

1992

Working with stepchildren: The role of the school counselor

Susan M. Johnson
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1992 Susan M. Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Susan M., "Working with stepchildren: The role of the school counselor" (1992). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2647.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2647>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Working with stepchildren: The role of the school counselor

Abstract

The structure of the family is constantly changing. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1983) predicted that by the year 2000, families of remarriages will be one of the types of families that dominate the personal lives of most Americans. A "remarried family" involves a married couple with the husband, the wife, or both in a second or subsequent marriage. Children under 18 in the home who were born before the remarriage occurred are considered stepchildren in the constituted stepfamily (Glick, 1988). Glick also reported that stepfamilies currently represent 17.4% of households with children under age 18 (Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

WORKING WITH STEPCHILDREN:
THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Susan M. Johnson
May 1992

This Research Paper by: Susan M. Johnson

Entitled: WORKING WITH STEPCHILDREN: THE ROLE OF THE
SCHOOL COUNSELOR

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Robert T. Lembke

4/8/92
Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Richard Strub

4-8-92
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

4/8/92
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

The structure of the family is constantly changing. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1983) predicted that by the year 2000, families of remarriages will be one of the types of families that dominate the personal lives of most Americans. A "remarried family" involves a married couple with the husband, the wife, or both in a second or subsequent marriage. Children under 18 in the home who were born before the remarriage occurred are considered stepchildren in the constituted stepfamily (Glick, 1988). Glick also reported that stepfamilies currently represent 17.4% of households with children under age 18 (Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

Visher and Visher (1982) noted that because of the complicated nature of stepfamilies, numerous challenges and questions arise. Research concerning problems of children in stepfamilies are mixed (Skeen, Covi & Robinson, 1985). Self-esteem of children in stepfamilies is one area that has been investigated. Some studies find that self-esteem is lower in children of stepfamilies while others find self-concepts not significantly different from those of intact families (Nunn, Parish & Worthing, 1983 ; Parish

& Philip, 1982). However, Manning and Wootten (1987) contended that there is ample evidence that the increase in stepfamilies is an accelerating trend which will make increasing demands on school children and professional personnel.

In the event of remarriage a transition period occurs and the stepchild is affected by feelings of loss, stress, different expectations and difficult adjustments. The school sometimes intensifies these feelings promoting a lowered self-esteem of the stepchild. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of the school counselor working with stepchildren to help them deal with the transition period of remarriage. Research will be presented on what capacity school counselors can also work with school personnel and stepparents.

Stepfamily Transition Period

Loss and Adjustment

The average time between divorce and remarriage is less than three years (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Studies by Parish and Philip (1982) suggested the greatest impact of the events of divorce and remarriage is usually within

the first two to five years after their occurrence. In many cases the remarriage occurs before the child has had sufficient time to adjust to the loss of the original family member. This leads to family members experiencing unresolved emotional issues including feelings of grief, guilt, or hostility toward the absent family member. Counselors can help family members, especially children, mourn the loss of the initial family and help in the formation of the new one (Skeen, Covi & Robinson, 1985).

The school counselor is in position to help stepfamilies become aware of the probable phases the stepfamily goes through during the transition period. The problems stepfamilies experience sometimes lessen after the first few years. A developmental stage theory that conceptualizes three stages in stepfamily life would be described as (1) recovery from loss and entering the new relationship, (2) conceptualization and planning of the new marriage, and (3) reconstitution of the family (Random, Schlesinger & Derdeyn, cited in Manning & Wootten, 1987).

Stepfamilies represent one of a multitude of family types sharing many common concerns as well

as unique issues. Two family cultures are brought together by remarriage to create new family rituals and traditions. Crosbie-Burnett (1989) reported that family role flexibility is a very crucial factor in the stepfamily's adjustment. Role clarification in a stepfamily is also very important. Capaldi and McRae (1979) stated:

All family members bring to the steprelationship their own individual perceptions of their role in the blended family and their individual perceptions of the roles of other members. Frequently, these role perceptions are not verbalized and shared. Each assumes the other members all think along the same lines (p. 51).

Counselors can be an important resource to stepparents and stepchildren in the development of effective communication skills. Often when there are adjustment problems family members attribute this to their failure as individuals.

The divorce rate for remarriages is 44% (Farmer, cited in Manning & Wootten, 1987), indicating the marriage-divorce-remarriage cycle may continue. According to Cherlin and Furstenberg (1983) many couples and their children

adjust successfully to their remarriage and, when asked, consider their new marriage to be a big improvement over their previous one.

