.**
  "*A new puppy is a good surprise for children. But, 'My new sweetheart is coming for dinner tonight" is often not a good surprise. Nor is, 'We're moving in together next week'* (Karen Bonnell). Better: "*Next Wednesday night, Sophie is coming for dinner. Then she's going home."*
- **Recent research from the business world suggests that it helps to hold a vision of what won't change** (Venus et al, 2019).
  "Sophie is going to move in with us next June. Mom will still be Mommy. I will still be Daddy. We'll both love you always. And we'll still do Ice Cream Night on Wednesdays."
- **Loyalty binds: The best help for children is to get the adults to stop badmouthing.**
- **"Loyalty bind talks" can sometimes help** (Papernow, 2013, p. 57.)
  - Anybody can do a loyalty bind talk. Parent, stepparent, grandparent, ex-spouse, teacher, rabbi, neighbor. Since Zoe is a teenager, Carl might start with:

    "*You probably already know this.*

    "But just so you know that I know." "Sometimes when a kid has a mom and a stepmom, it can be confusing. But I want you to know, that your mom's place in your heart is permanent. And your place in your mom's heart is permanent. Like the sun. Like the mountains. I chose Sophie, not you. I hope you come to like her. Even if you do, it will be a DIFFERENT place in your heart."
  - Loyalty bind talks will be more helpful to children with milder loyalty binds where the adults are not engaging in significant badmouthing or undermining.
- **An easy wrong turn:**
  - Stepcouples are often told to "make your couple relationship central. If the couple is OK the kids will be OK." This is somewhat true in first-time couples. However, in stepcouples, when the couple is extremely close, children do more poorly. We believe this is because children don't have enough parent-child secure connection.
  - **In stepfamilies, it's both/and. It is critically important to coach the adults to carve out both regular reliable parent-child time (including for adult children) and regular couple time.**
  - As we'll see, stepparent-stepchild time together, without parents, is also key.

Parent-Child Interpersonal Work

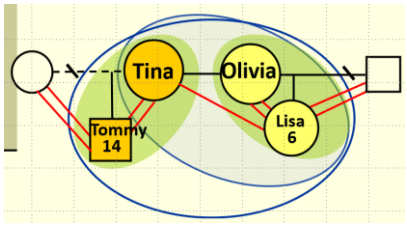
- "*Secure attachment is one of the most powerful predictors of healthy, focused, confident, self-regulating children."* (Alan Sroufe, 2005)
- **Help stepcouples to get that the best medicine for a struggling kid is a parent who gets it.**
- **Give children language for losses, loyalty binds, what all this change has been like for them, and help them feel heard.**
- Meet w stepcouple to deepen understanding. Help both to understand that this is usually parent-child work. (Exception: A very supportive stepparent may be able to help parent to hear their child.)
- Meet with the child to help child to tell a coherent story of loss and change. Then meet with parent and child. Help child voice "What do you most want your dad to get."
- Parents often need help empathizing (vs. explaining/defending).
- Use "joining" to help parent slow down and hear: "*I know you love your daughter. Can you take a breath. Can you find what you DO understand about what she just said? Can you tell your daughter?"* (See Papernow, 2013, pp. 58-59.)
- In parent-child work, joining goes in ONE direction, from the parent to the child. Not vice versa. I also use "joining" for stepcouples and co-parents where it usually goes two ways.
- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* (Faber & Mazlish, 1999) is a great primer for parenting skills. Also available on cd's by Faber.

SECOND CHALLENGE: INSIDER/OUTSIDER RELATIONSHIPS IN STEPFAMILIES ARE INTENSE. AND THEY ARE STUCK

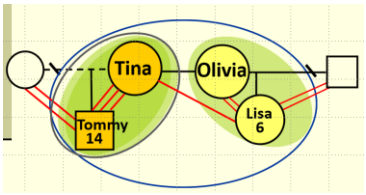
What's Normal

- If you are a parenting coordinator or mediator sitting with ex-spouses, it's critically important to understand this challenge and its impact on stepcouples.
- Children are hard-wired for attachment to their *parents*, not their stepparents. Stepparents are very important players for kids. But especially in the early years, and often forever, kids turn first to their parents for comfort.
- **So, in a stepfamily, stepparents are often stuck outsiders. Over and over again.**
- Stephen Porges: "*We are neuroceptively wired to expect people we care about to turn toward us."* When they don't it's very dysregulating.
- **Stuck outsiders often feel *rejected and invisible*.**
- **Parents are stuck insiders. Over and over and over again:** If I turn to my child, I have to turn away from my sweetheart. If I turn to my sweetheart, I have to turn away from my child. If I keep the peace with my ex, my sweetheart is upset. And vice versa.
- **Stuck insiders often feel *torn* between the people who are important to them. The often feel *anxious* about meeting everyone's needs. Anxiety easily fuels defensiveness.**

- **Leaving stepparents out of mediation and parent coordination ups the intensity of this insider/outsider challenge. It's important to ask *how* to involve the stepparent, not *whether*.**
    - Robin Deutsch: If stepparent is not in the room when ex-spouse agreements are made, write it down. Then give the couple 24-48 hours to "think it over." This gives parents time to go back to the stepparent. Stepparents may not have final say. But they will have to live with any agreements that are made. They need to have a voice and be heard.
    - Patricia adds: Julia says, "*He changed his mind because of HER."* We say, "*Yup. This is tough, huh. You so wish it was just between you and Carl. This is a huge adjustment. And, Sophie has to live with this decision, too. She needs a voice. Because it likely won't work for anyone if she's not on board*."
- **In double families, often one adult is more of an insider and the other is more of an outsider.**
    - Lisa is young and she's a friendly outgoing child. She's warm and playful with her stepmother Tina. So, when Tina, Olivia, and Lisa are together, Lisa is still closer to her mother. But Tina feels seen and cared about.



    - Tommy is an adolescent. And he's extremely shy. He lives half time with each of his moms. He enters Tina's house each week as an outsider. He finds "noisy Lisa" completely overwhelming. In fact Tommy doesn't need a new family. He needs time alone with his mom.



    - So when Tommy is in the house, Olivia becomes an almost complete outsider.
- **For LGBTQ couples, stigma and minority stress can intensify this challenge.**
    - Tina has been out since her teens. Her family is now accepting. She has strong relationships in the gay community.
    - Olivia left a heterosexual marriage just a couple of years ago. Her very Catholic family has cut her off. She has no connections in the lesbian community yet. Her husband has sued for custody because she is in love with a woman. Helping Tina to empathize and hold Olivia's outsiderness will considerably soften the pain for Olivia. And getting Olivia connected with the gay community will be part of our work.
- **Children in stepfamilies can also be stuck insiders and outsiders**.
    - Lisa is almost full time in this household. "Visiting" children like Tommy enter as outsiders. Outsider children need adults' empathy for, "*I don't belong. This isn't my home."* ("*Sounds tough. Tell me more*." Not, "This IS your home!")

- Full-time children like Lisa are stuck insiders. Insider kids need the adults to understand that they often feel invaded and intruded upon.

What Works to Meet Insider/Outsider Challenges

- **Empathize with and hold the pain of both the insider and the outsider**:
  - *"This is not happening because you don't love each other. It's happening because you live in a stepfamily. It turns out that stepfamily structure creates stuck outsiders (stepparents) and stuck insiders (parents). Outsiders often feel alone and invisible and rejected. Insiders often feel torn and anxious and inadequate. Does that fit?"*
  - "*Such a painful spot for both of you."* We can say to the stepparent, knowing the parent is listening: "*It is so hard, in your own home, to feel left out, over and over and over again."* We can say to the parent knowing the stepparent is listening: *"It's so hard to feel, whichever way you turn Someone who matters to you gets upset. And that makes you feel awful.''*
  - To both: "*Am I getting this right? What's this like to hear from me?"* If they say, "relieved," turn them toward each other: *"OK to share your relief with each other?"*

- **Naming and normalizing this challenge can be extremely helpful to stepcouples.**
  - Stepparents often say, "I knew I wasn't crazy."
  - Both say, "I knew I wasn't failing."

- **Encourage stepcouples to spend fun time together as a family AND carve out regular reliable 1:1 time for all subsystems:**
  - **For the adult couple** where stepparent is an "insider" and parents don't feel torn.
  - **For parent-child** where children have parent's full attention.
  - **Time for stepparent-stepchild relationships** without the parent present gives stepparents and stepchildren a chance to build their new relationship. When parent is present, the stronger parent-child relationship pushes stepparents to the outside.

- **Rethink "right of first refusal."**
  - So often stepparents tell me, "*I had a great weekend with my stepkids*." When I ask, "*Was your partner away*," the answer, very (very) often, is yes.
  - Without the parent present, stepparent-stepchild relationships have precious time to develop their own relationship, away from the pull of the stronger parent-child relationship. Neither stepchild nor stepparent may have been ready to go away together for an entire week-end. But having the time together "because Dad is gone" creates space for this new relationship to grow.
  - Positive stepparent-stepchild relationships are linked better wellbeing in children.
  - Giving Mom the "right of first refusal" when Carl has to travel for work may seem "logical." It may have been appropriate before Sophie joined the family. But once a stepparent is a committed part of the family, it deprives this family of precious relationship-building time.

- **Encourage stepparents to spend some time outside the family**

  The outsider position is often painful. Stepparents need a break. Go out with friends, go visit your favorite aunt, take a class, join a baseball team. Or put on earphones, go to another room and watch a movie. Both parents and stepparents may see this as "un-family-like." But time out will make it much easier to come back.

- **Strengthen Stepcouple Connection Across the Insider/Outsider Divide**
  - **Stepparents and parents need each other's empathy. But stepparent upset and parent defensiveness can sometimes make it hard to hear each other.**
  - **Research: Successful stepcouples and struggling stepcouples face the same challenges. Successful stepcouples have better interpersonal skills**. See **Handout A** and *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships* for more specifics. And/or come to a day-long workshop! (Day-long webinar on December 11th with the Ferentz Institute rb.gy/uy2as)
  - Insider/outsider work often focuses on helping stepparents to reach ("*I need a hug*") rather than attack ("How *could* you turn your back on me again?") Parents often need help to slow down and empathize rather than defend. Parents then need help voicing their torn insider position while we support stepparents to hear and empathize vs push back.
  - We often need to help both partners find the vulnerable feelings under their anger and criticism (i.e., sadness, grief, the longing to be understood and held.). "*Sophie I think you might be saying you need a hug*?" Dan Wile's little book *Solving the Moment* terrific for this. (Cite in **HO #9**).

A WORD ABOUT FAMILY THERAPY IN STEPFAMILIES

- Parents in stepfamilies often ask for (or are sent to) family therapy "to help the kids adjust" or "Help this family blend."
- However, many family therapists are still taught that the whole family must be in the room.
- *BUT, stepfamilies put the couple, parent-child relationships, and stepparent-stepchild relationships in competition with each other for meeting attachment needs.*
- As a result, putting a whole stepfamily together for therapy is often counter-productive and even destructive.
- **It is vital to *think* systemically:**

  No matter who you're working with, keep the impact of stepfamily challenges on all players in your heart and in your mind.
- **But *work* in subsystems or with individuals.**
  - Usually beginning with the couple and parent-child relationships. Sometimes the work includes sibling and stepsibling relationships.
  - **The work then often proceeds in parallel with the couple and with the parent and child**.
  - **Once attachment is secure in couple and parent-child relationships, it is possible to bring the whole stepfamily together.**

- **Intimate stepparent and stepchild work usually needs to wait until stepparent and stepchild have more of a relationship.**
- **Meanwhile coach stepparents to focus on "connection not correction."** Help find easy, low-key things to do with their stepchildren (play basketball, bake a cake) without the parent.

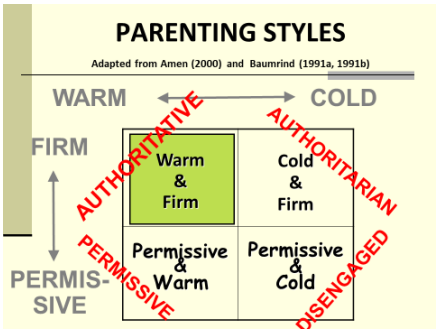
TWO CAVEATS re THERAPY with STEPFAMILIES

- **When you're making a referral, therapists without knowledge of stepfamilies are often not helpful and even destructive in helping stepfamilies meet their challenges.**
  - Unfortunately, there are still toovery few with this training. This usually means giving therapists a copy of *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships*. "*This has been really helpful to me. I think it might be really important for this family /stepparent/ child/ parent."*
  - I tell stepfamily members, if there's nobody trained in your area, find the best therapist you can. Bring them *Surviving and Thriving* and say, "*This has been really helpful to us. Would you read it and can we talk about it in a couple of weeks*?"
- **When multiple helping professionals are involved w a stepfamily, stay in touch!!**
  - The more a stepfamily is struggling, the more each person, or subsystem, can only tell their own story. It is very easy for well-meaning therapists to inadvertently add to the divisiveness.
  - Maintaining good regular contact with each other is critical. Leave each other voice mails or texts or emails and arrange a fairly regular conference call or Zoom meeting.

THIRD CHALLENGE: PARENTING AND STEPPARENTING ARE DIFFERENT. BOTH ARE IMPORTANT for CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

This cool little chart helps frame the challenge. (Handout #4)

Decades of research tell us that author*itative* parenting (loving, empathic and moderately firm) is the best for kids on every measure imaginable. (Upper left quadrant.)



What Works for Parenting, Stepparenting, and Discipline in Stepfamilies

- **We have four-plus decades of research about what works, and what doesn't, for parenting, stepparenting and discipline in stepfamilies:**
- **Parents need to retain the disciplinary role,**
    - until or unless children have formed a trusting caring relationship with stepparent.
    - Then stepparents can sometimes slowly, move into author*itative* (empathic, and moderately firm) discipline.
- **Meanwhile, coach stepparents to concentrate on *connection, not correction*** (Papernow, 2013).
    - Focus on making a relationship with stepkids, not setting rules.
    - Go for warmth and interest, not control. Find low-key one-to-one activities (playing basketball, making a special dessert) without the parent present. Send TikToks! (Get your stepkid to show you how to do it.)
- **Author*itarian* (upper right quadrant—hard, cold, controlling) parenting by stepparents is toxic to stepparent-stepchild relationships. This is true even in cultures that value authoritarian parenting.**
- **Even author*itative* discipline by stepparents too early can backfire.**
- **In many thriving stepfamilies, stepparents have positive caring relationships but no direct disciplinary role.** A disciplinary role is more likely with younger kids. Less likely with older kids.

An easy wrong turn

- Parents are often told they should back up the stepparent's discipline. This is often the strong wish of the stepparent and it makes sense in first-partner families.
- But in a stepfamily, this pulls stepparents into a premature disciplinary role.

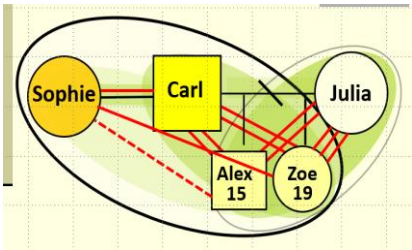
Assessment:

- **Because this information is just beginning to be out there, stepparents often expect themselves, and are expected, to step into discipline.**
- **If stepcouples have gotten some guidance, or managed to learn from experience, that stepparents need to lead with warmth and leave discipline to the parent, give them a TON of credit.**
- **If not, the assessment questions are: Is the couple open to coaching? Is stepparent able and willing to step back from discipline and is parent willing to step in.**

What Works, and What Doesn't, for Stepparent Roles

- **Within this guideline of "focusing on relationship not rules," "leading with warmth, not control**," **there is a very wide range of positive roles that work for stepparents.**
- **Positive stepparent roles may range from very emotionally involved and close to stepchildren, to primarily helping with academics and homework, to much more casual – maybe driving kids to school and music lessons, or just playing games together sometimes.**
- **This whole range of positive stepparent-stepchild relationships is linked to higher wellbeing for children (Jensen, 2019, 2020).**

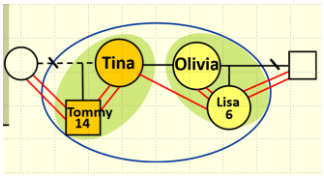
- **Negative, cold, and high-control relationships with stepparents are linked to poorer wellbeing in kids (Jensen, 2019. 2020).**
- **Stepparent-stepchild relationships do often have many turning points over the years.**
    - Six years into their stepfamily, Zoe (now 19) has a painful breakup with her boyfriend. Sophie, who dated for many years before marrying, really gets it. this turning point warms their relationship considerably.
    - Zoe is still very close to her mom so she cycles in and out with Sophie. But the "in" times are more frequent and closer.



Stepfamily Structure Adds to This Challenge!

- **Stepfamily structure constantly divides parents and stepparents.**
    - Stepparents all over the world seem to want more boundaries and limits with their stepchildren.
    - Parents all over the world seem to want more love and understanding for their kids.
    - Behavior that feels normal to parents is often upsetting to stepparents. Sophie says, "Zoe is rude and disrespectful!" Carl says, "She's just being kid."
- **Why is this?**
    - Parents have those shared understandings with their kids about what's "rude behavior" and "what's a mess." And they have that deep-rooted heart connection that can soften the upset. Stepparents don't have any of this.
    - Add that losses, loyalty binds and change often make kids cool and even rejecting of stepparents. Parents are often getting much more warmth from their kids than stepparents are. It's hard to be warm to a child who is rejecting. And, how much more irritating is it to Sophie (stepmother) when the kid who left the mess is Zoe who barely says hello to her.
- **When this goes badly: The "Polarization Polka"**
    - When this goes badly, the more frustrated and desperate stepparents get, the more defensive parents get, the more extreme stepparents get, the more protective parents get.
    - Stepparents are easily pulled into the upper right authoritarian (hard and harsh quadrant), the very worst spot for successful stepparent-stepchild relationships.Parents get pulled into the lower left "permissive" quadrant when what their children need is authoritative (upper left corner) parenting.
    - When this goes very badly, stepcouples get stuck in increasingly intense "Polarization Polkas" – the harsher the stepparent, the more permissive the parent. Worst, both of these parenting styles are linked to poorer outcomes for children. (As is the adult conflict.)

- **When this challenge goes well: A Collaborative Cha Cha**
  - When this goes well, stepparents can often help parents to pull "up" toward more firmness. Parents can often help stepparents to pull "over" to more compassion and understanding.
  - Stepcouples can work together in a "Collaborative Cha Cha":
- **Here's what a "collaborative cha cha" looks like: Tina and Olivia talk about Tommy**



- **So, successful stepcouples do talk A LOT about parenting.**
  - Notice that Stepmom (Olivia) helped pull Mom (Tina) "UP" on the Parenting Styles chart toward more firmness. Mom pulled Olivia "OVER" toward more understanding.
  - It is Tina (Mom) who will announce this to Tommy. If Tommy says, "*This was obviously Olivia's idea*." Tina can say, "*Well, actually yes. And I think you're old enough to help out, don't you?*"
  - **Stepparents need to have a voice. They often have a lot to add!**
  - **Parents need to allow themselves to be influenced. *And* parents have final say about their own children.**

Talking About Parenting Differences Requires Good Interpersonal Practices

- Handout A has a list of skills I like to teach. The *Surviving and Thriving* book has lots of examples of stepping in when arousal is too high for learning. (In longer workshops, I can demo this.)
- **Soft/Hard/Soft is a favorite I like to teach both stepcouples and co-parents. (Handout 6).** Even some of my most struggling clients seem to be able to get S/H/S.

Stepparents do not have to remain silent.

- **Stepparents do not have to remain silent when they are upset with their stepchildren.**
- **However, they do need to communicate skillfully and kindly when they're upset, in ways that build connection vs tear it down. Handout A has some good practices.**

FOURTH CHALLENGE: STEPFAMILIES NEED to BUILD a NEW FAMILY CULTURE, WHILE RESPECTING (and INTEGRATING) EXISTING CULTURES

What's Normal

- Just when the couple is longing for a loving new family, they are faced, right away, with constant, often unexpected, differences.
- Shared understandings about "how we do things" lie within parent-child and ex-spouse subsystems. Not in the couple. And not in stepparent-stepchild or stepsibling relationships.
- Especially if the couple had expectations of "blending," this can be extremely upsetting.

- Sophie and Carl's family has its first Christmas together. Sophie happily decorates the tree with white lights. Zoe takes one look, bursts into tears and runs to her room. Zoe was used to colored lights and this was just one too many changes.
    - If this goes badly, Sophie thinks Zoe ruined Christmas. Zoe cries alone in her room. Carl is aware of why she's crying but he's frozen. And maybe Zoe calls her mom and Mom says, "I always said that woman was a witch." Alex starts playing a video game.
    - If it goes well, Carl and Sophie look at each other. Carl pulls Sophie into the pantry and gives her a hug. (For kids, stepcouple physical contact often intensifies losses, loyalty binds, and the sense of too much change for kids.) Sophie plays a game with Alex while Carl goes to Zoe and holds her while she sobs and howls, "*How could she! A Christmas tree has colored lights. Doesn't she know*?" Carl hold Zoe. He keeps himself from defending Sophie. Instead he says, "*Yup. We always had colored lights. So many changes huh!"* If Zoe calls her mom, Mom says, "*Oh boy. That sounds hard. I bet your dad and Sophie will understand if you can sit down and talk with them. If they don't, let me know and I'll try to help.*" Later, the family gathers around the kitchen table with cocoa all around and they tell each other stories from past Christmases. (Because these stories are not shared experience across step relationships, this kind of story telling has to be done purposefully in stepfamilies.)

What Works

- **Validate and normalize for the stepcouple -- lead with your empathy.**
    - I'm going to say to Carl and Sophie, "*That term "blended family" didn't set you up for this, did it? So disappointing! Such a surprise when you were so looking forward to a happy new family."*
    - *"I want you to know you're not alone. Wanting a new happy family is so understandable! But it turns out that you're actually bringing together two different cultures here!"*
- **Change the metaphor.**
    - Bringing two parts of a stepfamily together is actually not like blending blueberries and strawberries into a smoothie. It's more like bringing together a group of Italians and a group of Japanese and saying, "Make a family."
    - There are going to be lots of differences! A lot of them will be surprises!
- **There's a lot of "learning by goofing in stepfamilies."**
    - Stepcouples are told to "talk about everything" ahead of time. It's important. And it helps.
    - But so much of what matters is not held in language. Until someone violates an expectation. It wouldn't have occurred to Carl or Sophie or Zoe to talk about what lights to put on the tree.
    - So it's important for everyone, including ex-spouses, to know that "learning by goofing" is not a sign of a failing stepfamily. Just people learning about each other.
- **An easy wrong turn.**
    - Stepcouples are often encouraged to make a big new set of "family rules." This may seem logical. However, it's too much change too fast for kids.

