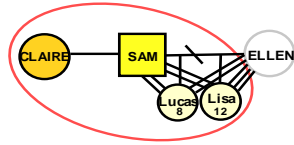


MEETING THE (BIG) CHALLENGES OF “BLENDED FAMILIES”: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T [Handout # 2]

INTRODUCTION

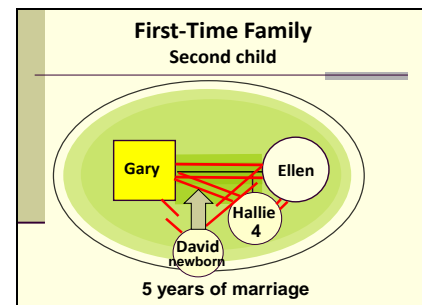
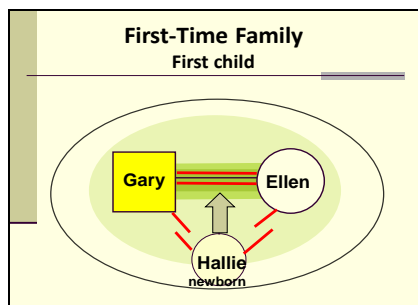
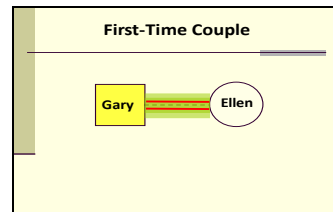


Claire and Sam’s Family The Numbers

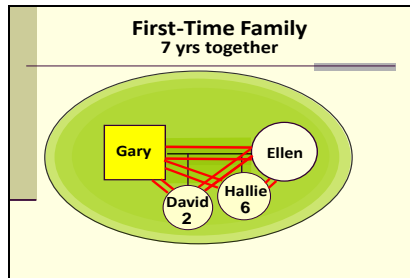
- After divorce comes (usually) stepfamilies.
- 42% of American adults have a *close* step relationship (Pew Research Center, 2011).
- 1 out of 3 children under 18 now lives in a stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995. *The changing character of stepfamilies. Demography* 32, 452-436).
- Increasing (& way under-counted) numbers of stepfamilies are headed by unmarried couples.
- Rates of divorce and recoupling among older Americans are rising steeply (Brown & Lin, 2012).

Stepfamilies Are Fundamentally Different from First-time Families

- **First-Time Family Structure**
 - **New couple in a first-time family:**
 - First-time couples have time to build trust and connection with other.
 - They have time to begin building shared habits, rituals, and values.



- **First-time family: 7 years together.**
 - Attachment bonds have deepened and expanded.
 - Understandings about “how we do things” and 1000’s of details of daily living no longer need discussion.

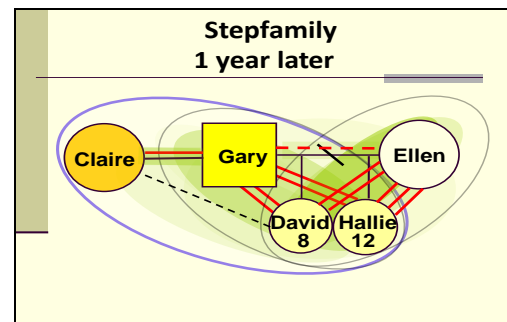
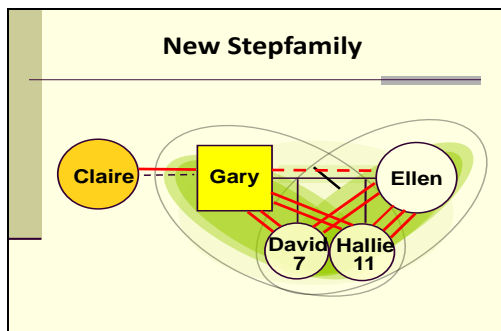


▪ **Parental Split and 2 Single-Parent Families**

- When parents protect children from adult conflict and they practice *authoritative* parenting, kids come through OK.
- Some shared ground is carried into both new single-parent families
- Over time, single-parent families develop their own separate “ways of doing things.”

▪ **Stepfamily**

- Lines of hard-wired, deeply established attachment lie in the parent-child subsystems.
- Understandings about “how we do things” lie in parent-child & ex-spouse relationships. Not in the stepcouple and not between stepparents and stepchildren.
- Ex-spouse relationships are also more established. The co-parenting relationship is a permanent part of the new family.
- Stepparents enter as “stuck outsiders” to all of these relationships, including ex-spouses.



