

STEPFAMILIES

Providing Education and Support

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Divorce and Remarriage in Later Adulthood

By Kay Pasley, EdD

Estimates suggest that about 11% of women will have their first marriages end in divorce some time after their 40th birthday (Uhlenberg, Cooney, & Boyd, 1990). While older adults are less likely to remarry than are younger adults (e.g., those in their 20s and 30s), many do remarry and confront unique issues to their age group. For example, when an older adult remarries, they may have grown stepchildren who are concerned about inheritance issues. Clearly, remarriages amongst mid-life and older adults is an increasingly common phenomena worthy of our attention.

What do we know about divorce among older adults? We know, for example, that there are social, psychological, financial, and physical consequences of divorce for older adults. Recent evidence shows that both at midlife and after midlife divorce negatively influences a person's economic and physical well-being (Holden & Smock, 1991; Lillard & Waite, 1995). Also, their relationships with their children are affected (Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994), as are their social networks (e.g. Gerstel, 1998). We believe some of these negative influences are a function of a more limited range of options after divorce among older adults, especially older women. Many older women may lack the requisite education, skills, and employment experiences that enhance their ability to either re-enter

the paid labor force or to advance in their current positions. The financial responsibility to one's children decreases with age, although at midlife many parents are assisting their young adult children with college expenses. There is some evidence to show that even older parents continue to contribute financial assistance (e.g., the down payment for a home.) When divorce occurs, the cost of maintaining two parental households may prohibit continued assistance to one's adult children.

Beyond financial issues, research also shows that the quality and nature of the relationship between parent and children change when parental divorce occurs later in children's life, especially for young adult children. For these children, custody, visitation and child support are no longer issues affecting the relationship, although there may be other forms of continuing financial support, such as college tuition. Using reports from 3,281 young adults who grew up in nondivorced families (but some had parents who divorced later), Aquilino (1994) found that parental divorce lowered the quality of the parent-child relationships as reported by the young adult, especially the father-child relationship. He also found less contact between parents and young adult children after parental divorce. Cooney (1994) found similar findings, although her

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Margorie Engel



The chore of packing away holiday decorations was put aside while I curled up in my favorite chair and reread the annual catch-up letters. Sure, I enjoyed them when they first arrived in December, but this reading was different. I noticed how many of our friends wrote about expanding families, a brother's second wedding, a stepson joining the family reunion for the first time, a daughter becoming stepmother to her new husband's nine-year-old son, a Christmas celebrated early since the stepgranddaughter would be spending the holidays with her birth father and I was struck by the number of different names used to describe these new relationships. T.S. Eliot wrote at length about how hard it is to name a cat. These letters pointed to another nationwide dilemma: What can/should/do

stepfamily members name each other?

The word stepfamily seems simple enough because it describes a state of relationship by marriage. And yet a few researchers, some authors, and most of the media have latched on to blended family. How depressing to be a blended family in which the various members have been mixed together so that their individuality can no longer be distinguished. Research suggests that couples and children in stepfamilies who try to function like a homogenized family must engage in massive denial and distortion of reality. Therapists report some pretty bizarre things happening when personal history is denied. So we circle back to the question: What can/should/do we name each other?

It all starts with the remarrying adults. Steve and I are sailors. And it's common practice to refer to one's wife as First Mate. Except that I'm not. So, tonight Steve presented us both with a Valentine present – new sailing caps. His still says "Captain" and, because he calls me the prime person in his life, mine says "Prime Mate". I love this guy!

When there are children from previous relationships, all of the adults will be connected throughout the children's life passages. Does that mean my husband's ex is my ex-wife-in-law and my ex is his ex-husband-in-law? And if his children are my stepchildren, is he my step-husband? And what do our children (three of his and two of mine) call us collectively? Our parents? And, if we're

their parents, then who are the non-resident mom and dad? And are the girls collectively our children or separately his children and my children? And, sure, we could eliminate the step in front of daughter (who needs the genetic blueprint?) but is that the best psychological move when my counterpart, my stepdaughter's mother, is nearby?

Stepparenting is untidy in many respects, including names. Most of the self-help books bring up the question of names almost always including the word complicated. For the child, there are two basic complications. First, "What is my name?" Having a different name from the adults in the household becomes conspicuous at school and church, and a problem when friends can't find the older child in the phone book. Then there's the guilt issue because making one part of life easier is guaranteed to make another part harder. Besides, they arrived in this new family with an identity, a name, and they may not want it to be blended.

