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Deanna S. Johnson
University of Northern Iowa

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Stepfamilies : implications and interventions for children

Abstract

The American family has been in a state of transition for the past three decades. Marital dissolution has quadrupled in the past 20 years, with three in five marriages ending in divorce. Approximately 80% of divorced men and 75% of divorced women remarry, creating 5.3.million married-couple households in which at least one stepchild under 18 resides.

The author of this paper will address several factors and intervention strategies that have been identified as potential determinants of healthy adaptation in children in stepfamilies. Given the increasing prevalence of stepfamilies in this country, it is imperative that school counselors become knowledgeable in the dynamics of stepfamily life so that the needs of stepchildren can be met effectively within the school setting.

STEPFAMILIES: IMPLICATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN

A Research Paper

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by

Deanna S. Johnson

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2-15- 0c
Date Approved

_____
Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Terry T. Kottman

2-21-2000
Date Approved

_____
Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

2.21.2000
Date Approved

_____
Head, Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

The American family has been in a state of transition for the past three decades (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993). Dad, Mom and the children happily ensconced in a warm, cozy home with a white picket fence has become the exception rather than the rule. Marital dissolution has quadrupled in the past 20 years, with three in five marriages ending in divorce (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998). Approximately 80% of divorced men and 75% of divorced women remarry (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1994, as cited in Kelley, 1996), creating 5.3 million married-couple households in which at least one stepchild under 18 resides (Norton & Miller, 1992).

It is estimated that 1,300 new stepfamilies originate daily in the United States (Visher & Visher, 1998), with the proportion of children likely to have ever lived in a stepfamily by age 18 having increased from 14% in 1970-1974 to 23% between 1980-1984 (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). By the year 2010, stepfamilies are predicted to be the predominant family structure in the United States (Visher & Visher, 1998), with one of every two Americans a stepfamily member (Larson, 1992, as cited in Berger, 1998).

Stereotypes and Myths

Throughout the ages, stepfamilies have been viewed as culturally disadvantaged, second-rate family structures in comparison to the idealized, intact family (Visher & Visher, 1996). Supporting this belief has been a cultural

perception of the biological mother as the perfect parent without flaws or imperfections. Societal refusal to acknowledge a biological mother's negative traits have placed unrealistic, unattainable expectations on stepmothers who step in to fulfill the role of surrogate mother (Nielsen, 1999). When these expectations are not met, stepmothers are cast as disinterested, unskilled parents who place their own needs above that of the families (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). While idealizing the role of motherhood, folklore and fairy tales across cultures have perpetuated negative stereotypes of stepmothers as wicked, cruel, sexual, selfish, vain, vengeful, greedy, unloving, deceitful, manipulative, untrustworthy, fearsome, and all-powerful (Dainton, 1993; Noy, 1991; Salwen, 1990; Schectman, 1991; Warner, 1996 as cited in Nielsen, 1999). In light of the dysfunctional portrayal of stepmothers, stepchildren have been viewed as abused, unloved, and neglected "poor maligned waifs" (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1996).

This socially negative stereotype of stepfamilies continues to persist and prevail in our society where the nuclear family remains the standard but not the norm (Walsh, 1992). Lack of societal support and acceptance have placed many stepfamilies at risk as they struggle to succeed without the assistance of clearly defined roles and expectations. Without acceptance and validation, stepfamilies may incorporate these beliefs leading to a self-fulfulling prophecy of alienation

and isolation (Visher, 1994). As a result of these negative representations, stepfamily members may develop unrealistic expectations of self and the stepfamily, thus creating mental, emotional, and interpersonal stress (Berger, 1998). As the newly formed family struggles to achieve a sense of equilibrium amidst these challenges, children may be left without the emotional support needed to cope with these new, unsettling changes putting them at risk for negative long-term consequences.

The author of this paper will address several factors and intervention strategies that have been identified as potential determinants of healthy adaptation in children in stepfamilies. Given the increasing prevalence of stepfamilies in this country, it is imperative that school counselors become knowledgeable in the dynamics of stepfamily life so that the needs of stepchildren can be met effectively within the school setting.