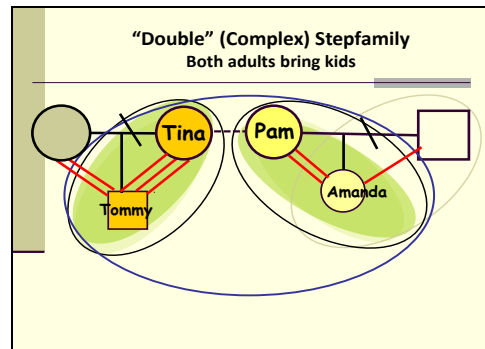
Stepfamilies Face 5 Major Challenges

1. **Children** struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and the pace of change.
2. **Insider/Outsider** positions in the adult stepcouple are intense. And they are stuck.
3. **Parenting** tasks often divide parents and stepparents.

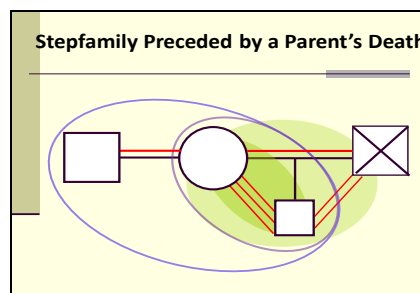
4. A new **family culture** must be built while respecting established cultures.
5. **Ex-spouses** (other parents) (dead or alive) and the co-parenting relationship, are a permanent part of the family.

Stepfamilies Come in Many Different Forms

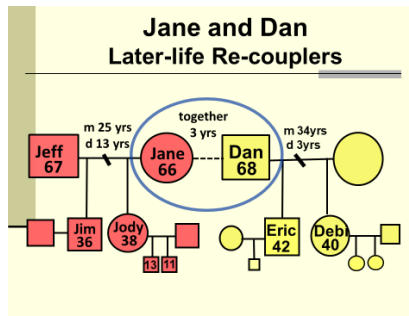
- **Single (“simple”) stepfamily:** One parent-child unit and an adult without children. (Gary & Claire)
- **Double (“complex”) stepfamily:** 2 parent-child units,



- **Stepfamilies may be headed by couples who are gay/straight/bi/trans/queer.**
- **The couple may or may not have child of the new relationship.**
- **Stepfamilies are increasingly headed by unmarried cohabiting couples.**
- **When a never-married parent recouples & marries, it will be in a first marriage. (Can’t equate stepcouple with remarried couple.)**
- **Stepfamilies formed after a death have the same basic structure.**
 - Sometimes the parent-child bond is intensified.
 - Can be similar when a parent has left or disappeared. (Except add that “ambiguous loss” needs rituals and acknowledgement of the loss.)



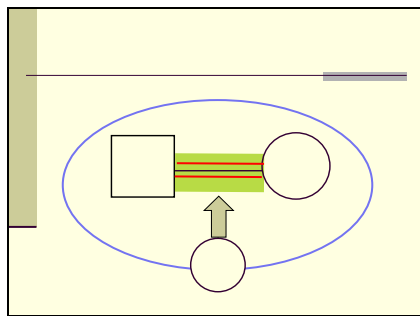
- **Later-life recouplers are increasing dramatically, often with adult stepchildren w their own kids!**
 - The census only counts stepfamilies with children under 18.
 - However, rates of divorce in the U.S. have fallen and evened out since the 1980s. *Except* among those over 55, where rates of divorce (and recoupling) are rising steeply.



- Late-life recouplers are often stunned to find themselves facing many of the same challenges that younger stepfamilies do.
- In addition, stepfamilies formed in late life must navigate emotionally charged issues of estate planning and medical care between stakeholders with widely differing agendas (stepparents, stepchildren, stepsiblings) and no time to build trust and understanding. *(This is a key new area for mediation, financial planning, and collaborative law.)*
- The couple may be “living apart together” (L.A.T.) in a committed relationship.
 - (Rates of L.A.T. triple over age 55!
 - LAT can also be a good solution with especially vulnerable kids

All of these have families in common that at least one parent-child unit precedes the adult couple. It is this structure that creates those 5 challenges.

- Foster and adoptive families are different from stepfamilies.
 - Unlike a stepfamily, a foster or adoptive child joins *adults'* established relationship.
 - However, the wish for an immediate loving family may collide with children’s reactive attachment trauma.