Expectations

The various "step" labels carry negative associations from history, mythology, and children's literature. Although stepfamily relationships are different from primary family relationships, the chances for success are not as bleak as they were in Cinderella's case (Skeen, Covi & Robinson, 1985).

Media also supports the stepfamily myths in several ways. Coleman and Ganong (1985) added:

Television shows such as "The Brady Bunch" and "Eight is Enough" present unrealistic stepfamily models. Stepfamily members watching these programs may feel they are failures if they are not as idyllically happy as are members of the television families because marriage makes people significantly happier (p. 119).

Counselors need to be aware of their beliefs and expectations when working with stepfamilies to be

able to help them view their situations more realistically and solve their problems more effectively.

Stess

Remarriage is a stressor event and stress associated with this family transition is expected and considered normal (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Stanton (1986) cited interpersonal stress as the major problem in all steprelationships and it is manifested in parent-child, sibling, and marital relationships as well as relationships among extended family members. Money-related stress is exacerbated. Family needs including space, time, and affection are redistributed to more family members. Changes in children's ordinal position in the family, power and authority issues, and different phases of family members' life cycles are also major causes of stress identified in stepfamilies (Stanton, 1986).

Skeen, Covi and Robinson (1985) reported that on questionnaires completed by stepchildren, it was revealed that households involving steprelations were characterized by more stress, more ambivalence, and lower cohesiveness than were non-stepfamily households. Knaub, Hanna and

Stinnett (1984) reported in their study of stepfamilies that there were certainly difficulties but their scores on family strength, marital satisfaction, and perceptions of family adjustment measures were high. The age of children at the time of remarriage is found to be an important factor. Clinical research supports that very young or grown-up children accept stepparents more readily and have fewer problems than adolescents, since this age child is more wary of any new relationship (Manning & Wootten, 1987).

Healthy stepfamily development requires responding to the challenges of remarriage. School counselors can help these families by preventing or reducing some of this stress. This is done by working with school personnel, stepparents and the stepchildren.

The School Counselor's Role

School Personnel

School is a major force in a child's socialization and many times reinforces the conflict and hurt in stepfamilies and contributes to its members feeling different (Skeen, Covi &

Robinson, 1985). Manning and Wooten (1987) suggested that even well-intentioned school personnel may not know where to begin in making school life more responsive to the needs of stepfamilies. Stepparents and non-custodial parents often both want to be involved in their children's school life. Communication is one area that needs to improve between schools and stepfamilies. Another area is to revise forms to allow people to indicate remarried status and residence of all children in the stepfamily system (Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989). Schools also need to eliminate stigmatization of stepfamilies. It is apparent that schools sometimes have difficulty in accommodating different lifestyles even when the old stereotypes no longer fit (Manning & Wooten, 1987).

Counselors can work with all school personnel in making them sensitive to the stress children and their parents experience as part of the marriage-divorce-remarriage cycle. One way to do this is to provide inservice training to the staff on this topic. Manning and Wooten (1987) also suggested including information about stepfamilies within the school curriculum for the benefit of

all children. Gutterman, Geva and Gefen (1988) reported from their study that negative stereotypes of a "child of divorce" were present in both teachers and students and had an adverse effect on evaluations of that child's academic, emotional, and social functioning. Another study of teachers rating behavior of children in stepfamilies found they had more conduct problems: negativism, aggression, and socialized delinquency, bad companions and cooperative stealing (Touliatos & Lindholm cited in Skeen, Covi, & Robinson, 1985).

Counselors can help staff examine their attitudes about children coming from nontraditional families. However, it is vitally important that the counselor portray a warm, accepting, matter-of-fact attitude towards all family situations (Crosbie-Burnett & Pulvino, 1990). Skeen, Robinson and Flake-Hobson (1984) suggested:

- a) avoid expecting children to manifest certain kinds of problems simply because they are members of blended families,
- b) examining personal feelings and values about blended families, and c) take into

consideration that blended families must deal with issues that do not come up in natural families but these experiences can help members grow and benefit (p. 70).

Teachers need to know which students come from stepfamilies not to stigmatize but to enable them to be aware of specific issues that could come up. Especially in the transition stage of remarriage the stepchild may need special or individual attention. Counselors can help teachers identify and use resources available for these children. The school counselor would be a primary resource to use with stepchildren experiencing difficulty or needing support.

