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Francesca Adler-Baeder^a; Anne Robertson^b; David G. Schramm^c

^a Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, USA ^b Abt Associates Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA ^c Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, USA

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Conceptual Framework for Marriage Education Programs for Stepfamily Couples with Considerations for Socioeconomic Context

FRANCESCA ADLER-BAEDER

Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, USA

ANNE ROBERTSON

Abt Associates Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

DAVID G. SCHRAMM, Ph.D.

Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, USA

Stepfamily couples face unique challenges that put them at higher risk for dissolution than non-stepfamily couples. Risks for stepfamily couples are magnified in the context of lower economic resources, making low-income stepfamily couples a key target population for intervention and for community education programs. Existing programs and services for couples often do not address the unique situations of stepfamilies. This article builds on previous reviews that have offered information on important research themes and assessment of available curricula for stepfamily couples and presents a more comprehensive conceptual model to guide program design and services for stepfamily couples inclusive of specific objectives, as well as conditions and antecedents affecting content and prioritized needs. The goal is to enhance efforts to strengthen more vulnerable couples in complex families.

KEYWORDS *conceptual framework, education, marriage, model, relationships, stepfamily*

Address correspondence to Francesca Adler-Baeder, 263 Spidle Hall, Department of Human Development and Human Studies, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849, USA. E-mail: francesca@auburn.edu

INTRODUCTION

There are several reasons to devote special attention to stepfamilies in family science programming and research. First, stepfamilies are common as a result of divorces, remarriages, and first marriages after out-of-wedlock births (Fein, Burstein, Fein, & Lindberg, 2003; Teachman & Tedow, 2008). Second, stepfamilies face a variety of unique challenges that generally go unaddressed in depth in most existing marriage education curricula but that may put them at higher risk for dissolution than non-stepfamilies. These challenges arise in part from complex relationships with stepchildren, former partners, and half- and stepsiblings (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Third, although children can do well in a variety of family forms, there is some evidence that living in a stepfamily is associated with greater risk for negative outcomes for children when compared with living in a nuclear family (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Orthner et al., 2009). This is evidenced more for children and youth in European American families (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010).

Risks for stepfamilies are magnified in the context of lower economic resources. Couples experiencing economic strain face additional stresses arising from financial difficulties and other personal and environmental challenges accompanying limited resources (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999). Research indicates that low-income married couples are comparatively more vulnerable to marital dissolution and that their children are at greater risk for negative outcomes (Kreider, 2005).

Based on existing information, it appears that couples are creating stepfamilies through remarriages and through first marriages in increasing numbers, particularly among low-income populations (Teachman & Tedow, 2008). Estimates are that about half of economically disadvantaged married couples have stepfamily relationships and that a majority of African-American, low-income married couples have stepchildren either living in the household or with a previous partner (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003). It also appears that low-income stepfamilies are comparatively more complex due to multiple partner fertility (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The combination of economic strain and complex stepfamily structure establish low-income stepfamily couples as an important target population for couple and family strengthening efforts. Even so, low-income and diverse stepfamily couples remain woefully understudied (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010).

Although efforts have been made to provide practitioners with information on research-informed themes important for inclusion in educational programs for remarried couples and information on existing stepfamily-focused educational curricula (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), a broad conceptual framework for programs and services for stepfamilies that

considers not only content but also measurable objectives, process, and socioeconomic context has not been articulated. Increasingly, lower-income couples are participating in couples education (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). The conceptual model developed includes considerations for more vulnerable, low-income families, has more refined themes useful as potentially measurable objectives, and offers a suggested process flow.

Overview of the Stepfamily Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) is an organizing tool, a heuristic, and attempts have been made to be comprehensive and inclusive of information. It is not intended to be a singular empirical model positing testable hypotheses, although, certainly, such empirical models can be derived from this framework and we encourage its use as such.

We adopted a normative-adaptive perspective in suggesting areas of focus for services for stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Early research on stepfamilies primarily used a deficit-comparison perspective and looked for ways that stepfamilies were deficient as compared with nuclear families with little emphasis on positive well-being and adaptation (reviewed in Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In contrast, the