- It's a little like making everyone eat pasta with chopsticks. That makes misery, not unity.

- **A step at a time saves nine**. Make a *few* new routines or rules.
  - **As much as possible, leave familiar routines in place for kids: Bedtimes, meals, etc.**
  - **In a double family, that may mean leaving some differences in place**.

    Six year old Lisa says, "*But Tommy gets to drink Coke with dinner!"*

    Her mother says, "*Yup. We have brought two families together. In their family they drink Coke with dinner. In ours we drink milk. Drink your milk and then you can have some Coke."*

- **In a double family, be aware of asking the same amount of change of both sets of kids.**

  "Knock before entering each other's rooms" may come naturally to one set of kids but require learning an entirely new set of habits for the other.

- **Do make new rituals and do fun things together.**
  - Try something new for everyone! And/or trade off showing each other "how we do it."
  - Find some "virgin holidays" (where nobody has any attachment to "how we do it") to invent new family rituals.

- **Holidays can evoke especially intense need to do things "the way we always do."**
  - "Learning by goofing" may intensify!
  - Spending some early holidays separately in parent-child subsystems is not a "failure of coming together." It can sometimes prevent scarring that may burden future family relationships.

- **Bottom lines**:
  - **Building a sense of "us" is a "slow cooker not fast food."**
  - **The key is often integration of old things + new things. Not a complete makeover.**

FIFTH CHALLENGE: ANOTHER PARENT (DEAD OR ALIVE) IS a PERMANENT PART of EVERY STEPFAMILY

What's Normal

- At least one other parent, dead or alive, wonderful or horrid, is a permanent part of every stepfamily. And, if the parent is alive, the ex-spouse co-parenting relationship is also a permanent part of the new family.

- For the ex-spouse in the other household, a stepparent, an adult she or her did not choose, is now part of your children's family. For both moms and dads, recoupling of their ex-spouse can be very anxiety-provoking. A low-conflict co-parenting relationship may suddenly get more tense. A high conflict one may get worse.

- Decades of research establishes that adult conflict is bad for kids. The most robust predictor of poor wellbeing in children is not divorce or single-parent families or stepfamilies. It's adult tension and conflict, along with poor parenting.

- Children with low-conflict divorced parents are doing significantly better than children with high conflict never-divorced parents. Young adult women are especially impacted by parental conflict (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

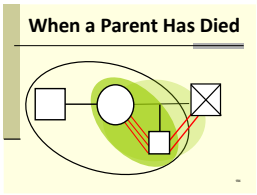
- Even "moderate tension" between never-divorced parents compromises children's attention, academic achievement and immune systems (El Sheikh et al, 2007).

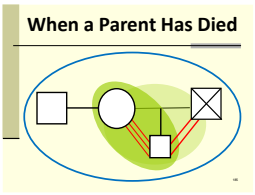
What Works

- **Monitor and intervene in adult tension and conflict.**
  Conflict is so clearly toxic for children, I teach my supervisees that we therapists need to identify and intervene in parental conflict and tension with the same focus that docs monitor our blood pressure.
- **Some books I especially like (all in your reference list):**
  - Bill Eddy (2020). *BIFF for Coparent Communication: Your Guide to Difficult Texts, Emails, and Social Media Posts.* [This is a nice short one.]
  - Wittman (2001). *Custody Chaos Personal Peace: Sharing Custody with an Ex Who Is Driving You Nuts.*
  - For lower conflict ex-spouses, *The Co-Parenting Handbook* by Karen Bonnell.
- **Rules in each household do not have to be the same.**
  - But adults have to handle differences with respect.
  - Tommy says, "*But Mama lets me watch TV on school nights."* Tina says calmly, "*Yup. At Mama's you can watch TV on school nights. Here we watch only on weekends. When you're an adult you can decide which you think is best for your kids*."
- **Again, recoupling can be triggering for the ex-spouse parent.**
  - I see this especially with moms, but colleagues are also seeing it with dads.
  - When Mom and Stepmom are at the same event, I say, "*It's in your best self-interest not to not push Mom's buttons. A triggered mom will be toxic for everyone*. *No hugging the children in front of their other parent.*" Ditto for stepdads.
  - Sometimes it helps to share Loyalty Bind Talks with the other parent. "*This is what we're telling the kids. And this is what we believe*." In this era of social media, a handwritten note communicating this can be powerful.
- **When either household denigrates the other:**
  - "*I know you want the best for your kids. We have a ton of research. Want to hear what the best predictor of children's poor wellbeing is?"* Wait until they say yes! … "*It's adult tension and conflict!"*
  - *"I know you want the best for your kids. Do you know what the research says about moms and stepmoms (and dads and stepdads)? Want to hear?"* Wait until they ask!
  - *"The research tells us that children do best when they have positive relationships with all of the adults in their lives: Both Mom and Dad, both stepparents."* (And, by the way, grandparents on both sides.)
  - **I have said to moms whose husbands have recoupled*, "Making room for this other adult in your kids' lives might be the hardest thing, and one of the most important things, you do as a parent to support your kids*."**
- **Navigating two entirely different belief systems can be really challenging.**
  - For instance, a child's other household is very dismissive of mask wearing.

- Her stepmom and dad said, "*One side of your family doesn't believe in masks. Here's what we believe. We believe masks can keep you safe. Those are two different beliefs. Here's why we believe this."* They did an experiment with black pepper and masks to show why they believe masks make a difference. "*so we make you wear yours When you're old enough you can decide what you think is right."*

- **When a parent has died**
  - We're seeing much more of this with Covid. Stepparents often expect (and are expected by their partner) to replace the missing parent.
  - Children do not usually want a stepparent to replace their missing parent. What kids need from adults is support for grieving and remembering.
  - Grief, especially grief of a child for a missing parent, is not linear. It comes and goes in different forms and at different times (Boss, 2021).
  - For some kids, grief shows up as anger.
  - Adults need to include the missing adult in their new family.





--Help kids plant a shrub or a tree or flowers each year for the missing parent.

--Ask children where they would like photos of their missing parent.

--At birthdays, holidays, "*What would Mom do on your birthday? What shall we do that keeps your mom with us*?" A stepmother helps a stepdaughter who had lost her mother at 15, to think about how she would like her mother included in her wedding ceremony. Stepmom helps place a photo of Mom at the front of the church. Daughter decides to also wear her mom's favorite bracelet.

  - **Diane Fromme: *Stepparenting the Grieving Child: Cultivating Past and Present Connections with Children Who Have Lost a Parent***

    This is one of the few really good trade books. Full of good wisdom.

Interpersonal Skills

- **See Handouts 7 and 8 for some very practical ideas for managing co-parent conflict.**
- **I proactively coach co-parents (and stepparents).**
  - On behalf of their kids, I am teaching them to use their best skills in situations that pull for their worst.
  - I edit emails with my clients, teach them how to use Soft/Hard/Soft when making requests and setting limits. Etc.
- **Stepparents can be resources.**
  - It is usually best if the parent handles the relationship with their co-parent ex-spouse.

- However, I have had a few cases where the parent was very triggered and a skilled grounded stepparent was much more able to navigate this. (This also may change over the years.
- Recently a client of mine (Mom) teamed up with her adult daughter's stepmom to plan the girl's wedding. When the girl was young, Stepmom had "circled the wagons" and cut Mom off. 15 years later. Mom approached Stepmom with, "*We both want the best wedding possible for our girl*. *Neither of us want tension at this wedding. Let's talk*."

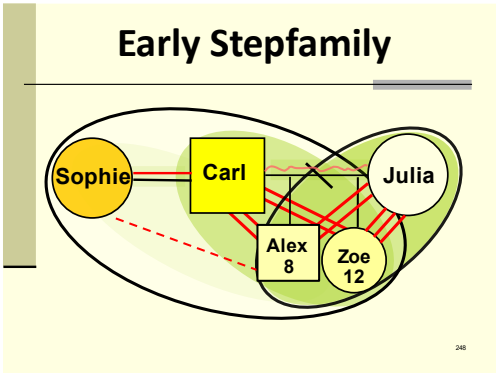
SOME THINGS to THINK ABOUT WHEN KIDS ARE HAVING TROUBLE in STEPFAMILY

- **If I hear that there's a 12 or 13-year-old girl** I know it's likely going to be a tougher ride, no matter what everyone does "right." That child may need more 1:1 with their parent and less family time.
- **Has the stepparent stepped into discipline? If so, can they step back?**
  - Lead with your empathy, "*It seems the obvious thing for an adult in the house. Plus stepparents everywhere want more limits with their stepkids. Parents want more love and understanding. It's easy to get pulled in. But we have a ton of research about what works in stepfamilies. Want to hear?"*
- **If stepparent is *stuck* in authoritarian parenting, this is toxic for kids**.
- **How fast did the couple move?**
  - If the couple is not living together yet, can they slow down the amount of time the stepparent is in the house? Can parent put his/her cell away during parent-child time?
  - If the couple is living together, can they increase 1:1 parent-child time.
- **Are the adults able to take in your re info what kids may be feeling?** Or do they defend or dismiss ?
- **Check for 1:1 parent-child time.**
  - If kids are struggling encourage more. Be sure this is time parents are paying full attention. Not multi-tasking time.
  - Balance with couple time and stepparent-stepchild time.
- **And of course, check for adults badmouthing each other:**
  - Is the new family "circling the wagons" and pulling children away from their other parent?
  - Is either parent (or stepparent) triggered and badmouthing? Can they stop?

SOPHIE and CARL MEET THEIR CHALLENGES

Sophie and Carl as an Early Stepfamily

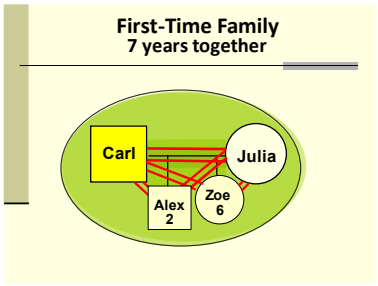
- The strong attachment bonds and the deep shared ground lie in parent-child relationships, not in step relationships.
- Alex is somewhat available to his stepmother. But Zoe's tight loyalty bind with her mother makes her extremely distant.
- Sophie's arrival on the scene has upped the anxiety for Carl's ex-wife Julia increasing the tension between her and Carl.



- The one thing they've done right is that Carl has retained the disciplinary role.
- But the stress and constant disappointment of "straining to blend," combined with lousy interpersonal skills, keep miring Carl and Sophie in conflict.

Sophie and Carl as a Thriving Stepfamily

- 7 years down the road, with some hard work, and some good help, attachment in the adult stepcouple is now strong and secure. Sophie and Carl can reach for each other. They can talk about differences and stay connected.
- The couple has developed a substantial sense of "we-ness" in their relationship, and throughout the family. Pieces of ritual that preceded Carl and Sophie have been woven into the new family's "ways of doing things."



- Typical in this healthy stepfamily, Carl is still closer to his own kids than Sophie is. (Mavis Hetherington calls this "own-ness.")
- But the relationship between Sophie and Alex, her stepson, is strong and getting stronger.
- Zoe's loyalty bind with her mom has loosened a little. She and Sophie have a warmer relationship, though Zoe cycles in and out, (likely feeling disloyal to her mom who is still single).
- Sophie has moved into an authoritative parenting role w Alex. Carl is still the go-to parent for Zoe.
- With some coaching, Carl and Sophie have worked to reassure Carl's ex-wife Julia and they now have a fairly cooperative relationship.
- It is a very different family from this first-time family.
- **And it's a healthy thriving stepfamily.**

Handout # 2

National Stepfamily Resource Center

Smart Steps
Embrace the Journey

Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey

This 6-session research-based educational curriculum, written by Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder, is designed for re-partnering couples and their children.

It focuses on building couple and family strengths while addressing the unique needs and issues that face stepfamilies.

It features parallel sessions for adults and children, with clear step-by-step lesson plans for high quality experiential learning. Children and adults come together at each session end in a shared activity that builds understanding.

The program includes information about "blended families," skill-building, multi-media, and group discussion to teach strategies for building healthy stepfamilies.

The Smart Steps curriculum guide is available for $199 from the National Stepfamily Resource Center.

www.stepfamilies.info/smart-steps.php

It gives you clear step-by-step directions and handouts for each session, movie clips, a flash drive with supplemental materials, and many other terrific resources. Like the child handouts that follow, some of the materials are also very useful in clinical sessions.

For information about the curricula, contact Teresa Wagner
Teresa@auburn.edu 334/ 844- 3238

CHILD HANDOUT # 1

National Stepfamily Resource Center ***Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey***

Used with permission from the author, Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder

DIRECTIONS for CHILDREN: Complete this sheet and ask your family to listen as you share.
You don't have to answer anything you don't want to.

DIRECTIONS for ADULTS & other listeners: Concentrate on learning about kids' experience.
NO explaining or convincing.
***Only*, "Gee that sounds tough." "That sounds nice." "Tell me more."**
"Help me understand more about that."

CHANGES in MY LIFE

My parent's decision brought change into my life.
Mark each with √ if there have been a *few* changes.
Mark √√√ if there have been many changes. Two checks if in-between.

Home
Family
School
Church
Parents I live with
Other people I love with
Rules
Time together
Time alone
Friends
Food
Money
Fights
Feelings

The best change for me:

The most difficult change for me:

How I feel about these changes:

CHILD HANDOUT #2

National Stepfamily Resource Center ***Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey***

Used with permission from the author, Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder

DIRECTIONS for CHILDREN: Complete the following phrases.
Ask your family to listen as you share.
You don't have to answer anything you don't want to.

DIRECTIONS for ADULTS and other listeners: *Listen* to each child's answers.
NO explaining or convincing.
***Only,* "Gee that sounds tough." "That sounds fun." "Tell me more."**
"Help me understand more about that."

MY FAMILY

1. **List your family members and one thing you like to do with each one:**

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

2. **We argue a lot about**

3. **One thing I would change is**

4. **I really like when we**

5. **I wish they knew this about me**

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[Handout #3] TIPS and CAVEATS for CHILD and FAMILY WORK

For Child Therapists, School Counselors, and Child Advocates in the Legal System

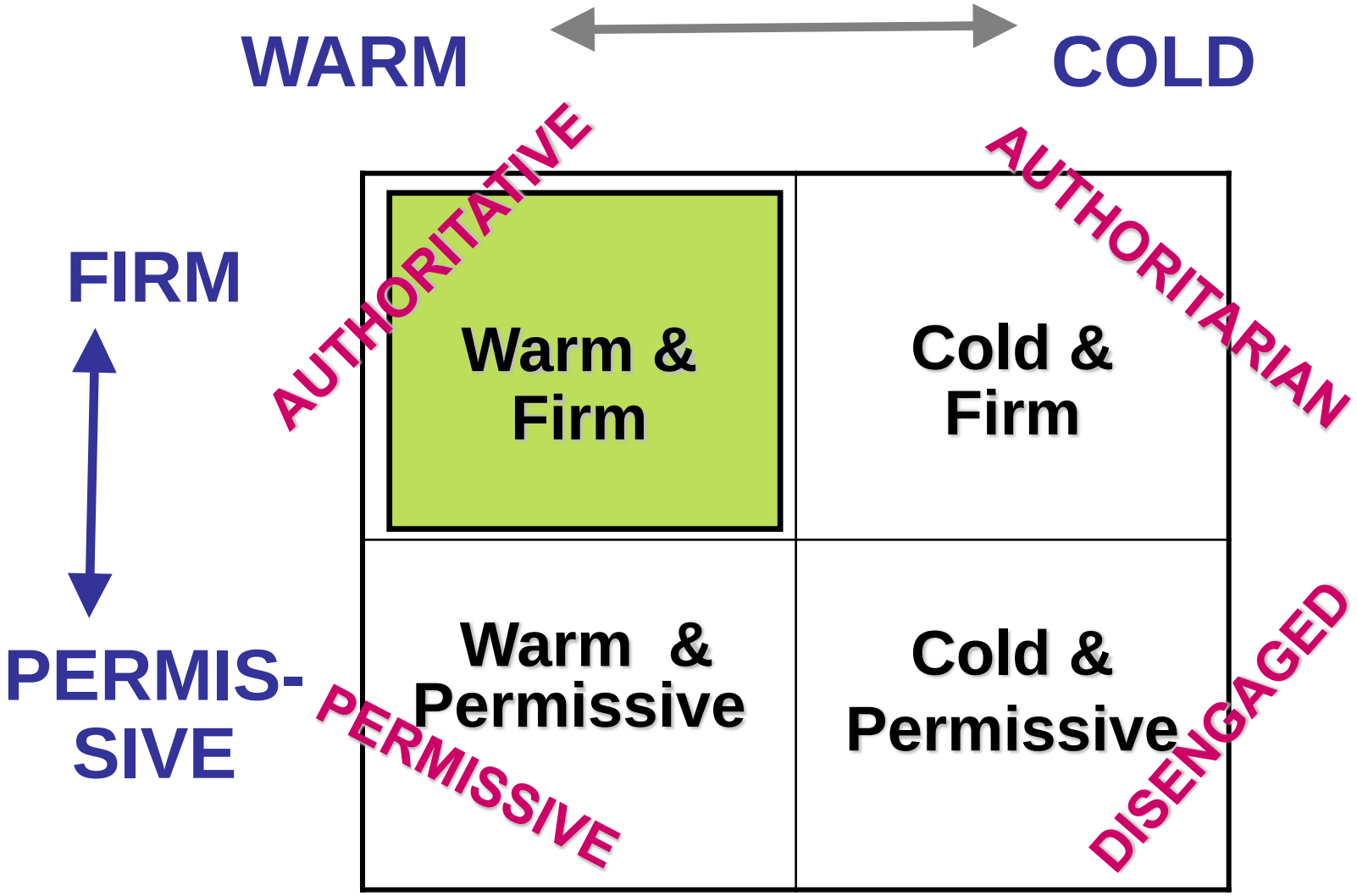
- **In child work, help children voice and find language for losses, loyalty binds, and the experience of change.** (Using the fill-in forms for children in **Smart Steps HO#3** can be very helpful.)
- **When children "aren't adjusting," it's almost always important to work with the adults.** "*I think I can help you understand what's happening here. Want to hear*?" Teach about children's losses and loyalty binds and change. "What's that like to hear from me?" "The good news is, there are things you can do that will help."
- **Assess**: **Is there enough reliable parent-child alone time?** Sometimes just increasing regular parent-child time and decreasing "family time" can help a struggling child.
- **Assess the pace of change:** The pace may be fine for the adults. But much too fast for kids. If so, have stepparent come over less often or for shorter time periods. If the family is already living together, decrease "family time" and increase parent-child time.
- **Ease stepparents out of a disciplinary role.** Help stepparents to move out of premature discipline. Coach stepparents to focus on *connection, not correction*. Help *parents* move into author*itative* (warm attuned *and* moderately firm) parenting. Normalize: Stepparents will want more limits. Parents will want more love and understanding for their kids. Stepparents have input. Parents have final say about their own kids.
- **Coach stepparents to focus on connection not correction:** Express warmth and interest, play together, etc. Encourage 1:1 stepparent stepchild time without the parent present.
- **The language of parts can be very helpful to kids with an absent or abusive parent:** "*Part of you loves your dad. He's your dad! That part wants to hold on tight. And part of you is so upset with him. That part wants to shove him away. Did I get that right? " "*Both are true*. I'll help you hold both*." Parents, grandparents, school counselors, clergy, etc. can use the language of parts.
- **Be aware that increasing parent-child 1:1 time may increase stepparent's outsiderness.** Support parental empathy for "outsiderness." Balance parent-child time with couple alone time.
- **Individual therapy for children is helpful when adults are stuck in high conflict.** If the adults cannot regulate themselves, individual therapy can give children a sanctuary, a safe place to listen into themselves, find their voice and be heard, and help developing coping skills.

Some Additional Tips for Therapists Working with Stepfamilies

- **In therapy w stepfamilies, THINK systemically.** Hold on to your own empathy for the challenges that stepfamily creates for ALL players. In individual therapy, empathize with the *pain*, *not with the blaming story*. "*That sounds painful for everyone."* NOT: "Clearly your wife is over-reacting."
- **WORK in subsystems.** Because stepfamilies create competition for attachment needs between the couple, parent-child, and stepparent-sch relationships, putting a whole stepfamily in the room together in therapy is often destructive**.** Meet alone with child(ren) to help them tell a coherent story and begin to find a voice for their needs. Provide psycho ed for the couple. Meet with the parent and child(ren), without stepparent, to help parent empathize with kids' experience of loss and change and repair attachment breaks.
- **Lower ex-spouse conflict.** If you can keep a firm, compassionate hand, meet with ex-spouses. If conflict is too high, meet with parents individually ("shuttle diplomacy"). Set a clear agenda focused on kids. Educate about the impact of conflict. Use "joining" to slow things *way* down. *If this work is not your strength or preference, develop a cadre of co-parenting coaches you can refer to and collaborate with.*

PARENTING STYLES

Adapted by Patricia L. Papernow
from D. Amen (2000) and D. Baumrind (1991)



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[Handout # 5]

What the Research Tells Us: 8 Tips for Parenting, Stepparenting and Discipline in Stepfamilies

More Resources:

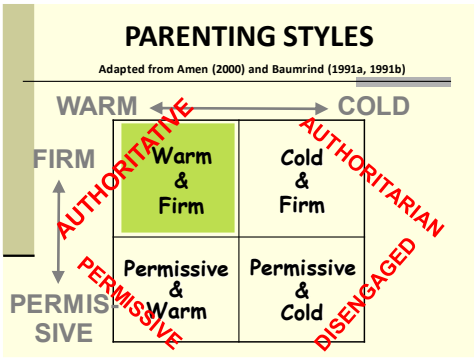
Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't, Chapter 5 Papernow (2019): 5-page downloadable handout [in **HO # 8 Resources & References**].

1. For many children, becoming a stepfamily is harder, and takes more time, than divorce. Age and gender make a difference:

- Stepfamilies are generally easier for children eight and under, and easier for boys.
- Stepfamilies are generally harder for girls. Adult daughters of older recoupling dads often have a very hard time. (Handout C is a good article.)
- Stepfamilies are especially hard for early teen girls.
- Becoming a stepfamily may be extra hard if: The transition was relatively fast, children are especially vulnerable (lots of losses, tight loyalty binds, more sensitive temperament, less solid relationship with parent) or stepparent leads with control.

2. Hands down, Authorit*ative* parenting is best for children on very measure imaginable. Authoritative parenting is both loving *and* firm.

- *Loving*: Authoritative parents are responsive, warm, and empathic.
- *Firm*: AND authoritative parents *calmly* set moderately firm, child-appropriate limits. They make "developmentally appropriate demands for maturity."



