



Research Brief

Encouraging Effective Coparenting in Blended Families

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Due to a consistently high divorce rate, many parents and children experience multiple marital and living arrangements during their lifetimes (Cherlin, 2010). Households in which a parent resides with at least one child and a new partner are referred to as *stepfamilies*, *repartnered* families, or *blended* families (Gold, 2010; Anderson & Greene, 2013). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, a blended family “consists of one or more children living with a biological or adoptive parent and an unrelated stepparent who are married to one another” (Blackwell, 2010). Blended families face many unique challenges, such as an increased risk for conflict and stress and difficulty caring for the day-to-day needs of children, as a result of changes in family structure (Sweeney, 2010). This brief reviews current research on the unique experiences of blended families and suggests practices to improve effective coparenting.

Strengths of Blended Families

Despite the instability experienced during the formation of a blended family, much strength can be found within this group. Blended families are a diverse group with varied outcomes; some members are able to manage conflict and change and report more positive outcomes than others (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Those with the most relationship satisfaction and highest relationship

quality are able to navigate movement between multiple households, provide easy transitions of members into and out of a new family system, and effectively negotiate new family boundaries (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Further, those who make their relationships a priority are better equipped to deal with the hassles of a blended family.

Michaels (2006) identified two major strengths that are factors in blended family success: informed commitment and a sense of family. Michaels reported that informed commitment

refers to a “proactive approach to achieving a strong marriage and family bond” and sense of family occurred with the “idea that a new family was being created.” Successful blended families agree on the importance of family and consistently work on their



commitment to each other. Parents focus on the needs of the children (e.g., keeping them from the center of conflict or having them choose between biological and stepparents) and encourage extended family members (e.g., ex-inlaws, current inlaws) to accept the new family (Dupuis, 2010; Michaels, 2008). This dedication to creating and maintaining a new family identity gives blended families resilience in the face of internal and external adversity.

Common Issues for Blended Families

Unrealistic expectations

Most blended families are formed with an optimistic outlook and unrealistic expectations. The prevailing assumption of parents is that this new family will experience a quick and smooth transition into family solidarity, unit cohesiveness, and love (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Sweeney, 2010). During this fantasy stage, children also have unrealistic expectations that their biological parents will eventually reunite and that stepparents will go away (Papernow, 1984).

It is estimated that 4.2 million children reside in blended family households (Lofquist, Lugaila, O Connell, & Feliz, 2010).

In reality, most blended families will encounter some level of difficulty, especially in the first few years (Anderson & Greene, 2013). Stress in the couple relationship, discord between parents and children, conflict with ex-spouses, and lack of extended family support are issues commonly found in most blended families (Michaels, 2006). Often, the “myth of the instant family” extends undue pressure on family members to fit an ideal and view problems as a sign of weakness and failure (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Gonzales, 2009). It is important for blended families to let go of their anticipation to be instant nuclear families and strive to develop their own new family identity (Dupuis, 2010).

Role boundary confusion

An additional issue for blended families is the role boundary confusion that can occur from forming new relationships and encountering new responsibilities while navigating the movement of children between multiple households (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Gold, 2010; Gonzales, 2009; Sweeney, 2010). Children who move back and forth between

households face the confusing and frustrating task of consistently needing to adjust their behavior as they are required to follow different sets of rules (Pasley & Lee, 2010; Michaels, 2006). Children’s identity in the family, often related to their place in the birth order, may change as they are shuffled around to accommodate the addition of step- and half-siblings (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Michaels, 2006). Being caught in the middle of two households, children may be forced to declare their allegiance to a specific parent (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; Pasley & Lee, 2010), which can create animosity toward the other parent or stepparent (Dupuis, 2010). Added difficulties arise as parents are often unaware, ill-equipped, or incapable of providing clarity to children because they themselves are also experiencing role confusion.