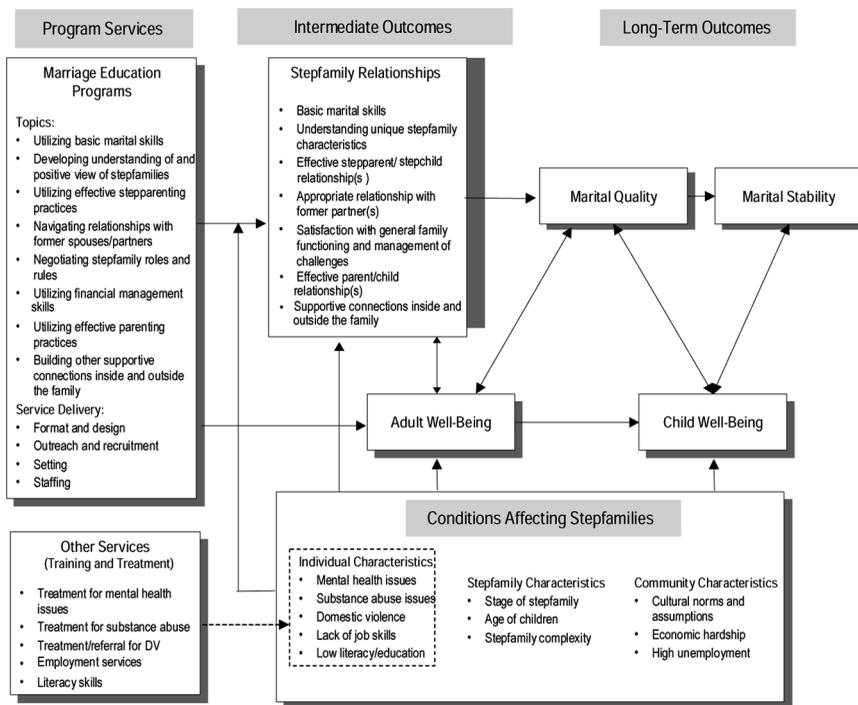


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework for marriage education for low-income stepfamily couples.

normative-adaptive perspective is a strength-based approach that views stepfamilies as distinct family forms, not “imperfect copies of nuclear families” (Visher & Visher, 1979). Informed by empirical information on characteristics and processes among successful stepfamilies, our strategies are centered on the identification of unique elements of family development and dynamics and areas for building in and enhancing strengths for the family system in the face of challenges. It is important to note that the empirical basis for the model comes from studies of married stepfamily couples; studies of non-married stepfamily couples are virtually nonexistent. Therefore, we articulate the model’s use for work with married couples. Its application for work with nonmarried couples requires further empirical study and validation.

The objectives guiding our conceptual framework for stepfamily programs are to maintain and strengthen healthy relationships between the spouses in the stepfamily and between spouses and children, thereby promoting the long-term outcomes of marital quality, marital stability, and child well-being (shown at the far right of the framework in Figure 1). We present these as co-occurring outcomes rather than explicate priorities or the processes among them that most certainly exist. The definition of marital quality or healthy marriage we use includes the couple’s commitment to one another, the ability to communicate and resolve conflicts effectively, lack of domestic violence, fidelity, time together, intimacy, and social support (Moore et al., 2004). Our view of adult and child well-being includes health and safety, positive socioemotional functioning, and, for children, age-level cognitive functioning and educational attainment among other characteristics (Moore et al., 2004).

At the heart of our framework are the intermediate outcomes, specific aspects of stepfamily relationships that the literature suggests are crucial to healthy marriages in stepfamilies (i.e., the long-term goals). These elements are influenced by the marriage education program and, in turn, contribute to the long-term outcomes. The literature does not validate the explication of prioritizing of these outcomes; therefore, they are presented as equally worthy outcome goals for marriage education. The intermediate outcomes encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to distinctive challenges facing stepfamily couples as well as aspects of marital relations common to all couples. The adult well-being of the stepfamily spouses, also considered an intermediate outcome, both influences the stepfamily relationships and is influenced by them. Under program services our conceptual framework identifies the principal topics marriage education programs should cover and the key issues involved in service delivery that influence the intermediate outcomes. Our research review suggests that comprehensive marriage education programs for stepfamily couples should include (1) insights and skills directly useful in addressing unique aspects of stepfamily functioning and (2) basic relationship skills that can benefit all types of couples. We also include under program services important training and

treatment services, listed as other services. Because they will likely directly influence only individuals and not couples or families, the link between them is indicated by the broken lines in Figure 1.

Conditions affecting stepfamilies constitute an important component of the framework and affect multiple components of the framework. These conditions include those individual and community characteristics that may influence any family as well as those characteristics specific to stepfamilies. Conditions relevant to families in general include the strengths and vulnerabilities each spouse brings to the relationship and the social and economic contexts surrounding families. These contextual conditions may be especially critical for understanding and designing programs for low-income couples, whether in stepfamilies or not. Because of their financial circumstances, such couples typically experience more difficulties and stresses that can challenge the maintenance of healthy relationships and marriages (e.g., Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

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

As depicted in our framework, conditions enter the picture in several ways. In addition to influencing intermediate and long-term outcomes, the conditions are also seen as influencing how the program affects stepfamily relationships, indicated by the arrow in Figure 1 connecting "Conditions" to the arrow linking "Marriage Education Programs" to "Stepfamily Relationships." For example, a spouse with an untreated mental health or substance abuse issue is likely not to benefit from a marriage education program without first addressing the individual challenge.