3. Stepfamilies often divide parents and stepparents around discipline.

- Stepparents everywhere seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren.
- Parents everywhere seem to want more loving and understanding for their children.
- When this goes well, stepparents help pull parents "UP" toward more firmness. Parents help stepparents pull "OVER" toward more softness.
- When it goes badly, we see increasingly painful cycles of "polarization polka."

4. Parents need to retain the disciplinary role with their own children.

- Until and unless stepchildren feel they have a caring, trusting relationship with Their stepparent, the parent needs to retain the disciplinary role.
- Once stepparents have forged a caring relationship, stepparents can move *slowly* into an authoritaTATIVE (loving and moderately firm) disciplinary role. This very often takes years. (Not months!)
- More likely with younger kids (eight and under) than with older kids.
- In many successful thriving stepfamilies, stepparents do not have a disciplinary role.

5. AuthoriTARIAN parenting by a stepparent is almost always toxic.

- Authori*tarian* parenting leads with control. It is hard (not loving or empathic).
- Unfortunately, stepfamily structure easily pulls stepparents toward authoritarian parenting.
- Authoritarian parenting often uses negative labels ("You're lazy." "You're a brat.") It makes harsh demands ("*Takeout the trash right now*.")

6. The guideline for stepparents is, "connection before correction."

- "Relationships before rules." Concentrate on getting to know stepkids. Not controlling them. (This can be hard if kids' behavior is irritating and/or they're distant!)
- Positive stepparent behaviors include: Openness, flexibility, warmth. Take an interest in kids. When there is conflict, *use constructive communication*.
- Spend 1 to 1 time with kids, *without their parent*. Find easy fun things you both like to do: Make a favorite food. Shoot baskets. Do a woodworking project.
- Good stepparent roles: Like an aunt or uncle, or adult friend. A wide range of warm relationships works, from very involved to providing academic support, to casually involved.
- *Research: Warm stepparent-child relationships make a big difference!* They are linked to psychological, behavioral, academic, and physical well-being in kids.
- Some kids will be less available than others, depending on loyalty binds, etc.
- Stepparents can practice "*monitoring"* (James Bray): *Check in* with kids (vs control them): "*How's that math class going*?" *Notice* what kids are doing. *Report concerns to parents*.

7. Meanwhile, stepparents have *input*, parents have *final say*.

- Successful stepcouples do work as a team. They talk a LOT about parenting.
- Often stepparents have a lot to contribute. They often can help parents to firm up a bit. Parents can help stepparents to understand their children better.
- Stay kind. Go slow! These challenging conversations will often need your very best skills.

8. Successful stepcouples face the same challenges that struggling ones do.

- Struggling stepcouples criticize and/or avoid. (Avoid Gottman's "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse": Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling.)
- Successful stepcouples communicate about parenting differences with kindness and caring.
- Successful stepcouples use a "soft start up" (Soft/Hard/Soft is a good tool for this.)
- Successful stepcouples repair when there is a glitch. "*Ooops. Sorry. I was sharp*!"

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[Handout # 6] "Soft/Hard/Soft"

Honesty without kindness is not communication. It's a weapon.

"Soft/Hard/Soft" is a simple tool for talking about hard things.
S/H/S operationalizes John Gottman's "soft start up." Gottman: *96% of conversations end the way they begin.*

1. Start with something SOFT. Some ways to access "soft":

Express your caring: *"I love you."*

Give positive feedback*: "I see that you're working on getting your kids to pick up." "I know that you've been trying really hard to be softer with my kids."*

Empathize*: "I get that my kids are driving you nuts." "I know it is so hard to talk to your ex-wife." "I know your kids aren't used to picking up like this."*

Express confidence: *"I do believe we can find a solution that works for both of us."*

Attribute positive intentions: *"I know in your heart of hearts you want to be caring of me."*

2. Now, say the HARD thing*, but say it with that soft energy*.

The very act of looking for "SOFT" can access your caring, open your heart a bit and calm you down a bit. Saying hard things in a loving way makes it *much* easier for the other person to hear.

Tip: "HARD" messages are heard best with "I" messages" *(I'm struggling*.").
Avoid "you: messages ("You obviously don't care.")

Tip: Offer sentence stems: *"I'd love it if…." "It's hard for me that…")*

3. Then add another SOFT. **Some examples** ("*Soft" is in italics*. "Hard" is in non-italics):

Stepparent to parent: *"I see that you've been working hard at getting your kids to clean up their stuff. I really appreciate it!* I wonder if you noticed that John's hockey gear is all over the living room. I'd love it if you'd ask him to pick it up*. I know this is new for him, and for you.*

[NOT: "Your kids are complete slobs. Didn't you ever teach them to clean up!"]

Stepdad to stepson*: "I know it's tough having a stepdad. I bet sometimes you wish I'd just disappear!* But, since we're living together, I do think we can be decent to each other. *I know it's a lot of changes*."

[NOT: "You are a brat! You WILL treat me with more respect."]

Parent to stepparent: "*I know my kids drive you crazy sometimes. It has to be hard that we are so much messier than you are.* But I have a request. Would you try to talk to them with more calm and respect? I will keep working on setting more boundaries. *I know it's not easy for you with them. I love you."*

[NOT: "You are over-reacting."]

Divorced parent to ex-spouse*: "I'm sure it would be really fun for Janie to go to a Red Sox game with you on Sunday.* However, you know that is my weekend with her. I know you wouldn't want me to schedule anything on your time with her. You'll need to find another time to take her. *I know we both love our kids and want to do fun things with them."*

[NOT: "I can't believe you expect Janie to go to a Red Sox game on my time. You always were a self-absorbed bastard."]

[Handout # 7]

SIMPLE RULES for CONFLICT by a CO-PARENTING COACH

From Joshua Williams of Journey Counseling in Calgary Canada
joshua.williams@journeycounselling.ca>

- **Stay in the present. No bringing up past hurts or judgements**
- **No blaming. Instead, use curiosity when you respond.**
- **No swearing**
- **No name calling**
- **No shouting**
- **No making assumptions. Ask for clarification if you don't have all the evidence.**
- **Keep logistic information brief and to the point.**
- **Give positive feedback.** Say thank you when the other person does something you like. (Specifically in an info exchange: “I'm on my way to drop off our son to the meeting place.” Response: “Thanks for letting me know!”)

In session: Consequences for breaking rules: 1st time = 5 min break. 2nd time I will end the session and still charge full price.

Outside of session: This transferred to homework that they practiced outside of the session. In session they reported and we recognized what they are doing well.

Prior to each session: They must email with goals for topics of discussion in the session. In each session, we use those topics as a training ground for implementing the communication practices.

Preparation: Minimal teaching!

- I explained that these were the things I saw and gave some real life examples, particularly around bringing up the past, that was helpful for their context.
- We tried one example of what showing curiosity would look like.
- Logistic information just refers to communicating about the parenting plan components.
- I also checked in with each of them to confirm *what positive feedback would look like for them*. He didn't have much to say but she asked for the "thank you!" following an interaction.

Handout #8

Judge's Parenting Conduct Orders for High Conflict Couples

From Comm. Nikki Clark

AFCC California Conference February 25, 2022.
Plenary Four. *Before Too Much Damage Is Done: Creative Approaches to Early Intervention*

From Patricia: These parenting orders from a terrific judge. For stepfamilies, add "and stepparent."

From Nikki:

- ***I explain each part of this order. I help them understand how impactful conflict is on children, and why each of these is important.***
- ***Next time I see them, I will ask each of them what they have done to comply with this order.***
- ***Books Nikki likes to recommend ("I like short ones"):*** **Bill Eddy's *BIFF* and *Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising a Child with an Uncooperative Ex*** (Corcoran & Ross)

1. Each parent shall encourage a positive relationship between the children and the other parent.

2. Each parent shall encourage and allow the child(ren) to express their love for the other parent. (For instance, each parent allows children to have pictures of the other parent in each home.)

3. Each parent shall ensure that the child(ren) comply with court orders.

4. Both parents are prohibited from making or allowing others to make negative verbal comments about the other parent, the other parent's past or present relationships or family within hearing distance of the child(ren).

5. Both parents are prohibited from posting anything negative about the other parent, the other parent's past or present relationships or family on social media.

6. Both parents are prohibited from questioning the child(ren) regarding the activities of the other parent.

7. Both parents are prohibited from having the other parent served with any legal documents in the child(ren)'s presence.

8. Other than to simply advise of upcoming scheduling that directly involves the children, both parents are prohibited from discussing with the child(ren) or allowing discussion by others in the presence of the child(ren), any issues relating to the case or any related case.

9. Both parents are prohibited from providing, showing or reading to the child(ren), or allowing any other person to do so, any documents relating to this case or any related case, including but not limited to pleadings, declarations, letters, photographs, video recordings, mediation reports and/or custody evaluations.

10. When parents are together, both parents shall be civil to each other and protect the child(ren) from their conflict during exchanges, at the child(ren)'s school or any other time or location where both parents are present with the child(ren).

11. Both parents shall think critically about their own choices and behaviors to gain introspection and understanding about how they each contribute to co-parenting dynamics, and how they each could modify their own behavior to reduce conflict to benefit their child(ren). The parties shall be prepared to discuss compliance with this order at any future Family Court Services mediation or court hearing related to parenting issues.

[Handout # 9] RESOURCES and REFERENCES

RESOURCES SPECIFICALLY for and about STEPFAMILIES

Patricia's books and website:

Papernow (2013). *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't* https://tinyurl.com/5c3dt7me (written for both clinicians and stepfamily members)

Papernow & Bonnell (2019) *The Stepfamily Handbook: From Dating to Getting Serious to Forming a "Blended Family"* (written for the public.)

www.stepfamilyrelationships.com **Links to upcoming workshops and webinars.** Video tapes -- some just a few minutes and a good hour-long one. Lots of radio interviews.

Smart Steps https://www.stepfamilies.info/programs-services/smart-steps/ **[Handout #2]**

Smart Steps is a 6-session psychoeducation and skills program for stepcouples and their children. This curriculum is supported by considerable research for a wide range of populations. There are step by step directions for leaders, with lots of very well-designed experiential exercises and supportive materials.

Smart Steps has been translated into Spanish and Japanese. NSRC is likely open to other translations.

Many of the handouts are very useful for family and child therapists. (For instance, the worksheets for children in **Handout #2**). Detailed curriculum is available from the National Stepfamily Resource Center. Well worth the $199 cost. Needs to be taught much more widely.

For more information, contact **Teresa Wagner Teresa@auburn.edu (1) (334) 844-3238**

A downloadable handout, an article and two book chapters:

Papernow, P.L. (2023). What four-plus decades of research and clinical practice tell us: A baker's dozen tips for parenting, stepparenting, and discipline in stepfamilies. *Association of Family and Conciliation Courts eNews*, *18*(9). https://tinyurl.com/yc7fkb92 **Downloadable handout for clients.**

Papernow, P.L. (2022). Therapy with couples in stepfamilies. Lebow & D. Snyder (Eds.) *Clinical handbook of couple therapy, 6th ed.* (pp. 467-488). NY: Guilford. **[Handout B] [20 pages]**

Papernow, P.L. (2021). Helping queer stepfamilies meet their challenges. In M. Murphy & R. Harvey (Eds.). *Handbook of* LGBTQ-*affirmative couple and family therapy (2nd edition).* New York: Taylor & Francis.

Papernow, P.L. (2018). Recoupling in mid-life and beyond: From love at last to not so fast. *Family Process*, 57(1), 52-69. DOI: 10.1111/famp.12315 **[Handout C] [18 pages]**

Resources for Post-Divorce Co-Parenting

Custody Chaos Personal Peace (Wittman) and ***BIFF*** (Bill Eddy) **[Cites on next page]**
Two excellent books re managing a high-conflict ex-spouse. (And *BIFF* is nice and short!)

The Co-Parenting Handbook by Karen Bonnell (A road map for doing post-divorce co-parenting well.)

AFCC Association of Family and Conciliation Courts https://www.afccnet.org/
An international organization of mental health professional, mediators, family lawyers, collaborative lawyers, and judges devoted to the resolution of family conflict.

Family Court Review, the AFCC journal, is a wealth of recent research and info about evidence-based approaches to family conflict.

SOME GENERAL RESOURCES and REFERENCES

[RESOURCES for CLIENTS ARE in BOLD with AUTHOR in CAPS]

ABRAMS SPRING, J. (2004). ***How can I forgive you? The courage to forgive, the freedom not to.*** HarperCollins. [good book re affairs]

AHRONS, C.R. (2004). ***We're still family: What grown children have to say about their parents' divorce.*** HarperCollins.

BOSS, Pauline (2021). What if there's no such thing as closure? https://tinyurl.com/yc6uw7n4 [Wonderful interview about loss]

Cartwright, C. (2008). Resident parent–child relationships in stepfamilies. In J. Pryor (Ed.), *The international handbook of stepfamilies: Policy, and practice in legal, research, and clinical environments* (pp. 208–230). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

DEAL, R. (2020). Preparing to blend: The couple's guide to becoming a smart stepfamily. [Ron's Christian religious stance makes his books too couple-focused, at the expense of parent-child focus. He accepted some edits from me on this one, so it's a bit better! Best: The end of each chapter has great starter questions for stepcouple and parent-child conversations.]

Drozd, L., Saini, M., Olesen, N. (Eds) (2016). Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court, 2nd Ed. Oxford

EDDY, W. (2020). ***BIFF for coparent communication: Your guide to difficult texts, emails, and social media posts.*** Unhooked Books.

El-Sheikh, M., Buckhalt, J., Cummings, E.M. & Keller, P. (2007). Sleep disruptions and emotional insecurity are pathways of risk for children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 48*(1), 88–96.

FABER, A. & MAZLISH, E. (1999). ***How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk.*** Avon. [My favorite parenting primer.]

FROMME, Diane (2017). ***Stepparenting the grieving child: Cultivating past and present connections with children who have lost a parent.*** [One of the few really good trade books about stepfamilies] https://tinyurl.com/2p8nxyar

GOTTMAN, J. (1994). ***Why marriages succeed or fail: What you can learn from the breakthrough research to make your marriage last.*** Simon and Schuster. [And any other of Gottman's books.]

HUGHES, D. danielhughes.org [Resources for parents, foster and adoptive parents, & clinicians re attachment parenting. Coach parents in P.A.C.E. Click on "Books and CDs." See his home page for on-line trainings.]

Hetherington, E.M., & Jodl, K.M. (1994). Stepfamilies as settings for child development. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.) *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?* (pp. 55-80). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Jensen, T. M. (2019). A typology of interactional patterns between and their stepfathers. *Family Process 58*, 384-403.

Jensen, T. M. (2021). Patterns of interactions between youth and resident stepmothers: A latent class analysis. *Family Process 60*(2). 538-555.

Jensen, T., & Howard, M.O. (2015). Perceived stepparent-stepchild relationship quality: A systematic review of stepchildren's perspectives. *Marriage and Family Review,51*(2), 99-153. doi:10.1080/01494929.2015.1006717

Jeynes, W.H. (2007). The impact of remarriage on children: A meta-analysis. *Marriage & Family Review 40*(4), 75-98.

King, V. (2006). The antecedents and consequences of adolescents' relationships with stepfathers and nonresident fathers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *68*(*4*), 910–928.

King, V. (2009). Stepfamily formation: Implications for adolescent ties to mothers, nonresident fathers, and stepfathers. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *71*(*4*), 954–968.

Sroufe, L.A. (2005). Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood *Attachment & Human Development 7*(4):349-67 doi:10.1080/14616730500365928

Venus, M., Stam, D., van Knippenberg, D. (2019). Visions of change as visions of continuity. *Academy of Management Journal 62*(3), 667-690. doi:10.5465/amj.2015.1196

Wile, Dan, & Kaufmann, Dorothy (2021). *Solving the moment: A Collaborative couple therapy manual.* [This is a fabulous practical little book about working with couples. Lots of very concrete ways to help couples hear and connect.]

WITTMAN, J.P. (2001). *Custody chaos, personal peace: Sharing custody with an ex who is driving you crazy.* NY: Penguin.

ZIETTLOW, A. (2015). Making Things fair after a parent's death. Institute for Family Studies https://ifstudies.org/blog/making-things-fair-after-a-parents-death (Handout D)

ZIETTLOW, A., & CAHN, N. (2017). ***Homeward Bound: Modern Families, Elder Care, and Loss.*** **Oxford University Press.**

[Handout A] WORKING on THREE LEVELS

I. PSYCHOEDUCATION [Handout E has a 2-page summary of key psychoeducation.]

What's normal. What works and what doesn't.

Some key skills for effective psychoeducation:

- *Remember that providing corrective information can easily be shaming. And it can easily start a power struggle.*
- **Stay "low, and slow."** (Sue Johnson)
- **When clients have "wrong ideas," discipline yourself to *start with what you DO understand*. Lead with your empathy.**
- **Ask, "*What's that like to hear from me?*"**
- **When there is "resistance," *empathize*:** "*This was not what you expected. So disappointing…"*
- **Use the "language of wishing"** to reach for underlying grief: *"You so wish this was easier for his daughter*."

II. INTERPERSONAL PRACTICES for staying connected in the face of differences

"I know you want to be heard. Can I help?" "*This is an important conversation. Can I help you have it better*?"

- **Some skills that pull for optimal arousal and connection:**
  - **Track arousal levels.**
    "*Let's take a breath."*
    "The most important interpersonal skill is self-regulation" (Gottman).
  - **Make positive requests. Not negative criticisms**.
    "Would you be willing to…"
    Not, *"*You never…" "You always…"
  - ***Soft and kind* makes more connection than hard and harsh.**
    "Can you try that again. But softly?"
  - **"I" messages.** ("*I'm having a hard time with the dishes piling up in the sink.")*
    Not labels or "you" messages. (*"Your kids are slobs*.")
    ("I feel that your kids are slobs" is not an "I" message. It's labeling.
  - **Maintain a ratio of 5 positive moments: 1 negative moment**.
    "*Kindness is a muscle. It needs to be exercised often*." John Gottman.
  - **Use sentence stems**
    "I would love it if…."
    "It's hard for me that… "
  - **Teach** "**soft/hard/soft**" **for bringing up hard things.** [Handout #6]
    96% of conversations end the way they begin (John Gottman).
    Soft/Hard/Soft operationalizes Gottman's "soft start up."

- **Help couples slow down so each "feels felt."**
- **Track negative cycles. Make the cycle the enemy, not the partner.**

III. INTRAPSYCHIC/INTERGENERATIONAL WORK

When information doesn't hold, skills don't stick, or reactivity remains high (or low), wounds may be driving reactivity.

- **"Bruise Theory of Feelings"**
  - "*If I hit my arm where the flesh is healthy, it hurts. If there is already a bruise there, it hurts a whole different way. …If it's a deep bruise …. fight, flight, freeze."*
- **Start asking early: "*What happens inside when…?"***
  - **Always begin by empathizing fully with the (very real) challenge:** "*Yes, it's so painful when you get stuck in that outsider position/you get stuck between the people you love."*
  - **Early on, move from empathic connection into *psychoeducation*:** "We know a lot about this. Want to hear more?" **OR to *interpersonal* connection**.
  - **When despite working on these two levels, you get that "looping, looping" feeling**, time to turn attention inside.
- **Before turning inside, first, always, validate the reality of the challenge:**
  - To a stepparent: "*Being left out over and over, up close and personal, is so hard. Nobody would like this*."
  - To a parent: "*It's so painful to feel torn between the people you love. Nobody would love this!"*
- **Then extend an invitation to turn inside:**
  - "***And**…something is frying your wires!" "**And**, something is taking your wise mind completely off-line. At just the moment when you need it most!"*
  - "*You will never like this. But healing these old bruises might help you bring up your best, not your worst, to these situations."*
  - Going to old painful bruises can be frightening and overwhelming. Patience and persistence are often required to get people interested.
- **Create a list of trauma-trained clinicians**
  - **Look for trauma training** (Internal Family Systems, EMDR, AEDP, sensorimotor).
  - **Look for therapists with specific training in stepfamily dynamics.**

    Unfortunately, they're almost impossible to find. You may need to ask them to read my book. I tell clients: Bring a copy of *Surviving and Thriving* and say, *"I have something that's helped me a lot. Would you be willing to read it?"*
  - **Multiple therapists working with stepfamily members need to collaborate closely.**

    - The more troubled a stepfamily is, the less likely that any member can hold the stories of the other members.

    - It is extremely easy for therapists to fall prey to "Compassion Traps": "buying" their own client's story and, inadvertently, adding to divisiveness.

    - Leave each other regular phone/email messages.

    - Arrange regular check-ins among therapists.

From *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy, Sixth Edition*. Edited by Jay L. Lebow and Douglas K. Snyder.
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CHAPTER 22

Therapy with Stepfamily Couples

Patricia L. Papernow

BACKGROUND

The intensity and complexity that couples in "blended families" bring to therapy can be daunting for even senior, experienced clinicians. Principles that may be applicable to first-time couples are often not only ineffective but also even destructive for couples in stepfamilies. In the United States, about 42% of all Americans have a close stepfamily relationship (Parker, 2011). Twenty-six percent of all marriages include stepchildren (Stykes & Guzzo, 2015). The number of families, including stepfamilies, headed by unmarried cohabiting couples has risen substantially throughout most of the world (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). Although divorce and marriage rates have evened out since the 1980s, they are rising steeply among older Americans (Brown & Lin, 2012) with a concomitant rise in later-life stepcouples (also see Chapter 21 on divorce, in this volume, by Lebow).

These numbers tell us that stepfamilies saturate the caseloads of all therapists. Nonetheless, few graduate programs in psychology, social work, psychiatry, or even postgraduate programs in couple and family therapy provide training in this area. This chapter describes the fundamental differences between stepfamilies and first-partner families. It maps out five major challenges that stepfamilies face. It provides evidence-based guidance for meeting each challenge on three different levels: psychoeducational, interpersonal, and intrapsychic/family of origin. Intersectionalities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ), African American and Latinx stepcouples, and later-life recouplers are explored. The chapter ends with a case study illustrating work on all three clinical levels.

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT STEPFAMILIES

What Makes Stepfamilies Different?

Stepfamilies must build their lives together on a fundamentally different foundation from first-partner families. Couples in first-time families usually enter childrearing having had time alone together to build some trust and to develop some shared understandings about "how we do things." In a first-partner family, children enter their parents' established relationship, usually one at a time. They also usually arrive hardwired for attachment to *both* of their parents, and vice versa. If things go well, attachment throughout the family becomes secure and strong and, as the years go by, thousands of details of daily living eventually no longer need discussion.