Second, "What do I call my stepparent?" A parent name: Mom, Dad or any variation such as Mommy, Momma, Daddy, Poppa? Seasoned stepparents point out that to insist a stepchild call them Mom or Dad immediately puts stepchildren in a loyalty bind. A special nickname (I, myself, am not too fond of Stepmomster or Fake Father) and do all of the stepchildren use the same one? Or do children go the route of first names, either plain or in combination such as Daddy Bill and Mommy Joan, now that our culture has become increasingly informal? Does the stepchild's age have anything to do with the choice? Do teens use first names and little ones stick to parent terms because that's what adult-size men and women are called? Is anything preferable to She, He, or Hey, You?

And how do stepsiblings feel about the choice? Is it awkward for some children in the household to refer to the adult by a first name and others in the home use Mom or Dad? Is it different from visiting a friend's house and calling their parents Mr. and Mrs. while their friends use typical parenting terms?

Maybe different names for when members of the "old" family and the "new" family are present or for different occasions? As one young man put it, "When I'm around my father, I'm careful to call my stepfather by his name and not 'Dad.'" When I'm around my stepfather, I call him 'Dad' even though that's what I call my father. When they're both together, I'm in trouble."

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STEPFAMILIES

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DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN LATER ADULthood

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study showed that parental divorce had little impact on the relationship between mothers and children, but some dramatic effects on fathers and children. These studies both show that divorce weakens kinship ties and obligations when it occurs later in life.

What happens when an older adult remarries? We know much less about a remarriage in older adults than we know about divorce. Some research shows that older remarries perceive more negative social pressure about their decision to remarry. Sanctions ranged from knowing glances and raised eyebrows to rejection by adult children. In one of the few studies of a remarriage in older adults, McKain (1972) reported that 25% of her 100 couples said they almost did not remarry because of such pressure. Later research by Vinick (1978, 1983) showed that the negative sanctions were more common from one's peers than one's children. In fact, most adult children in this study were supportive of their parent's remarriage.

More recent studies have examined the internal dynamics of a remarriage in older adults. For example, Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1990) studied the effects of conflict, sharing, and consensus on marital satisfaction in a sample of 70 remarries 55 years and older. They found that those who report higher levels of marital satisfaction also reported less negative types of conflict being expressed (e.g. argue/shout, slap/hit, sulk/slam doors). In addition to expressions of negative conflict, women who perceived their spouses

shared their problems with them also more frequently reported higher levels of marital satisfaction.

Another study by Bograd and Spilka (1996) used 125 remarried families to compare types of self-disclosure and marital satisfaction in mid-life remarriages (ages 30-40) and late-life remarriages (ages 60-75). Their key findings were: (a) the amount and depth of self-disclosure were less in late-life remarriages, and (b) men in mid-life remarriages reported less marital satisfaction than men in late-life remarriages. They suggested that remarried couples may develop communication patterns that were absent in their first marriage, and these contribute to marital survival and satisfaction. Findings from Wu and Penning (1997) support this idea. These authors found that redi-orce was more common among older remarriers when the marriage represented a remarriage for only one of the adults, than when the remarriage was such for both adults.

What does all this mean? Clearly, there is a need to focus more research attention on remarriages among older adults, given that the "baby boomers" are now in these age groups. We would anticipate that more older adults and their adult children will experience these marital transitions. Learning about the experience of divorce and remarriage for all members of these families can help us to better meet their needs through prevention and intervention strategies. □

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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Then there is the issue of grandparents. Do all of the existing grandchildren, steps and bios, use the same name or are step-grandchildren starting from ground zero? What if the first grandchild/stepgrandchild comes along after your remarriage? When the youngster begins to talk, are you "grand" anything? My step-grandchildren call me Marmee a play on my name and initials and also what the daughters in Louisa Alcott's Little Women called their mother. It has now become my name used by all of our daughters and our sons-in-law as well as the little ones.