In the following sections, we provide further details. We describe eight core topic areas for marriage education programs the research suggests should be covered as a minimum in programs for stepfamilies. Next, we identify and discuss some of the principal conditions likely to affect stepfamily couples, with an emphasis on conditions for low resource couples. Discussion of marriage education's service delivery elements is then presented.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We conducted a review of the literature to guide and inform the development of the conceptual model. This process was conducted in several steps, each focusing on a particular part of the literature relevant to stepfamilies and

the conditions and characteristics that influence stepfamily functioning and intermediate and long-term outcomes. To begin, we examined the past two decade reviews published in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, several recent books containing summaries and updates on research on stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Pryor, 2008), and other recent reviews of stepfamily research and the implications for marriage education (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004) and clinical interventions (Falke & Larson, 2007; Pasley, Koch, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). Because published summaries covered available literature on stepfamilies up to 2003, we narrowed our comprehensive literature review to information published within the past 6 years (2004–2009). Accordingly, we searched several academic publication databases (e.g., PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and EBSCO's Academic Search Elite) for relevant studies published in that timeframe. We also expanded our search to include literature from other disciplines (e.g., economics, education, health behavior). As with previous literature reviews and summaries, we limited our search to studies conducted within the United States for internal consistency in presenting a conceptual framework for supporting stepfamilies in the United States.

After our initial review process of the remarriage and stepfamily literature, we performed an additional search to locate studies of low-income and ethnic minority populations. A more careful exploration of this research revealed that although not necessarily highlighting findings related to stepfamily functioning, several articles contained relevant information when the sample characteristics and analyses were examined. A number of scholars with specific expertise were also contacted for studies in press.

MARRIAGE EDUCATION PROGRAM TOPICS

Using Basic Marital Skills

We expect that stepfamily couples' interactions have the same causes and consequences as non-stepfamily couples and thus will benefit similarly from basic relationship insights and skills training (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2008). Although these basic skills have been summarized in a variety of ways, the core elements that appear to emerge across all summaries of research on healthy marriages are communication skills, conflict management skills, effective anger and stress management, emotion regulation, and friendship-building skills (i.e., caring, nurturing, expressing affection, showing empathy, attempts to connect) (e.g., Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Moore et al., 2004). It may be especially important for low-income stepfamily couples to gain and maintain strong basic relational skills, as low-income adults are more likely to have experienced their own parents' relationship disruption and repartnering and are comparatively less

likely than those reared in healthy, nondisrupted families to have been exposed to positive relational role models (Amato, 2000; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

The importance of learning how to manage conflict and stress is magnified in stepfamily situations (Fausel, 1995). Stepfamily couples can face relational challenges at the onset (Dupuis, 2007; Falke & Larson, 2007; Michaels, 2007), whereas for nuclear family couples, issues that create conflict are more likely to evolve over time. In addition, because of the complexity of stepfamilies, stepfamily couples may be faced with managing not only their own conflicts but conflicts with and between other stepfamily members. Irrespective of the amount of conflict, it appears that it is the method of conflict management that is most important for family well-being.

The research on low-income couples also suggests training in skills for successfully managing stressful situations and aggressive behaviors may be very relevant and helpful. Studies of parenting show that low-income adults are less likely than higher-resource adults to have learned emotion regulation techniques from their interactions with caregivers (e.g., Gottman, Fainsilber-Katz, & Hooven, 1996). Research suggests that low-income individuals also are less likely to have learned effective emotional expressivity and cognitive reappraisal strategies that assist with managing stressful situations and negative emotional arousal (e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1995; Labouvie-Viet & Medler, 2002). An important assumption, therefore, is that adults in low-income stepfamily couples will be especially benefited by learning emotion regulation skills in relationships and individual stress, anger, and conflict management (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Another important general relationship emphasis is to foster skills and practices that promote friendship and intimacy in the marital relationship, such as caring, nurturing, verbalizing affection and appreciation, and disclosing intimate information (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). This is a critical buffer for couples when they face challenges such as economic strain (Bradbury & Karney, 2004) and is particularly important for stepfamily couples, as their relationship is one of the newest and potentially the most vulnerable in the stepfamily system. It is noted that this focus on creating a strong, intimate marital bond is important to establish in the minds of the couple as well as in the minds of the children (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). When children view the new couple as a solidified team, they may be less likely to attempt to undermine the relationship (Afifi, 2008; Cissna et al., 1990).

Exposure to program content in this area is expected to result in enhancement of multiple areas of basic relational skills. Measurable objectives can include interpersonal competence, with specific assessment of anger and emotion regulation skills, stress management skills, conflict management skills, use of positive and negative relational behaviors, and use of empathy skills.