If things do not go well and the adult couple splits up, children in much of the developed world become part of two single-parent families. Ex-spouses often maintain some common ground. In addition, over time, each single-parent family also begins to develop its own culture. So, imagine that a year or two after his divorce, a dad named Mike begins dating a woman named Anna, and their relationship becomes serious. Like most new couples, Mike and Anna are very much in love. However, unlike a first-time family,

this family begins with children on board. Furthermore, in this new stepfamily, and often for many years to come, the powerful, historically rooted channels of attachment, and the shared understandings about "how we do things," lie between the parent, Mike, and his children (and, often, between Mike and his ex-wife)—not within the stepcouple or between the stepparent, Anna, and her stepchildren. A stepparent such as Anna enters the new couple relationship as an outsider to an already established system. This is what I call "stepfamily architecture."

The Five Challenges of Stepfamily Architecture

Stepfamily architecture creates five major challenges to intimate connection:

1. Stepparents are stuck outsiders in the family. Parents are stuck insiders.
2. Children in stepfamilies struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and change.
3. Parents and stepparents are often divided around parenting tasks.
4. Stepcouples must forge a new family culture while respecting already established cultures.
5. Ex-spouses, dead or alive, are a permanent part of the family.

At just the moment when a new stepcouple is looking for delicious connection, these challenges place parents and stepparents in fundamentally different positions that create constant attachment breaks. Furthermore, at a time when children especially need attuned adults, this family structure often puts both parents and stepparents at odds with kids.

The Many Forms of Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies come in many forms. Mike and Anna form what researchers call a "simple" stepfamily (as if any stepfamily is simple) in which only one adult brings children. In "complex" stepfamilies, both adults bring children. Children may be present in the household on a full-time or part-time basis, or neither. The new couple may, or may not, go on to have a child of their own. Stepcouples may be married. Increasingly, they are not. The partners may be just beginning to date, or in a long-established relationship. The adults may be straight or LGBTQ. Children may be young, under 18. Children of older recouplers, though, are adults, some with their own kids. All of these couples have one thing in common: At least one parent–child relationship precedes the adult couple relationship. All face most of the five challenges listed above.

THE PRACTICE OF COUPLE THERAPY WITH STEPFAMILIES

Three Levels of Help

A three-level framework helps to organize clinical work with stepfamilies: psychoeducational, interpersonal, and intrapsychic/family of origin.

The Psychoeducational Level

Systems therapists are usually taught to "attend to the process, not the content." Process is critical in this work. However, stepcouples are often lost in difficult, confusing territory, making one "wrong turn" after another. Providing an accurate map and clear "driving directions" is a crucial part of lowering distress and supporting well-being. On this level, the conversation takes place between the therapist and both members of the couple.

The Interpersonal Level

On this level, the partners are asked to turn to each other. The therapist teaches key interpersonal skills and works to identify and shape patterns of connection and disconnection. Stepfamily architecture pulls for disconnection. All stepcouples face similar challenges. However, those with better interpersonal skills meet their challenges more successfully (Golish, 2003). If you have good couple therapy training, this is the place to put it to work. My own work on this level integrates a number of different models: internal family systems, gestalt therapy, emotionally focused couple therapy (see Johnson, Wiebe, & Allan, Chapter 6, in this volume), and Gottman method couple therapy (see Gottman & Gottman, Chapter 16, also in this volume). When reactivity is high and negative cycles are dominating, therapists need to actively step in to shape experiences of caring connection. This chapter focuses on concrete tools that can be especially effective in helping stepcouples to connect across the constant experiential divides that stepfamily structure creates.

The Intrapsychic/Family-of-Origin Level

On the third, intrapsychic/family-of-origin level, we are asking clients to make a "U-turn" inside

(Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019) to heal family-of-origin wounds that may be making stepfamily challenges especially painful. Stepcoupling is a very bumpy road to intimacy. When stepfamily challenges hit old wounds, the flood of feelings can overwhelm the capacity to respond wisely. Healing those old bruises can lower the emotional temperature enough to enable stepfamily members to meet their challenges. I depathologize this level of work with what I call "Papernow's bruise theory of feelings": "If I bump my arm in a place where the flesh is healthy, it hurts. If there is already a bruise there, it hurts much more. If it is a deep bruise, just touching it can be blindingly painful."

I turn now to describing each of the five challenges and evidence-based guidance for clinical work on each of the three levels of intervention.

First Challenge: Insider–Outsider Relationships Are Stuck and Intense

Any therapist working with stepcouples has likely heard an exchange that sounded something like this:

ANNA (stepmother): Your kids don't talk to me. They don't even look at me.

MIKE (father): Half the time they don't look at me, either. Teenagers are like that!

ANNA: But, Mike, it's like I don't exist. When they're here, you don't talk to me either!

MIKE: What do you expect me to do? They're my kids!

ANNA: (*voice rising*) I'm your *wife*. Don't I *ever* come first?!

MIKE: (*slumping*) Anna, how many times have I said this! *Please* don't make me choose!

Understanding the Challenge

In a first-time family, insider–outsider positions in the adult couple shift back and forth. Sometimes one child is particularly close to Mom or to Dad. A few days or months later, that child suddenly wants only the other parent. Being the left-out parent can be painful. However, both adults in a first-time couple can draw on a history of parent–child and couple attachment that provides some refuge. Familiar habits of daily living also provide multiple pathways for togetherness. Furthermore, in first-time families, adult insider–outsider positions usually shift back and forth between parents.

In stepcouples, insider–outsider positions are stuck. Children want to bring their stories, their excitement, and their disappointments to their parents, not to their stepparents. The easy paths to joint action lie between parents and children, not in the newer steprelationships. As a consequence, every time a child enters the room or the conversation, the stepparent is very often a stuck outsider. Outsiderness leaves most humans feeling left out, uncared for, and invisible. In the dialogue we just heard, Anna says, "It's like I don't exist." This is the anguished cry of a stuck outsider. In contrast, often at the very same moment, the parent is in a stuck insider position. Insiders feel connected, cared about, and engaged, but torn between the people they love. Mike replies, "Please don't make me choose!"—the cry of a stuck insider. This insider–outsider challenge appears early and threads through all of the other four challenges. It often reappears throughout stepfamily life, albeit in softer form, especially at major transitions.

When both members of a stepcouple bring children to a stepfamily, one adult often occupies more of an outsider position than the other. One partner's child may be younger, in less of a loyalty bind, or more easygoing. The other partner's child may be older, in a tighter loyalty bind, more introverted, and/or more overwhelmed by the new family. One parent–child(ren) unit may accidentally dominate the emotional and physical space through sheer numbers, more time spent in the household, or a noisier/more aggressive style. As we will see, minority stigma can add an extra layer of outsiderness for stepparents.

Helping Stepcouples to Meet Their Insider–Outsider Challenges

Shared experiences make for easy empathy. For stepcouples, day in and day out, stepfamily structure places parents and stepparents on opposite sides of an experiential divide. For this reason, empathy and compassion are often in very short supply. Begin by connecting empathically with both sides of the divide. To the stepparent (with the parent listening), the therapist can say, "It is so hard to feel ignored, up close and personal, by a child in your own home." To the parent (with the stepparent listening), "It is so very painful that two of the people you love most in the world are having such a hard time together." Early on, the work moves from affective resonance into a piece of psychoeducation ("I think I can help you understand what's happening here") or interper-

sonal connection ("Anna, what's it like to hear about how torn Mike feels? Can you let him know what you're getting about how this feels for him?").

A note of caution: Stepfamily structure sets a kind of "compassion trap" for therapists. The heavy load of affect and the couple's seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints can easily draw well-meaning therapists toward one side of a stepcouple. Supporting already fragile stepfamily systems requires therapists to work very hard to hold on to their empathic understanding of all of the players in any dilemma. For the same reason, when more than one therapist is involved with a stepfamily, maintaining regular collegial connection is almost always essential to avoiding these compassion traps.

PSYCHOEDUCATION FOR INSIDER–OUTSIDER CHALLENGES

Several specific psychoeducational interventions can help stepcouples navigate insider–outsider challenges.

- *Name and normalize the pain.* Naming the pain and providing language for "stuck insiders and stuck outsiders" can be incredibly helpful: "It's not because you don't love each other. It's because you live in a structure that makes one of you an insider and one of you an outsider, over and over and over again!"

- *Support all subsystems with one-to-one time.* The phrase "blended family" implies that spending family time together would soften this challenge. Stepfamilies do need to do fun things together and create new rituals to build a new "we." However, insider–outsider positions will be most intense when everyone is together. One of the most helpful, and often least intuitive, strategies for stepcouples is to add lots of "compartmentalizing" to "blending." Carving out time alone for the adult stepcouple, for parent–child relationship(s), and for stepparent–stepchild relationship(s) meets the competing needs of all of the subsystems in a stepfamily.

- *Help stepcouples establish recurring daily (private) intimate routines.* Daily life in a stepfamily erodes couple connection, before it is deeply rooted. Creating recurring routines of connection helps build soothing, secure attachment: a "good morning" kiss before getting out of bed, a loving text during the day, a hug each evening before one or both retires. However, there is an important caveat for stepcouples: Do snuggle, kiss, and hug. However, in stepfamilies, it is important to do so out of children's eyesight. (More about this in the next challenge.)

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR THE INSIDER–OUTSIDER CHALLENGE

For a stepcouple, the binding force of mutual empathy cannot come from parents and stepparents feeling the same way. Rather, connection comes from the insider parent's compassion for the outsider's experience of feeling invisible, and the outsider stepparent's compassion for how torn the parent feels between the needs of the child(ren) and the needs of a new partner. On this level, stepcouples often need help learning how to calm down, hold on to their curiosity, and find some empathy rather than getting mired in conflict. Following are some concrete, teachable skills that I reach for often.

- *Self-regulation.* "Let's all take a breath." The constant attachment breaks in stepcouples easily trigger intense emotional arousal. Many clinicians see self-regulation as a key interpersonal skill. Taking a deep breath is the all-time best tool for this.

- *Tracking physiological arousal levels.* I might say, "Looks like things are getting tense. Did you notice?" If the answer is yes: "Great! What was the clue?" If the answer is no: "Lots of people have trouble with this. How about if I help you start to recognize the cues?"

- *Joining.* I use "joining" to interrupt the "but, but, but" escalation that leaves both members of a stepcouple feeling increasingly alone. I use it often in my office to slow things way down, to provide safety, and to shape an experience of connection and caring in the face of divisive stepfamily challenges. On the surface, joining is quite simple. I put up a "time-out" sign and say something like: "I think both of you are longing to be heard. And neither of you is feeling heard. Am I right?" (I have never had a couple say no to this!)

Continuing, I say: "I have something that I think will help. It's awkward and simple, although it can be surprisingly hard. I'll help. Want to try?" I then invite one person to say, "just a sentence or two—what you most want the other person to get." For example, Anna, the stepparent in the previous example, says, "I feel so invisible when your kids are here." Mike starts to react. I step in and ask him to take a breath: "I know you love Anna. See if you can find the place in your heart where you do understand

what she just said. Not what you agree with. Just what you do understand." Mike slows down just a bit. He looks at Anna. "You feel really left out." We wait for a nod from Anna that Mike got it.

Now Mike is invited to add just a sentence or two of his own—"the nub of what you want Anna to get." Mike looks up and says, "It's so hard, Anna. It's so hard because I feel so torn." Now it is Anna's turn. She starts with, "But . . . " I step in and say, "Take a breath, Anna. Find the place where you do understand what Mike just said."

I hold this structure with a firm, compassionate hand. We go back and forth, taking just one or two sentences at a time. I am not looking just for the words, but for a kinesthetic sense that each is beginning to "feel felt" (Siegel, 2012) by the other. "It's a bit like holding a cello note with your partner," I often say. Little by little, each person is helped to settle more deeply into their affective experience and to feel the soothing comfort of the other's understanding.

When this goes well, a resonating channel of understanding and caring begins to open. Now it is important to anchor the experience. I ask, "What's it like, Anna, to feel Mike really getting how lonely you feel when nobody in the family looks at you?" She replies, "Such a relief. So much closer." I say, "Can you tell him? Can you tell him what a difference it makes just to feel his understanding?"

And to Mike, I say, "What's it like, Mike, to hear that your compassion makes such a difference to Anna? Is that a surprise? Is it a surprise to hear that what Anna needs most from you is just your loving understanding?" I warn couples that they may not be able to do this at home yet. However, I want to plant seeds of confidence that this channel of connection between them is here and available.

FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN ISSUES IN THE INSIDER–OUTSIDER CHALLENGE

Nobody likes being left out, day in and day out, up close. However, for a stepparent who played second fiddle to a favored sibling, or who was left unprotected and alone in a scary family, the pain can be agonizing. Likewise, nobody likes feeling torn between loved ones. However, a parent who was an anxious kid in a high-conflict family, or who felt they "could never do it right," may find the stuck insider position especially anxiety-provoking.

It is critically important to begin, always, by legitimizing the very real affective impact of stepfamily structure. Staying "low and slow" (Johnson, 2012), I may say, "Being left out over and over and over is so hard. Nobody would like it. And something about this seems to be just frying your wires, right? Again, nobody would like this. But something is triggering you so much that your wise mind is going offline! Just when you need it most! Can I tell you about Papernow's bruise theory of feelings?"

The Second Challenge: Children Struggle with Losses, Loyalty Binds, and Change

Understanding the Challenge

"Seeking a therapist for a couple forming a blended family. Each has two adolescents. Kids are resistant, hostile, and splitting. Couple is very motivated as wedding is in three months."

This quotation, taken from a therapist listserv, sets the stage for the second challenge. During a major transition when children especially need attuned, empathic parents, parents in stepfamilies are often out of tune with kids. Stepcouples are excited and eager to move forward. But their children (of all ages) are often facing a complicated set of challenges. Struggling kids are often experienced by the adults as "resistant," "uncooperative," or "manipulative," and by therapists as "splitting." It is sometimes big work to help the adults slow down and empathize with kids.

LOSSES

Qualitative research about children in stepfamilies is saturated with themes of markedly decreased parental closeness and increased parent–child conflict (Cartwright, 2008). A new, loving adult relationship is deeply engrossing for adults. Add that outsider stepparents, especially very jealous ones, crave attention from the parent. Older recouplers are often stunned that their adult children feel just as "left" as their younger counterparts.

LOYALTY BINDS

Stepparents often create loyalty binds for children: "If I care about my stepmom [stepdad], I am disloyal to my mom [dad]." To some extent, these loyalty binds are normal; they appear even in highly collaborative ex-spouse relationships. However, when ex-spouses bad-mouth each other or bicker, they tighten these binds unbearably for children (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008).

THE PACE OF CHANGE

As the amount and velocity of change go up, children's well-being goes down (Jeynes, 2007). Adults are understandably eager to move forward. However, for many children, adjusting to a stepfamily is more difficult and requires more time than adjusting to parental divorce (Ahrons, 2007).

STEPSIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Stepsibling relationships are generally less close than biological sibling relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Be aware that children who spend less time in the household enter as outsiders to an up-and-running family. A child who is a more full-time resident is the stuck insider, asked to share space and attention with an intruder.

AGE, GENDER, AND TIME

Boys and children under 8 years of age seem to have an easier time in stepfamilies than do girls and older children. Early adolescent girls have the hardest time (Jensen & Howard, 2015). The early years are hardest in all stepfamilies. However, once things have stabilized, research finds that children in stepfamilies often do as well as children in first-time families (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Children's Struggles Can Intensify the Stepcouple's Insider–Outsider Divide

Struggling children are often not happy to have stepparents. They may treat them with disinterest or even outright rejection. Meanwhile, children continue to need their parents. As a result, at the same moment that parents feel cared about and engaged, stepparents often feel (and are) rejected and alone. Expressions of stepparent discomfort may be met by an oblivious and/or defensive parent.

Helping Stepcouples Work Together to Support Children in Stepfamilies

PSYCHOEDUCATION FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN

A variety of psychoeducational interventions can help stepcouples collaborate in supporting children:

- *Understand children's losses and loyalty binds*. The therapist can say, "It is so natural to want your children to be as happy as you are. It might be painful. But understanding where your kids are coming from will help you to help them."

- *Teach "both–and," not "either–or."* Even experienced clinicians still advise therapists and stepcouples to focus on the couple relationship: "If the couple is doing well, the children will do well." However, in stepfamilies, very close stepcouple relationships are linked to poorer child outcomes, particularly for preadolescent girls (Hetherington, 1993). Both the stepcouple and parent–child relationships need secure attachment and one-to-one time. Note that this also holds true for later-life recouplers.

- *Keep adult physical affection private*. New couples can be very physically affectionate. Parents may believe this gives their children "a better model of closeness." However, watching Mom or Dad snuggle with a new partner very often intensifies children's sense of loss and tightens their loyalty binds.

- *Attend to the particularly resistant child*. A "particularly resistant" child is likely a struggling child. Help the adults understand the story from the child's point of view. Ask whether that child is especially close to the parent in the other household. Children with more intense loyalty binds and/or more loss and change often need less family time and more time alone with their own parents. Because struggling children so often need a lot of distance from their stepparents, help parents understand that rejected stepparents need extra caring and attention from their partners.

- *"But she's your sister now."* Help stepcouples understand that closeness between stepsiblings is an understandable wish for the adults, but it is often not realistic for kids. "Imagine if you were expected to live with, much less love, someone you didn't choose and maybe don't even like!" Coach adults to expect civility, but not love. Do coach stepcouples to establish a few clear rules for safety and civility. This is not a time to "let the kids work it out." Sometimes providing more separation is the most useful intervention for stepsiblings. *The Stepfamily Handbook* (Bonnell & Papernow, 2019) provides practical, evidence-based guidance for stepcouples on these issues.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN

Use "joining" to help parents attune to kids. Parents in stepfamilies often need help providing the empathic, compassionate presence that is so regulating for distressed children. In a mother–son

session, 13-year-old Bobby says to his mother, Sarah, "I hate our new house." Sarah splutters, "But it's a nice house!" Bobby slumps in sulky silence. I put my hands up to call a time-out. I say to Sarah, "I know you want Bobby to feel better. I think I can help. Can you find the place inside where you *do* understand what Bobby said? Can you tell him what you *do* understand about what this is like for him?" (The final case study at the end of this chapter returns to this family.)

In parent–child work, joining goes primarily in one direction, *from* parents *to* children. Parent–child attachment is forever. Even older adolescents and adult children should not be asked to "return the favor" until parental empathy is firmly established.

FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN WORK FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN

In a stepfamily, parental attunement requires moving toward the child's pain. Parents (and stepparents) who had to exile their own vulnerability as children may find this particularly challenging. When parents get stuck trying to "fix" their kids, criticizing them, or withdrawing from them, it is time to begin turning attention inward. (The same is true when a stepparent remains highly reactive to a stepchild's distancing.) As Sarah tries to respond to her son's distress, it is clear that despite considerable work on the first two levels, she is continuing to jump into "fix-it" mode, triggering angry sulking from Bobby.

In a session alone with her, I say, "I know you want to help your son. And I know that you are getting that what he needs most is to feel like his mom gets it. But something keeps pulling you right into that 'fix-it' part, huh?" Again, it is important to first, always fully validate the pain created by stepfamily dynamics: "No parent wants to see their child hurting"; "And something about this seems especially painful for you"; "What happens inside you . . . ?"; "And then what happens? And then?"

The Third Challenge: Parenting Tasks Divide Parents and Stepparents

Understanding the Challenge

Bobby's most recent report card had been loaded with C's. His mother, Sarah, at the urging of her new husband, Ben, had agreed to a rule of "no recreational technology" until homework was completed. Ben had caught Bobby texting his friends. Furious, Ben had called him "lazy and irresponsible" and had taken his cell phone away for a month.

Sarah had returned from working out to find her son fuming and crying. She had comforted him and then stayed up late helping him complete his homework. She had also totally removed the consequence. A tense conversation followed between mom and stepdad:

BEN: Bobby broke the rule.

SARAH: He's 12. Twelve-year-olds break rules.

BEN: He needed to be punished.

SARAH: You went way overboard! That was an outrageous thing to do to an adolescent.

BEN: You cave the minute he gets upset! No wonder he's lazy and irresponsible!

SARAH: Why do you always overreact?

Sarah and Ben are struggling mightily with the third challenge. Parenting tasks are dividing them. The chart in Figure 22.1 describes parenting from "warm" to "cold," and from "firm" to "permissive," creating four parenting styles. The challenge is that stepparents and parents are pulled to opposite corners. A large body of research indicates that children in all family forms do best when parents practice *authoritative* parenting—the upper left corner of Figure 22.1 (Darling, 2013). However, stepparents, as we see with Ben, are pulled toward the upper right, *authoritarian* (harsh and firm) quadrant. Parents, as we see with Sarah, are pulled toward the lower left, *permissive* (loving but not firm enough) quadrant of parenting. What the parent sees as normal adolescent behavior, the stepparent sees as "lazy and irresponsible." What Ben sees as appropriate discipline, Sarah sees as way too harsh. Furthermore, parents' deeper emotional connection with their children makes compassion easier to access when their children misbehave. Add to this that struggling stepchildren can be distant and even rude to their stepparents, making distasteful behavior that much more irritating.

Children are often a primary area of disagreement in stepcouples. When this goes poorly, stepcouples get caught in escalating cycles of a "polarization polka," each pulling further into opposite corners. Meanwhile, neither harshness nor permissiveness meets children's need for authoritative parenting. When this goes well, stepparents help parents pull "up" toward firmer parenting, and parents help stepparents pull "over" toward more warmth and empathy. Stepcouples work together in a kind of "collaborative

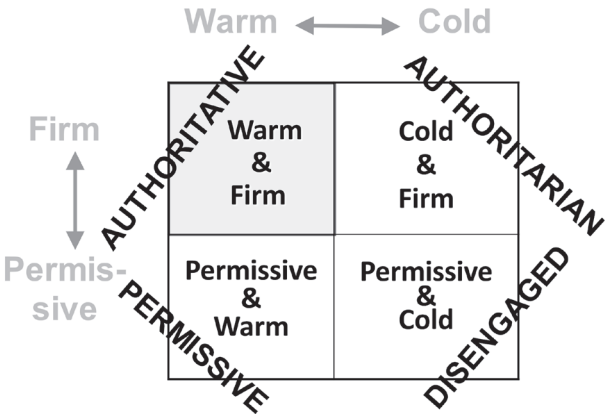


FIGURE 22.1. Parenting styles. From Bonnell and Papernow (2019, p. 191). Reprinted with permission.

cha-cha," talking constructively about their differences.

Best Practices for Meeting the Parenting Challenge

PSYCHOEDUCATION FOR THE PARENTING CHALLENGE

Forty years of research and clinical practice provide some clear guidelines for meeting stepcouple parenting challenges.