Resources for adoptive & foster families: Arthur Becker-Weidman, Dan Hughes, and Colby Pearce

A 3-Level Framework for Helping Stepfamilies to Meet Their Challenges

I. Psychoeducational

- What's normal
- Evidence-based information about what works and what doesn't to meet stepfamily challenges.
- *"I think I can help you understand what's happening here. Want to hear?"*

II. Interpersonal

- Teach skills that pull for connection and understanding across differences.
- In session, shape experiences that build compassion and connection.
- *"This is an important conversation. Can I help you have it differently?"*

III. Intrapsychic, Family-of-Origin Work

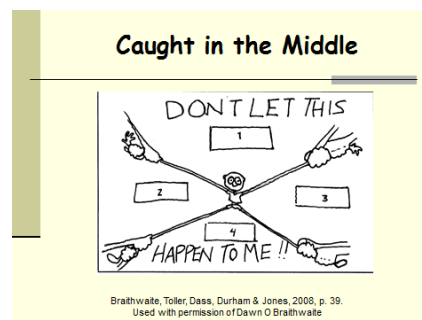
- "Papernow's Bruise Theory of Feelings" If stepfamily challenges hit unhealed old bruises, the pain and the level of reactivity impedes the ability to meet stepfamily challenges. Healing old bruises may be necessary for further progress.
- *"Anyone would feel this way. And something is taking your wise mind right off line."*

MEETING the 5 CHALLENGES

1st Challenge. CHILDREN struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and too much change.

Understanding the challenge

- **What is exciting and wonderful for adults often makes many challenges for kids:**
- **Losses:** Parents turn away to a new love. The new family may move into a new house. Children may lose familiar neighborhood and school, easy access to friends, etc. All of this is preceded by the losses of divorce.
- **Loyalty binds:** *"If I care about my stepmom/stepdad, I'm disloyal to my mom/dad."* Loyalty binds are normal. They happen even in collaborative friendly divorces. *However*, adult tension and conflict make loyalty binds unbearable for kids.



Some kids' loyalty binds are tighter *without* adult conflict. For instance, a daughter who is very close to her mom may feel disloyal caring about her stepmom.

- **Change:** The adults are often eager to move forward, but kids need time.
 - **Research: For many children, adjusting to a stepfamily requires more time and is harder than adjusting to divorce.**
 - **Research: As the pace of change goes up, children's wellbeing goes down.**
- **Age and gender make a difference.** Research finds that:
 - Stepfamilies are easier for children under *8 and under*.
 - Stepfamilies tend to be *easier for boys than girls*.
 - Becoming a stepfamily is *hardest for early adolescent girls*. (And, in my experience, it is often hard for young adult and adult women of recoupling later-life dads.)
 - Even when early adjustment was easy, there is sometimes a "bump" of difficulty in adolescence (James Bray's research)

Helping adults to help kids in stepfamilies

Hold your own empathy for the pain of struggling kids, and for overwhelmed parents and for stepparents who are being rejected.

Adults often ask for individual or family therapy "to help kids adjust." Often, we best help children by helping the adults to understand what kids are feeling & needing. However, because adults and children in stepfamilies are in such different places, adults often need considerable help with this.

I. Psychoeducation

- **To help kids with loss:**
 - **Carve out regular reliable one-to-one parent-child time.**
 - **Avoid this "easy wrong turn."**
 - Our first-time family models prioritize the couple relationship. "If the couple is strong, the kids will be OK." In stepfamilies, the vulnerable adult couple relationship does need special attention and time alone together.
 - However*, in stepfamilies when the adult couple relationship is extremely strong, *kids' wellbeing actually goes down*. (Likely because parents may not be available enough to their kids.)
 - **Successful stepcouples do "both/and": They create *both* alone time for the couple *and* regular alone time for parents and their children.** (One-to-one stepparent-stepchild time without parent present is also helpful.)

- **To help kids with loyalty binds:**
 - **Help all of the adults to resist the urge to badmouth other adults** in a child’s life. (Children often complain that the adults “leak.”)
 - “Loyalty Bind Talks” can help some children (Papernow, 2013, p. 57).
 - Children with tighter loyalty binds will need more distance from a stepparent. (Note: *For stepparents, even with full understanding, being shunned is still painful. Shunned stepparents need extra hugs and empathy from their partners.*)
 - Children who tell “bad stories” to one parent about the other may be caught in a painful loyalty bind.

- **To help kids with change:**
 - **Kids often need to move much (much) more slowly than the adults wish they did.**
 - **Adults often need help slowing down.** *The Stepfamily Handbook* has good concrete step-by-step guidance for introducing kids and new partner. When in doubt, **wait**. Make early meetings extremely low key.
 - If you can’t wait, start by running into each other at the park, walk by at the mall. No introductions.
 - Then perhaps meet up at a neighborhood or school gathering. Then invite new partner to come over for a few hours and go home, etc. Adults: Try to treat each other like *friends*, not lovers.
 - Especially in early meetings, coach parents to *attend primarily to their kids*, not to new partners. (*Might be hard for new partners!*)

- **Keep adult physical contact private.**
 - Adults may wish to demonstrate a “loving adult couple” to kids.
 - However, for children, stepcouple physicality often intensifies losses and tightens loyalty binds. Do snuggle, kiss, and hug each other, *but* in private out of children’s eyesight.