Understanding Stepfamilies' Unique Characteristics and Developing a Positive View toward Stepfamilies

It is vital that stepfamily couples recognize that stepfamilies are structurally and developmentally different from nuclear families (Papernow, 2008). For example, in stepfamilies the biological parent-child bond predates the couple relationship, whereas in non-stepfamilies the couple relationship predates the parent-child relationship. There are relationships that exist only in stepfamilies (e.g., stepsiblings, new spouse/ex-spouse). Accepting that stepfamilies are unique and having realistic expectations for stepfamily development and stepfamily relationships are critical to healthy stepfamily functioning (Falke & Larson, 2007; Papernow, 2008; Visser, Visser, & Pasley, 2003).

A key element of appropriate expectations/beliefs is an understanding of the substantial length of time necessary to establish roles and to determine a stepfamily's particular pattern of successful functioning (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2008). It is common for some members to take longer to adjust and feel comfortable in the new family form than others. Older children tend to adjust at slower rates than stepfamily couples with younger children. Research suggests that striving for equally cohesive bonds and similar feelings of connection and love between stepfamily members may not be a realistic goal for most stepfamilies and may not be essential for well-functioning marital and stepfamily relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2008). The more important dimension of healthy stepfamily functioning is the level of mutual agreement about the nature of each relationship (e.g., parent-child bond, friendship) within the stepfamily system.

Without an understanding of the ways that stepfamilies differ from nuclear families, stepfamily couples may be more strongly influenced by the societal norms that still largely consider the nuclear family as "ideal." Media (from fairy tales to college textbooks to motion pictures) reinforce negative portrayals of stepfamilies (e.g., Coleman, Ganong, & Goodwin, 1994; Leon & Angst, 2005). It is important for marriage education programs to address norms about stepfamilies in the wider culture because they play a role in determining the cognitive context in which individuals evaluate their situation, conduct themselves, and expect to be regarded by others (for a detailed discussion on this topic, see Dallos, 1991).

Program content in this area is expected to yield gains in participants' awareness of stepfamily-specific norms. This includes greater awareness of average time for stabilization of stepfamilies, greater awareness of a functional model of family cohesion in stepfamilies (i.e., different from nuclear family model; varying levels of connection and affection among members). In addition, gains in participants' awareness of their own biases and negative views of stepfamilies can be assessed.

Using Effective Stepparenting Practices

Bringing children into a new marital relationship can influence couple functioning and overall family functioning. Some studies have indicated that remarriages are more unstable mostly due to conflicts revolving around stepparenting and stepchildren (Pasley et al., 1993; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2008). A critical and consistent pattern observed in every decade of research on couples in stepfamilies is the spillover of negative stepparent–stepchild relationships onto the quality and stability of the marital relationship (Coleman et al., 2000; Falke & Larson, 2007; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2008). Thus, factors related to improving stepparent–stepchild relationship quality are indirectly related to the enhancement of marital quality. Research supports the suggestion for stepparents to ease into a disciplinarian role and to initially offer support for the parent and the stepchild(ren), although the transition period may be shorter for families with multiparental cultural norms (Adler-Baeder & Schramm, 2006). Enforcing family rules, rather than asserting a primary parenting role, is associated with more satisfying stepparent–stepchild relationships and higher marital quality (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This is a particularly important approach when adolescent stepchildren are involved and particularly in the early years of stepfamily formation.

Stepparents who continually use caring, but not intrusive, behaviors in an attempt to acquire a stepchild's trust and affection tend to develop more effective relationships with their stepchildren (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). When stepparents disengage and interact very little with their stepchildren or when they use coercive, punitive disciplinary behaviors, the stepparent–stepchild relationship is negatively affected (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Cohen & Fowers, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It can be helpful for the stepparent to use empathy and constructive conflict management skills with stepchildren (Afifi, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In addition, including in programs basic information on child and adolescent development and nonpunitive behavior management techniques can be especially helpful for stepparents who are not also biological parents.

Measurable objectives after exposure to this program content area include assessments of stepparenting skills, ability and usage, and stepparent–stepchild relational quality. The latter can be assessed through measures of reported level of conflict between stepparent and stepchild and measures of satisfaction in the stepparenting role.

Navigating Relationships with Former Partners

Because most stepfamilies are formed after separation or divorce from a partner rather than death, we can assume that coparenting relationships with former partners exist for most. Among low-income parents, this is more likely to include multiple coparenting relationships from both previous married and

nonmarried relationships (Adler-Baeder & Shirer, in press; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The quality of coparenting relationships among former partners/spouses and the level of involvement between former partners have been shown to impact the relationship quality of the new marriage (e.g., Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Cissna et al., 1990; Knox & Zusman, 2001). Thus, another critical element in marriage education with stepfamily couples is the inclusion of skill-building on successful coparenting strategies for use with former partners/spouses.