<div align="center">Implications for Children</div>

Remarriage can have a detrimental impact on the academic, social, and psychological lives of children (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996; Pong, 1997; Visher & Visher, 1996; Zill, 1994). Numerous studies have found that children in stepfamilies have a higher probability of problems in educational achievement and adjustment, including both externalizing and internalizing behaviors, than children from intact

families (Zill, 1994). Adolescents growing up in stepfamilies are more likely to be unemployed, drop out of school, become sexually active at an earlier age, have children out of wedlock, become involved in substance abuse and delinquent activities, and associate with antisocial peers (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

In the academic area, children from stepfamilies tend to perform more poorly on standardized tests, are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, and are less likely to complete high school or attend college (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Parents who are remarried often invest less time in supervision of daily school work and have lower educational expectations for their children. As a result, children are more likely to disengage from school and become disinterested in attaining educational goals (Pong, 1997).

Within the psychological domain, parental remarriage may significantly alter a child's perception of his or her world, triggering feelings of discomfort and shame that often lead to social withdrawal and isolation. Sensing the stigmatization that is often present, children in stepfamilies frequently view the family situation as a personal reflection that is best kept secret (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Pasley, Rhoden, Visher & Visher, 1996).

Psychological well-being is affected as children experience a variety of fluctuating emotions, including hostility, anger, confusion, guilt, shame, hurt, frustration, loneliness, embarrassment, powerlessness, and abandonment which

often creates inner turmoil and unpredictable behavior. These feelings often intensify as children struggle to adapt to new households, new communities and schools, divided family loyalties, stepsibling and stepparent relationships, new boundaries and roles within the family, competition for parental attention and time, as well as the stigma associated with the role of stepchild (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Stepchildren can also experience significant long term adverse effects. Adult offspring from remarried families are less satisfied with their lives, more likely to be on welfare and attain lower socioeconomic status (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), as well as continue to have more adjustment problems (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Hetherington, in press, as cited in Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Marital instability is prevalent as more escalating, negative communicative patterns such as belligerence, contempt, criticism, denial, and ineffective problem-solving characterize marital transactions (Hetherington, in press, as cited in Hetherington et al., 1998). Given these staggering statistics, it is imperative that school counselors assume an active role in the provision of services to the children of stepfamilies so that they might be assisted in overcoming the numerous obstacles that can block the path to healthy adjustment.

Process of Stepfamily Development

The process of development in a stepfamily is comprised of a complex

sequence complexence of transitions and alterations that can span a four to seven

year period before a new family identity is solidified. Papernow (1993, as cited in

Berger, 1998) identified seven stages through which stepfamily development

progresses:

1. Fantasy Stage-the stage at which interactions are on a superficial level

   as a way of maintaining the idealistic view held by family members.

2. Immersion Stage-the stage characterized by conflict and tension as the

   reality of the situation emerges.

3. Awareness Stage-the stage in which family members become aware of

   the individual needs of each individual within the stepfamily.

4. Mobilization Stage-the stage in which covert and overt expressions of

   anger and aggression emerge as power struggles occur.

5. Action Stage-the stage in which reasoning is used to work out

   differences and solidify family connections.

6. Contact Stage-the stage in which stability is achieved as family

   relationships are developed.

7. Resolution Stage-the stage in which cooperation and stability are

   solidified as family members are accepted for who they truly are.

Stepfamily development is not a static event, and the process by which a new family identity is established is not always sequential. Time in and movement between stages varies until emotional resolution occurs enabling a successful transition to the next stage (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Adjustment Factors

As children are presented with adaptive challenges associated with parental marital transitions, diverse responses are possible based on several factors including gender of child, developmental age, presence of siblings, personality/temperament characteristics, stepparent-stepchild relationship, boundaries and structure, roles, emotional response, divided loyalties, and fantasies involving reuniting of biological parents.

Gender of Child. Boys and girls have been found to experience the transition and adjustment to remarriage differently. The stepparent situation appears to be more beneficial for boys and more detrimental for girls regardless of whether the stepparent is male or female (Lee, Burkham, Zimiles, & Ladewsk, 1994).

When custodial mothers remarry, the initial response of both genders is negative as the stepfather enters the picture. However, girls tend to prolong and intensify the animosity, viewing the stepfather as an intruder who is interfering with the mother-daughter relationship. Boys, on the other hand, may find a

source of companionship and support as they look to the stepfather as a male role model. A close, supportive relationship between stepfather-stepson has been found to alleviate behavioral problems as well as increase social competence in preadolescent boys (Bray & Berger, 1993).