- *Use the parenting styles chart.* I keep the parenting styles chart visible in my office. I use it to begin teaching the research about "good parenting" and to help stepcouples visualize and track their polarizing cycles.

- *Coach parents to retain the disciplinary role.* The research is clear: Until or unless stepparents have established a caring, trusting relationship with a stepchild, parents must retain the active disciplinary role (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Even authoritative parenting by a stepparent, too early, can backfire. A helpful guideline for stepparents is "connection before correction."

- *Stepparents have input; parents have final say.* Stepparents do need to have a say in parenting decisions. Again, they can often help parents to firm up a bit. However, stepparents function best as "sounding boards, not saviors."

- *Authoritarian parenting by stepparents is toxic to stepparent–stepchild relationships.* This assertion is true even in many cultures that value authoritarian parenting (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Unfortunately, stepfamily structure pulls stepparents to this corner.

- *When the parent is absent.* When Sarah is leaving the house, she can say to her son, "Ben is in charge. The rule is no social media before homework. I expect a good report from Ben!" If Ben catches his stepson texting, he can say, calmly, "You know the rule! No texting before homework! I'd like to give your mom a good report." Ben then reports to Sarah. Sarah (not Ben) follows through with consequences.

- *Children in the same family may respond very differently.* Young children (age 8 and under) are often more available than older kids to a relationship with a new stepparent. Children with lots of losses and intense loyalty binds may need much more parent–child time and less "family" time.

- *Stepparenting over time.* Stepparents who have forged a caring, trusting relationship can move slowly into an authoritative parenting role. "Slowly" often means over at least a couple of years. In many healthy stepfamilies, especially those that began with older children, stepparents do not ever move into a disciplinary role.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR THE PARENTING CHALLENGE

Feelings run high on these parenting issues. The pull toward polarization can be powerful and extremely destructive. In addition to accurate information about what works, good interpersonal skills are key to engaging constructively over parenting differences. I use "joining" to help stepcouples slow down and begin to hear each other (see Insider–Outsider challenge). Follow-

ing are two more concrete tools that can be very helpful.

- *Help stepcouples to recognize their "polarization polkas."* The goal is to help couples begin to see their polarized cycles rather than each other, as the enemy.

- *Use "soft–hard–soft" to bring up difficult issues.* "Soft–hard–soft" is a simple, concrete tool that offers ways to bring up hard things while still pulling each other close. Couples who cannot do "joining" at home can do "soft–hard–soft." "Soft" can be an expression of caring, expressing understanding, owning your part, giving positive feedback, or acknowledging positive intentions. The directions are: "See if you can find a few softs. When you've found some, notice what happens in your heart." Then, "Try starting with a couple of softs." Then, "Now try saying the 'hard' thing, but with that same soft energy." Finally, "Now add another soft." I describe this to my clients as a kind of "reverse Oreo cookie." Sarah might have said to Ben, "I get that you were upset. But, Honey, I need to ask you not to yell at him or call him names. I get that I let him off a bit too easy." Ben might have initiated, saying, "You're right. Maybe a month was too long. I do think Bobby needs more follow-through on the rules. Can we talk about that together?" Either of these moves might have had a decidedly higher probability of beginning a collaborative conversation about setting realistic limits for Bobby.

FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN ISSUES TRIGGERED BY THE PARENTING CHALLENGE

When either stepparents or parents cannot seem to move out of a "wrong" corner of the parenting chart, I begin asking, "What was parenting like in the family you came from?" Sometimes just raising awareness of the past's contribution to the present enables parents or stepparents to shift into new behavior. When things stay "stuck," however, old family-of-origin wounds may need healing before further progress is possible.

Issues for Stepparents. No stepparent enjoys a stepchild's irritating behavior. However, stepparents who grew up with authoritarian parenting have a double pull toward that upper right corner: both stepfamily structure and deep-seated beliefs about "how parents act." These stepparents may also confuse the empathic warmth of authoritative parenting with "weakness." Stepparents who had to shut down their own need to protest in order to maintain safety with an authoritarian parent may find their stepchildren's "back talk" especially triggering.

Issues for Parents. Parents raised with either authoritarian or permissive parenting may confuse a stepparent's request for calm, caring firmness with "being mean." For a parent with a history of parental abuse, a stepparent's harsh parenting behavior may trigger reactive hysteria or numb collapse rather than the constructive engagement needed to protect children.

The Fourth Challenge: Stepcouples Must Build a New Family Culture While Respecting Already Established Cultures

Understanding the Challenge

Stepfamilies face constant differences over everything from the definition of an "expensive" pair of sneakers to the details of holiday rituals. What feels like "home" to one part of the family may range from uncomfortable to deeply upsetting to the other. Furthermore, an entire parent–child team often weighs in on one side of every difference. Some of these issues can be anticipated by talking about money, bedtimes, discipline, and other important issues before stepfamily members begin living together. However, a substantial portion of any group's most central operating assumptions lie out of awareness until someone violates an expectation. In a stepfamily, this often happens in the midst of ordinary family activities that everyone presumed would be uneventful or even comforting: cleaning up after dinner, decorating the Christmas tree, buying a gift. The spike of distress easily registers as an attachment break.

Meeting the Challenge

To meet this challenge, stepcouples must find a way to bring some measure of self-soothing and curiosity to these moments of culture shock, perhaps even some humor. Stepcouples are often advised to immediately create a list of familywide shared rules, and parents are urged to "back up" stepparents. Although this makes some logical sense, it creates too much change too fast for kids, and it prematurely pulls stepparents into a disciplinary role.

PSYCHOEDUCATION FOR DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES

The following guidelines can help stepcouples work toward building a new family culture.

• *Normalize the intensity.* Gentle empathic humor can be very helpful: "Amazing, isn't it, that you are suddenly in World War III over what to do with wet towels!"

• *Change the metaphor.* Becoming a stepfamily is less like blending blueberries and strawberries into a smoothie, and more like bringing together a Japanese family with an Italian family. It will take time to learn about each other! Requiring everyone to eat pasta and use chopsticks will only make misery.

• *Expect surprises.* We can help stepfamilies expect a lot of "learning by goofing," which can help stepfamily members to take a breath and respond with, "Oops! Another one. Help me understand what happened here!"

• *Maintain familiar routines and objects that support children's comfort and security.* It is especially important to maintain the structure of bedtimes, mealtimes, morning routines, and so on. This is not, in fact, a good time for brand-new everything. When possible, encourage parents to hold on to some familiar things such as furniture and pictures.

• *Make changes a step at a time.* Successful stepcouples bear the discomfort of their differences while they build enough mutual understanding to forge resolutions that best meet the needs of all concerned. In double families, making gradual changes may mean having two sets of rules for a while. Giving children input can substantially increase their buy-in. "Let's all think about a couple of rules that would make this family better for everyone." Start with a few shared rules that ensure safety and civility.

• *Equalize the amount of change.* Knocking first or asking before borrowing may be second nature to Eric but brand new to his stepbrother Tommy. For Tommy this will require much more effort and lots of calm reminding. When possible, equalize demands for change.

• *Honor differences.* Just as many of the differences between a group of Japanese and a group of Italians will remain in place, healthy thriving stepfamilies often keep many of their differences, right alongside their new shared rituals and habits and values.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR LIVING WELL WITH DIFFERENCES

Following are a few concrete tools that help stepcouples to meet this challenge.

• *Take a breath and track arousal levels.* (See Insider–Outsider challenge.)

• *Make requests, not criticisms.* I find that sentence stems can be very helpful: "I'd love it if you'd . . . [ask your kids to wash the dishes/speak more kindly to my son, etc.]" or "Would you be willing to . . . [talk about some firmer limits for Bobby]?"

• *Use "soft–hard–soft."* For example: "I know your kids are used to leaving their dishes in the sink. It's driving me nuts. Can we work on this together?" not "Your kids are slobs."

• *Help stepcouples lead with curiosity.* For example: "Tell me more about how you guys think about [doors, noise/presents/the cost of a pair of sneakers, etc.]" not "How *could* you . . . !"

FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN ISSUES IN DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES

When expectations are broken, and intimate others "don't get it," the sense of alarm and aloneness can be intense. Rude surprises are much more provocative for those who grew up in an abusive or chaotic family, where unpredictability was terrifying. Likewise, constant glitches are much more triggering for those with a history of insecure attachment. If reactivity persists, healing old bruises may free resources to meet the challenge.

The Fifth Challenge: Ex-Spouses Are Part of the Family

Understanding the Challenge

Children in stepfamilies almost always have another parent outside of the family—dead or alive, present or absent—who can affect everything from the child's openness to their stepparent, to family finances, to holiday planning. Several decades of family scholarship have unequivocally established the deleterious effects of conflict on children (Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, & Harold, 2014). The primary determinant of poor outcomes for children is not family structure (divorce, single-parent families, or stepfamilies). It is family process: exposure to conflict, along with compromised parenting (Dunn, 2002). In fact, young adult and adult children with long-divorced, low-conflict parents exhibit significantly better well-being than those (especially women) of never-divorced, high-conflict parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Even moderate tension in nonclinical, never-divorced families negatively impacts chil-

dren's sleep, which in turn compromises their academic achievement, attention, and immune systems (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Cummings, & Keller, 2007).

Meeting the Challenge of Co-Parenting across Households

PSYCHOEDUCATION FOR THE CO-PARENTING CHALLENGE

The following guidelines can facilitate better co-parenting across households:

- *Collaborative, low-conflict ex-spouse relationships are best for children.* Collaborative divorced parents work together to meet children's needs. In my experience, putting children's needs ahead of ex-spouse conflict is just beginning to take root in the United States.
- *Low-conflict "parallel parenting."* Low-conflict "parallel parenting" is next best for children and is more common. It works well enough for children, especially when one or both parents provide authoritative parenting (White & Gilbreth, 2001) and neither parent exerts coercive control over the other. In my experience, children can manage very different rules and routines in their two houses if parents are respectful: "In Mom's house, you can have sugar cereal for breakfast. In Dad's house, we eat whole-grain cereal. When you grow up, you can decide which you think is best."
- *Teach the research.* Remind parents that children fare best when they have positive, close relationships with both sets of parents and stepparents (King, 2009; White & Gilbreth, 2001).
- *Promote predictable and consistent parenting plans.* Such plans are linked to better outcomes for children. For school-age children, consistency in weekday scheduling is especially important. Weekends are less critical (Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004).
- *Nonresidential father–child relationships.* These relationships are vulnerable in divorce and recoupling, particularly father–daughter relationships (King, 2009). Fathers often need extra support to keep reaching out. Stepparents can be an important source of support and encouragement: "How about taking your daughter out to lunch?" or "If she won't answer a phone call, then text her!"
- *Attachment is hardwired.* Adults are often eager to be free of abusive or inadequate ex-partners. Children need adults to understand that their relief at less contact with that parent is very often mixed with grief and confusion.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS TO MEET THE EX-SPOUSE CHALLENGE

The toxic impact of parental conflict on children is clearly established. Clinicians need to monitor, educate parents about, and intervene in postdivorce conflict with the same attention that physicians pay to managing adult blood pressure. Therapists must proactively help ex-spouses to use their very best skills with each other, in situations that often pull for their worst. Parents (and stepparents) often need some coaching to meet this challenge. I teach my clients to use "joining" ("Stop, take a breath, and say what you *do* understand first") and "soft–hard–soft" with ex-spouses. I also help my clients learn to write short, factual, nontriggering responses to provocative communication (Eddy, Burns, & Chafin [2014] and Wittman [2001] are excellent resources).

FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN ISSUES IN EX-SPOUSE RELATIONSHIPS

Even very senior couple therapists are vulnerable to allying against the "bad behavior" of an ex-spouse, without looking at the contribution of their own client's reactivity. Very volatile or "irresponsible" ex-spouses require especially wise, strategic responses. However, a dad with his own childhood history of abandonment or abuse may be so triggered by his ex-wife's poor parenting that he either flails helplessly at her or freezes. Therapists can begin asking right away, "What happens inside when . . . ?" Provide psychoeducation about protecting children from conflict and teach skills for handling a high-conflict ex-spouse (Eddy, 2014; Wittman, 2001). If reactivity persists, healing old wounds can increase capacity for effective engagement.

ADDITIONAL GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND TECHNICAL ASPECTS

Becoming a Stepfamily Is a Process, Not an Event

An early task is helping stepcouples absorb that becoming a stepfamily takes time, lots of it. Even stepfamilies that move most quickly may take a couple of years to feel some stability and ease. A substantial sense of "we-ness" usually requires another couple of years. Faster families tend to begin with more realistic expectations, get some

good evidence-based guidance early on, and/or learn quickly from experience. Faster families also tend to bring better interpersonal skills. They bring fewer family-of-origin bruises or they fully commit themselves to their own healing. On the other end of the spectrum are stepcouples with entrenched fantasies of "blending," very poor interpersonal skills, and/or deep, old bruises triggered by stepfamily challenges. An extremely jealous, "bad-mouthing" ex-spouse can make moving toward stepparents almost impossible for children.

Work in Subsystems

This chapter focuses on therapy with stepcouples. However, stepcouples are embedded in complex interlocking systems with competing attachment needs that make meeting with a whole stepfamily more destructive than helpful. It is critical for therapists to keep the whole system in their minds and hearts, but to work in subsystems (Browning & Artfelt, 2012). Often the focus is couples work in parallel with parent–child work (and sometimes work with siblings or stepsibs). Once a compassionate secure connection is more established in these two systems, work with the whole family is more possible. Early work with the stepparent–stepchild relationship focuses on low-key friendship building. I generally do not see stepparents and stepchildren together until stepparents can fully hear their stepchildren's pain.

Who you see in therapy depends somewhat on your particular skill set. My own training is in both systems and individual trauma work. As we move into the intrapsychic level, I may work individually with one member of the couple in front of the other, carefully contracting for safety both in my office and after the couple leaves the session. If conflict is high, and safety is low in the couple, I am comfortable interspersing individual sessions with couple work. Other clinicians may prefer to refer for individual therapy. If conflict is high, meeting with ex-spouses is also key. (If this is not your forte, develop a trusted cadre of mediators and postdivorce co-parenting coaches.)

A caveat: The intensity and pain in stepfamilies pull therapists to ally with their own client(s). Again, if more than one therapist is involved, maintaining regular collegial contact is critical.

Getting Started with Stepcouples

I begin by asking each member of a stepcouple, "What would you each like help with? Is there anything you *don't* want to have happen here?" The answers to these questions help to focus our work. They also provide a contract for intervention, enabling me to say, "I'm going to step in here! You both said you didn't want to fight. Let's take a breath and try something different."

Even more than most, stepcouples arrive for couple therapy feeling inadequate, overwhelmed, frightened, and embarrassed. I look for every bit of evidence about what a stepcouple is doing well, even if it is, "I can see you guys really care about each other."

Assessment in Stepcouple Work

With Which Challenges Is This Couple Struggling?

Begin where the couple is, with the challenge that is giving them the most trouble. When in doubt, the insider–outsider challenge is often the first that needs to be addressed. It is a core challenge for stepcouples. It comes early, stays late, and threads its way through the other challenges. Challenges related to parenting children often come in a close second. When adults are your clients, look for children's challenges hidden in complaints about "resistant" or "manipulative" stepchildren.

When a child is the referred client, couples work is often key to helping kids. Look for losses (is there enough parent–child alone time), help adults acknowledge and, if possible, loosen loyalty binds. When a child is struggling, stepcouples often need to slow the pace of change, increase parent–child one-to-one time, decrease demands to "be part of the family," and move stepparents out of discipline.

Construct a Genogram

I begin constructing a genogram with my first contact and fill it in as we go, noting which relationships are going well and where the difficulties lie. In early sessions, I focus on the present: "Who is in your family?" "Who is with you when . . . ?" I ask for a few descriptive words about each child. I inquire about ex-spouses and listen carefully for levels of ex-spouse conflict and collaboration. In the second or third session, I may begin filling in the past: "Who was in the family you came from?" I ask about siblings, family interaction, and attachment: "Who did you go to if you were sad or scared?" I store this information until intrapsychic work is appropriate. Over time, I begin exploring intergenerational patterns and burdens.

Begin with Psychoeducation and Interpersonal Skills

Again, naming painful insider–outsider positions, encouraging one-to-one time, deepening empathic attunement with kids, and easing stepparents out of discipline are often early and vital pieces of psychoeducation.

Learning that you've been "doing it wrong" is always potentially shaming. Throughout clinical work with stepcouples, I discipline myself to begin any "correction" with an empathic "joining" statement about what I do understand. For instance, I may say to a stepparent like Ben, "It makes total sense that, as an adult, you would expect to be a disciplinarian." When I offer a new piece of psychoeducation, I always ask, "What's this like to hear from me?" If you get "resistance," slow down. Take a breath. The "language of wishing" can help access the grief that often lies under apparent resistance: "You so wish you could just step in and set this kid right."

On the interpersonal level, can this couple talk about their struggles with kindness and caring? How do they handle differences—with respect and curiosity, or with criticism and withdrawal? Can they soothe themselves and reach for each other when there are glitches?

I do begin asking right away, "What happens inside when [your husband focuses entirely on his son/your wife tells you that she feels abandoned, etc.]?" This question lays the groundwork for the fact that external events evoke internal responses that can play a big part in how things unfold. Early on, however, I make an empathic connection, then move into one of the first two levels—providing psychoeducation or fostering interpersonal connections ("Yes, living with a child who doesn't speak to you can be so painful! It turns out that we know something about what's happening here. Want to hear?" or "Can I help you talk about this together in a way that pulls you closer to each other?").

When to Begin Turning Inside

The intensity of stepcouple distress can lead individually trained therapists to begin their work on this level. However, beginning here is disrespectful of the fact that daily living in a stepfamily can make the sanest of us look and feel crazy. I always start with the first two levels. But, if information doesn't stick and skills don't hold, it is time to turn attention from very real outside events to the old wounds they may be activating. The clue to shift levels is often a sense of "looping, looping, looping" or "we've been over this before."

I have been storing away clues to family-of-origin dynamics that may be in play. I may have noted on my genogram that a parent with a big "fix-it" part had a very depressed mother, or that a stepparent with big feelings about their outsider status had an older brother who got all the attention. When reactivity continues to be high (or low) despite psychoeducation and building connection, I do always begin by fully validating stepfamily dynamics ("It is so painful when people up close turn away from you"). Now I follow with "And it looks like something is frying your wires!" or "Can I tell you about 'Papernow's bruise theory of feelings'"?

My toughest cases involve a stepmother with deep family-of-origin wounds about being left unprotected or invisible, partnered with a parent who grew up subjected to intense criticism and/or abject alone-ness. Stepfamily challenges unleash a torrent of agonized rage from the stepmother, evoking terrified withdrawal in her partner. These couples get stuck in intense cycles of Stepmom's pained rage and Dad's overwhelmed withdrawal. Forward movement can often require several years of both intensive couple work and significant individual trauma work.

Intensity and Frequency of Treatment

Work with stepcouples varies tremendously. A few psychoeducational meetings that provide a map and some driving directions enable some stepcouples to move forward. As one stepdad said to me, "I just needed a guide in the wilderness." For other couples, the work can extend over several years, moving among all three levels.

Therapy may involve weekly meetings with one or both members of the couple, as well as collateral work with children, ex-spouses, and in-laws. One person may choose to do an extended piece of individual work, with or without the other partner. We may go for periods of time where we meet less often or not at all, then convene again when external or internal events reintensify the challenges. Each cycle of work may last a few sessions, a few months, or several years.

INTERSECTIONALITIES WITH STEPFAMILY CHALLENGES

Although the research still focuses on Anglo-American stepfamilies headed by mixed-gender married couples with children under 18, fami-

lies all over the world, including stepfamilies, are increasingly diverse and complex (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). Stepfamily structure creates the five challenges described here across populations. However, intersectionalities with ethnicity, cultural values, legal systems, life stage, and minority status can soften or intensify those challenges. This section describes what we know about the challenges for LGBTQ stepcouples, African American and Latinx stepfamilies, and later-life recouplers.

LGBTQ Stepcouples

Because the average age of coming out has dropped from 37 to 17 in the last four decades (Family Equality Council, 2019), the percentage of LGBTQ couples in first-partner families will increase in the next few years. Currently, however, although it is rarely acknowledged, the majority of LGBTQ-headed families are stepfamilies. LGBTQ stepcouples face challenges very similar to those of their mixed-gender counterparts, with some extra themes and variations, as well as some special strengths that may come from living outside heteronormativity. It is stigma, not sexual preference or gender identity, that intensifies some of the challenges.

Dashed expectations of "blending" and the experience of insiderness and outsiderness in LGBTQ stepcouples echo those in other stepcouples, sometimes with extra layers. A trans stepmom said to me, "There is already so much about how 'different' we are. I just want us to be a family. Like any other family." Differences in "outness" can intensify outsiderness for stepparents. Jenny, mom of two children from a lesbian relationship, came out as an adolescent. She now has a strong gay-affirming network of family, friends, and coworkers. Her partner, Dora, came out only recently. Dora, mom of a son, remains closeted at work and with most of her very conservative family, leaving her with nobody to reach for when Jenny turns to her kids.

Children in stepfamilies headed by LGBTQ stepcouples speak about the same losses and loyalty binds that other kids do. Currently, children of LGBTQ stepcouples often begin their lives in a family headed by a mixed-gender couple. However, research suggests that adjustment to a conflicted divorce and/or to a stepfamily is actually more challenging than coming to terms with changes in their parents' sexual preference or gender (Titlestad & Pooley, 2014). Most challenging for kids is living in a homophobic heterosexist culture that exposes them to bullying (van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, van Rooij, & Hermanns, 2012), homophobic slurs, and heterosexist school and church teachings (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Despite the burden of stigma, many child outcomes for children in gay- and lesbian-headed stepfamilies are slightly better than those headed by mixed-gender stepcouples (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013).

Parenting challenges in LGBTQ stepcouples are also very familiar: Stepparents want more firmness and control, and they may occasionally step in too harshly. Parents want more care and acceptance for their children, and they may struggle with limit setting. However, gay and lesbian stepcouples appear less likely to have stepparents move prematurely into a disciplinary role (van Eeden-Moorefield, 2013), and children of gay male stepcouples also appear to complain less often about intrusive parenting by their stepfathers (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). Lesbian stepcouples also expose children to lower levels of conflict (van Eeden-Moorefield, 2013), which we know is key to well-being.

In terms of ex-spouse challenges, divorce for LGBTQ parents remains a legal minefield, which in turn impacts stepfamily well-being. LGBTQ parents, especially trans parents, still lose their children to straight parents. Property division for the lower-earning partner in a decades-long LGBTQ relationship may be determined by "marriage length," even though gay marriage was only legalized in 2015 (Kim & Stein, 2018).