The quality of the relationship is enhanced when individuals communicate unemotionally, use supportive language, honor agreements, use written communication, maintain privacy regarding other aspects of their lives, and actively support their child's connection to the other parent (Ahrons, 2004). In addition, it appears that coparenting relationships are best managed directly or with a neutral person rather than through the child or through communication between the former partner and the current partner.

Exposure to program content in this area is expected to result in enhanced coparenting skills and coparenting relational quality. Measures of level of coparenting conflict, cooperation, and emotional disengagement can be used to assess impact in this targeted area.

Negotiating Stepfamily Roles and Rules

Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies and the fact that stepfamilies have been a focus for researchers and clinicians for at least three decades, clear societal norms about roles and relationships do not exist (Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991), and in fact, public policies do not consistently recognize step-parents as parents (Mason, Harrision-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002). In general, strong stepfamily couples recognize that accepted norms for roles and stepfamily functioning are nearly nonexistent. They proactively work to negotiate mutually acceptable roles and rules within the stepfamily and with those connected to the stepfamily. They determine together the best ways to manage the unique financial issues inherent in stepfamilies, and they exhibit an understanding of the importance of being flexible and patient with the dynamic process of these negotiations (Afifi, 2008; Golish, 2003). Consensus building in these areas is critical to couple quality (Falke & Larson, 2007).

Program content can center on negotiating skills for establishing family-specific roles and rules. Programs can also emphasize the dynamic nature of these processes. That is, negotiating roles and rules is not a one-time event but is rather a continuing, evolving process that incorporates family experiences and developmental changes.

Using Financial Management Skills

Especially relevant for stepfamily couples is the lack of norms about financial management in stepfamilies. Instead of a prescription for managing complex

financial relationships between biologically related and unrelated persons in the family system, it appears that most important for healthy stepfamily couple functioning is agreement about the methods used and the level of support provided to resident and nonresident children and stepchildren (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, & Weaver, 2001). In addition, meeting expectations for level of financial support for the immediate family is related to remarital stability (Schmiege, Richards, Zvonkovic, 2001). This is particularly salient for low-income couples.

It is expected that exposure to program content in the areas of financial management and the negotiation and establishment of family-specific roles and rules will result in enhanced general stepfamily functioning. Measures of perceptions of family harmony, family conflict, level of agreement on household roles and practices, and satisfaction with stepfamily functioning can provide evidence of positively affecting these targeted outcome areas.

Using Effective Parenting Practices

In stepfamily research, and subsequently in program content focused on stepfamilies, typically more attention is given to the stepparent–stepchild relationship(s) and the impact on marital functioning than to the relationship between original parents and their children. There is, however, research that indicates that parents and biological/adopted children also face unique relationship challenges in stepfamilies (Cartwright, 2008). For example, resident parent–child relationships (typically mother–child) frequently change during single-parent living and after remarriage. Some studies find that post-divorce mothers become more authoritarian (i.e., punitive, controlling) (Bray & Kelly, 1998), and some find post-divorce mothers become more disengaged and permissive (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Thomson, Mosley, Hanson, & McLanahan, 2001). These parents then tend to again alter their parenting style after remarriage (e.g., a more permissive mother may become more strict after remarriage), creating difficulties in the parent–child relationship, particularly in the first few years (Cartwright, 2008). Attention to providing a consistent, predictable parenting environment is critical for children’s well-being and ultimately for family functioning.

Measurable objectives after exposure to this program content area include assessments of parenting practices and of parent–child relational quality, both for stepparents and stepchildren and original parents and their children. The latter can be assessed through measures of reported level of conflict and support between parent and child and measures of parental efficacy and satisfaction in the parenting role.

Building Other Supportive Connections Inside and Outside Stepfamilies

Research on relationships among children in stepfamilies has recognized for some time that difficulties in these relationships can “bubble up” and create

stresses within couples, (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Clinical studies indicate that biological/adopted children are especially reactive to perceived inequities in how parents treat them compared with stepsiblings and half-siblings. In practice, helping stepparents to treat children in the household consistently can serve to enhance family functioning (Anderson, 1999; Baham, Weimer, Braver, & Fabricius, 2008).

Beyond immediate family members, there is evidence that fostering stronger relationships with external family and nonfamily networks can be beneficial and that compared with nuclear families, stepfamilies tend to have weaker external family linkages (DeLongis, Capreol, Holtzman, O'Brien, & Campbell, 2004) and weaker ties to community institutions such as schools and churches (Deal, 2002; Visher et al., 2003). A perceived lack of social support has a negative impact on the marriage and on stepfamily members (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Discussions of proactive support-seeking can be part of program content in marriage education for stepfamily couples. Feeling supported and validated can have a positive impact on marital and family functioning (Visher, 2001).