The introduction of a stepmother into the family is also more problematic for girls, as they tend to view the stepmother as a threat to the father-daughter relationship (Visher & Visher, 1996). Custodial fathers who are not involved in intimate relationships are more likely to depend on daughters to fulfill emotional needs (Hetherington et al., 1998). Girls may view the stepmother as a competitive rival seeking affection and time from the father. They may also feel displaced as the stepmother assumes the privileged role within the family, becoming the father's new adult confidant while undermining the intimate bond forged between father and daughter. As the stepmother-father marital relationship deepens, hope for parental reconciliation and re-establishment of close mother-daughter ties are lost. The stepmother's presence can be a painful reminder of happy times when the biological mother was present in the home (Walsh, 1992).

In comparison, boys in stepmother families tend to view the stepmother as an additional support rather than a threat. During the single-parent stage, a close friend type of relationship can be forged with the father based on joint activities

spent together. When fathers remarry, the new stepmother-father relationship does not usually interfere directly with these positive relationship dimensions (Bray & Berger, 1993). It has been found that boys usually develop more conflicted, distant relationships with biological mothers following parental divorce (Nielson, 1999). Therefore, increased cohesion and emotional bonding as a result of the remarriage may benefit boys' intellectual performance, behavioral adjustment, and self-esteem (Bray & Berger, 1993).

Developmental age of child. The adjustment to stepfamily living can vary according to developmental characteristics of the child. Younger children and older adolescents tend to have fewer adjustment problems, adjusting more readily to a stepparent (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In preschool age children, remarriage is frequently associated with loss. The introduction of new adults into the family structure signals change in living arrangements as well as changes in social environment. It is desirable for children at this age to have the opportunity to express feelings in a supportive environment that fosters positive growth and change.

Children in the latency stage, six to twelve years of age, often infer self-blame, believing bad behavior caused the marital break-up. Children in this stage often think that how they behave influences whether the biological parents separate or reunite. Children may also experience confusion as to how to

accommodate an additional adult as another parental figure. It is vital that

children realize that it is all right to have more than two parental figures, which

does not necessitate giving up their biological father or mother to accept a

stepparent into the family (Visher & Visher, 1996). Preadolescents and

adolescents, nine to fifteen years of age, often experience the most difficulty

accepting a stepparent (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The emotional

turmoil prevalent in adolescence often serves as a catalyst for latent adjustment

problems in families who have been characterized by stress and loss associated

with marital disruptions. Early adolescents are frequently less able to adapt, as

the presence of a stepparent magnifies normal early adolescent concerns

regarding emerging sexuality and autonomy issues (Hetherington et al., 1998).

A stepfather is often viewed as a threat to autonomy, as the adolescent

seeks to gain independence and move through the normal disengagement process

from the family. Adolescents may try to escape an unstable home environment by

disengaging and seeking support through peer groups or school activities. At a

time of emerging sexuality, adolescents may also struggle with ambiguous

affections they may have for a same-sex stepparent. The stress and threat

associated with a step-family transition may lead the adolescent to form early

intimate attachments resulting in early sexual relationships (Flewelling &

Bauman, 1990 as cited in Chapman, 1991). Premature sexual activity may result

as adolescents seek an emotional attachment at a time when they are dealing with new feelings of sexuality (Chapman, 1991).

Personality/temperament of child. Children's temperament may also play a role in adjusting to stepfamily living. Children who are socially mature, responsible, intelligent, and have fewer behavior problems cope much better with marital transitions. Competent, adaptable children who possess social skills and positive personal characteristics are more likely to get positive support and use available resources to alleviate stressful situations (Hetherington et al., 1998).

Children who are already experiencing existing problems may see these difficulties intensify as the additional stress of divorce and remarriage occur (Hetherington et al., 1998). Children with difficult temperaments and behavior problems may also provoke more negative responses from parents who are already emotionally stressed and drained from the marital situation. These children may lack the skills to gain the support they need to effectively adapt to the negative situation around them (Hetherington et al., 1998).

Emotional state of the child. Stepfamilies arise from loss, being the final phase that results from the disintegration of a marital relationship. As the marital relationship breaks down, parents often seek emotional support from their children, further strengthening the parent-child bond. When remarriage occurs, the parent-child relationship is often threatened, particularly if the stepparent is

presented as a replacement for the biological parent. The remarriage may reactivate the feeling of loss associated with the marital dissolution, further emphasizing the finality of the situation. As this loss is brought to the forefront again, the child may re-experience the stages of grief, encountering feelings of denial, guilt, anger, despair, and betrayal (Pasley et al., 1996).