Work with LGBTQ stepcouples proceeds as it does with all other stepcouples, with some critical additions (Papernow, 2021). Differences in "outness" and living in the context of stigma often need to be part of the conversation. Engage LGBTQ stepcouples about, and give kids a say in, how the family makes decisions about openness—when and how much to include stepparents in school and athletic events and children's birthday parties, how much "outness" to display to children's friends. LGBTQ stepfamilies often experience less family support than their heterosexual counterparts. Developing a "chosen family" is important to both adults and kids. With the current threats to the newly won protection of LGBTQ marriage, encouraging stepcouples to execute wills, health care proxies, and so forth, is important to support family health and stability.

When humiliation and rejection have been part of growing up, stepchildren's rebuffs may be especially painful for stepparents. Likewise, a family history of parental rejection may unbearably amplify the anxiety of the stuck insider position. Concurrent trauma treatment can support

stepfamily development. When shame is so much part of the story, it is especially critical to begin any invitation to turn inside by acknowledging and validating the very real power of stepfamily dynamics: "Nobody would like this one bit. And it looks like your wise mind is going offline! How about we pay attention to what happens inside when . . . ?"

African American Stepfamilies

The percentage of stepfamilies among African Americans is considerably higher than in other racial groups. However, African American cultural values offer some special strengths for stepfamilies. African American adolescent stepchildren in several large samples show significantly more positive outcomes than European American stepchildren do (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). African American traditions of "child keeping" and "informal adoption" provide support for child-caring across family lines (Stewart, 2007), which may ease ex-spouse tension and contribute to better outcomes. This value on cross-household parenting may also be linked to findings of strong co-parenting relationships, even among some never-married, never-cohabiting parents (McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012). African American stepfathers are more likely than their Anglo counterparts to support their partner's parenting rather than stepping into a disciplinary role (Stewart, 2007). Most striking, across a variety of measures, African American nonresidential fathers, both formerly married and never married, maintain much higher levels of ongoing involvement with their children than either Anglo American or Latino dads do (Stykes, 2012).

African American stepcouples are more likely to be unmarried and cohabiting, often with children from multiple partners. Cohabiting couples sometimes establish long-term relationships and stable families. However, these unmarried parents are much more likely to form "fragile families" that are generally younger, experience more household transitions, and tend to come from populations that experience more poverty, less education, and higher rates of depression and anxiety than do married co-parents (McHale et al., 2012).

All of these realities mean that effective clinical work with stepcouples in African American stepfamilies sometimes involves an extended network of co-parenting adults. This was the case for Darnell's family. Eight-year-old Darnell was referred to a local clinic for fighting and skipping school. Darnell's mom and dad had parted when he was 5. Darnell lived mostly with his mother, Nia (24); her boyfriend, Tyrone (26); their new baby; and occasionally Tyrone's two children. Darnell also spent time with his dad, his grandmother, and several neighbors.

The caseworker began by convening "Darnell's team," including Darnell's grandmother, two of the neighbors, his father, his mother, Tyrone, and Darnell. The caseworker helped the team to express their concern for Darnell, who in turn divulged that he hated sharing his mom with Tyrone and his children. A neighbor offered to care for Nia's baby to free up some regular mother–son playtime. Concurrently, the clinician met with the mom and her son, focusing on strengthening their relationship. He also worked to stabilize Nia and Tyrone's relationship, honing their communication skills and helping them work together to be better parents to their own children. He applauded Tyrone's support of Nia's primary disciplinary role with Darnell. The caseworker also met with Darnell's parents together, actively appreciating their very cooperative co-parenting, and working on Mom's limit-setting skills with Darnell.

Latinx Stepfamilies

The Latinx community comprises a diverse group from about 23 different countries. Nonetheless, Latinx stepfamilies share some commonalities that shape stepfamily processes and inform clinical work. Latinx stepcouples are more likely to be poor and to be cohabiting and unmarried (Donahue, Garfinkel, Haskins, McLanahan, & Mincy, 2010), with the vulnerabilities discussed earlier for African American fragile families.

Latino nonresidential fathers are more likely to be "exiled" from the new stepfamily, leaving children with unvoiced losses. Although Latinx adults are more likely to treat stepfathers as fathers, researchers found that, when alone, children spoke longingly about their dads (Adler-Baeder & Schramm, 2006). For undocumented stepfathers, the current U.S. political climate can painfully intensify the isolation of their outsider position.

Clashes between American and Latinx value systems may interact with parenting challenges: A Latino stepfather may be especially alarmed by his Americanized adolescent stepchildren's lack of *respeto*, while his Americanized stepchildren and their second- or third-generation mom see a certain amount of back talk as "normal."

There is no word for "stepfamily" in the Spanish language. Latinx stepfamilies often identify

as "regular families" (Adler-Baeder & Schramm, 2006), with stepparents listed as parents on school records. Thus, "strengthening the family" is likely to be more engaging than "learning about being a stepfamily."

Latinx cultures value close family ties and cooperation over individualism (Falicov, 2013). The Western clinical bias toward expressing individual needs ("I feel," "I want") runs counter to these values. Therapy is framed in the service of "making the family closer" rather than of enhancing individual well-being. Work with Latinx stepcouples may sometimes need to proceed without using the words "stepfamily" or "stepparent": To a stepfather who left his parents and siblings behind in Guatemala, a social worker talks about being a "double outsider." She describes his wife, a third-generation Latina surrounded by her family, as "an insider several times over." Recommending one-to-one time, a guidance counselor speaks in the third person, using no "step" words: "When there are lots of changes in a family, it makes the family stronger when kids have time alone with their moms and the new people have time alone together to get to know each other."

Older Recouplers

Although divorce rates in the United States are at a 40-year low, rates for those over age 55 doubled between 1990 and 2010 (Brown & Lin, 2012), with a concomitant rise in older recouplers. Add to this that Americans age 65 and older are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Note that "gray recouplers" may not be living together. They are three times more likely to be "living apart together" (LAT) in a committed relationship (de Jong Giervald, 2004). (LAT can also be a good solution for younger stepcouples with especially vulnerable children.) "Gray recouplers" now form a substantial portion of stepfamily referrals.

Later-life recouplers find themselves facing challenges similar to those of their younger counterparts, with some additions due to the later life stage. Like younger stepcouples, gray recouplers often need help grieving their fantasies of "blending." A dad loves having his adult kids and grandkids over. His new partner finds their presence intrusive and burdensome. Especially surprising to older recouplers, adult children, just like their younger counterparts, often experience new partners as intruders. Sixty-three-year-old Sheila happily brings her new love to her son's 40th birthday party. She is stunned at her son's upset. "Why aren't they happy for me?" is a frequent refrain. "I've got an answer for you," I respond. "Want to hear?"

Father–daughter relationships are often a focus of difficulty (Papernow, 2018). I have had dozens of consultations in which an older dad's expectation that his adult daughter would embrace his new relationship unleashed years of the daughter's unvoiced pain and abandonment. In these families, reparative father–daughter work must precede any openness to Dad's new relationship. The stepcouple often needs help processing this together. The new partner often needs help focusing on reaching out to her sweetie ("I'd like a hug") rather than insisting, "Dad, make your daughter accept me." Dad may need help setting boundaries: "I can hold you (new partner) and comfort you. I cannot, and will not, cut off my daughter to prove my love for you."

That said, new partners can also have profoundly transformative effects on strained father adult–child relationships: A previously distant, irascible dad finds an engaging, warm new partner who encourages him to reach out more persistently to his children and grandchildren, and coaches him to be less critical and controlling.

Parenting challenges also abound in these later-life recouplers. Parenting differences often focus on "appropriate" levels of financial, physical, and emotional support for adult children. Parents want to help their kids; stepparents see this as "infantilizing" or "enabling." Add to this that young adults are much more likely to be living at home than they were a few decades ago, due in part to crushing student debt and the higher costs of housing (Payne, 2011). In regard to cultural challenges, each member of an older stepcouple brings daily habits ingrained over many decades. Celebratory rituals and family values are embedded in complex systems of adult children, grandchildren, and friendships, intertwined with a decades-long marriage.

An "easy wrong turn": Family therapists all too often make the mistake of privileging the older stepcouple's relationship as more "primary" than the parent–child relationship: "Your daughter needs to get that this new couple is the reality now." However, "reality" includes both decades-long parent–child relationships and the new stepcouple relationship. Like their younger counterparts, therapists can often help older stepcouples carve out one-to-one time that supports all relationships and they can urge parents to remain in charge of setting limits with their own children.

Older stepfamilies are more likely than first-time families to need help negotiating how, where, and by whom an ill partner will be cared for and estate division among children of parents and stepparents (Zietlow & Cahn, 2017). When one member of a stepcouple dies, lack of shared history can trigger highly emotional flare-ups between adult stepsiblings over seemingly "small items": "What! You gave away that plate! That's the one Mom gave me when I graduated." As with younger stepfamilies, begin by meeting in subsystems rather than with the whole family.

EMPIRICAL SUPPORT

The research on stepfamilies has expanded exponentially over the last four decades. The field began with "deficit comparison" (Ganong & Coleman, 2017) studies that compared outcomes for children in stepfamilies to children in first-time families. It has moved to more strengths-based explorations of processes within stepfamilies that differentiate healthy stepfamilies from struggling stepfamilies, using increasingly sophisticated qualitative (e.g., Ganong & Coleman's work, and the work of Dawn Braithwaite and her colleagues [2008]) and quantitative (e.g., Todd Jensen's work, including Jensen & Howard, 2015) methodologies.

In terms of intervention, Smart Steps is an evidence-based, six-session, extremely well-designed group psychoeducation and skills-building program targeted specifically for stepfamilies (see "Suggestions for Further Study"). The effectiveness of Smart Steps has been empirically validated with couples of varied distress levels, diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and different ethnicities.

However, empirical exploration of therapy with couples in stepfamilies has remained almost nonexistent. In one 1996 study, Pasley, Rhoden, Visher, and Visher found, not surprisingly, that stepcouples most needed help with parenting/stepparenting issues and were most frustrated when therapists lacked sufficient stepfamily training. No other studies have looked at process or outcomes of therapy with stepcouples. More broadly, only two clinical books have been published in the past three decades about working with stepfamily couples (Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 2013). Even more concerning, clinical training in effective therapy with these couples remains virtually nonexistent.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

For some stepcouples, a few sessions of psychoeducation, combined with a bit of coaching around interpersonal skills, puts them on track to meeting their challenges. Ben and Sarah, who have appeared several times in this chapter, were on the other end of the spectrum. They needed considerable help on all three levels, stretching over several years.

Ben was the divorced father of 4-year-old Judy and 6-year-old Jimmy. Sarah was the widowed mother of 13-year-old Bobby. The couple had been coworkers before Sarah's husband had died of COVID-19, and Ben had been a "huge comfort" to Sarah. The relationship had quickly deepened. They had moved in together, excited to combine their resources in a new family. Ben's children were doing well.

"The problem is Bobby," Ben said, launching into a bitter recitation of his stepson's "inexcusable" behavior. "He's rude and manipulative. He barely says hello to my kids. He locks himself in his room. He ignores even my most basic request to set the table." Sarah sat silent and tight-lipped. "He has been through a lot," she offered weakly. Ben replied tersely, "We've given him a beautiful new family. Besides, my kids are okay. What's his problem?"

When I asked for more background, it became clear that, within a short time, Bobby had lost every secure attachment in his life. He had lost his father. Then soon afterward he had lost his mother to an intense new love. He had started in a new school with no friends and much tougher academic standards. Two much younger stepsiblings had joined the family and now competed for attention.

As Bobby's distress became palpable to me, I could feel my frustration rising. Especially with couples in this much trouble, a strong alliance is critical. I took a breath, looking for a way to open my heart to Ben and Sarah. Seeing the anguish in both of them gave me a way in: "You both were so wishing to give all of you a good new start." They nodded. "This is so not what you had hoped for!" We lingered there with their grief and disappointment. As they each voiced their pain, I began helping them reach out to each other: "Okay to share that with Ben [Sarah]?"

Finally, I said, "I think I can help. But it might not be what you thought!" They looked wary but interested. I reassured them that although what I had to say might be hard to hear, understanding more about Bobby's experience would help them

to right their ship. Tenderly and slowly, reminding myself to stay "soft and simple" (Johnson, 2012), I began walking with them through the year's events from Bobby's point of view. I layered each new piece of information about Bobby with my full understanding of Ben and Sarah's excitement about having found each other and their heartfelt wish to do the best for all the kids. Despite my care in delivering this news, Sarah collapsed into a sinkhole of guilt, sobbing, "What have I done to my boy?" Ben looked grim. But he offered, "This is so much harder than we thought it would be." I said softly, "I know. You have been trying to manage all this without a map. You're both feeling so alone!"

I took another step: "There is a way through, and there really are things that work! I'm not going to say it will be easy, and it might not be what you expected. But we can do this together." Again, good psychoeducation and a few basic interpersonal skills are sufficient to turn some stepcouples around within a few sessions. Ben and Sarah were not that couple. Our work extended over several years, moving among all three levels.

We began by putting some emergency measures in place: We built in more one-to-one time throughout the family, with special attention to increasing reliable alone time for Sarah and her son and making some intimate alone time for Ben and Sarah. Early sessions focused on psychoeducation and interpersonal connection, beginning with helping Ben and Sarah take in Bobby's experience of loss.

Early on, we turned to moving Ben out of his disciplinary role. I pulled out the Parenting Styles chart. We talked about "authoritative" parenting, identifying Ben's authoritarian and Sarah's permissive parenting styles. Like many stepfamilies in which a parent has died, this couple needed help grasping that Ben could not replace Bobby's father. In fact, Bobby needed the adults to focus on helping him grieve his father. He also needed both his stepfather and his mother to help keep his father in the family—talking about him, remembering special moments, noticing his absence at birthdays and holidays, perhaps finding a special place for a photo.

On the second, interpersonal level, as we saw earlier in this chapter, Ben and Sarah were using name-calling, dismissiveness, and defensiveness to engage over highly sensitive issues. I began helping them tap into their mutual vulnerability and their need for each other. We began deescalating their polarization polka by tracking their intensifying cycles. I often used "joining" to help them slow them down and establish some safety: "Sarah [Ben], can you take a breath? Can you find the place in your heart where you do understand what Ben [Sarah] is saying?"

It was often tough going. A few very productive satisfying sessions would be followed by difficult slogging. Meeting their stepfamily challenges required both Ben and Sarah to do some substantial pieces of individual intrapsychic work—at first alone with me, and, as they built more trust, in each other's presence. Although Ben initially looked like the villain in the piece, it became increasingly clear that Sarah's reactivity and passivity left both her son and her husband feeling overwhelmed and alone. We traced Sarah's own history of abandonment and began healing some of the wounded places that contributed to her reactivity. Slowly, she became more present with both her son and her husband, and more able to stand up to each of them with both confidence and heart. We did a number of mother–son sessions, helping Bobby voice his grief and devastation to his mom, and using "joining" to deepen Sarah's ability to express her compassion for Bobby's grief and his anger at having to share his mom with Ben and his younger stepsiblings.

Underneath Ben's harshness we found a little boy who had learned to tuck his own softness away from an annihilating father. Ben returned many times to that boy, at many different ages. At first, holding his tongue with Bobby required great effort. Over time, as Ben healed his own bruised young self, it became easier to take a breath and open his heart.

As in many healthy stepfamilies, several years down the road, insider–outsider challenges and parenting differences remained, but in much softer form. Sarah retained the disciplinary role with Bobby. As is common in stepfamilies, Bobby remained closer to his mother than to Ben. However, over time, focusing on "connection not correction" began to pay off for Ben. He and Bobby became rather good buddies.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Becoming a stepfamily confronts couples with a set of challenges that differs fundamentally from first-time families. Effective clinical work with stepcouples requires a solid understanding of these challenges, combined with knowledge of evidence-based "best practices" for meeting them. Given that 42% of Americans have a close steprelationship, this information needs to be a basic part of all clinicians' training.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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Smart Steps and *Together We Can*. Detailed training materials available from www.stepfamilies.info/smart-steps.php.

Videos and radio interviews. www.stepfamilyrelationships.com.

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FAMILY PROCESS

Recoupling in Mid-Life and Beyond: From Love at Last to Not So Fast

PATRICIA L. PAPERNOW*

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Divorce rates have dropped in the United States, except for couples over 50 where they are rising steeply, along with rates of late-life recoupling. Both stepcouples and their young adult and adult children in new older stepfamilies are often surprised to find themselves facing many of the same challenges that younger stepfamilies do. Some challenges are even intensified by the decades-long relationships and additional layers of extended family that come with recoupling after mid-life. Stepfamilies formed in later life must also negotiate decisions about estate planning and elder care among stakeholders who often have sharply divergent agendas before there is time to establish trusting relationships. This article describes the "normal" challenges facing stepcouples who come together over age 50. It provides evidence-informed guidance for therapists in meeting these challenges on three levels of clinical work: Psychoeducational, Interpersonal, and Intrapsychic/Intergenerational. As in younger stepfamilies, "family therapy" must usually begin in subsystems—often the adult stepcouple and parent–adult child. The article then describes a particularly fraught subgroup of recouplers: over-50 fathers and their new partners, where the dad's young adult or adult daughter is very unhappy with his new relationship. In these latter stepfamilies, father–daughter repair must precede stepfamily bonding. Stepfamilies that are preceded by a partner's death and those that begin with affairs are also discussed. Finally, some "easy wrong turns" for therapists are described.

Keywords: Late-Life Stepfamilies; Middle-Aged and Older Stepcouples; Adult Stepchildren; Late-life Divorce and Remarriage; Stepfamily Therapy; Stepfamilies after Death or an Affair

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Americans 65 and older are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Although rates of divorce in the United States have generally dropped and evened out since their peak in the 1980s, the stark exception is among those over 50, where the divorce rate doubled between 1990 and 2010 (Brown & Lin, 2012) along with a concomitant steep rise in late-life recoupling (Brown & Lin, 2013). Indeed, the fastest-growing users of internet dating sites are not millennials, but "silver surfers" (Watson & Stelle, 2011). Nonetheless, an entire 2016 issue of the *American Psychologist* devoted to the mental health needs of aging Americans makes no mention at all of "gray divorce" or late-life recoupling (Gatz, Smyer, & DiGilio, 2016).

Most stepfamily scholarship also continues to focus on stepfamilies with children under 18 (Ganong & Coleman, 2017, 2018; Stewart, 2007). Nonetheless, as the

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demographic statistics would predict, stepcouples formed after "gray divorce," and their adult children, are increasingly appearing in our offices. They are often stunned to find themselves facing many of the same challenges that younger stepfamilies do. The myth for the stepcouple is, "The dog is dead, and the kids are grown. It's just us and now it's our time." For adult children, it is, "I'm a grown up. This won't affect me." In fact, it is not "just us" and parent–child relationships are forever. At this later life stage, normal stepfamily challenges are sometimes even intensified by decades-long ex-spouse and parent–child relationships, as well as by multiple intergenerational layers of extended family. Skilled help can make a big difference in meeting these challenges. However, relying upon first-time family clinical models is inadequate, misleading, and even destructive (Browning, 2017; Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 1993, 2008, 2013, 2015b, 2018).

This article begins with a description of how stepfamilies differ from first-time families. An overview of how the "normal" challenges facing stepfamily members of all ages play out in later life is provided, along with evidence-informed (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011) strategies for meeting them. The focus then turns to special challenges for stepfamilies formed in later life and how we can help. Next, we will look at a particularly distressed group of late-life stepfamilies: older recoupled dads with adult and young adult daughters who are very unhappy with their father's new relationship. Finally, stepfamilies preceded by the death of a spouse and those that begin with affairs are addressed. The article ends with a few "easy wrong turns" for well-meaning therapists.

WHAT DO LATE-LIFE RECOUPLED STEPFAMILIES LOOK LIKE?

Stepfamilies (of All Ages) Are Different from First-time Families

First-time couples usually begin with some time together to deepen their sense of trust in each other, and to begin building some "middle ground" (Papernow, 1987), that is, shared understandings and ways of doing things. Children in first-time families are more likely to enter their parents' already-established relationship. Important for our story, children in first-time families generally arrive hard wired for attachment to *both* of their parents, *and* vice versa. In contrast, in stepfamilies of all ages, the deep lines of attachment and shared history lie between the parent and his or her children, as do the agreements about money, time, family rituals, and a host of other things. As a result, stepfamilies of all ages must build intimate relationships on a fundamentally different foundation from first-time families (Papernow, 2008, 2013, 2015b, 2018).

Grandma and Her New Love May Not Be Married

Like their younger counterparts, stepfamilies formed in later life come in many forms. Rates of cohabitation are rising throughout the United States (Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006; Manning & Stykes, 2015), including for late-life recouplers (Brown & Shinohara, 2013). Research indicates that these cohabiting late-life couples are also just as happy as married couples (Brown & Kawamura, 2010). While younger couples are still more likely to see cohabitation as a transition to marriage, older couples engage in long-term cohabiting arrangements as a stable alternative to marriage (King & Scott, 2005). Older couples are also more likely than their younger counterparts to be "Living Apart Together" (L.A.T.)—living in separate homes, in a fully committed relationship (Benson, 2014; Benson & Coleman, 2016; De Jong Gierveld, 2004; Levin, 2004). Indeed, a Netherlands study found that the rate of LAT triples over age 50 (De Jong Gierveld, 2004). As with younger stepcouples, one or both members of a late-life stepcouple may be gay, straight, bi, trans, or queer.

Adult Children May Be Grown, But Not Gone

While adult children may be "grown", they are much less likely to be "gone" than in earlier generations. In the 50 years between 1960 and 2010, the number of young men aged 18–24 living at home in the United States increased from 10% to 57%, with similar increases for young adult women. In addition, a significantly higher portion of American young adults leave home, but now "boomerang" back to live with parents (Payne, 2011). Major contributors to this phenomenon include overwhelming student loan debt (Kamenetz, 2006) and housing costs that require a significantly higher percentage of income (Warren & Tyagi, 2005).

NORMAL STEPFAMILY CHALLENGES FOR LATER-LIFE RECOUPLERS

Whether late-life recouplers are married, cohabiting, or living apart together, stepfamily structure creates five major challenges to intimate relationships. Here, is how they play out when the happy new couple is over 50.