- **Stepsibs**
 - Close stepsib relationships may be the adults’ wish, but not the kids’ reality. (If you were told you had to live with folks you didn’t choose...)
 - If stepsibs are not getting along, separate them when you can.
 - *Monitor safety*. This is not a time “to let the kids work it out.”

- **Kids in the same family will move at different paces.**
 - **Give struggling kids more 1-to-1 parent-child time & less family time.**

- Children with more losses, tighter loyalty binds, or more vulnerability (on the spectrum, bipolar, very anxious) may need to go much more slowly.
- Younger (8 & under), more outgoing, more easygoing kids, kids with fewer losses and no painful loyalty binds, may be more available.

II. Interpersonal Skills [Reference list: Faber & Mazlish, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. Bonnell & Papernow, 2019.]

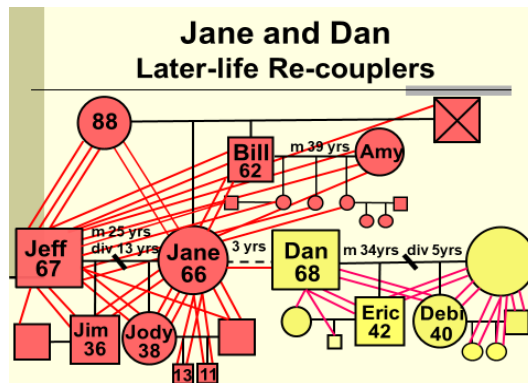
- Parents often need help to empathize with children's very different experience.
 - Use "joining" to help parents to help kids "feel felt." To child: *"Can you give your dad one or two sentences, the nub of what you want him to know about how this is for you?"* To Dad: *"Take a breath. Find what you DO understand about what your child just said."*
- **Smart Steps is an excellent, beautifully designed 6-session, psychoeducational and skill-building program for stepfamilies (adults and kids).** Research finds it is effective for a wide range of ethnic, educational, and socioeconomic populations. Also for stepfamilies in more trouble vs less trouble.
 - **About family therapy with stepfamilies**
 - Family therapists are often taught to see the whole family together. However, this is often destructive in stepfamilies as each subsystem is in competition with the others.
 - **Therapists need to *think* systemically. No matter who is in the room, they need to hold empathy for the feelings these challenges create for *each* family member.**
 - **But stepfamily therapists need to *work* in subsystems (couple system, parent-child system, sometimes sibling/steppibling system, co-parenting ex-spouses).**
 - When needs for connection and understanding are met in couple & parent-child relationships, *then* it's possible to bring the family together. Stepparent-stepchild relationships usually come after the above.
 - **Individual, couple, and family therapists need to have enough understanding of stepfamilies to provide evidence-based guidance specific to stepfamilies.** Since there's almost no training, ask them to read my books! *"These books have been helpful to me and my clients. Would you read them?"*

2nd Challenge. INSIDER/OUTSIDER positions are intense. And they are stuck.

Understanding the challenge

- In a stepfamily, even years later, the powerful, historically rooted channels of attachment, and the shared understandings about "how we do things," lie in parent-child and ex-spouse relationships, not in stepcouple or stepparent-stepchild relationships.
- Stepparents become "stuck outsiders."
 - Children need their parents, not their stepparents. Parents in a stepfamily must turn *away* from their partners to care for their kids.
 - **Outsiders feel left out, invisible, rejected, alone:** *"When your kids are here, it's like I'm invisible." "I feel like I'm last on the totem pole, after kids, after ex."*

- **Parents are “stuck insiders.”**
 - Parents are closest to kids, new partner, and their ex-spouse. But they are often torn between the needs of kids and needs of partner.
 - What is needed to keep the peace with the ex and protect children from conflict may be different from what the stepparent wishes for.
 - **Insiders feel connected to everyone, but torn, anxious, and unable to meet the needs of all the people who are important:** *“No matter what I do I can’t please all the people who are important to me.” “Please! Don’t make me choose!”*
- **In double stepfamilies, one adult may more outsider and the other more insider.**
- **Children may also be stuck insiders and outsiders.**
 - **Part-time children who come in and out enter each week as “outsiders”** to an up-and-running household. They may feel “homeless,” “left out,” unimportant.
 - **Children who spend more time in the home are “stuck insiders.”** They may feel intruded upon or invaded.
 - **Temperament can make a difference.** A quieter shyer child becomes more of an outsider than an outgoing energetic child.
- **The fantasy for later-life recouplers is, “The dog is dead. The kids are gone. It’s just us.”** Here’s the reality:



- The insider/outsider challenges are stunningly similar.
- Now with decades-long parent-child and ex-spouse relationships, plus intergenerational networks of extended family and friends with long-established rituals and rhythms of togetherness.