So, what can/should/do we name each other? The name chosen reflects what the person means to us. What we call someone

cannot be separated from how we feel about the person's position, acceptance, respect, and love. The two go together. Or at least, they ought to go together. On the other hand, what is it that has prevented us from devising other names children can use when relating to, and referring to, their stepmothers and stepfathers names that belong exclusively to them and identify the roles they play in stepfamilies? Is there a rational solution to the name problem? Write and tell us how you solved the "problem with no name" in your stepfamily. We'll pass on your ideas in a future issue of STEPFAMILIES. □

Chapter Meetings: Are They an Adjunct or Replacement for Therapy?

As was stated in the last Counselor's Corner, as a matter of policy, we will announce the population for which the column is best suited. This column is directed to Counseling Professionals.

As a therapist and a chapter president, this subject often comes up. In order to answer this question we must take a closer look at the purpose of chapter meetings, our definition of therapy and the needs and goals of the stepfamily.

SAA Mutual Help Groups (MHG's) are educational support groups for adults in stepfamilies. They usually meet once a month, through some chapters meet more often. These meetings offer an opportunity for people to share similar problems that arise in their family situations. This decreases the feelings of isolation that often accompany stepfamily life. MHG's offer different perspectives and an opportunity to learn from others. Knowing other people are in the same situation helps to normalize the experiences of living in a stepfamily and helps to decrease feelings of guilt and blame. The education that the group provides helps the adults define who they are in their relationships, accept themselves, their spouses, their children and stepchildren. The group imparts knowledge and a nurturing environment that helps promote insight and change.

Is that therapeutic? One would be hard pressed to say it is not. If our definition of therapy is an environment whose purpose is to promote emotional and psychological well being for those who are experiencing problems, the MHG's fit the bill. But is the chapter meeting sufficient? The meetings may be therapeutic but are they therapy? Should it replace therapy? We could ask the same question of other support groups. Is AA sufficient for those with alcoholism?

The answer in part lies with those seeking help. Are they able to utilize information to make changes, or are they stuck in a pattern that knowledge, by itself, cannot alter? A couple in a stepfamily may be aware that they need to improve upon their bond with one another, and the examples offered at a MHG meeting may solidify their resolve to do so. However, having a resolve to change, and successfully changes are not always part of the same process. There may be other problems within the family that are unrelated to the stepfamily such as clinical depression, poor impulse control and anger management or addiction issues. It is a function of the MHG to help people define and recognize their problems. Then give them information and advice to help them make the best decisions on how to resolve these issues. Often this means referring them to therapy.

Conversely, it is up to therapists to recognize when their

clients need this vital information and support. As therapists, we are trained to focus on the process of the family's problems. We seek to assess and change the underlying dynamics of the system. We focus on patterns of communication and the interconnectedness of subgroups within the family system. We are trained to go beyond the content of the problem and intervene at a deeper level. We define content as the "stuff" people argue over, and we are taught that it is not nearly as important who does more house cleaning as who has more power. While this is true for all families systems, including stepfamilies, the content has special meanings in the stepfamily system. This is because the content is so closely related to our family cultures.

A stepfamily is the blending of two cultures. Much of our family identity is defined by its culture. Take the following scenario: In one family meal times are quiet relaxing times and family members are expected to be polite at the table. In the other family meals are a time of excitement and table manners are used for going out or special occasions. Each families style is appropriate within their context, however, when combining two distinct styles, miscommunication of intention can result in problems. Resolving this issue is imperative to creating a new stepfamily culture. It is the small details like who does what chores and how you address each other that define our family culture. While the therapist can help the couple become a communicative and supportive team to resolve these conflicts, a referral to a MHG will help them to experience their sameness with other couples and generate more solutions. In this way I believe that MHG's are an adjunct to therapy.

In her book *Becoming a Stepfamily*, Patricia Papernow describes four principals that are the basis for interventions with stepfamilies. One of the four principles is education. She refers to the SAA as a primary resource. She contends the clinicians who are "rigidly committed to remaining a blank screen will not be helpful for most stepfamily members. People in stepfamilies very often need new information in order to be successful." She recommends that clinicians encourage clients to become active members in the SAA. She actually uses the SAA as part of her interventions!

This brings me to my next point. Maybe we should not be asking if the chapters are an adjunct or a replacement for therapy. While the question comes up quite often, it seems to imply competition. At the root of this question may lie a bit of anxiety. I am concerned that we may fear decreasing group size or decreasing practice, and that this fear may be stopping us from working together. Maybe we should be asking how we can both chapters and therapists work

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STEP WRITE UP

by Rick Harper, M.F.C.C.