First Challenge: Stepparents are Stuck Outsiders. Parents are Stuck Insiders

In stepfamilies, the deep channels of intimate connection and the established, often unspoken, norms and rhythms of interaction lie in parent–child relationships, not in the stepcouple or in stepparent–stepchild relationships. Just as in younger stepfamilies, when parents are needed and engaged with their children, this often means that stepparents are left on the sidelines and sometimes even directly rejected by their stepchildren. Stepfamily structure consistently puts stepparents in a "stuck outsider" position, standing on the sidelines of family life; parents become "stuck insiders," torn between the needs of the people they love (Papernow, 2013). Younger cohorts divorce after an average of 7 years. The gray divorces in my practice had first marriages between 15 and 40 years, with multiple layers of decades-long relationships, not only with now-adult children and their spouses and children but also with extended family and friends. Two case studies illustrate very different responses to this challenge.

***Joan (62) and Marla (69)* (married for a year)**

Although both Joan and Marla have adult children and grandchildren, Marla's live nearby and Joan's are far away, making Joan more the stuck outsider and Marla the stuck insider. After their regular Sunday dinner with Marla's two adult sons and their wives and children, Joan says, softly, to Marla, "That was tough. I could use a hug." Marla, who had fully enjoyed the evening, is surprised. But she takes a breath and gets curious. "What's happening, Sweetie?" Joan responds, sadly, "They only talk to you, Marla. It's like I don't exist." This news makes Marla very anxious. However, she takes a breath and says thoughtfully, "That must be hard" and puts her arm around Joan. Joan and Marla go to sleep holding each other. The next morning they talk some more. Now Marla says, through her tears, "I hate feeling so torn. I love you. And I love my sons." Now Joan softens and holds her partner. Over time, and many more conversations like this, despite their very different insider and outsider positions, Marla and Joan become an empathically attuned team. At Sunday dinners, Marla plays footsie with Joan secretly under the table and gives her plenty of eye contact. Joan joins a women's basketball league that plays on some of Marla's mom-and-sons nights.

Sally (76) and Tony (74) (living together for two years)

Sally relishes her adult daughter Lea's unannounced visits and loves having her adolescent grandchildren sleep over as often as possible. However, her partner of two years, Tony, finds all of these folks intrusive and aggravating. He is annoyed that Sally's daughter Lea lets herself in with her own key and he is often sour and distant when Lea or her kids are present. "Why can't she call first?" Tony says glumly. Sally retorts, "What's your problem!"

Tony and Sally attend Tony's sister Rhonda's 70th birthday celebration. Rhonda and her husband had a five-decade relationship with Tony's ex-wife Julie. They are decidedly cool to Sally. Tony's mother, who adored her former daughter-in-law, barely acknowledges Sally. When Sally complains, Tony responds, "Why are you being so sensitive?" Sally withdraws in silence.

The insider/outsider challenge is pulling Sally and Tony into corrosive cycles of bickering, punctuated by long periods of brooding silence. In contrast, Joan and Marla are reaching out to each other, becoming an attuned team, and collaborating to find ways to meet the competing attachment needs of their complicated family.

Stigma intersects with stepcouple insider/outsider challenges

The difference between these two couples is all the more impressive because Joan and Marla's minority status adds another layer to their challenge. Marla has been out since her mid-twenties. Over time, Marla's family has become very accepting. This is Marla's third long-term lesbian relationship. She works in a travel agency owned by two gay men and has deep friendships in the lesbian community. In contrast, Joan is among those in this late-life age cohort who have just come out, having left a heterosexual marriage 3 years earlier. As acceptance grows, later cohorts may see fewer waiting until this age. However, Joan's parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren are making an extra transition—to accepting not only Joan's divorce and her new family but also to accepting Joan as a lesbian. Joan's adult daughter and grandchildren have been very welcoming of Marla. However, her son, as well as her parents and brothers, remain rejecting and cold. Joan also teaches in a conservative Catholic school where she is not out.

When Joan's daughter and family visit, Marla becomes the outsider. However, Marla has many other places to turn outside the family. In contrast, when Marla turns toward her children and extended family, Joan has few places to turn outside their family where she is not closeted, exacerbating her sense of aloneness and abandonment.

Second Challenge: Stepchildren Struggle with Losses, Loyalty Binds, and Change

The American census does not count stepchildren over 18. However, when an older parent recouples, the challenges for adult children look and feel remarkably similar to those for younger children.

Stepfamilies create losses for adult stepchildren, too

Like their younger counterparts, adult children bring a history of loss to their parents' new union. Older divorcing couples often assume, "Our children are grown. Our divorce won't affect them." In fact, one study found that almost 50% of gray divorcees reported that their adult children were "upset," "very upset," or outright "unsupportive" of their parents' divorce. Even among supportive adult children, 67% of those in that study were very sad and 19% were devastated when their parents divorced (Jensen & Bowen, 2015). Furthermore, while a new love is a wonderful gift for the couple, not only younger children (Cartwright, 2008) but also adult and young adult children (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010) often experience Mom's or Dad's new relationship as a loss. Sally's daughter, Lea, says, "Now that Tony's there, I feel like a stranger, and an unwelcome one at that. I want to be happy for my mom, but I'm so sad. I've lost her!"

Stepfamilies can create loyalty binds for children

The entry of a stepparent can also create loyalty binds for children of all ages: "If I care about my mom's/dad's new partner, I have betrayed my mother/father." Loyalty binds are normal. They occur even in friendly, collaborative divorces. However, parental conflict makes loyalty binds unbearable for children of all ages. Sally's daughter Lea says, "My

mom left my dad. My dad is so upset; he says one snarky thing after another about Tony. I can't bear it. But when I ask him to stop, he looks so sad. I can't bear that either."

A parent's recoupling can make lots of changes for adult children

"I've been single for 18 years," says Sally. "I don't see why my daughter is having such a hard time. You'd think she'd be happy for me." The changes in Sally's life are exciting for her, and they bring her much longed for connection. For Lea, the same changes bring painful disconnection. "My mom has hosted Christmas for as long as I can remember. This year she and Tony went away together. My kids were so sad that Gramma wasn't here. I was devastated!"

Third Challenge: Parenting and Discipline Issues Polarize Parents and Stepparents

Stepparents of all ages seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren. Parents want more care and understanding for their children (Papernow, 2013, 2015b). Stepparents see parents as "wimpy." Parents see stepparents as "too harsh." This division seems to hold across many cultures and in many cultures (Faroo, 2012; Papernow, 2015a; Tai, 2005; Webber, 2003). In later-age stepcouples, the differences often center on financial, physical, and emotional support of young adult and adult stepchildren. Parents want to help their adult children. Stepparents want stepchildren to "be independent." What is "good parenting" to the parent may be seen as "enabling" to the stepparent.

The fact that American adult children are increasingly likely to be "grown, but not gone" contributes to this fault line. While it is accepted and common in many cultures for adult children to live with their parents, the American value on independence and differentiation has created what Martha Strauss calls "the going away story":

> In its basic form, this story holds that most emerging adults still living at home are wretched, entitled, or manipulative kids who are victimizing their hapless 'permaparents.' These parents, in turn, should get their own lives, stop being wimps and concierges and escort their leeching offspring out the door. (Strauss, 2009, p. 32)

In fact, Strauss reminds us, the literature on development is beginning to shift away from an emphasis on "independence" and "individuation" and toward secure attachment as the key to wellbeing in children, through young adulthood (e.g., Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009). However, in older stepcouples, stepparents are much more likely to subscribe to the American "going away" story while parents are more likely to want to welcome their children.

Fourth Challenge: Stepfamilies Must Build a New Family Culture in the Presence of (at Least Two) Already-Established Cultures

Building a new family culture is a key developmental task for stepfamilies. This requires finding a way to live respectfully with at least two sets of very different routines, habits, and values that are shared between parents and children, but not in step relationships. In late-life recouplers these differing sets of shared "middle ground" (Papernow, 1987) have a many decades history. Furthermore, agreements about how "we" do birthdays, how "we" vacation together, how (and whether, and with whom) "we" celebrate major holidays, as well as the definition of "good parenting," are now shared both horizontally and vertically across extended networks of siblings, in-laws, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, and family friends.

Fifth Challenge: Ex-spouses are Part of a Stepfamily

For a wounded ex-spouse, the urge to confide in an adult child, especially an adult daughter (Bowen & Jensen, 2015), can be very strong. "She's 33. She can handle it." "She's

old enough to know the truth." However, the research is clear that it is not divorce, but parental conflict that most robustly predicts poorer wellbeing in children in all family forms (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Not just young children, but adult and young adult children of never-divorced high-conflict parents are doing significantly more poorly than those with low-conflict divorced parents (Ahrons, 2004). Conflict proves especially damaging for young adult and adult daughters (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

SPECIAL CHALLENGES FOR STEPFAMILIES FORMED IN LATER LIFE

All of these five challenges weave through two especially thorny issues specific to this life stage: financial planning and elder care arrangements. All stepfamilies must make decisions about estate plans and elder care in the context of subsystems that often have competing needs and, very often, that have very different definitions of who is "family" (Ganong & Coleman, 1999, 2006). Late-life stepfamilies involve several generations of extended family invested in these issues of money, inheritance, and caring for aging parents. Younger stepfamilies often do not have to face these matters until mutual understanding and trusting relationships have been established. Late-life recouplers and their families must address these issues considerably earlier in their relationships, before they have built strong bonds with each other.

Estate Planning in Late-life Stepfamilies

> Upon his death, Tony wants to leave his adult son a substantial amount of money. His partner Sally is hurt and affronted that he is not leaving his entire estate to her. "I'm your wife," she says. "He's my son," Tony says.

Resolving these issues can be an intricate process in any stepfamily. However, Tony and Sally (and their children) must wade into this major difference very early in their relationships with each other, balancing the divergent needs of multiple stakeholders. The numbers make it clear that clinicians will increasingly be involved in resolving these sticky late-life issues in both newly formed and long-standing stepfamilies. Nonetheless, an excellent article in *American Psychologist* focusing on what psychologists should know about financial planning for older Americans makes no mention of either the significant financial losses that often accompany "gray divorce" or of the complexities of financial planning in stepfamilies (Quinn & Cahill, 2016).

Elder Care in Late-life Stepfamilies: "Who gets custody of Grandma after the divorce" (Coleman & Ganong, 2011) or Grandpa?

Over 75% of all long-term care for older adults is provided by families (Thomas & Applebaum, 2015). It is projected that this need for our aging population will more than double between 2010 and 2050 (U.S. Senate Commission on Long-Term Care, 2013). Negotiating family roles in serious illness and disability is often extremely complex (e.g., Rolland, 2012). It becomes infinitely more so in a stepfamily.

> Jim (age 82) has had a series of strokes. Jim's second wife of twelve years, Delia (age 79), is exhausted with his care, and resentful that, in her mind, Jim's children have not been helpful. With her own adult daughter Debbie's encouragement, Delia decides to place Jim in a nursing home. Jim's daughter June (age 56) has felt painfully excluded from her father's home since his remarriage. She is outraged that Delia did not consult her before making this decision.

HOW DO WE HELP LATE-LIFE RECOUPLERS AND THEIR FAMILIES?

General Guidelines

With stepfamilies, work in subsystems

Emotional bonding in one stepfamily subsystem easily triggers a sense of loss and abandonment in the others. Thus, the usual family therapy guideline to convene the entire family is very likely to be destructive. Family therapy proceeds best in subsystems (parent–child, stepcouple, and sibling/stepsibling, and, if needed, ex-spouses; Browning, 2017; Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 2008, 2013, 2015b). Focus on bonding in stepparent–stepchild relationships comes *after* secure attachment is established in couple and parent–child relationships.

Negotiations over elder care often require convening a series of subsystem and individual meetings focused on identifying what truly matters to each person and each subsystem, and insuring that everyone gets heard. A skilled professional mediator can be an invaluable collaborator and colleague in this process.

Discipline yourself to think (and feel) systemically

Froma Walsh reminds us, "A family systems approach is distinguished less by who is in the therapy room and more by the clinician's attention to relationships and systemic patterns in assessment and intervention" (2012, p. 44). Whether your client is an individual child or adult, a stepcouple, or a family, *thinking* systemically remains essential (e.g., Tramonti & Fanali, 2015). It is also challenging. In Sally and Tony's family, the first task is *not* to decide whether Sally's daughter Lea should have a key or not. The first task is to help Sally and Tony develop some understanding and empathy for each other's very different experiences of "family." Sally needs help understanding Tony's sense of feeling intruded upon. Tony needs help understanding Sally's equally strong sense that she wants her daughter to feel at home. Each needs to feel held and "gotten" by the other. Both need to empathically hold Lea's experience of suddenly becoming a stranger in her own home.

A Three-Level Clinical Framework

Therapy with stepfamilies unfolds on three levels: (1) *Psychoeducational*: Information about what is normal, and about what works, and what does not work, to meet stepfamily challenges; (2) *Interpersonal*: Forging more effective interpersonal connection across the divisions these challenges create; (3) *Intrapsychic and intergenerational*: Healing family-of-origin bruises and intergenerational legacies that may be driving extra reactivity.

For couples like Marla and Joan, a few sessions of psychoeducation may be sufficient. For Tony and Sally, therapy will weave among all three levels and extend over several years, on and off. Work on all of these levels begins with stepping in and holding the intense affect, often beginning with naming the grief, surprise, shame, and chagrin. "*This is so not what you were hoping for." "It is so upsetting that you each feel so differently about each other's kids (brother-in-law/sister/mother)."*

Psychoeducation: Share Evidence-Informed Information about What's Normal, What Works (and What Doesn't)

Stepfamily members are often lost in difficult territory, making one wrong turn after another. Providing a map and accurate "driving directions" is vital to restoring, or establishing, wellbeing.

Several caveats: Some people are deeply relieved to receive evidence-informed guidance. However, for many stepfamily members, psychoeducation involves substantial grief work. Stay "soft and slow" and "low and slow" (Johnson, 2008, 2012). With each round, ask

"*What's that like to hear from me?"* Watch for "red lights"— signs of apparent "resistance" that signal underlying disappointment and grief that will need attention before moving forward.

Normalize the insider/outsider challenge

For stepcouples of all ages, naming and normalizing stuck insider/outsider positions, and the feelings they create, can relieve considerable shame and blame. "*You are disagreeing about whether Lea should have a house key not because you don't love each other, though it may feel that way at times. You are disagreeing because you live in a stepfamily. You are disagreeing because you, Sally, are the parent, and you, Tony, are the stepparent. You have totally different positions and histories with Lea. They are different relationships. Can I help you find out more about that from each other?"*

Support one-to-one time in subsystems

Late-life stepcouples, even more than younger ones, are often upset and even outraged when an adult child wants time alone with Mom or Dad without his or her new partner. However, parent–child relationships are forever. Parent–child alone time honors this reality. Spending stepparent–stepchild alone time is also important. In the presence of the parent–child relationship, stepparent–stepchild relationships take a back seat. Encourage stepparents to find easy bonding activities with their stepchildren. The same holds with adult siblings, in-laws, and old family friends. Help clients identify the most accessible relatives and begin there. Stepgrandchildren can sometimes provide an entry. We learned, for instance, that Sally's grandson Luke was, like Tony, a baseball player. Tony began doing batting practice with Luke, which softened Lea's heart considerably.

Ease children's loyalty binds

Children, including adult children, need clear signals that they are free to love all of the important people in their lives. Monitor your own clients' behavior. Listen for cues that, like Lea's father, parents are "leaking" their feelings to their children. Support adult children in making boundaries with distressed parents. "*I know Mom's relationship with Tony is hard for you, Dad. But when you tell me these things, I feel sick for days. I'm going to need you to stop. I'll remind you if you forget*."

Help late-life recouplers to expect loyalty binds and losses among extended family members

New couples are naturally enthusiastic about introducing their new love to their children, siblings, parents, and friends. Like Tony and Sally, it can be deeply disappointing to be greeted coolly or even met with outright rejection by family members and long-time friends. Embrace the grief with them: *"It is so disappointing that his brother-in-law/your sister/his mother is not as excited about this as you are." "I think I can help you understand what's happening here. Want to hear*?" Tony and Sally's wish that family members would shift their loyalties from Tony's ex-spouse to his new partner is totally understandable. It is equally understandable that family members and friends have decades-long relationships with an ex-spouse and may need considerable time to grieve and adjust.

Normalize parenting polarities

We can say to Sally and Tony, *"You might have noticed that, when Sally's kids are involved, Tony wants more limits and boundaries, and Sally wants more love and care for her kids. When it's Tony's kids, your positions are reversed. Right?" "It's not because your relationship is in trouble. Or because either of you is hypocritical*!" (an accusation I often hear). "*It's because you live in a stepfamily!"* The goal is *not* to "be on the same page." It is to be able to talk constructively and kindly about being on such different pages (Papernow, 2013, 2018).

Share what we know about parenting in stepfamilies

Research primarily focuses on younger stepfamilies (for reviews, see Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). However, in my experience, many of the findings apply in older stepfamilies as well: (1) *Parents need to retain the limit-setting role.* As in younger stepfamilies, until stepparents have forged close, trusting relationships with their stepchildren, stepparents have input, but parents have the final say about their own children and deliver the news; (2) *Authoritarian* (harsh/cold) *parenting by stepparents is toxic to stepparent–stepchild relationships*; and (3) *Successful stepparents concentrate on "connection, not correction"* (Papernow, 2013, p. 79). Stepparents can voice concerns and wishes to their stepchildren, but they need to do so in ways that build connection, with "I" messages and kindness, not "you" messages and harshness. A helpful sentence stem is, "*I'd love it if…"* (vs., "You never.…").

Change the metaphor

As with younger stepfamilies, becoming a stepfamily is not like blending raspberries and blueberries together to make a smoothie. It is much more like creating a family out of a group of Japanese and a group of Italians, some of whom are not at all interested in sharing. This metaphor can help stepcouples to shift their energies from straining to blend to getting to know each other and it helps normalize the constant jolts created by the differences that characterize early stepfamily life.

Becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event

Older couples are often especially eager to move forward into their new lives "while we have time." However, successful stepfamilies of all ages do not rush into "being one." They introduce new partners slowly. They build new routines and rituals a little at a time while they learn about, and honor, their differences.

Interpersonal Level: Strengthen Skills and Build Connection

Successful stepfamilies face the same challenges that struggling stepfamilies do (Golish, 2003). However, successful stepcouples have developed much better interpersonal practices and they offer each other more mutual support (Golish, 2003; Pace, Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2015; Shapiro & Stewart, 2012; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999). Work on this level includes at least two components: (1) teaching key interpersonal practices (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Gottman & Silver, 2015; Papernow, 2013, 2016c) (see Papernow, 2013, pp. 177–186, for a "toolbox" with step-by-step directions), and (2) shaping interactions within the session that build empathy and deepen intimacy (Fishbane, 2013; Johnson, 2008; Papernow, 2013, 2016a; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

"***Joining***" is one very specific useful tool for shaping connection and understanding within the session (Papernow, 2013, pp. 179–180; Papernow, 2016a). Here, it is in action with Tony and Sally:

> Tony and Sally are tangling over Sally's daughter Lea's key to the house. "This is an important conversation," I say. "Can I help you have it better? I have something I call 'joining.' It sounds simple. But it's actually kind of hard. Want to try?" Tony offers to start.
>
> "Great!" I respond. "Tony, can you find a couple of sentences, just the nub of what you most want Sally to understand?" Tony says, "I just feel invaded. Like it isn't my home…" Sally begins, "But.…
>
> I put my hands up in a time-out sign. "So, Sally," I say tenderly but firmly, "I know you love this man. Before you respond, can you take a breath? Can you find the place in your heart where you DO understand what Tony just said?" Sally stops. She struggles a bit. She says somewhat diffidently, "It's hard for you that Lea has a key." "Great," I say to Sally. "Now it's your turn. Add a sentence or two. Just the nub of what you most want Tony to get." "This was our house together,

Lea's and mine," Sally says a little bit more tenderly. "I need you to understand that she's my daughter."

Now Tony is ready to pounce. I again put my hands up in a time-out sign. "So, Tony," I say, staying "low and slow" (Johnson, 2008), "I know you love this woman. Before you respond, find the place in your heart where you DO understand what Sally just said."

By about the fourth or fifth round, both are softening. Moving to anchor this, I ask, "What's that like, Tony, that Sally gets what you're feeling?" "Such a relief," he says. "Can you tell her?"

Ultimately, Tony and Sally agree that Lea will keep her key. They also agree to spend part of their week "living apart together," each in their own condos. When they are together, they agree to clearly label some "just us" nights and some "open door" times, solutions that also provide more clarity for Lea.

With couples like Tony and Sally, I use this simple structure over and over again to help them slow down, and begin to feel heard by each other. "*You may not be able to do this at home,*" I often say. "*But I want you to know that this connection is here. We're going to help you reach for it.*" Later, as trust builds, I may send them home with a "talking and listening stone" from the collection in my office. The person holding the stone says just a sentence or two, "the nub of what you most want the other guy to get." He or she then passes the stone to the other person. The other person first says what she or he does understand, and checks for accuracy. She or he then adds a sentence or two and the stone is passed back.

Intrapsychic Family-of-Origin and Intergenerational Work

Stepfamily challenges can make attachment breaks, often at totally unexpected moments. The surprise, disappointment, and even anguish can be overwhelming. Psychoeducation about what is normal and improved interpersonal practices can go a long way in easing the pain. However, when reactivity remains, it is time to look for old family-of-origin bruises or intergenerational legacies that may be driving reactivity (Papernow, 2013, 2018). Always begin by validating the intense feelings that stepfamily challenges create.

Sally and Tony, continued

Tony wants to help his son Roger buy a new truck. "You're enabling," Sally snaps. "Roger is leeching off of you again!" Tony retorts, "That's ridiculous! How can you be so heartless!"

Holding the pain with them, and offering another round of normalizing psychoeducation, I say "It is so hard that you each see this so differently." "You are both so longing to be understood and 'stood with.'" "Here it is again, huh," I continue. "You, Tony, are the parent. You want to help your son. You, Sally, are the stepparent. What seems reasonable to the parent seems over the top to the stepparent! Sound familiar?" They begin to calm a bit.

To provide some perspective, I pull out my newsprint pad and we begin extending their genograms back two more generations. We learn that Tony grew up in an Italian family where "good parenting" was "providing for children." As the grandson of a poor Italian farmer, Tony was proud to be able to pay for his children's private colleges and to now help his son buy a new truck. Sally grew up in an Irish family where "good parenting" was expecting children to "stand on their own." Sally is just as proud that her children earned their own way through public universities. "Our money is for us," she says. "Not for our kids." As we sit back and look together at their genograms, it is clear that these values are now shared not only by previous generations, but by the next generations of children and grandchildren.

Both Tony and Sally look calmer. "No wonder this is hard," Tony says quietly. Sally reaches for his hand. "Now what?" she says. "Remember that 'joining' thing?" I say. Now, as they slow way down, they can begin truly hearing each other, and feeling heard and they become more

vulnerable and connected with each other. A compromise emerges. Tony will buy the truck. But he will ask his son to save for the down payment and to pay his own auto insurance.