Helping Stepfamilies to Meet Insider/Outsider Challenges

Hold your empathy for both the pain of outsidersness and the pain of insidersness.

- To the stepparent (with parent listening): *“It’s so hard to feel ignored over & over, up close & personal. Is that right?”*
- To the parent (with the stepparent listening), *“It’s so painful that when you turn to your kid your wife is upset. When you turn to your wife, your kid is upset.”*
- *“Did I get that right? What’s that like to hear?” (OK to share that with each other?)*

I. Psychoeducation

- **The language of “insiders and outsiders” can be enormously helpful.**
- **One-to-one time throughout the family helps stepfamilies to meet this challenge.**
 - Stepfamilies do need time together doing fun things as a family to become a “we.”
 - AND carving out reliable one-to-one time meets the attachment needs of *all* the family’s relationships (couple, parent-child, stepparent-child).
 - Stepparents and stepchildren also need time alone together. Help stepparents to find low-key “shoulder-to-shoulder” activities they can do w stepchildren.
- **Give stepparents a break!** Stepparents need time away outside (or inside) the house.
- **Sit with the often considerable grief and disappointment.**
“Not what you expected, huh! That language of “blended” didn’t set you up for this, huh!”

II. Interpersonal practices to bridge the insider/outsider divide

Research: Successful stepcouples and struggling stepcouples face the same challenges. *Successful stepcouples have better interpersonal skills.*

In successful stepcouples, “both hold both”: *Parents* provide empathy for *stepparents’* experience of being left out, over and over, up close and personal. *Stepparents* provide empathy for *parents’* experience of being caught between the needs of all the people who are important to them.

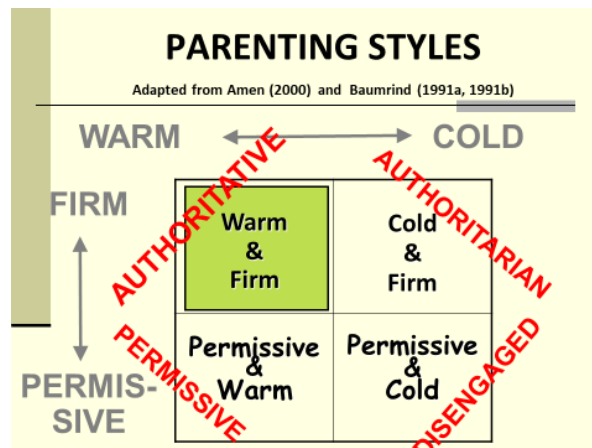
- **Teach a few key skills**
 - Take a breath.** Gottman: Self-regulation is the most important interpersonal skill.
 - Soft and kind makes more connection than hard and harsh.** Gottman:
Kindness is a muscle. Exercise it. *“Can you try that again, but soft?”*
 - Make positive requests. Not negative criticisms.** *“Would you be willing to...”*
Not, *“You never...” “You always...”*
 - “I” messages.** (*“I’m having a hard time with the dishes piling up in the sink.”*)
Avoid labels and “you” messages. (*“Your kids are slob.”*)
 - 5:1 Maintain a ratio of 5 positives: 1 negative.**
 - Use sentence stems.** *“I would love it if...”*
- **Use “joining” to help couples slow WAY down and hear each other. Handout # 5.**

III. Intrapsychic/Family-of-Origin Work

If psychoeducation doesn’t stick, skills don’t hold, reactivity remains high or low, it’s likely that old family-of-origin wounds are driving reactivity. Healing those wounds may be necessary to free resources to meet the challenge.

3rd Challenge. PARENTING tasks often divide parents and stepparents

Understanding the Challenge



- **Four parenting styles:**
 - **AuthorITATIVE** parents are warm, empathic and loving AND they set moderately firm limits/make “developmentally appropriate demands for maturity.”
 - **AuthorITARIAN** parenting sets limits, but is often too harsh and without enough warmth or empathic attunement.
 - **PERMISSIVE** parenting provides love and caring without enough limits. It makes too few demands for age-appropriate behavior.”
 - **DISENGAGED** disconnected parenting does not provide either enough attunement or enough limits for kids.
 - Not on this chart: **UNPREDICTABLE** parenting swings between authoritarian and permissive parenting.

- **Kids do better on every measure imaginable with “authorITATIVE” parenting.**

- **Stepfamily structure pulls parents and stepparents to opposite corners.**
 - Stepparents everywhere seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren.
 - Parents everywhere want more love and understanding for their children.