Research on low-income families suggests that, comparatively, low-income families both provide and receive outside support in many forms more so than do high-resource families (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). When practitioners, working with low-income stepfamilies, address this program content area, they may only need to affirm and encourage these help-seeking and providing methods rather than assist in initiating them.

The outcome goal for this program content area is enhanced familial connections and support. Measures can focus on the assessment of sibling relational quality and perceptions of equity. In addition, assessments of complexity and quality of support networks can be used to look for expected gains in this area.

CONDITIONS AFFECTING STEPFAMILIES

Certain conditions affecting stepfamilies can, in turn, affect the targeted intermediate outcomes as well as adult and child well-being directly. Conditions can also influence the effects of program participation on expected outcomes. It is important that educators and program staff, particularly those serving low-income stepfamilies, recognize and respond in their program planning to the individual, family, and community characteristics that can affect stepfamily couple relationships. Low-income stepfamilies can face both stepfamily-specific challenges and additional stressors arising from their financial situations and community context. If programs cannot provide services directly, they may make referrals to appropriate sources that can provide the additional services stepfamily couples may need. Consideration should also be given to sequence. Under some conditions, marriage

education and other services (e.g., job skills training, literacy enhancement) can be offered simultaneously, whereas under other conditions, special services provision leads (e.g., drug/alcohol treatment, mental health services), with participation in marriage education following successful management of condition.

In the following paragraphs we describe and note implications for educators for three categories of conditions that may affect stepfamilies: individual characteristics (e.g., mental health issues, substance abuse issues, lack of job skills), stepfamily characteristics (stage of development, age of children, complexity of stepfamily membership), and community characteristics (cultural norms and assumptions, economic hardship, and high unemployment).

Individual Characteristics

In a decade review of the research literature related to families in poverty, Secombe (2000) reviewed numerous studies that point to higher levels of mental health and substance abuse issues and lower levels of education among those who live in poverty. Certainly, issues and needs exist across the socioeconomic spectrum; however, because the prevalence of a variety of challenges or risk factors has been shown to be higher among low-income adults, programs for low-income families and stepfamilies should be prepared to respond to challenges such as mental health issues, substance abuse issues, exposure to domestic violence and/or physical aggression in past/current relationships, and the need for job skills and literacy training.

Stepfamily Characteristics

Turning to characteristics of the stepfamily unit itself, one important factor is how long couples have been together at the point they participate in a marriage education program. More specifically, program content for new stepfamily couples should cover information on the unique characteristics of stepfamilies and the skills needed to discuss and negotiate family roles, rules, and boundary ambiguity, resulting in a clearer shared view of the family and smoother transitions into the new family structure (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Stewart, 2005). At later stages of stepfamily development, programs are more likely to encounter stepfamily couples seeking resources for longer-term challenges and adjustment issues (Nicholson, Sanders, Halford, Phillips, & Whitton, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1996).

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

Marsiglio, 2004). Adolescents tend to have the most difficulty adjusting to their parents' remarriage and new relationships with stepparents (Nicholson et al., 2008). Part of the issue may stem from difficulties many teens have in coming to terms with their parents' separation or divorce, an adjustment that may be even more difficult due to the independence granted during single parenting and the normal challenges characteristic of adolescence. Program content needs will vary depending on the ages of children in the family.

The complexity of the stepfamily is another consideration. Families in which only one spouse has children from a previous relationship (i.e., a "simple" stepfamily) have fewer relationships to navigate compared with families in which *both* spouses have children from a previous relationship (i.e., a "complex" stepfamily). Further complexity arises when the children of one or both spouses are from more than one previous relationship; managing multiple coparenting relationships and a variety of stepsibling and half-sibling relationships within households and across households can be challenging. Stepfamily complexity is increased in situations that include grandparents who have also played parental roles with their grandchildren. For couples in complex stepfamilies, emphasis and information on building positive relationships among stepsiblings is important. In addition, general material on coparenting skills is likely to be relevant regardless of whether couples are navigating one or multiple coparenting relationships. Thus, practitioners should take into consideration the stage of the stepfamily development, the age(s) of the child(ren), and the complexities associated with the possibility of multiple current and previous relationships and spend more time on topic areas most relevant to their class population. Educators should also consider the inclusion of children, particularly older children and adolescents, in the program through either a parallel program or involvement in some aspects of the parent program.

Community Characteristics

Community factors can both strengthen and pose challenges for relationships in families, including stepfamilies. More general research on community, culture, and family relationships allows us to offer some suggestions for working with stepfamilies from diverse cultural backgrounds. Halford (2000) noted some cultures may have different norms about functional relational dynamics. He stressed that the communication that is culturally appropriate between partners varies greatly by culture. Marriage education curricula should recognize and allow room for discussion of potential variation in norms about couple interactions as well as views of stepfamilies and acceptance of stepparents.