Parents and stepparents feel pressure to measure up to traditional family norms and may face difficulty when trying to define or modify their parental roles (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Roberson, Sabo, & Wickel, 2011; Sweeney, 2010). While all parents in a blended family experience some sort of role ambiguity, stepparents face the most uncertainty, especially with regard to parenting their stepchildren (Schrodt, 2010). Conflict with the biological parent can arise when a stepparent seeks to be more involved in the lives of their stepchildren, while on the other hand, resentment may occur if they choose to remain distant (Dupuis, 2010; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

Biological vs. stepparents

After remarriage, biological parents must decide what—if any—involvement the new stepparent will have in parenting. Previously established parent-child relationships may change to accommodate input from stepparents and non-residential biological parents (Sweeney, 2010). Difficulties may arise as parents struggle to determine who is responsible for making the final parenting decisions. Although variations

occur, gender appears to be a prevailing factor in parental responsibility, as the majority of children identify a woman (residential/non-residential or step) as their primary caregiver (Gasper, Stolberg, Macie, & Williams, 2008).

Compared to biological parents, stepparents are often unequipped with the support, resources, or authority to parent their stepchildren (Dupuis, 2010). Legal constraints limit parental rights to biological and/or adoptive parents, which controls how much responsibility stepparents can have for their stepchildren (Dupuis, 2010). Still, stepparents provide essential economic and caregiving resources and are an integral part of the blended family (Sweeney, 2010).

Conflict between custodial and non-custodial parents

Conflict with an ex-partner is an issue that can affect the relationship quality in a blended family. Deliberate or not, ex-partners can cause additional conflict and place strain on the residential parents' relationship quality, which in turn, hinders the ability to coparent effectively (Dupuis, 2010; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

The attempt to satisfy custody and support agreements with an ex-partner can affect the quality of a coparenting relationship, especially as it relates to gender. Although ideas of the parenting capability of fathers have changed slightly over time, they are still more likely than mothers to be non-custodial parents (Mason, 2011). Mothers make up more than 70% of the parents with primary custody of children (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002), but in those few cases where mothers are the non-custodial parent, they are still more likely to initiate and maintain close

relationships with children compared to non-custodial fathers (Berg, 2003).

Custodial mothers are less likely to initiate interaction with their former partners. They also often negate the ability of fathers to interact with children and do not allow children to spend the appropriate amount of quality time to benefit from relationships with their non-custodial fathers (Ganong, Coleman, Markham & Rothrauff, 2011; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002; Mason, 2011).

Custodial mothers report that there are many factors that determine the frequency and amount of contact that occurs between children and their non-custodial fathers. Laakso (2004) reported three main concerns held by custodial mothers:

- Non-custodial father behavior,
- Children's desire to see the non-custodial father, and
- Personal experiences with their own non-custodial father.

Mothers who had experiences with their own non-residential fathers had the desire to foster better father-child relationships for their



children. Mothers had more difficulty making visitation agreements with fathers when there was a possibility of children being exposed to drinking, smoking, dating, and possessing guns, a decision often made more difficult by their children's intense desire to engage with their fathers. As a

result, any decisions that limited or stopped interactions between children and non-custodial fathers proved extremely distressful for mothers (Laakso, 2004). Laakso's research emphasizes how thoughtful decisions by custodial parents can encourage relationships between children and their non-custodial parents.

Coparenting in Blended Families

Predictors of coparenting quality

Quality coparenting in blended families occurs when parents are able to cooperatively address the day-to-day needs of their children (Ganong et al., 2011; Hohmann-Marriott, 2011).

Roberson, Nalbone, Hecker, and Miller (2010) outlined three prevailing types of coparenting relationships found in blended families:

- Cooperative coparenting, where involvement of both parents exists with little to no conflict;
- Conflictual coparents, who are also very involved with children, but have high conflict; and
- Disengaged parents with less involvement and varying degrees of conflict.

Infrequent conflict and increased reciprocity can influence quality coparenting and parental perception of the coparenting relationship. Perception is a key factor in dictating the level of involvement coparents have with one another (Ganong et al., 2011). Parents who experience quality coparenting are more likely to pay child support, less likely to consider support payments as paramount to their relationship, and are more likely to have positive interactions with each other (Roberson et al., 2010).