- **When this goes badly, stepcouples get stuck in a “Polarization Polka.”**
 - The harsher and more demanding the stepparent, the more protective the parent. The more protective the parent, the more desperate the stepparent.
 - Stepparents get pulled to the upper right *authoritarian* (hard and cold) corner. Parents get pulled to the lower left *permissive* (warm but not firm enough) corner.

- **When this goes well, stepcouples do a more “collaborative cha cha”**
 - Stepparents can often help parents pull “UP” toward more firmness
 - Parents can often help stepparents to pull “OVER” to more understanding.

What helps: Parenting, stepparenting, and discipline in stepfamilies

I. Psychoeducation

▪ **Normalize the challenge**

“You’re differing over parenting not because you’re failing at being a family. But because you live in a stepfamily. For some reason, stepparents EVERYWHERE want more limits and boundaries for their stepchildren. Parents EVERYWHERE want more love and understanding for their kids.”

“In stepfamilies, it turns out that what is irritating “bad behavior” to stepparents is experienced as “normal kid behavior” by parents.”

▪ **Use the chart to teach about parenting**

- *“You’re both right. Kids need both warmth and limits.” “It turns out that we have a huge amount of research about this! Want to hear?”*
- Authoritative parenting produces better outcomes on everything adults care about: Social skills, academic achievement, risk of prison, drug and alcohol use, lower depression, etc. What’s that like to hear from me?

▪ **Use the chart to help clients to visualize the “Polarization Polka”**

- *“Ooops. The more you’re pulling this way, the more you’re pulling other way.”*
- *“Make the cycle the enemy, not your partner.” (Sue Johnson)*

▪ **Parents need to retain the disciplinary role**

- **Until/unless stepparents have built a caring, trusting relationship w their stepchildren, parents need to retain the disciplinary role with their own kids.**
- There are many mature healthy stepfamilies where stepparents do not have a disciplinary role with stepchildren, especially when stepfamilies begin with older children or with more vulnerable kids.

▪ **Successful stepparents practice *connection* before correction.**

- *“Relationships before rules.”* Research: Warm caring stepparents make a big difference to children’s wellbeing.
- Stepparent find fun things to do with stepchild, without parent present. Get interested in children’s activities. Play a video game together.
- Stepparent as “monitor,” “supporter,” “adult friend.”

▪ **AuthorITARIAN parenting is toxic to stepparent-stepchild relationships.**

- Even in cultures that value authoritarian parenting.
- Unfortunately, it’s the parenting style that the structure pulls stepparents into!

▪ **Once stepparents have built a caring, trusting relationship, they can move SLOWLY into authorITATIVE discipline** (loving/empathic and moderately firm).

- More likely with younger kids (8 and under). Less likely with adolescents.
- “Slowly” often means over several years.
- There are many healthy mature stepfamilies where the stepparent does not have a disciplinary role.

II. Interpersonal moves to soften polarization

- **Successful stepcouples do talk a lot about parenting.** Often stepparents can help parents pull “up” on the chart toward firmer parenting, Parents can help stepparents to pull “over” on the chart to more understanding.
- **But stepparents have *input*, parents have *final say* about their own kids.**
- **How to do this without polarizing! Same list of skills:**
 - 1) **Take a breath.**
 - 2) Stay soft and kind
 - 3) Make positive requests. (Not criticisms.)
 - 4) Stick to “I” messages. (Avoid labels.)
 - 5) **5:1 positive to negative.** Notice what parent/sp is doing well!
(Note: 5:1 with kids, too: The behavior of struggling kids pulls for negative feedback from adults. All kids, especially struggling kids need warm caring communication. The rate goes WAY down in stepfamilies (Schrodt 2006). We often need to coach both parents and stepparents to look for opportunities to give warmth and positive feedback to kids.)
 - 6) **Sentence stems** We can say, “*Would you each be willing to finish the sentence, “I’d love it if....”*”
- **Soft/Hard/Soft is another good one. (See Handout # 7)**
- **Stepparents can communicate their wants. But they need to do so *especially* caringly and skillfully.** “*It’s hard for me that...*” “*I’d love it if...*”
NOT: “You WILL treat me respectfully. NOT: “Take the trash out now or else!”