In addition to cultural awareness, it is critical to consider whether and how community level unemployment and/or economic hardship influence stepfamilies. In their longitudinal work with rural families, Conger and Elder (1994) found that decreases in family income led to feelings of financial pressure,

anxiety, and depression among both spouses. This feeling of financial pressure, in turn, increased the number of hostile exchanges between husbands and wives, which led to declines in marital satisfaction for both spouses over time. Ooms and Wilson (2004) also write, “Regardless of race or cultural background, being poor or near poor brings with it a host of factors—chronic shortage of money; accumulating debts; low levels of literacy; high rates of unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, depression, and domestic violence; poor housing, unsafe neighborhoods, multiple-partner fertility—that place enormous stress on relationships in ways that scholars are only beginning to explore” (p. 441). Multiple, simultaneous needs are best addressed through multiple, coordinated interventions. Issues such as these can be more explicitly addressed in programs when there is shared experience. Support among program participants can enhance the effectiveness of resources offered.

Service Delivery

Although our literature review identified only one evaluation study of aspects of service delivery in the context of marriage education programs for low-income stepfamilies (Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010), we include information from studies relevant to our work that examine implementation of programs for low-income populations generally or for marriage education generally. Here we briefly review research relevant to program design, recruitment, and the setting and staff.

To begin, marriage educators want to be sensitive to participants’ level of comfort in group settings with couples from diverse backgrounds. Low-income couples may be uncomfortable discussing financial stresses they are facing together in a group that also contains non-disadvantaged couples. Also, low-income participants are less likely to have had positive experiences in previous educational settings. Recruitment materials can address some related concerns by explaining clearly how programs differ from traditional school approaches and the gains for participants expected. Further, low-income couples may find it more difficult than more advantaged families to make time for both partners to attend relationship education classes due to demands related to working long hours and/or nonstandard shifts. Flexibility in scheduling and offering “make-up” sessions can be critical, as are resources that remove barriers to participation (e.g., childcare, transportation, etc.) (Adler-Baeder & Shirer, in press; Skogrand et al., 2010).

An additional challenge may be that some stepfamily couples may feel a stigma attached to their stepfamily status and “disguise” their stepfamily status. There is also some suggestion that low-income, ethnic minority couples in stepfamilies may not identify with the term “stepfamily” (Skogrand et al., 2010). This may be considered a White, middle-class term. Program planners can assess through needs assessments or focus groups whether there exists a term that may be more culturally appropriate and may help with recruitment.

They can also seek out formal and informal community leaders (e.g., clergy) who can validate the stepfamily experience and encourage participation.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR COUPLE EDUCATORS

In using the conceptual framework for program planning, one design question is whether to develop programs specifically for “stepcouples” (i.e., couples in stepfamilies) or to incorporate stepfamily-specific material in general marriage education programs serving both stepfamilies and non-stepfamilies. We are not aware of any research assessing the comparative effectiveness of the two approaches. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Targeted programs can be more fully tailored to stepfamily issues and needs, and participants may benefit from the additional social support and “normalization” from sharing experiences with others in similar circumstances. On the other hand, it may be difficult to identify and recruit participants who are strictly from stepfamilies. Programs for mixed groups are more practical, as a substantial number of the current participants in general marriage education programs, given current rates of prevalence, are likely to be in stepfamilies, and thus a new outreach effort would not be needed. Furthermore, if stepcouples tend to avoid programs that single them out, they may be more likely to participate in a general program. Another possible benefit may be in raising awareness of stepfamily issues among non-stepfamilies.

General marriage education content and stepfamily-specific content might be combined using a number of approaches. For instance, content on stepfamilies, emphasizing their unique characteristics and developmental stages and other high priority topics, could first be presented to all participants in general marriage education programs. Then more specific content on stepfamilies could be addressed in separate breakout sessions for stepcouples. Such sessions also would provide them with an opportunity to build social support among the stepfamilies.

The conceptual model also can be useful for those involved in planning and offering marriage preparation classes. Many couples, including stepcouples, are encouraged or required by their religious institutions to attend a marriage preparation class. Participants in marriage preparation programs are likely to include couples who are forming stepfamilies, whether through remarriage or by marrying for the first time but with children from previous relationships. It would be reasonable, therefore, to use the model and include general content about the unique characteristics of stepfamilies within these courses to address the needs of this group and to raise awareness of stepfamily issues generally. As was suggested in the context of general marriage education programs, marriage preparation programs could offer additional sessions for those forming stepfamilies to discuss their particular concerns, cover the remaining core topics, and offer or connect these couples to other program services as needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The model offers practitioners and evaluators an organizing tool for applied and basic research. Core elements and the suggested flow of a logic model are contained within the model and allow for assessments of change in targeted outcomes. Because hypothesized connections were derived in deductive fashion from basic research, examining the links from program services to intermediate and subsequent long-term outcomes will serve as the applied tests of these influences. More nuanced tests of the model will include examinations of mediating and moderating effects among variables and the examination of relative contributions of predictors to targeted outcomes.