Dear SWU,

My name is Hanna. I'm a twenty-eight-year old mother of two. My "A" student Monica is twelve and Andy is almost two. They get along great, although, Monica complains about baby sitting her little brother on weekends. Art is Andy's father and my husband of eight years. Monica's birth father, Brad, and I had an abusive relationship ending ten years ago and resulting in Monica, then two years old herself, living with her grandparents until last year. Everything was fine until then.

Art is a good father to Andy and a reasonably good husband to me. Art and I have been having more and more arguments since Monica came to live with us. Monica and Art fight all the time, especially when Monica romanticizes about Brad.

Monica and I are having our own problems sorting out our mother/daughter stuff. I hate telling her over and over to do the dishes or clean her room. After all no one has to tell her to do her homework. All I want is the same when it comes to her chores.

When I ask Art to help out and give Monica some guidance, all he does is make demands on her or he complains about how I let Monica get away with too much. Art tells Monica her disrespect for him makes him glad he's not her father.

Our house is in constant confusion. I keep thinking we'd all be better off if Monica returned to her grandparents, but they say they're too old. The only time any of us is happy is when Monica is in school.

What can I do?

Dear Hanna,

What a predictable mess. You and Art seem to believe Monica is the problem. What can you do...? WAKE UP!

Monica is not the problem – she is the result of the problem. If I have the math right, you were about sixteen when Monica was born into a bad relationship. Next, she likely took a back seat to your misery, if she wasn't directly abused herself. And then, she was left behind while you tried to improve your life. Now, Monica is expected to be Mommy's little girl even though she finds herself in a family that doesn't want her ... duh! Your lucky she's in school, let alone an "A" student.

Let's see if we can break this down and find a place to start.

FACT: You owe Monica the best you can do for her. If you're not committed to her welfare, find her someone who is. End of story

or...

There are three overlapping sets of issues:

1) You and Art

- You and Art have to figure out if he's in or out

- You and Art need to work together for everyone's sake
- Art may need some help dealing with his insecurities and learning some parenting skills, not only to help with Monica but for Andy's sake.

2) You and Monica

- You'll need to learn about Trust & Abandonment to teach Monica; ask her school for suggestions. Share what you learn with Art.

• You need parent training to get some idea of normal childhood behavior, i.e., foot dragging on chores.

• The two of you need to gradually talk your way through the past to rebuild your relationship from scratch. There's help out there.

and

3) Monica and the Family

The families strength or weakness begins at the top. You and Art need to remember why you got together in the first place. Take some time alone and get your relationship back on track. And then, like it is for all of us, "if you want more you have to do more". Negotiate and write down family improvements, weekly, i.e., scheduling time, rotating, chores, revising decisions.

Remember: Structure cuts down on chaos and effectiveness is the only reliable compass through this trial and error process.

Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

- Listening Exercise for you and Art: Take two uninterrupted minute turns speaking while the other listens and repeats all they can remember. Then, switch. Any subject, but no criticism allowed.

• You and Art discuss your difference away from the children.

• Regularly schedule family conversations about progress while providing encouragement for participation. Always check for old and new business and double check children's comments.

• Write down your family rules, rights, and rewards. Post family made posters. Review and revise frequently.

• Provide Monica with the same recognition and encouragement at home she obviously earns at school.

Monica has had a stressful beginning to her young life. My guess is that you and Art may have had difficult childhood's as well. But you and Art have a chance to organize a family like the ones you wish you'd had.

All families struggle at times. Your family will improve through everyone's participation and shared goals. So, count your lucky stars that Monica finds approval and acceptance through her schoolwork. May learning save us all. □

Stepmoms – A Mother’s Day to Remember

A hhh-we’re all in this together-being a part of and sometimes raising children who are not our own, but belong to the first, second, or third marriage (or all of the above?) of our husband.

How will our Mother’s Day be? Over the years of counseling and therapy with some of the most beautiful women (inside and out) who are stepmothering, I have had such compassion for the many tears, confusions, and tensions these women experience every year around Mother’s Day. As more and more women find themselves struggling with this role at the close of this century, perhaps someone can find a day to honor these courageous, generous women...a day that isn’t shared with another women.