Children may feel different from others, experiencing feelings of embarrassment and shame. They may experience social isolation and alienation as they struggle with the perception that, because their family is not "normal," it is better to keep to themselves in order to safeground family secrets. Stability and familiarity become threatened as familiar "givens" are no longer certainties amidst the sea of transitions that stepchildren encounter (Visher & Visher, 1996). Not only may there be physical transitions such as relocation to a new home, neighborhood, or school, but also emotional transitions such as learning to share toys, pets, and time/affection of significant others. Privacy may be lost as children are forced to share their bedroom, which may represent their last safe haven in a world characterized by disorganization, uncertainty, and the disruption of balance (Berger, 1998). As children deal with these multiple losses, a multitude of emotions can arise ranging from anger and hostility to shame and humiliation which affect the successful restructure of the stepfamily (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Unrealistic fantasies. Remarriage also represents a finality that many children resist. Children may look for signs that parents will reunite, interpreting even friendly gestures as signs of reconciliation. Children may consciously or unconsciously sabotage the stepparent relationship as they strive to make their fantasy of parental reconciliation a reality. As the stepparent relationship further solidifies and strengthens, children may experience more frustration and disappointment, creating greater distance and hostility in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In order for the stepparent-stepchild relationship to have a chance, children's questions need to be addressed, accepted, and discussed so that a distinction can be made between fantasy and reality (Visher & Visher, 1996).

Stepparent-stepchild relationship. An important determinant of adjustment in children is the interactional process within the family. In the early stages of a remarriage, stepfathers tend to assume the role of "polite stranger" by showing less negativity, less control, monitoring, and affection than fathers in intact families (Bray & Berger, 1993). It has been found that the most successful stepfather relationships have developed involved, communicative, warm relationships with their stepchildren during the first two years of remarriage (Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vushinich, & Clingempeel, 1991). Stepfathers who support the custodial mother's parenting style without attempting to establish new expectations, rule, and disciplinary measures build more successful relationships.

After the initial two-year period, better outcomes are evident if a more active, authoritative parenting stance is taken (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Stepmothers tend to have a more difficult time establishing a relationship within the stepfamily structure. Remarried fathers often force stepmothers into active, confrontative roles by expecting that they will participate in child rearing (Hetheringtonet al., 1998). Stepmothers incur less stress when the father assumes primary responsibility for the implementation and reinforcement of disciplinary measures (Nielsen, 1999). Authoritative custodial parents and warm, involved stepparents set the stage for responsive, healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships (Bray & Berger, 1993).

Presence of siblings. Another factor that affects stepfamily adjustment is the type and number of sisters and brothers with whom the child lives. Stepchildren who are products of a former marriage are often cast into an "outsider" role, putting them at a higher developmental risk. Children with half-siblings (born of the stepparent-biological parent union) tend to exhibit a higher level of behavior problems than children in other sibling situations. When half-siblings are present, the stepchild may assume a less favored position reflective of an earlier, disintegrated relationship. As a result of this, sibling rivalry may intensify creating additional emotional challenges for the stepchild (Zill, 1994).

Boundaries/structure within the family. Stepfamilies are complex

structures. Two previously separate family units comprised of children who

belonged to two households combine to form a collection of full and part-time

subsystems characterized by multiple parental figures and numerous relationships

(Berger, 1998). There are a minimum of three types of stepfamilies: stepfather-

mother, stepmother-father, and "complex" stepfamilies comprised of two

stepparents. If noncustodial children are considered, the number of subsystem

combinations increases to 15. If the remarriage produces children, another 15

parent-child subsystems are possible (Wald, 1981, as cited in Ganong &

Coleman, 1984).

In stepfamilies, generational boundaries become less clear. The biological

parent may always feel a closer connection to his/her own biological children

than to the stepchildren as a result of the parent-child ties that were in existence

prior to the remarriage. The parent-child ties may be particularly strong and

resilient as a result of the bond that was formed during the single-parent stage.

Boundaries in stepfamilies need to be more permeable than in intact families to

accommodate the numerous interrelationships between the members. Children

living between two homes often experience confusion and anxiety. Movement

between two different living environments requires flexible boundaries to

facilitate and accommodate differences in sleeping arrangements, eating manners,

religious patterns, and interpersonal communication styles (Visher & Visher,

1996).