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

- What societal norms, neighborhood contexts, family of origin experiences, aspects of childbearing/children, individual characteristics of mental and physical health, and so on affect stepfamily formation, quality and stability, and other possible outcomes? Which factors, comparatively, are more predictive of changes in these outcomes?
- Through what relationship processes do these conditions operate on stepfamily outcomes?
- How do the above differ for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged stepcouples? How do the above differ based on other demographic characteristics of participants, including marital status?

It will also be important to examine how elements of service delivery, both of the marriage education program and other services, affect outcomes. Because one-group, short-term study designs dominate marriage education research (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010), research on effectiveness should incorporate rigorous study designs (i.e., experimental) and follow stepcouples for several years or more and include both married and nonmarried couples. These efforts will further validate the usefulness of the framework and will lead to refinement of the model.

Efforts to implement the model specifically targeting low-income stepcouples also offer the opportunity to examine critical questions related to successful implementation of programs. Service delivery suggestions are derived mainly from work with lower-income families, in general. Process

studies would help identify potentially promising practices for work with diverse stepfamilies. For instance, it would be useful to know whether low-income stepcouples would take advantage of programs sponsored by institutions serving the general population, such as public schools and hospitals, or whether more focused community and grass-roots organizations' offerings have greater appeal. Research on the experiences of stepfamilies participating in both general and stand-alone marriage education programs would be valuable. What factors drove stepcouples to volunteer for the programs? What factors contributed to retention? What aspects of the programs did they find most and least relevant? Which types of programs attract which types of participants?

It would also be useful to learn what elements of teaching techniques and program materials make the marriage education content most useful and relevant to program participants. A recent study found limited evidence that characteristics of the facilitator matter for assessments of stepcouples' satisfaction with the program (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010). Understanding more about the educator's role in enhancement of target outcomes for stepcouples would be useful.

Importantly, enhanced basic research information on diverse stepfamilies is a serious need for refining the model, formulating policies, and designing models of best practices for stepcouple programs. Components of the model are derived from the extant literature on majority culture stepfamilies and the broad spectrum of low-income families. We know almost nothing about the attitudes and experiences of economically disadvantaged stepcouples or of stepcouples who are racial and ethnic minorities. We also have limited information on nonmarried stepcouples. To more effectively reach out to minority and economically disadvantaged stepcouples and address their perceived needs, it would be beneficial to know more about how they view themselves, their attitudes and beliefs about stepfamilies, and developmental and relational patterns of successful stepfamily couples within context. Using an ecocultural lens (Phenice, Griffore, Hakoyama, & Silvey, 2009) may result in variants within the larger framework of best practices models for stepcouples.

SUMMARY

Existing evidence suggests that many married couples in the United States are managing stepfamily relationships. Empirical studies of stepfamily dynamics highlight the unique factors inherent in stepfamily couple relationships that impact their quality and stability—most notably the complexity of multiple relationships that exist at the onset of the marriage. Research on low-income populations suggests that economic strain carries with it risks for marital health and stability, as well.

Our empirically informed conceptual framework for marriage education for stepfamily couples, particularly those in low-income families, suggests the

inclusion of eight core content areas for educational programs that target stepfamilies: using basic marital skills, developing an understanding of and positive view of stepfamilies, using effective stepparenting practices, navigating relationships with former spouses/partners, negotiating stepfamily roles and rules, using financial management skills, using effective parenting practices, and building other supportive connections inside and outside the family. In addition, this framework suggests the consideration of several elements of program service delivery and of conditions that exist at the individual, family, and community levels in planning service needs and priorities. It is expected that these elements are related to dimensions of stepfamily relationships as well as individual well-being (i.e., adult and child), which in turn affect the overall quality and stability of stepfamily couple relationships. Use of the conceptual framework can assist practitioners in assessing elements of current program offerings for stepfamily couples or in the development and planning for such programs to ensure a comprehensive and appropriate approach to empowering and strengthening stepfamily couples. The framework can also assist researchers in conceptualizing applied and basic research questions that can serve to enhance our empirical knowledge of stepfamily couple dynamics and developmental trajectories as well as knowledge of evidenced-based best practices for marriage education for low-income stepfamily couples.

An empirically validated model of best practices for marriage education for diverse couples could make a significant contribution towards increasing the numbers of stepcouples experiencing healthy relationships and marriages, thus promoting their greater relationship stability and the increased likelihood of positive child outcomes.

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