Stepchildren

Farwell (cited in Crosbie-Burnett & Pulvino, 1990) discussed the counselor's role working with nontraditional families as the primary processes of counseling, teaching, and group work, and the three secondary processes of consultation, program development, and evaluation. The primary processes are characterized by being involved in direct client intervention. Crosbie-Burnett and Skyles (1989) found that school counselors had more contact with stepchildren than with children

from intact, nuclear families or single-parent families. Counselors can use books, puppets, drama, and other techniques in working with individual children and groups of children in the school setting (Skeen, Covi & Robinson, 1985).

Another successful intervention that counselors can use is to implement a nontraditional family unit in the classroom guidance program. Crosbie-Burnett and Pulvino (1990) stated the purpose of this program would be to:

- a) educate students about the two most prominent emerging family types,
- b) promote positive attitudes toward nontraditional families,
- c) to teach decision-making and coping skills related to family issues, and
- d) to show students that their counselors and teachers understand what children in stepparent households experience (p. 286).

This intervention would also enable classroom teachers to become involved so counselors can provide a model for teachers, help them understand children from nontraditional families better, and

help teachers devise means for integrating ideas presented in the program into other curricula (Crosbie-Burnett & Pulvino, 1990).

Another intervention counselors can use to help stepchildren would be to sponsor support groups. These groups would benefit children by providing developmental assistance to individuals faced with critical life situations such as remarriage of one of their parents. The goals of a small group would be to clarify the child's feelings about the family situation, help the child understand that others are experiencing similar feelings, help the child gain a realistic picture of their situation, and assist the child in learning new ways of coping with the feelings associated with their situation (Wilkinson & Bleck, 1977). These support groups would also provide opportunities for stepchildren to work through their feelings. The counselor can help the child recognize and acceptably express feelings and resolve conflict through the use of curriculum activities such as writing experience stories about the child's family and reading books about alternate family styles. Other activities to incorporate include painting, flannel board,

clay, drawing pictures, dramatic play, doll play, free play, woodworking, music, and movement (Skeen, Robinson & Flake-Hobson, 1984).

The school counselor can also implement many of the techniques applicable to the group setting in the individual setting. Another method is the use of assigned readings, or bibliotherapy, which is especially useful in educational and preventive programs for stepfamilies (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). McInnis (1982) stated that bibliotherapy uses fiction that portrays children in a situation similar to that which the child is experiencing and the story and characters are discussed by the counselor and child in the process of finding solutions to problems. Bibliotherapy appears to be most effective with children who are in the habit of reading, who have above-average intellectual ability and who are suffering from relatively mild to moderate emotional reactions to living in a stepfamily (McInnis, 1982). Coleman and Ganong (1990) cited the major goals of bibliotherapy as conveying information including new facts and different ways of approaching problems, alternative ways of thinking about problems, gaining insight or self-understanding,

and to stimulate discussion. Books chosen for this purpose need to have situations similar to the client's problems and feelings. The counselor must also be careful not to confuse insight gained through reading with the actual working through and coping behavior required before a problem is solved.

Another caution in using bibliotherapy is to not use books which portray stereotypical situations such as a lecherous stepparent, alcoholism, physical and psychological abuse, and neglect. Coleman, Marshall and Ganong, (1986) conducted an extensive search and included in their research a bibliography for appropriate fiction that provides children with positive models to help them handle situations.

Stepfamilies

The school counselor can also suggest bibliotherapy with the parents in stepfamily situations. Good fiction provides models to help readers handle situations they may encounter and good non-fiction provides readers with concrete advice and suggestions to help them better handle situations (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). The school counselor may have a parent library or a reference

list available for parents to help facilitate the adjustment to stepfamily life during and after the transition period.

For counselors in school settings, the establishment of a parent education program for stepfamilies can be very effective (Skeen, Covi & Robinson, 1985). These programs provide a multitude of information to the parents such as the development of effective communication skills, help with discipline problems, and encouragement and support the stepparents need during the transition stage of the remarriage. The counselor may also establish support groups in which stepparents can share their problems and solutions.

Counselors in the schools also need to be aware of family therapists or outside agencies who provide family counseling. Referrals for stepfamilies can be made when necessary. The school counselor can work with this counselor when appropriate to provide helpful information based on their interaction and observation of the child (Skeen, Robinson & Flake-Hobson, 1984). Knowledge of the outside agency from previous experience,

former clients, or personal visits by the school counselor would be helpful and beneficial to maintain professional validity.

Conclusion

A classroom today that does not contain a stepchild would be a novelty (Coleman, Marshall & Ganong, 1986). The increasing number of remarriages in our society affects the children of these families and how they perform in school. Krot (1983) stated that the public school is a logical place to work with these children because they spend a large portion of time there. School is primarily a place to learn academic subjects but educators are becoming more aware of barriers to learning. One barrier can be family transition resulting from the formation of a stepfamily. This stage can be especially stressful because of the complexity of the issues stepfamilies are dealing with.