Communication with non-residential parents

Communication is a crucial component of the coparenting process. Parents who recognize the impact that positive interactions have on children and their overall coparenting success are more likely to display them (Ganong et al., 2011).

Father involvement

Research has emphasized the distinctive benefit that fathers have on their children's overall well-being (Ganong et al., 2011; Laakso, 2004). Having a consistent relationship with a father has been positively linked to a child's level of self-esteem (Gasper, Stolberg, Macie, & Williams, 2008). Even if there is conflict in the relationship, mothers and fathers agree on the importance of father-child relationships (Laakso, 2004).

The benefits of responsible fatherhood and marriage and relationship education programs:

- Increase access to children and payment of child support;
- Provide employment services and assistance;
- Improve father child interaction;
- Offer peer support and parent education; and
- Assist with coparenting.

Source: McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012.

The biggest predictor of father involvement is parental perception (both mother and father) of his role and his ability to perform that role. When fathers feel influential in making decisions on their children's behalf, they are more likely to participate in parenting and spend time with their children (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011). Mothers' perceptions encourage involvement too; fathers who perceive that their parental ability is viewed positively by mothers are more likely to participate in parenting (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002). This maternal "gate-keeping" is vital to the success of the coparenting relationship and its importance continues to increase over time (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Ganong et al., 2011).

Stepfather involvement has also been a focus of research with regard to coparenting in blended families. Gold (2010) found that stepfathers should form coparenting relationships with biological mothers while supporting efforts to include non-residential fathers. This parenting alliance can be formed more easily when non-residential fathers meet financial obligations, are reliable with visitation, and respectfully interact with others in the alliance (Marsiglio, 2011). Having a relationship with both a biological father and a stepfather increases children's overall well-being and the likelihood that they will have positive outcomes (Gold, 2010).

Goals of coparenting:

- **Negotiate new family roles and rules;**
- **Endorse realistic expectations for all family members;**
- **Strengthen the relationship between stepparent and stepchild; and**
- **Manage relationships with children's other parent.**

Source: Adler Baeder, Erikson, & Higginbotham, 2007.

Influence on child adjustment

Research has highlighted the unique experiences and stressors encountered by children in blended families, compared to those in traditional biological families. Children in blended family households are more likely to encounter difficulties during family transitions, which may result in decreases in economic status, academic achievement, and prosocial behaviors (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Roberson, Sabo, & Wickel, 2011). The amount and type of conflict found within the coparenting relationship has been found to be a predictor of child adjustment outcomes (Ganong et al., 2011; Pasley & Lee, 2010). While children are

susceptible to the hostile interactions of parental conflict, subtle behaviors—such as an overall lack of solidarity between parents—appear to be most harmful (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

Despite the risks, there are children in blended families who fare better and show more positive outcomes than their peers, even those in biological parent households (Anderson & Greene, 2013). What separates these children is the quality of communication and cohesion found within the behavior of their parents. Research has highlighted numerous benefits that effective coparenting can have on overall child adjustment, such as increased self-esteem, increased physical and mental health, and more satisfaction in future romantic relationships (Berg, 2003; Roberson, Sabo, & Wickel, 2011).

Influence on the couple relationship

Surprisingly, the relationship satisfaction of couples in blended families has been linked to communication with non-residential parents (Schrodt, 2010). In other words, positive communication between ex-partners can influence positive communication between the remarried couple. Therefore, it is important for ex-partners to create cooperative coparenting relationships for their children as well as for their own mental health and marital satisfaction.



“When remarried adults coparent in ways that are supportive and cooperative, such efforts are likely to ameliorate some of the stress associated with stepfamily development (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010).

Best Practices and Strategies for Healthy Relationship Education Programming

A need exists to address the unique experiences of blended families and focus on improving the quality of post-divorce interactions and strengthening coparenting partnerships (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Dupuis, 2010; Ganong et al., 2011; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; McBroom, 2011; Roberson et al., 2010). Instead of one-time workshops and seminars, relationship education programs should be part of long-term, sustainable resources that contribute to the current and future well-being of the entire family (Bonach, 2005).