So much else in a stepmother’s life is share, and often not acknowledged, much less appreciated by the biological mother. Many of these women put in hours of worry, communication, and counseling to do their job well trying to be sensitive to children and ex-wife issues. Among the many issues to deal with are the unresolved angers, hurt and guilt from the first marriage, the lack of awareness in schools and discipline and loyalty issues. Since more than half of all families in the U.S. will be in a stepfamily by the 2000, let’s look at what would make a positive difference and make life better for these stepmothers, and all those they love. And let’s look at the collaboration that sometimes happens when two women are mothering the same child.

MUTUAL APPRECIATION:

Look for opportunities to appreciate each other. Biological mothers are strongly encouraged to reflect upon all the responsibilities participated in by the stepmother in the care and daily routines of their children. (This may simply be as little as getting the beds out and ready nearly every other weekend or driving the kids to a ball game when neither biological parent can take them.) It is in the child’s best interest that the women develop a good working relationship of mutual respect and appreciation. So mothers, show your love for your children and model for them how to share and support well. Look for the good things and nurture them openly. One stepmother said with a tear in her eye, “I was so touched when the children’s mother called me to say thank you for caring for her children and apologized for the hard times. It wiped out years of pain and encouraged me to give more heartfully.” Stepmothers, too, must avoid saying negative things about the mother as well and nurture a positive attitude. Acceptance, forgiveness, and collaboration are the goals and the means to peace of mind and satisfying exchanges.

PERMISSION, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND COOPERATION:

All parents need to openly and publicly give kids permission to love their step mothers, and encourage the children to respect, accept, and cooperate with this stepmother in finding ways to bond. Right in their own stepfamily, kids can learn the greatest lessons about the hurtfulness of cliques and sensitivity to outsiders.

TIPS FOR STEPMOTHERS:

1. Nurture the couple “team” bond. Without a strong couple, the stepfamily won’t succeed.

2. Stop trying so hard to make it all better, straightening out behaviors and responsibilities. That is your husband’s job and you both need to strategize about this. Focus on having some fun, and being the “good guy” Find ways to enjoy and share a hobby and activity with kids. What if kids are angry and resistant? Find a way to detach, get some professional help and support, focus on staying centered as a lighthouse in a storm. Don’t react, and try not to use the word “but.”

3. Call a good friend for a hug and supportive words. Be clear about when you want advice and from whom, and when you just want a kind, listening ear. People who don’t live in stepfamilies often don’t understand the deep conflicts and confusing dynamics in a step family journey.

4. Let those you love know what you need and want. Go only to those “wells” that have water in them.

5. Set reasonable limits for self and be clear and kindly assertive with kids when these limits are violated.

6. Use humor as often as possible. Have a family meal where all bring a joke or funny story. Play a game together like Outburst or Scattergories.

So, as Mother’s Day approaches, perhaps this difficult role of stepmothering and the courageous women who live it will be considered. I admire the stepmothers I’ve worked with for their pioneer spirit. For many children, these women become mentors and heroines. However, many more stepmothers are seen as an interference and the reason the children are unhappy. (Stepmothers are often scapegoated for the unresolved first marriage and divorce issues.) So let us hope for clarity of role, expectation, and for a lot of forgiveness as we travel together, both biological mother and stepmother, on the road with the kids. With this vastly changing world we live in, a new day named for stepmothers only, would bring acknowledgment, pride and a warm comfort they deserve. □

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn

Being a sports enthusiast, I believe athletic and sports events can be great learning experiences for our children. I am, however, concerned about the messages and images our children are receiving through the media.

Today's sports broadcasts and commentaries focus almost totally on the "exceptional" plays and players. We have developed a "big play" mentality where only the exceptional are valued. Good coaches will tell you that, while big plays are exciting, they do not necessarily make a winning team. Success is instead the combined result of good planning (the game plan), players with good fundamental skills, good communication, practice and teamwork. Big plays are generally the result of another team's weaknesses in one or more of these areas. In other words, winning is based on consistency play after play, not the exception which shows up on the highlight tape.

As parents, we sometimes fall into the same flawed

thinking in our family life. We believe the "exceptional" things we do with (or for) our children will have the greatest impact on their lives. Worse yet is the mistaken belief of some that a few "big plays" (i.e., gifts, money, trips, etc.) can take the place of or make up for our failure to provide the basics in family life (i.e., a genuine concern for each other, time together, communication, sharing of values, consistent expectations, etc.).