Skeen, Covi and Robinson (1985) stated that there is a need for more understanding of the problems faced by stepfamilies and the provision of support and encouragement to the members. Helping professionals such as educators and counselors, typically are not adequately trained

in understanding stepfamilies because training programs seldom include course work on stepfamily dynamics, even though stepfamily members often make up a sizable portion of a counselor's practice (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

Many interventions used with school personnel, stepchildren, and the stepparents have been implemented and found successful to help stepfamilies. The school counselor is in the position to provide in-service to staff and incorporate information on stepfamilies in the school curriculum. Support for stepchildren and stepparents is given by sponsoring support groups and using bibliotherapy. Although the transition stage is not always an easy one, it is possible for most stepfamilies to manage their lives with reasonable success (Schulman, cited in Skeen, Covi & Robinson, 1985).

REFERENCES

- Capaldi, F. & McRae, B. (1979). Stepfamilies: A Cooperative Responsibility. New York: New Viewpoints/Vision Books.
- Cherlin, A. & Furstenberg, F.F. Jr. (1983). The American Family in the Year 2000. The Futurist, 17, 7-14.
- Coleman, M. & Ganong, L.H. (1990). The Uses of Juvenile Fiction and Self-Help Books with Stepfamilies. Journal of Counseling and Development, 68, 327-331.
- Coleman, M. & Ganong, L.H. (1985). Remarriage Myths: Implications for the Helping Professions. Journal of Counseling and Development, 64, 116-120.
- Coleman, M., Marshall, S.A., & Ganong, L. (1986). Beyond Cinderella: Relevant Reading for Young Adolescents About Stepfamilies. Adolescence, 21, 553-560.
- Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1989). Application of Family Stress Theory to Remarriage: A Model for Assessing and Helping Stepfamilies. Family Relations, 38, 323-331.

- Crosbie-Burnett, M. & Pulvino, C.J. (1990). Children in Nontraditional Families: A Classroom Guidance Program. The School Counselor, 37, 286-293.
- Crosbie-Burnett, M. & Skyles, A. (1989). Stepchildren in Schools and Colleges: Recommendations for Educational Policy Changes. Family Relations, 38, 59-64.
- Glick, P.C. (1988). Fifty Years of Family Demography: A Record of Social Change. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50, 861-873.
- Gutterman, J., Geva, N., & Gefen, S. (1988). Teachers' and School Children's Stereotypic Perception of "The Child of Divorce". American Educational Research Journal, 25, 555-571.
- Knaub, P.K., Hanna, S.L., and Stinnett, N. (1984). Strengths of Remarried Families. Journal of Divorce, 7, 41-55.
- Krot, S. (1983). The Adolescent in the Transitional Family: How the Schools Can Help. Educational Horizons, 61, 205-208.
- Manning, D.T. & Wootten, M.D. (1987). What Stepparents Perceive Schools Should Know About Blended Families. The Clearing House, 60, 230-235.

- McInnis, K.M. (1982). Bibliotherapy: Adjunct to Traditional Counseling with Children of Stepfamilies. Child Welfare, 61, 153-160.
- Nunn, G.D., Parish, T.S., & Worthing, R.J. (1983). Perceptions of Personal and Familial Adjustment by Children From Intact, Single-Parent, and Reconstituted Families. Psychology in the Schools, 20, 166-174.
- Parish, T.S. & Philip, M.K. (1982). The Self-Concepts of Children From Intact and Divorced Families: Can They be Affected in School Settings? Education, 103, 60-63.
- Sims, J.G. & Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1989). Stepfamily Research: Implications for Policy, Clinical Interventions, and Future Research. Family Relations, 38, 19-23.
- Skeen, P., Covi, R.B., & Robinson, B.E. (1985). Stepfamilies: A Review of the Literature with Suggestions for Practitioners. Journal of Counseling and Development, 64, 121-125.
- Skeen, P., Robinson, B.E., & Flake-Hobson, C. (1984). Blended Families: Overcoming the Cinderella Myth. Young Children, 39, 64-74.

Stanton, G.W. (1986). Preventive Intervention with Stepfamilies. Social Work, 31, 201-206.

Visher, E.B. & Visher, J.S. (1982). How to Win as a Stepfamily. New York: Dembner Books.

Wilkinson, G.S. & Bleck, R.T. (1977). Children's Divorce Groups. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 15, 205-213.