Forgiveness

Research consistently identifies forgiveness as a “strong predictor of quality coparenting,” although a double standard exists. Seemingly more relevant to mothers’ perception of coparenting, forgiveness is an essential component in determining the level of compliance and satisfaction that mothers have within their coparenting relationships (Bonach, 2005; Bonach, Sales, & Koeske, 2005; McBroom, 2011). Therefore, the importance of the forgiveness process should be encouraged for fathers during coparenting education. Educators can help parents realize that for forgiveness to occur they must release anger and animosity toward their ex-partner, and then make the choice to view the ex-partner in a more positive light (Bonach, 2009).

Pre-family counseling

Research suggests that the best interventions for blended families should begin prior to family formation (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Michaels, 2006). During the pre-family stage (i.e., before remarriage), it is important for the couple to have reasonable expectations, work on effective communication patterns, and address role ambiguity from the start (Braithwaite et al., 2001). One way in which couples can accomplish this is through pre-family counseling. Gonzales (2009) suggested the following four stages of pre-family counseling to prevent and lessen stress during the family blending process:

- *Discovery*: family members get to know one another, increase bonding, and create a sense of family unity.
- *Education*: teaching families “what to expect” while becoming a blended family. Grief/loss and change are discussed with emphasis on developing patience.
- *Parental unification*: parents focus on their relationship and come to an agreement on parenting issues such as discipline and parenting techniques.
- *Family unification*: discussion of fears and expectations of what family life will be like and a commitment to periodic family meetings.

Coparenting education programs during divorce

The ability to shield children from conflict and understand the necessity of civilized post-divorce interactions is not an innate skill, but one that most parents will need to acquire (Bonach, 2005). Consequently, parents need educational interventions that help them focus on how divorce affects children and how they can coparent effectively (Bonach, 2005; Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002). Mandatory parent

education programs during divorce have helped families decrease conflict and improve the level of satisfaction in the coparenting relationship (McBroom, 2011). The primary goal of coparenting education programs for divorcing parents is to work toward interactions that increase the well-being of children.

Therefore, successful parent education programs:

- Emphasize the importance of decreasing conflict and increasing parent efficacy;
- Teach parents not to undercut efforts of coparents;
- Use skill-building activities; and
- Assist parents in assessing their need for further interventions (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 2011).

Parenting coordination

Although issues that cause conflict might not change, properly implemented parenting coordination has proven successful in disengaging coparents from conflict (Sullivan, 2013). The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (2006) defines parenting coordination as a process where professionals help adversarial parents resolve conflict, learn what is best for children, and create and maintain quality parent-child relationships. The primary goal of parenting coordination is to concentrate on the well-being of children, thereby helping parents make decisions toward this goal (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Parent coordinators work to decrease conflict and act as intermediaries who promote positive interactions between parents (Sullivan, 2013). This distinctive role merges mental health and legal systems to assist with:

- Transitioning parents from a confrontational legal system to a more child-friendly, solution-focused arena;

- Creating new manners of interaction that encourage coparenting;
- Designing a parenting plan that specifies appropriate behaviors and interactions;
- Continuing to provide a conduit for interaction between parents; and
- Maintaining case management and collaboration with a team of individuals working with the family (Sullivan, 2008).

Conclusion

There is an increasing need for interventions that assist parents and children with adjustment to life as members of a blended family. Educational interventions at different points during the blended family process (post-divorce, pre-family, post-family) can help to alleviate stress, define roles, decrease conflict, increase father involvement, and solidify a new family identity.

Suggested Resources

Association of Family and Conciliation Courts
<http://www.afccnet.org/>

Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education
<http://www.smartmarriages.com/index.html>

National Extension Relationship & Marriage Education Network
<http://www.nermen.org/>

National Parenting Education Network
<http://npen.org/>

National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families
www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org/

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse
<http://fatherhood.gov/>

National Stepfamily Resource Center
<http://www.stepfamilies.info/>

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