

Showcase USA: Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies

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Abstract

Stepfamilies may appear to be like first time married two-parent families, but in reality, they are not. Their complexity becomes more apparent when one begins to recognize the number of close relationships that are possible. Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies, an Extension program developed by Kansas State University, is designed to assist, not only stepfamilies with children under the age of 18 years old, but professionals, extended family members, and friends who want to understand how to be supportive of successful stepfamily living within their communities. Different learning styles require different types of educational strategies; thus, the program consists of a six-lesson home study course, a 35-minute video, an audiotape, single page fact sheets, a teaching guide, a training manual, and evaluation instruments. These resources can be used in combination with each other or individually as the situation warrants.

Relevance

During the 1990's, Kansas County Extension agents had informally observed that the number of stepfamilies was increasing in their counties and more and more agents were experiencing stepfamily living themselves. When these observations were checked against a recent summary of Kansas vital statistics (Kansas Department of Health and Environment 1995), it was discovered that over half of Kansas marriages involved at least one partner who had been married previously. These remarriages often included children still living at home.

Purpose

Stepfamilies as well as professionals working with them need accurate information on stepfamily processes to deal with the complexities and challenges encountered in daily stepfamily living (Hughes and Schroeder 1997; Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1994; Visher and Visher 1991). Stepfamilies may look like a first-time married family, but in reality, they represent a distinct family structure that can provide unique challenges to everyday living. For instance, Ganong and

Coleman (1994) calculated that a total of 22 potential dyadic relationships exist when a divorced couple each unites with a new partner who has children.

Partnerships

Thus, K-State Research and Extension set forth to address the need for stepfamily educational resources. A state extension specialist and area extension specialist assumed leadership of a statewide action team that included county extension agents throughout the state. This team effort was essential for developing resources that were useable and marketable in reaching the targeted audiences. The decisions made by this group covered everything from selecting a name for the program to listing the types of resources needed to previewing drafts. They also were the core group to pilot the home study course.

Other partners in the process were a state extension specialist who wrote the legal and financial information and conferred with a family law attorney, and a K-State residential faculty member who enlisted a graduate level class to assist in writing the script for a 35-minute video. This professor also recruited Larry Ganong and Marilyn Coleman, prominent stepfamily researchers, to be taped for the video. Members of the Kansas Association for Family and Community Education played a part in the process by adopting the teaching guide. The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund approved a grant proposal for producing the video and printing a portion of the materials.

Resource development process

After reviewing the stepfamily research literature and searching for existing extension programs in other states, the team got down to work. Team members liked the extension resources from other states (Bosch, Gebeke, and Meske 1992; Coleman and Ganong 1991; Duffin 1993; Duncan 1992; Duncan and Brown 1995; Frazier 1990; Gebeke, Dunlop, and Bjelland 1994; Strzok 1987; Winckler 1992), but wanted to create a more versatile package of resources that would allow multiple teaching and learning possibilities. Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies became the "trade" name for this program based on the premise that stepfamilies go through a series of stages in creating a viable stepfamily unit (Burt 1989; Papernow 1993).

The action team specifically targeted the materials toward adults in a stepfamily who have children under the age of eighteen although the resources have been used successfully with other audiences. The stepping stones or goals addressed by this program are the following.

- Building a strong couple relationship
- Maintaining strong parent and child relationships

- Developing stepparent and stepchild relationships
- Understanding financial and legal issues
- Working with the absent parent and other persons outside the stepfamily
- Nourishing the stepfamily in everyday living

Final resource products

The action team was adamant about addressing different learning styles as well as providing materials for facilitators and program evaluation. Therefore, the program has the following components.

- Home study course
- Video
- Audiocassette
- Three one-page fact sheets
- Teaching guide
- Training manual
- Evaluation surveys

Participant resources

The home study course is divided into six lessons, each one designed to take about an hour to read and approximately one week to complete the suggested activities. The course is designed to be helpful to persons who could not or would not come to public workshops.

The video has been popular in a variety of settings. Families can check it out to view in the privacy of their homes or it also can be shown in group settings. Family and consumer science teachers have found it an excellent teaching tool in high school classes, but it can also be used in professional inservices for teachers, health care and mental health workers, social service agency personnel, clergy, lawyers, and persons working in the court system as well as for public presentations to civic and educational groups.

The audiotape is for busy stepfamilies or professionals who want to learn more about stepfamilies on the run or for the person who learns better by listening than reading.

The three fact sheets summarize information found in the other materials and are designed to be used as handouts at a stepfamily program or a public display . The titles of the fact sheets are:

- Parent Fact Sheet
- Grandparent Fact Sheet
- Financial and Legal Issues Fact Sheet

Facilitator Resources

The teaching guide is a useful format for delivering a one-hour program, using the fact sheets for take-home materials. The stepfamily information in the teaching guide is contained in three group activities that allows the presenter to pick and choose, depending on the audience and available time. The video could be substituted for any one of the activities.

The training manual is for the professional or volunteer who wants to implement this program in his or her community. It contains the entire set of resources. Dissemination guidelines, master overheads, supplemental activities for stepfamilies, and evaluation tools are part of the training manual package as well as graphic aids for creating public displays and other promotional materials. It also gives suggestions on using the home study course and teaching guide for creating a series of workshops.

Evaluation surveys come with the home study course and teaching guide to help the facilitator measure the program effectiveness.

Program evaluation

Thirty-seven adults in stepfamily living situations participated in the pilot phase of the home study course. Ninety percent of these participants indicated that the resource was superior or good. The remaining ten percent rated the resource as fair. Eighty-two percent indicated that they had increased their knowledge about stepfamilies and eighty-eight percent learned new skills to use in stepfamily relationships.

Eight months after the participants completed the home study, they were asked to take part in focus groups to discuss the longitudinal impact of the course. Key findings among the six who attended a focus group include the following.

- The program helped participants to understand that their stepfamily problems are normal.
- The program increased awareness about the importance of the marital relationship.
- It increased awareness of what to expect with stepfamily relationships.
- Participants wanted more information about teenagers in a stepfamily and how to deal with difficult situations.
- The program enhanced communication among stepfamily members.
- It increased understanding that love among stepfamily members is not instant.
- Participants learned useful information on financial/legal issues although they have taken few actions as suggested in the materials (i.e. prepare or revise will).

The Kansas Association for Family and Community Education reported evaluation data for 1,025 participants who had received one hour instruction by facilitators that used the Stepping Stones teaching guide and fact sheets. Ninety-one percent learned differences between stepfamilies and first time married families. Ninety-six percent learned or reviewed useful ideas for living in a stepfamily. Ninety-five percent learned or reviewed ways of which others can be of support to stepfamilies and 96 percent indicated that they would teach or tell other people any of the information or principles learned from the program.

Summary

Kansas county extension agents are using Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies in workshop series developed in collaboration with religious groups and community coalitions; one-session workshops at Parents Universities, other family life single events, and family and consumer sciences classes; and in media and newsletter releases. Furthermore, the Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. is sending selected Stepping Stones materials to its membership.

This program is designed to assist stepfamilies, their extended families, and other community members in understanding the inevitable dynamics that are part of everyday living for stepfamilies. One person who took the home study course commented that more than anything, Stepping Stones made her realize that what her family was experiencing was very normal for stepfamilies. It gave her family hope and some ideas on making the tough times go better.

Note: Ordering information for all materials except the training manual is available by calling 785-532-5830 or e-mailing orderpub@oz.oznet.ksu.edu. The training manual can be ordered by calling 785-532-5773 or e-mailing pseele@oz.oznet.ksu.edu.

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