In family life, just as in sports, it is nice to have a few big plays now and then. We cannot, however, rely on them to lead to success. I believe we must instead learn to celebrate and encourage each other in carrying out the day-to-day basics of family life if we truly want to be successful. □



"DEAR ASHLEY"

Written and submitted by Susan Mayer

We met when you were all of five
A beautiful little girl I saw
Wit a velvet dress and tiny, shiny shoes
Anxiously awaiting entrance to the play

It was a chance meeting
For then your dad and I were merely friends
Yet that night I learned something very important
We both shared a passion for the arts

That night I learned you were a budding ballerina
Was it a coincidence that I also shared a love
for the dance?
We had only known each other for a moment
And yet I knew that we shared a dream

Three years passed and your dad and I married
Beside me you stood as my bridesmaid
Again, beautiful, in a long flowing gown
Looking far more mature than your tender seven years
Together we made a promise
And together we made a family

Throughout your preteen years we learned and we grew
You taught me to sew and to roller skate
After rolling out endless sheets of pizza dough
We baked, we crafted, we watched horribly scary movies

Through those early years of my marriage
I learned that we shared far more than our interests
As our own relationship began to take shape

As a stepmother and stepdaughter
We share such special bond
Two people brought together by chance and by love
I see so much of myself in you
I often wonder if the fates made this so

Around the corner you will be a teen
Our relationship will take many new turns
I hope that one day when you are grown
That I will not only be your stepmother
But one of your dearest friends

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS FOR SPRING 1998

By: Gloria Clark

As Chapter Development chair I recently received and read through the Stepfamily Association chapter status forms that many of the chapter leaders filled out. I would like to thank you for taking the time to fill out the forms. As always I am impressed by the dedication that goes into running a chapter. Some common themes emerge:

1. Getting the word out to the public about your group.
2. Attracting and keeping members.
3. Financial support.

Following are some suggestions, based on the status forms and experience with the Pittsburgh chapters of SAA:

1. GETTING THE WORD OUT TO THE PUBLIC ABOUT YOUR GROUP:

There are several options open to nonprofit groups such as ours. One that we in Pittsburgh plugged into was a listing in The Guide to Human Services that is part of our phone book. We estimate that we get the majority of our callers/members that way. There is a "Where to Turn" directory published by our Self-Help-Group network and the Carnegie Library which just instituted a Guide to Parenting Programs and will be sending it out to pediatricians and local social service agencies. We have recently acquired a local website.

Recently I spoke to KDKA, one of our local TV stations, and they told me that they have two ways to publicize our group. One is a Home Town Happenings bulletin boards that list events or meeting times and places. They also accept preproduced 10-, 15-, 20- and 30- second announcements, They would require Beta or 3/4 tapes but not VHS. We haven't made a tape yet but hope to look into it. You could check with your local station for their requirements. Radio stations often are willing to do interviews on stepfamilies, and newspapers run a local calendar on Sundays.

We have found that networking with our groups in the community such as PTA's, parenting groups and father support groups helps to let people know who we are and what our program is about. Often they invite us to speak to their group and are willing to reciprocate. More and more churches are providing their single families with information about stepfamilies and remarriage

and include us in their information lists. Recently we were invited to speak at an African-American Fathers Coalition meeting, and we hope to reach out to more people in this area.

2. ATTRACTING & RETAINING MEMBERS

During the 17 years that we have been meeting we have seen people come and go, and we feel this is a natural group process. Some people come for information when they get into a step-dating situation, but most people come when they are in pain with a crisis. Often a couple will attend a few meetings and decide that they received all that they need to manage; others stay and become helpers. From these helpers and other longer-term members grows a core group. New members breathe life into a group. It was interesting to read in the chapter status reports that many of you have a six-week educational workshop two or three times a year; others have speakers every so often and then follow-up what they spoke on with handouts and having the group talk about the topic.

Some groups have social meetings several times a year as a way of building group cohesion. A picnic that includes the children is a way of meeting the couples' children.

We hand out a survey twice a year that asks members for meeting topic suggestions and solicits help to do telephoning, new-member greeting, handling the library or facilitating a meeting. It helps to spread the responsibility and to get people more involved.

3. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

We have found that the United Way donor option for nonprofit is a good way to get money to run our group. We contacted United Way, and once we established that we were a nonprofit group exemption number, 501(c)(3), we received a code number to be entered in the United Way donation form. In fall we give out information at our meetings and in our newsletter about how to donate through United Way.

I hope these thoughts might be helpful to you as you work with your chapters and continue to make a difference in the lives of stepfamilies. If you have any suggestions or comments about leading a chapter I would be pleased if you would write to me at the SAA office and share your ideas. □

Stepfamily Association of America

List of Chapters in the U.S.

ALABAMA
NORTH ALABAMA CHAPTER
205-766-6588 or 205-718-0804

CALIFORNIA-LA AREA
LOS ANGELES CHAPTER
310-552-7837 or 562-926-8298

ORANGE COUNTY CHAPTER
714-579-3121

EAST VENTURE CHAPTER
805-497-0780 or 805-493-4589

CALIFORNIA-BAY AREA
CONTRA COSTA CHAPTER
510-838-2383 or 510-842-1067

EAST BAY CHAPTER
510-433-1848

MARIAN NETWORK CHAPTER
415-388-1848

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By definition, Stepfamily Association of America chapters are organizational units of SAA within specific geographic areas that are committed to the association's overall mission. The purpose of SAA chapters is to provide support, education, and enrichment to stepfamilies. Chapters accomplish this purpose by offering support groups, referring stepfamilies to community resources, inviting guest speakers to address specific topics or situations, or simply organizing a pot-luck dinner. Some chapters organize workshops or classes. A handful publish informative newsletters. A few chapters have established children's programs in which a professional may be hired to work with the stepfamily children.

Whether it's a Stepmother's Breakfast or a Stepteen Workshop, SAA's chapters are exploring the strengths and challenges of stepfamily living. Currently there are fifty established chapters throughout the United States. If you are interested in starting a chapter in your area, please contact the national office at Stepfamily Association of America, 650 J Street Suite 205, Lincoln, NE 68508 or at 1-800-735-0329.

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COUNSELOR'S CORNER

Continued from page 4

together to achieve a common goal. We all know of cases where we have discussed stepfamily issues with someone and they have said, "I wish I had known." I believe that the SAA and the therapeutic community can and should work together to promote each other. Otherwise, how will we spread the word? Increased community awareness is essential to both chapters and therapists.

The SAA has done much to increase professionals' involvement in the SAA. They have developed the Professional Training Institute an absolute necessity for therapists interested in working with the population. They offer a catalog of stepfamily resources. This year they published the Professional Affiliate Directory and distributed to affiliate themselves with mental health and therapy organizations. This, I believe will bring us to an interrelationship between chapters and the therapeutic community that will help bring about increased social awareness.

My love for the SAA runs deep. I was an adolescent when my parents divorced. Their subsequent remarriage caused all the familiar stepfamily issues. We experienced the same developmental cycle. However, I did not learn of the SAA until I was in my early thirties. Even though I was quite comfortable with all of my family and stepfamily members by this time. I was amazed, enlightened, and delighted by some of the education I received from SAA. As we approach the next millennium, it appears that close to half of our country will be involved in a stepfamily. I believe it is our duty as professional SAA members to work together to create public awareness and decrease the amount of "I wish I would have only known" throughout our communities. The result being more referrals to our SAA chapters and the therapists clinical practices. □



BOOK REVIEW

By: Pat Estess

Must Adult Stepchildren Validate the Saying, “Kids Will Be Kids”?

“Becoming An Adult Stepchild: Adjusting to a Parent’s New Marriage”

By Pearl Ketover Prilik (American Psychiatric Press)

You think you’re mature. You think you’re well adjusted. You think you’ve dealt rather successfully with the adolescent issues that plagued you during your teen years. Then you find out that a parent is going to remarry and you’re knocked off your pins. You begin feeling things you haven’t felt in a long time: anger, conflicting loyalties, fear that you’ll lose the parent, or worry that you’ll be discarded in favor of another. Does this mean that when people become adult stepchildren that they need to act out the way a child would?