III. Family history can make this challenge harder

- When a parent or stepparent is “stuck” in a “wrong” corner, ask, “*What was parenting like in the family you came from?*”
- Stepparents who grew up with *authoritarian* parenting may confuse the empathic caring of authoritative parenting with “permissiveness.” A parent who grew up in an authoritarian family (or a very permissive family) may confuse the calm firm limits of authoritative parenting with harsh authoritarian parenting.
- To a stepparent who grew up in an *authoritarian* (harsh and firm) family:
“*You have a ‘double whammy.’ That upper right ‘authoritarian’ corner feels so right to you. And it’s so easy for stepparents to go there.*” “*We have lots of research about this. Wanta hear? Turns out, as you’re seeing, in a stepfamily, authoritarian stepparenting makes things much worse.*” “*What’s that like to hear from me?*”

4th Challenge. A NEW FAMILY CULTURE must be built -- while respecting already-established cultures.

Understanding the challenge: Tuna fish makes the point.

- In a first-time family, how “we” do tuna fish and a 1000 other details and basic values about “how we do things” are a done deal. They require no discussion. Stepfamilies bring together fully established cultures. The flood of surprises and differences can be stunning!

- Often these differences arise at moments that all members fully expect to be ordinary and even comforting. (Stepmom hangs white lights on the Xmas tree. Stepdaughter, who is used to colored lights and runs to her room sobbing.)
- The shared sense of what feels “right,” and of what is comfortable, lies in the parent-child unit not within the stepcouple or between stepparents and stepkids.

Helping stepfamilies meet this challenge

I. Psychoeducation: What works (and what doesn’t) to create a new family culture.

Hold your compassion for the pain of all the players in every story.

- **Empathize with the grief:** *“That word ‘blended’ didn’t set you up for this, huh!”*
- **Normalize the surprise and upset.**
 - This level of “*otherness*,” in up-close relationships can be surprisingly triggering, especially so if you are expecting and longing for “blending.”
 - *“Hard to believe tuna fish would start a Cold War, huh!” “Stunning isn’t it!”*
- **Change the metaphor.**
 - It turns out, becoming a stepfamily is not at all like putting blueberries and strawberries together to make a smoothie!
 - It’s much more like asking a group of Japanese to live closely with a group of Italians. There are going to be lots of differences, some of them quite unexpected. Some of those differences may stay forever. “Success” is not “becoming all the same.” It’s staying curious and respectful with surprises.
- **There is a lot of “learning by goofing” in a stepfamily!**
 - Stepcouples are often told to talk ahead of time about money, rules, expectations, etc. This is a very good idea.
 - *However*, so much of what we most value, of how we think “things are done” is no longer held in language, if it ever was. UNTIL someone breaks an expectation! *This is a very hard way to learn!*
- **An “easy wrong turn”:** Stepcouples are often encouraged to create a new slate of “family rules.”
 - That makes logical sense. However, it is very likely to make too much change too fast for kids.
 - It’s also a little like asking everyone to eat pasta and use chopsticks. Much more likely to make misery not unity! (*“What’s that like to hear from me?”*)
- **Successful stepfamilies do create new rituals. AND they honor and respect (and take time to get to know) their differences.**
- **A step at a time saves nine**—2 or 3 changes at a time. What’s easy for one set of kids (“knock before entering”) may be foreign and a big challenge to the other group of kids.
- **Start with rules for safety and civility.**
 - This is not a time to “let the kids work it out.
 - Again, each parent disciplines his or her own kids.
- **Holidays may require intense negotiation, both within the family, and between households.**
- **Bottom line: Building a sense of “we” is a process, not an event.**

- Resolving differences well takes time—time to listen and understand.
- Time to experiment. Time to try things and learn what doesn't and does work.
- Thriving stepfamilies will often still have some (even many) differences.

II. Interpersonal

- *“It is how stepfamilies communicate about disagreements, rather than the mere presence of disagreements, that is important to mental health in stepfamilies.”*
Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999
- We are helping couples to shift from “right and wrong” to “an attitude of learning.”
- Soft/Hard/Soft is useful in bringing up differences.
- Use “joining” in session to help couples slow WAY down and hear each other.

III. Intrapsychic/family-of-origin work

If you come from a family where differences and surprises signaled danger (for instance an alcoholic or bipolar parent) this challenge may kick up old bruises that need some healing to free up resources to be effective

5th Challenge. EX-SPOUSES (& their co-parenting relationship) are a permanent part of a stepfamily

Understanding the Challenge

- Stepfamilies do not begin and end at the front door. They extend across households. The co-parenting relationship, good or bad, is a permanent part of stepfamily life.
- **The most robust predictor of poor adjustment for children in any family form, including first-time families, is not divorce. It is conflict,** along with the quality of parenting.
 - Research: Children with *high-conflict never-divorced* parents have significantly poorer wellbeing than children with *low-conflict divorced* parents.
 - Research: This includes young adults and adults. Young adult and adult women are especially vulnerable to parental conflict
- **Even moderate tension matters** (for kids in *first-time nonclinical* families) (El Sheikh et al)
 - **Impacts children’s academic functioning, attention, and immune system.**
 - **The moderating variable is sleep.** Compromised sleep makes all those outcomes. (When kids are having trouble sleeping, assess adult tension levels.)
- **Sometimes ex-spouse relationships get more fraught when one parent recouples**
 - Especially hard for moms to share with stepmoms.