Role confusion. The role of stepparents and stepchildren is not clearly

defined in our society. Stepfamilies are unacknowledged, as evidenced by the

lack of adequate norms, definitions, and expectations set within our culture. The

lack of role models creates stress, competition, confusion, and role strain as the

stepfamily struggles to learn the ropes through trial and error (Berger, 1998).

Without biological or legal ties, confusion often reigns as to how the stepparent

and stepchild are supposed to feel and act (Visher & Visher, 1996). As roles are

less clearly defined, role strain increases. This is especially true for stepmothers

who are expected to be caretakers when they have neither the authority nor the

parent-child closeness needed to succeed (Kelley, 1996). Children struggle with

the role of stepchild not only as they battle with the shame of coming from a

reconstituted family but also the tarnished dream of recovering their real family.

Divided loyalties. When a good stepparent-stepchild relationship does

begin to develop, children in stepfamilies often experience feelings of guilt. They

may feel they are being disloyal to their biological parent if they begin to develop

a close, loving relationship with the stepparent. Loyalty conflicts are further

aggravated if children are asked to call a stepparent "Mother" or "Father" (Kelley,

1996).

It is important for children to recognize that loving many people does not detract from preexisting close relationships. Loyalty conflicts can be diminished by giving children the opportunity to express both positive as well as negative emotions (Kelley, 1996).

Interventions

School personnel are not only expected to meet educational demands, but also the increasing mental health, health, and child-care needs of families and their children (Stolberg & Mahler, 1994). School counselors continue to see increasing numbers of children and adolescents whose lives have been turned upside down by parental divorce and subsequent remarriage (Cobia & Brazelton, 1994). School counselors can play an important role in facilitating understanding and acceptance in children who are faced with this situation (Frieman, 1994).

In light of research stating that the first two years are the most challenging in the life of a stepfamily, it is imperative that therapeutic interventions be instigated during this critical period of time to help the family achieve maximum adjustment, forestalling problems before they occur (Kelley, 1996).

Individual counseling. Support institutions, such as schools, can help normalize the stepfamily experience by recognizing and validating the unique characteristics of this family structure. One way this can be done is through individual counseling sessions with the stepchild.

Individual sessions give the child the opportunity to accept the natural differences inherent in the stepfamily structure, acknowledging them as normal variants rather than defective variations (Kelley, 1996). As children are empowered to resolve issues in a context of normality, they become "unstuck" as anxiety is alleviated and strengths are utilized (Berger, 1998). This, in turn, reduces helplessness and increases autonomy which leads to healthy functioning and improved well-being (Visher & Visher, 1996).

As the diversity of the stepfamily is normalized, various ways of dealing with stepfamily issues can be explored without comparison to a singular, "normal" model (Berger, 1998). Individual counseling also provides an opportunity to address and challenge irrational beliefs that the stepchild may hold about self and stepfamily living. When given accurate information, children can sort out feelings, thoughts, and actions to determine if they are realistic and conducive to healthy adjustment (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Through individual sessions, needs of security, belonging, and self-esteem can also be addressed. As the structure of the family changes, children may experience feelings of insecurity. This loss of stability, in turn, affects the child's sense of belonging. The child may feel totally displaced, experiencing feelings of rejection and/or abandonment as a result of not thinking or feeling like he/she fits in or belongs to a particular family unit. At this point, children often feel

powerless to change the course of life events. Feelings of unworthiness and self-hate may become evident as children assume self-blame and responsibility for the parental divorce and subsequent remarriage (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Individual counseling also provides a safe, neutral environment in which children can explore feelings. Through exploration, children can learn to recognize that all feelings are real and serve a purpose. A warm, stable one-to-one relationship with a counselor can supersede reluctance and fear on the part of the stepchild in discussing these transitions. Emotional wellness can be achieved as children are enabled to cope with change and provided continued support until stabilization occurs (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

The counselor can empower stepchildren through individual sessions by providing opportunities to develop and build personal strengths that can be used as strategies during difficult times. Children can be taught to recognize, challenge, and restructure erroneous beliefs using positive self-talk and "I" messages that will facilitate the adjustment process (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Psychoeducation