INTENSIFIED CHALLENGES FOR LATE-LIFE RECOUPLERS: FRAUGHT FATHER–DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

In the past few years, one particular group of over-50 stepfamilies is appearing for help where "normal" stepfamily challenges are markedly intensified: late-life recoupling fathers whose daughters are having a very rough time with their dads' new relationship (Papernow, 2013, 2016b). The plea from the dad is, "Help! My new family isn't blending. We need family therapy." The call from Dad's new partner says: "I have finally found the love of my life. His daughter is wrecking things." The adult daughter's call: "My Dad is clueless. This is so painful for me and he just doesn't get it. He never has."

Three Patterns of Pain

The majority of these cases involve a fraught, strained, or distant father–daughter relationship that extends back into the first marriage. Current losses created by dad's recoupling sit on a long history of missed connections. A handful of cases exhibit two other patterns: In a second pattern, fathers report having been highly engaged with their daughters. However, further exploration reveals that these fathers had been quite controlling. Fathers in this second pattern often describe their daughters as "good girls until. . ." pressure to embrace Dad's new relationship, a wedding announcement, a difficult exchange with Dad's new partner, or the birth of a new baby opened the floodgates to years of unvoiced protest. Finally, in a few cases, the father–daughter relationship had in fact been very close, often in the context of a long, unsatisfying first marriage. For the daughters in this third pattern, seeing Dad turn away and fall in love creates an especially wrenching loss. Mark's family fits the first pattern:

> "It's just so upsetting and such a mystery," Mark (59) began. "I don't understand. He pulled out his cell phone and played a message from his daughter, Megan (38). In between screaming sobs, the words I could make out were, "You just don't get it! You never got it. . . . You are such an idiot. . . . Enjoy your new family."
>
> Piecing the story together, Mark had been the hardworking, somewhat depressed, provider for his family. Mark's daughters and his first wife, Angela, had accommodated to his distance and depression. A few years earlier, Angela had "suddenly" left the marriage.
>
> Mark's second wife, Amy (52), engaged Mark much more effectively than Angela had. However, Mark's tendency toward withdrawal was, in fact, one of the reasons they had entered couple therapy. It became clear that Megan and her younger sister Ellie (35) had continued to silently tolerate Mark's distance through their parents' divorce. However, pressure to embrace Amy had altered the landscape. An altercation between Amy and Megan over Megan's refusal to attend a "family dinner" with Amy's sons had been "the last straw" for Megan. "It was like the dam broke," Megan said later.

What is Happening?

The daughters in all three of these patterns have little experience and few skills for lodging a protest with their fathers. Dad's new relationship, however, unleashes an underground river of (often previously unvoiced) hurt and anguish. When they finally find their voices, the torrent of unprocessed grief is particularly raw and messy. The new partners of these dads feel unfairly treated and deeply hurt by the daughter's behavior. As in Mark's family, in many cases, harsh words between Dad's distressed partner and his grieving daughter have deepened the wounds. The dads in these families are stuck squarely in an

especially wrenching insider position: New partners want dads to "step up and set limits" on their daughter's rejecting behavior. Meanwhile, each of these daughters desperately needs her father's empathic presence. Dads who attempt to keep the peace by "setting limits" with their daughters find themselves wreaking further damage.

What is a Therapist to Do?

Overview: Shifting the agenda from "blending" to repair

In all three patterns, the level of loss and distress in the father–daughter relationship will need considerable attention before the stepparent–stepchild relationship can make headway. The general stepfamily caveat to eschew meeting with the whole family in favor of working subsystems is vital here (Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 2008, 2013, 2015b). Whether the clinician is therapist to the whole family, to the couple, to the father–daughter pair, or to any of the individuals involved, the first order of business is to shift the agenda from "blending" to separately meeting the needs for connection in *both* the father–daughter *and* the couple subsystems.

Family therapy often involves a series of separate father–daughter and stepcouple meetings, interspersed with individual intrapsychic work when necessary. The focus with the adult couple is on educating them about stepfamily challenges, and helping them support each other across the divides these challenges create. The focus in the father–daughter relationship is on facilitating repair. Family meetings and stepmother–stepdaughter relationship building can only begin when attachment needs are more fully met in both the couple and the father–daughter subsystems. In these cases, this can sometimes require several years.

These realities require stepparents to sit in the outsider position for a very long time. Meanwhile, Dads become painfully stuck insiders, trying to navigate needs of their new partners and their daughters.

Helping the stepcouple to hold each other while dad and daughter repair

As is often true, work with the stepcouple begins with holding their grief and disappointment. "*This is so not what you imagined*." It moves into psychoeducation about the (often surprising) realities of their stepfamily system, and building empathy across their insider/outsider divide. Often, before a new partner can be more open to father–daughter meetings, dads need to be helped to understand, and to express their compassion for, the rejection and sense of invisibility of their partner's outsider position. Along the way, dads will also need their partner's compassion for their torn insider position. "Joining" is an incredibly useful tool here for helping couples to slow way down, begin deepening their empathy and accessing their tenderness for each other.

Facilitating father–daughter repair in late-life stepfamilies

Preparing dads to hear the pain

Father–daughter sessions focus on helping daughters to express their grief, and helping dads to hear and repair. It is crucial to prepare dads for this. My message to Mark was, "*You so wish you could make this better. You can! But maybe not the way you thought. The conversation I can help you have with your daughter is not convincing her to accept Amy. It's hearing about how much your daughter has missed you and how much she needs you. That is what will bring her back to you."*

Father–daughter joining

I keep a firm hand in these meetings. I ask daughters to begin with a sentence or two, "the nub of what you most want your dad to know." I use "joining" to help dads slow down

and focus only on opening their hearts. "*Mark, can you take a breath Can you find the place in your heart where you DO understand about she just said? Can you tell her?"* When there is a long history of disappointment, joining goes in *one* direction, *from* father to daughter. Until repair begins to take hold, dads need to concentrate only on taking in their daughters' heartache, and expressing what they do hear and understand.

Individual work for dads, stepmothers, and daughters

Helping dads become skilled insiders

The insider dads in this subset of stepfamilies must often become the primary movers in any relationship building and repair. This role requires them to step into full empathic connection with the vulnerability and distress of both their daughters and their partners. For many, this requires learning a new skill set and, often, some individual work accessing their own vulnerability. This work can unfold within the couple therapy, if it is safe, or in individual meetings.

> Mark has a formidable "fix-it" part. In his rush to make things "OK" he consistently skips over both Amy's and his daughters' feelings, leaving them all even more bereft. In response to their disappointment, Mark would withdraw or explode in anger. In his individual therapy, Mark began to befriend his "fix-it" parts and his "shut down parts," both of which had emerged to manage his utter aloneness in an alcoholic family. Healing the young boy(s) he had shut away inside allowed Mark to begin showing up more for both his wife and his daughters.

Helping stepmothers reach for comfort, not control

Throughout the life span, we teach sharing as a primary value. However, for many of the stepmothers in these fraught families, the importance of the father–daughter relationship generates intense feelings of abandonment and jealousy. Paradoxically, the more secure the father–daughter relationship is, the more likely these daughters are to be able to befriend their dad's new partner. However, for many new partners, learning to self-soothe when Dad needs to turn away is a major challenge. Many of them also need considerable help shifting from insisting on control ("If you loved me you would put me first!" Or, "If you loved me you would make your daughter accept me!") to reaching for comfort ("This is so hard. Will you hold me?"). Making these shifts may require some individual work, either with a collaborative therapist, or in the context of the couples work.

Helping daughters do their own work

For daughters, the therapeutic task is to reach under the anger to find the grief and yearning. A collaborative, informed individual therapist can make a huge difference in this process.

WHEN A PARTNER HAS DIED

While the percentage of late-life recouplers formed after divorce is rising, in this life stage, the number of stepfamilies formed after death is higher than for younger stepfamilies. In both younger and late-life stepfamilies, the death of a spouse leaves both the remaining partner and his or her children with a profound sense of loss. More than in divorce, stepfamilies formed after death must include the lost spouse as part of the fabric of their ongoing family life. Diane Fromme's *Stepparenting the Grieving Child* (2017) focuses on younger stepchildren. However, it is nonetheless a tender and practical guide for both stepparents and parents of all bereaved families. (It is also one of the few evidence-informed books to be found in the morass of well-meaning but often misleading trade publications.) Wise stepparents will acknowledge and even embrace the deceased parent, especially at birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays, and at adult children's weddings and graduations.

This challenge is more formidable for some than for others. Susan (age 53) says of her husband's deceased wife, Tina, "I guess I thought that I would just fill the hole that Tina's death left. For a lot of years I got hurt every time Josh and his kids talked about her. I'm embarrassed to say that at first I tried to remove all of her photos. It's taken me a long time to get that there is room for both Tina and me." In contrast, Marco (age 72) says, "I knew when I fell in love with Jenny, that I would also be living with Doug," Jenny's deceased husband. "We keep pictures of him and the kids on the mantle. Jenny's kids and grandkids come over on Doug's birthday and they all tell stories about him all the time. At first it was a little bit weird. But now it just feels like he's part of the family. And that's how it should be."

The sense of loneliness and loss after a death can propel some widows and widowers to move very quickly toward a new relationship. Because mammals do best with intimate connection, especially at painful times, a new relationship is often quite comforting to bereaved parents, but this can leave their children feeling alone and betrayed. Even when parents recouple after many years, adult children may see their remaining parent as disloyal. "I want to be happy for my dad," says an adult daughter. "But I feel like he's somehow being disrespectful to Mom's memory." Again, the therapist's job is not to choose between this adult daughter's need to hold a place for her mother and her father's need to feel loved and held. It is to help them each to understand and hold each other's longing and pain. Again, parent–child relationships are forever, so the work begins with Dad holding his daughter.

WHAT ABOUT AFFAIRS?

Affairs magnify all five stepfamily challenges. Beloved former in-laws and treasured friends may treat the "offending" spouse and his or her new partner like pariahs. The aggrieved ex-spouse, joined by well-meaning friends and family members, may feel especially entitled to confide in adult children. Affairs magnify children's sense of loss, and often exponentially intensify their loyalty binds. Insider parents must bear a boat load of grief and anger from all the people they love. Stepparents must often hang in an outsider position for a very long time while parents slowly repair with children and extended family. However, handling these challenges with wisdom and patience can pay off.

The Pay Off for Patience

George (57) left Jody, his wife of 3 decades, when "by total surprise" he fell in love with Elaine (55), a client of mine. George's older daughter refused any contact at all. George's younger daughter and his father remained open to George, but refused any contact with Elaine. George's mother, who remained very attached to her daughter-in-law of many years, refused to meet Elaine. George was not invited to his former father-in-law's funeral.

Through all this, I coached Elaine not to pressure George for his family's acceptance. I helped her encourage George to have dinner alone with his daughter and father. For Elaine, who was the scapegoated outsider in her own family-of-origin, this intense outsiderness was particularly evocative. We worked hard together to heal those old bruises so, as she put it, "I can keep reaching for hugs from George instead of throwing fits." Two years in, George's older daughter joined her sister at dinner with George. Finally, three years in, George's two daughters began visiting both Elaine and George, followed the next year by reconnection with his mother.

In several joint meetings with George, I coached him to start with his rejecting family members by "simply" showing up for his daughters' sense of hurt and betrayal and his mother's sense of loss. As these relationships stabilized, we made him a script with his daughters that went something like, "Relationships are complicated. Your mom and I got more and more distant over the

years. I own my part of not speaking up. I think I just didn't have words. So things piled up in me. But it's not the way I would have wanted to end our relationship. I so get how hard this is."

EASY WRONG TURNS FOR THERAPISTS

Stepfamilies, including those that begin in later life, can heal old wounds and provide new nourishing relationships. However, well-meaning but poorly informed therapists can easily derail the process. Here are some "easy wrong turns" I see a lot, especially in fraught father–daughter stepfamilies.

Falling into a "Compassion Trap"

The more stepfamilies are struggling, the more likely that each person can tell only his or her own story, painting other family members as villains. It is crucial not only to empathize with our own client(s), but to hold compassion for all the players in the system. The pull to buy into maligning other players in the system is particularly strong in fraught father–daughter families: Hold compassion for fathers who were never able to express their own deepest longings and are now torn between the people they love, *and* for daughters who never quite had their fathers and have now lost him to another woman, *and* for stepmothers who are being rejected and distanced.

Prioritizing the Couple

Western therapists are prone to prioritizing the couple relationship over parent–child relationships. This tendency is especially strong with late-life couples. In this framework, meeting an adult child's request for time alone with a parent is seen as inappropriate and an adult daughter's pain is seen as "childish." In fact, children of all ages need their parents.

Pressuring Parents to "Draw the Line"

This advice frames the issues in fraught father–daughter stepfamilies as a problem of boundary setting. "His daughter is an adult. She needs to accept that Dad's new relationship is the reality." This seemingly logical counsel ignores another reality: the parent–child attachment that precedes the adult stepcouple relationship. It is, of course, not acceptable for any family member to be uncivil and nasty to another. However, adult daughters with a long history of unexpressed loss and disconnection often cannot begin the conversation graciously or skillfully. The clinician's task is to *first* help Dad hear the howl of pain under the "bad behavior." Requests for more civil behavior can follow this.

CONCLUSION

"Love at last" can indeed be a reality and a gift for stepcouples over 50. However, late-life recouplers and their adult children are often surprised to find themselves facing challenges similar to those of younger stepfamilies: stuck insider/outsider positions in the stepcouple, children struggling with losses and loyalty binds, polarizations over parenting, divisions over family traditions and values, and tension with ex-spouses. At this life stage, all of these challenges unfold in the context of multiple layers of decades-long family and friendship relationships. Late-life recouplers' families must also navigate the challenges of elder care and estate planning among stakeholders who bring divergent needs and who have had no time to build trust and mutual understanding. In a subgroup of late-life stepfamilies, the fallout from fraught father–daughter relationships significantly intensifies all of these challenges.

Clinical work requires compassionate connection with the intense affect these challenges can create. A three-level clinical framework guides intervention: *Psychoeducation* normalizes challenges and provides evidence-informed guidance for meeting them. Work on the *interpersonal level* teaches practices and shapes interactions that build compassion and forge connection in the face of constant attachment breaks. When information does not stick or skills do not hold, turn to healing *intrapsychic family-of-origin* bruises that may be driving reactivity.

Stepfamily structure places the attachment needs of the stepcouple, parent–child, and stepparent–stepchild subsystems in conflict. Carving out one-to-one time for each subsystem is usually very helpful. Likewise, family therapy proceeds most effectively in subsystems, beginning with the stepcouple and or the parent–child subsystem. When these subsystems are functioning well, stepparent–stepchild work and family work can be very useful. With patience, and evidence-informed wisdom and guidance, "love at last" can indeed be a reality.

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https://ifstudies.org/blog/making-things-fair-after-a-parents-death
Institute for Family Studies March 2, 2015
(PP: Bolding is mine)

Handout D

Making Things Fair After a Parent's Death

by Amy Ziettlow @RevAmyZ

Everyone dies. But what happens to everything that they leave, their earthly possessions? Deciding who gets what is easier when there's a will or some other record of what the decedent wanted. Regardless of how much formal planning was ever completed, however, **the process of distributing prized (or non-prized) possessions is always shaped by the level of cohesion** within the family that settles the estate. With the dramatic changes in family structures over the past fifty years, different family forms could have a powerful effect on how property is distributed.

Naomi Cahn and I interviewed a number of American adults* a year after the death of their parent or stepparent, and we looked for a guiding principle in how they navigated the inheritance process. As we explain more fully in a recent *Elder Law Journal* article, the phrase "making things fair" served to define the experience of distributing assets, such as houses, cars, life insurance policies, and sentimental items like a work shirt from Sears or a football-shaped beer koozie. We learned that death never seems fair to those who mourn, **but fairness weighs heavily when distributing a deceased parent's stuff, especially in blended families.**

In families in which the parents remained married for life, shared internal norms defining fair distribution were often strong, which compensated for the absence of formal planning. Most grown children deferred distribution decisions to the widowed parent and did not formally contest what was decided. This deferral was significant because in the absence of a will, grown children in Louisiana, where all the deaths occurred, have a significant claim to the property. **This law was either not known or ignored, and the distribution process happened privately on the timetable set by the widowed parent.** A year after the death, grown children interpreted the process as fair even when the widowed parent made choices that everyone knew went against the expressed wishes of the deceased.

For deceased single parents, making things fair in the distribution process tended to fall to one grown child who interpreted the wishes of the parent while weighing the needs of the other siblings. For example, we have written previously about the Guttierez family. We interviewed sisters, Heather and Jackie, after their divorced and single father died leaving four adult children to settle his estate. Heather and Jackie asked their brother to handle the financial aspects of the estate. He agreed and chose not to benefit from the estate since he had been estranged from their father for years after his father accused him of having an affair with his fourth wife. Heather, who lived several states away, also relinquished any claim to the property as a way to honor the care Jackie had provided their father prior to his death. Jackie and their youngest sister, Ginger, eventually split the estate because they were willing to live on the property for almost a year in order to prepare the land for sale. **Each sibling sought to "make things fair" by weighing the strength and character of their previous relationship to their father** while honoring the sacrifices and needs of each other.

The process of distributing possessions is always shaped by the level of cohesion within the family that settles the estate.

In **remarried families, the grown children often described the process of making things fair as marked by conflict. The grown children rarely deferred to the widowed stepparent's decisions and timetable in the way that grown children did with a widowed parent**. Accepting a surviving stepparent's interpretation of a deceased parent's wishes often proved challenging and stressed the ambiguous kinship ties between the biological children of the deceased and the stepparent. **The closeness of their blended relationship became a determining factor** in how grown children perceived the justice of what they inherited. **They sometimes fought over asset distribution because they felt that their role as a biological child was not honored.**

Candace's father, for instance, had always promised that "she would be taken care of," but he failed to put that promise into writing. After his death, her stepmother tried to give her a few sentimental jewelry items in lieu of property or money, but she rejected them, angry that her stepmother had locked her out of her father's inheritance. Candace, like other grown stepchildren, felt excluded by her stepmother, and she responded by displaying a strong sense of territoriality toward her father's property. Louisiana law, which would have protected Candace's inheritance, was not a tool she used, even though she felt that her stepmother's decisions were unfair.

On the other hand, **some remarried families did work well together to "make things fair." Their level of interpersonal warmth, intentional inclusion of one another in their life stories, and willingness to write a family history together**—one that included not only financial issues but also words of appreciation—were the primary differences setting them apart from stepfamilies that fractured, took their conflicts to court, or terminated relationships with one another.

Most Americans have not completed a will, which shows they tacitly presuppose that their grieving families will find a way to settle the property fairly without resorting to legal intervention. **This assumption of family consensus and teamwork** often holds in families led by married parents, in their first and only marriage. **However, single and remarried-parent households need greater external support in reaching agreement and in mediating conflicts between the related parties, be they step-relatives or full- or half-siblings.**

Service professionals, such as clergy members and lawyers who often companion couples and families through the life transitions of marriage, divorce, serious illness, and death, should take notice. They can encourage formal planning and conversation particularly in blended or single-parent families as a way to help them avoid future legal conflicts over property. Families of the future will need more help in making things fair.

**All names have been changed to protect the identities of our interview cohort. Our research is featured in volume 23, no.1 of* The Elder Law Journal *and will be presented in the book* Homeward Bound*, slated for publication by Oxford University Press in 2016.*

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Handout E

Summary: What Works for Kids and Adults in "Blended Families"

- **Bottom line: Becoming a stepfamily is a process not an event.**
  - **It often takes years to establish a solid sense of "we-ness."**
  - **Stepparent-stepchild relationships often grow and change over the years.**
  - **Patience pays off.** As one mom said, "It's a slow cooker, not fast food."

- **Help adults to understand children's struggles and meet their needs:**
  - **Help parents to empathize with children's sense of loss, so much change, loyalty binds.**
  - **Expect that younger children (8 and under) may have an easier time than older children.**
  - **Coach adults to give regular, reliable 1:1 parent-child time.**
  - **Work with adults to loosen loyalty binds.**
  - **Help the adults to get that kids often need to go much (much) more slowly than the adults wish they did.**
  - **If a child is struggling or refusing visitation check for: stepparents moving into discipline prematurely, 1:1 time, level of parental attunement for kids challenges, pace of change.**

- **Empathize with, and normalize, "stuck" insider/outsider positions in the adult stepcouple:**
  - **Insiders often feel rejected and invisible. Outsiders often feel anxious, torn and inadequate. These are normal human responses to the structural challenges of living in a stepfamily.**
  - **Spending fun time together as a family is important. (And all challenges may be more intense.)**
  - **To meet the attachment needs of all relationships in the family, also carve out regular 1:1 time.**
    - **Regular time alone for adult couple *and* time alone for parent-child relationships. Stepparent-stepchild relationships also need time without the parent to build a new relationship.**
    - **If family time is tense, keep it short and increase 1:1 time throughout the family.**

- **Help stepcouples to meet parenting challenges:**
  - **Children do best with author*itative* (warm and moderately firm) parenting. "Firm" needs to be by parents, not stepparents.**
  - ***Parents retain the disciplinary role until or unless stepparents have formed a caring, trusting relationship with stepchildren.***
  - **Stepparents will likely want more structure and limits with their stepchildren. Parents will likely want more understanding and caring for their kids.** The goal is not necessarily to "be on the same page." The goal is to able to talk in a caring respectful way and learn from each other.
  - **If there is parent-stepparent tension over discipline, protect children from tension and conflict.**
  - **Coach stepparents to practice "*connection before correction.*"** Encourage stepparents to express warmth, caring, interest, engage in fun activities with kids. Relationships before rules.
  - **Meanwhile, stepparents have *input*, parents have *final say* about their own kids.**
  - **If a child is struggling or refusing visitation, check for whether stepparent has moved into a disciplinary role. Backing stepparent out of disciplinary role can sometimes make a big difference.**

- **Change the metaphor: From blending a smoothie to bringing together Japanese and Italians**.
  - **Expect a lot of "learning by goofing." It's a sign of growth, not failure!**
  - **Make just a few changes at a time, starting with rules for safety and civility.**

- **Maintain cooperative, or at least low-conflict, relationships between ex-spouses:**
  - **House rules (and cultures) can be different. But adults need to remain respectful and neutral.**
  - **Kids do best with positive relationships with ALL of the adults in their lives. Both parents and stepparents.**
  - **Monitor, educate about, and intervene in conflict and tension between households. Use the same level of attention that is used to monitor, educate about, and intervene with blood pressure!**