Helping stepfamilies to parent across households

[Some resources: Bonnell & Papernow: *The Stepfamily Handbook*, Wittman: *Custody Chaos, Personal Peace*, Eddy: *So What’s Your Proposal?*, Stone et al.: *Difficult Conversations*; Bonnell: *Co-Parenting Handbook*]

Because conflict is so toxic for kids, we need to monitor, educate about, and intervene in adult conflict with the same attention that health care professionals monitor, educate, and intervene in blood pressure levels.

Express your empathy for feelings. Resist joining in labeling the other players.

- Empathy for feelings: *“I know it’s upsetting that....” “That sounds painful for everyone.”* NOT Labeling: *“That’s outrageous!”*

- Discipline yourself to assume that there is another side of the story that also makes total sense. *“Gee, I wonder what was going on there? If we can figure that out, maybe we can have some influence on what’s happening.”*

I. Psychoeducation

- **Collaborative, cooperative co-parenting is best for children.**
 - In my experience, this is becoming more common, but still not the norm.
 - Close ex-spouse relationships can be challenging for stepparents.
- **Low-conflict “parallel parenting” is next best for kids.**
- **Transitions between houses ask a *lot* of kids. Adults need to keep them calm and low key.**
 - This is NOT the time for adults to discuss differences, scheduling glitches, etc.
 - “Transition rituals” can help.
 - If the adults can’t maintain calm during drop off and pick up, have one parent drop at school, the other pick up after school. Or use a public place like McDonald’s.
- **Help stepcouples to reassure the children’s other parent.**
 - Parents and/or stepparents can share the content of Loyalty Bind Talks. *“This is what we’re saying to the kids. And we believe it 100%”*
 - Help stepparents to take it slow.
- **Help parents in the other household (often, especially moms) to let go**
 - Look for grief under “resistance”: *“Divorce is one thing. Having to share your child with an adult you didn’t choose is entirely another. So painful, huh.”*
 - We can say to struggling parents: *“I know you want the best for your kids. Sharing is hard for the adults. But it is MUCH better for the kids. Research: Kids do best with loving relationships with both mom and dad and with both their stepparents.. “What’s that like to hear from me?”*
- **Rules between households can be different IF adults are respectful.**
 - A child says, “But Mommy lets me drink Coke.” The other parent can say, ***“Yup. In Mommy’s house you drink Coke. In this house, we drink milk with dinner. When you grow up you can decide which is better!”***
 - NOT: “Your mother never did care about healthy eating.”
- **Generally, neither household can expect the other household to enforce rules that the other parent did not agree to.**
- **Young school-age children do best with co-parenting plans that provide consistent predictable weekday schedules. Weekends can be more flexible.**
- **Young children (under three) need a lot of verbal communication between households (because they can’t talk).**
 - If co-parents can’t talk without fighting, encourage simple emails or texts. Communicate only *data*—what a Martian anthropologist would see or hear: *“Johnny had a hard time with potty training this week.” “Janie is not liking something about daycare. We haven’t figured out what yet.”*
 - NOT, “You have obviously been slacking with potty training.”

- **Adolescents may need monitoring between households.** (Adolescent says, “I’m going to Dad’s.” And then spends the night drinking with friends!) Simple texts can work:
 - *“Johnny says he’s going to your house. Just want to make sure that’s OK with you.”*
 - NOT, “We have a midnight curfew and I expect you [ex-spouse] to enforce it.”

- **When a parent has died, parent-child attachment is forever.**
 - Stepparents cannot “replace” the missing parent.
 - Stepparents help children to grieve and honor their lost parent.
 - See Diane Fromme’s excellent book, *Stepparenting the Grieving Child: Cultivating Past and Present Connections with Children Who Have Lost a Parent*.

- **Even for kids with neglectful/abandoning/abusive parents, attachment is forever.**
 - The “language of parts” can be helpful: *“Part of you is relieved you’re not seeing Daddy because he loses his cool so much. AND part of you misses him. Cuz he’s your dad! Those are two opposite parts! One makes you want to run. The other makes you want to hold on tight! And they’re both real. I’ll help you hold both.”*
 - Parents, grandparents, and other extended family members, teachers, ministers, rabbis, and counselors can use the “language of parts” with kids.

- **Good news: When one parent is abusive, narcissistic or inadequate, authoritative parenting by the other parent can make a significant difference in children’s wellbeing.**