Efforts to minimize the stress associated with remarriage often focus on improving stepparent-stepchild interaction through parent education. Research has found that family process is a greater determinant of healthy adjustment in children than either family type or structure (Amato, 1994). Family relationships

that are supportive and congenial foster resilience in children who are faced with the challenges associated with stepfamily life. However, support and compatibility may seem elusive to adults in the stepparent role as they struggle to stabilize roles and relationships in a new family system (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Counselors can assist in this adjustment process by providing accurate, pertinent information to parents. Through acquisition of information on stepfamilies and how they differ, realistic yet attainable expectations can be established and accomplished (Berger, 1998). Understanding and acceptance of different norms along with the realization that being different does not substantiate a problem enables stepfamilies to escape the pressure of striving to fit the ideal family type (Kelley, 1996). As members of stepfamilies are educated about the processes and characteristics that are typical of similar families, a realistic perspective can be gained, resulting in less anxiety and more confidence as the role of stepparent-stepchild is assumed.

An important aspect of psychoeducation is that stepfamilies be informed of the unique roles that will transpire, requiring establishment of new boundaries and new family rituals. As new roles are established, it is important that the role of the non-custodial parent be honored and upheld. Just as the uniqueness of the stepfamily structure is emphasized, so must the fact that each stepfamily is unique in its own structure and function. There are as many ways for a stepfamily to be

functional and well-adjusted as there are forms of stepfamilies. In this respect, it is important to be respectful of the stepfamily as a unique unit while providing support (Berger, 1998).

Another important component of psychoeducation involves educating stepfamilies about the importance of flexibility and creativity in approaching stepfamily situations. In light of the fact that there are limited normative expectations, it is important that stepfamilies be encouraged to invent new options and try unusual solutions without fear of social disapproval. Principles of creative process can be taught and practiced based on the problem-solving process of redefining the circumstances, brainstorming solutions, and exploring options (Berger, 1998).

Group Counseling

Child-centered groups can be advantageous as well as effective in serving large numbers of children (Stolberg & Mahler, 1994). Children who are experiencing stepfamily difficulties are provided with a foundation of coping skills and competencies in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Peers share similar feelings and experiences, creating a sense of "family" and unity. Questions and feelings can be explored as well as strategies to cope with stressful situations. Problem-solving skills can be taught and practiced to build cooperation and

improve communication skills, while maintaining a personal identity (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

As children share similar feelings, thoughts, and concerns, they discover that they are not unique to this particular situation. A sense of "family" can develop as peers develop a supportive bond based on commonality. Through the group format, erroneous assumptions and myths can be dispelled by aknowledging fears and beliefs and providing accurate information. The safe environment offered by groups enables children to explore thoughts that may be hurting them, while learning acceptable, responsible outlets of expression for such feelings. Children learn to accept their thoughts and feelings nonjudgmentally, reaffirming that they are not "wrong" to feel that way (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

With the acquisition of accurate information based on rational thoughts, assertiveness skills can then be taught. Groups help children to identify wants and needs while teaching them how to communicate assertively. This process can be facilitated by helping children see that they always have options, as well as the ability to make positive choices. Groups also help children to problem-solve. Children can practice confronting specific situations as they learn to define the challenge and generate alternative solutions based on factors of reality, responsibility, and rightness. Behaviors can be examined to assist positive

outcomes and achieve goals. As children learn problem-solving skills, control can be regained and self-confidence restored (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Lastly, groups can promote acceptance of situations within the stepfamily that are unlikely to change. As group members share with other peers who have made the transition, choices can be made that give the child some measure of control in the situation. Acceptance may well be the most difficult aspect of adjustment, but one that is necessary for emotional well-being and tranquillity (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996).

Conclusion

Children spend almost half of their waking hours in school, frequently bringing with them emotional baggage created by parental remarriage and the issues of stepfamily living. Due to the sheer numbers of children served in the school setting, school personnel are in a prime position to positively assist children's adjustment to changing family structures and the associated behavioral and emotional risks. School counselors, in conjunction with other members of the school staff, can create a supportive network that provides structure and promotes healthy adjustment to stepfamily living.

A child's healthy adjustment to stepfamily living is contingent on several factors, but the true determinant may well be the balance between risks and resources (Hetherington et al., 1998). Through provision of services, school

counselors can facilitate adaptation and capitalize on strengths inherent to the uniqueness of the stepfamily situation. Counseling services can facilitate healthy psychological adjustment, incorporating problem-solving as well as coping skills that help to minimize the impact of environmental change. Through education, the stepfamily experience can be "normalized," reducing the stigmatization that often blocks expression of feelings leading to psychological risk and vulnerability.

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