That’s the question Dr. Pearl Ketover Prilik deals within her book, *Becoming An Adult Stepchild: Adjusting to a Parent’s New Marriage* (American Psychiatric Press). Adults may have more developed coping skills, but just because they “know better” doesn’t mean they can put aside their feelings and the unresolved psychological issues surrounding a parent’s remarriage and automatically deal with this event – unaffected by the changes that are taking place.

But the feelings can be worked through successfully. The event of a parent’s remarriage and the process of reconnecting with that parent in another manner might be the cause of pain, Dr. Prilik says. But it’s also an opportunity for personal growth.

Dr. Prilik, a psychotherapist with private practices in two Long island suburbs, begins each chapter by posing a few questions on specific subjects and situations that challenge readers to examine their feelings, attitudes and behavior toward their parent’s marriage. She explores the underlying conflicts brought about by these particular circumstances and provides numerous vignettes to illustrate typical adult reactions to a parent’s remarriage. Fortunately, she doesn’t stop there. She continues, providing suggestions on how readers can reduce the acrimony that can develop during this transition. And it is here that the adult, who has more experi-

ence at problem-solving than a child, can be most effective at decreasing the tension and developing new relationships.

The suggestions are more thoughtful than revolutionary – such as taking a parent out to lunch and explaining why certain heirlooms are so important to you and why you have a right to them, thinking carefully about what role you want your new stepfamily to have in your life and how your relations with your parent can change for

the better, or using the extra time you’ll be having (a result of not checking in with your mother daily) to refocus on your own life.

The book’s psychological slant does touch on some “real life” issues such as money and inheritance and senior competency (there’s a chapter on each), but it doesn’t provide hard answers to those especially difficult topics. Other resources are available that focus on these areas.

The power of this book is that it addresses a group that is frequently overlooked in the stepfamily literature – the adult stepchildren. And it speaks to them in a friendly, readable and accessible way. It assures them

they’re not alone if they have problems adjusting to this new family constellation. And it dishes out some important truths from their vantage point.

“When all is said and done, the most significant gain that we may garner from a parent’s marriage is a greater tolerance of ambiguity. The disruptions, shifts, conflicts, recognized yearnings and confrontations of losses brought about by a parent’s marriage teach one clear lesson: life is about change.”

“In the end, no matter how young or old we are, part of us always remains our parent’s child.”

The most important reason for reading this book, though, is that it points the way for adult stepchildren to capture the opportunity to make and deepen connections to enrich themselves and their families. And, no matter how old you are, that’s a goal worth striving for.

**“In the end,
no matter
how young or old
we are,
part of us
always remains
our parent’s
child.”**

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Over the past several years SAA has been pleased to publish many excellent articles and research findings on various aspects of stepfamily life within its quarterly publication *Stepfamilies*. These have included articles by many of the top researchers and scholars in the field as well as more personal articles written by stepfamily members from across the country.

Collections of SAA's best articles and findings in the areas of Stepparenting, Stepmotherhood, Stepchildren, Grandparent Relations, Stepfamily Research, and Counseling Stepfamilies are available.

A complete index of articles found in each collection follows:

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- Adaptation from *Becoming A Stepfamily: Patterns of Development in Remarried Families* (Jossey-bass 1993) - Patricia L. Papernow
- Building Stepfamily Traditions - Elizabeth Einstein
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Establishing a stepfamily or blended family can be challenging, but the challenges depend on the people involved and their circumstances. Generally, there are advantages and disadvantages to stepfamilies. Patience, respect, commitment and time are necessary to overcome any hurdles. Becoming part of a stepfamily involves adjusting to a number of changes, both for parents and children. Young people of different ages tend to feel different things about this at first. A stepfamily, blended family, or bonus family, is a family where at least one parent has children that are not genetically related to the other spouse or partner. Either parent, or both, may have children from previous relationships. Children in a stepfamily may live with one biological parent, or they may live with each biological parent for a period of time. In addition, visitation rights mean that children in stepfamilies often have contact with both biological parents, even if they permanently Stepfamilies consist of at least one minor child who is living with a biological parent and that parent's spouseâ€”a stepparentâ€”who is not the child's other biological parent. According to Larry Bumpass, James Sweet, and Teresa Castro Martin (1990), approximately one-half of all marriages are a remarriage for at least one partner. In 1992, 15 percent of all children in the United States lived with a mother and a stepfather (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995).