The Purpose of this Lesson:
- Explore the differing characteristics of biological families and stepfamilies.
- Recognize the transitions and adjustments which stepfamilies usually experience.
- Initiate discussion on how extended family and the community can support stepfamilies.

Preparing for the Lesson
- Read through the entire teaching guide before you present the lesson.
- Prepare yourself for each activity by imagining people’s reactions and your responses.
- Have a paper plate and pencil for each participant.
- Have a flip chart or writing board available for recording group responses.
- Have an evaluation form for each participant to complete at the end of the lesson.
- To group leader: Please send completed evaluation forms to Charlotte Shoup Olsen, KSU School of Family Studies and Human Services, 343 Justin Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506. Thank you.

The Lesson
Did you know that stepfamilies are becoming more common? Stepfamilies have existed for many generations. In the past, they were usually formed following the death of a partner; now, most stepfamilies are created after a divorce or separation.
What is a Stepfamily?
A stepfamily is a family in which at least one adult has a child or children from a previous relationship. “Blended” and “remarried” are other names applied to stepfamilies. In some homes, the adult couple may not be married, but the family is living like a stepfamily. Stepfamilies deal with common family matters and special concerns as well.

Stepparents have a ready-made family from the beginning. The new family must learn to live together and get along. In addition to the stepfamily, there are former spouses or partners, grandparents, grandchildren, friends, and perhaps teachers, clergy, and others in the community who have to adjust to the new stepfamily.

Becoming a successful stepfamily can take time.

Activity 1
Give each person a paper plate and a pencil. Ask the participants to tear their plate into two sections in any way desired (zig-zag, straight, curved, etc.) as long as it results in two pieces, not three or four.

Now that you have two pieces, pass one piece to the person on your left. Put the two halves together and examine the fit.

- Do they fit exactly?
- Is it a smooth fit?

It is normal that the two halves do not fit because they come from different plates. Fitting a new stepfamily together is just as challenging.

- Both adults and their children have a previous history with different traditions and ways of doing things.
- Each family member has his or her own habits, attitudes, values, and preferences.
- Even if one partner has no children, this individual also has certain expectations for routine daily living that may be different from the new partner.

Think about the differences between families in which the couple is married for the first time as compared to families where one or both adults have children from previous relationships. Often, a stepfamily assumes they should act and feel like a first-time married family; in reality, that is impossible.

Ask the participants to either write on the paper plate pieces or think about some differences between

1) biological families without stepfamily members and 2) stepfamilies. Encourage them to think about the differences between biological families and stepfamilies — each having young children, teenagers, adult children, or adult children with their own families. Suggest that they visit with someone sitting next to them about these differences. After a few minutes, ask the group to share their ideas. List these responses on a flip chart or writing board.

Stepfamilies must take many differences into consideration as they go about their daily lives. Here is a summary of the differences that you may or may not have thought about:

A stepfamily is born of loss.
A divorce, death, or separation comes before the stepfamily. The feelings that come with that loss must be taken into consideration. A divorce or separation represents a loss of dreams for the adults involved, regardless of the circumstances. A parent who has died may be elevated to sainthood and the partner wants an exact replacement. Or, an adult may be looking for the exact opposite of a former partner.

Children grieve the loss of their first family, no matter how imperfect it may have been. It is not unusual for stepfamilies to discover that these feelings create tension if no one is willing to recognize and talk about them. It can help if the stepparents accept this tension and its origins and understand that time and patience will be required to overcome this challenge.

Individuals in stepfamilies have different personal histories.
A man and his children may form a family with a woman without children. The father and his children will have memories, traditions, and sometimes private jokes that do not include the new stepmother.

If both partners bring children to the family, there are several sets of histories and relationships that cannot be ignored. Someone may feel like an outsider at times, so other family members may need to try a different approach to help everyone feel included.

There can be differences in family traditions and values.
Meals, homework, discipline, family rules, holiday celebrations, and inheritance expectations are just a few of the issues likely to be questioned in stepfamilies. Differences in traditions and values are not right or wrong, just different. The older the parents and children, the longer the history and
the more differences possible. Stepfamilies with stepgrandchildren add another layer of complexity.

Instant love is often unrealistically expected between stepfamily members. A biological family’s relationship with each child begins at birth. In a stepfamily, the new stepparent becomes an instant parent, and maybe grandparent, to persons that may seem like strangers. Individuals within stepfamilies may not necessarily even like each other. Relationship building requires commitment, time, and patience.

**Activity 2**

As you think about the strengths and challenges of stepfamilies, take a quiz based on information from stepfamily research. Raise your hand when you think the statement is true or false.

1. **The stories and myths about wicked stepmothers such as Cinderella and Snow White do not affect today’s stepfamilies.**

The answer is *false*. Many best-loved fairy tales have introduced and reinforced the image of the cruel, uncaring stepmother and the mistreated, unwanted stepchild for generations. This legacy can be a major hurdle when building positive relationships between children and the stepparents. Sometimes the stepparent — especially the stepmother — may be so intent on overcoming this stereotype that she tries to be “super mom.” This role is usually overwhelming for the family and discouraging for the “super parent.”

2. **Children ages 9 through 15 usually have the most difficult time adjusting to a new stepfamily situation.**

The answer is *true*. Children in this age group generally have strong loyalty issues when a new stepparent enters the family because:

- having the biological parents reunite may still be their fantasy;
- accepting the new stepparent may make the child feel disloyal to the absent biological parent, even if that parent is deceased; and
- having the new stepparent may make the child feel displaced and angered.

Younger children have had less time to establish strong loyalty ties and are more adaptable to change. Older adolescents may be more concerned about “breaking away from the nest” and may even welcome less attention as their biological parent concentrates on a new partner.

3. **It is not unusual for a stepfamily to take at least four years or more to feel like a solid family.**

The answer is *true*. There are so many tasks for the new stepfamily that it may seem overwhelming. Initially, the adults may be ecstatic over their new partner relationship. Their children may think otherwise. As reality settles in, it may seem chaotic. The parent might feel a tug between the child and the new partner. There may be grieving over the loss of the first family, but no one realizes it. Even a deceased parent may take on larger-than-life status and children cling to the idea that life would be better if they had their “real” parent. Everyday living is a struggle. Discipline and money can be big issues. Getting along with the ex-spouse and inlaws may be overwhelming. Adult stepchildren may be concerned about their inheritance. Tension fills the air.

To get past this stage, the couple must develop awareness of the many dynamics that are occurring and understand that the feelings of loss, disloyalty, and rejection are normal. Steps that may help are:

- The stepparent spending time with each stepchild individually, such as assisting with a school project, playing games, cooking, or doing other activities.
- The stepparent supporting the biological parent rather than directly disciplining the stepchild(ren).
- Creating new family traditions that help all family members feel like they belong, such as a family movie or game night.

4. **A strong couple relationship is an important part to forming a strong stepfamily.**

The answer is *true*. Couples need to focus on building and maintaining a strong, caring relationship. Parents may feel guilty about giving attention to the new partner rather than the children, but a strong couple who works as a team has less risk of dissolving their relationship than couples who are pulled into power struggles over disciplining children, money issues, ex-spouse and extended family, and other stepfamily challenges.

A happy and successful couple relationship starts with a deep friendship. Each partner needs to know when the other feels like an outsider and work to decrease that feeling. They constantly work to learn more about each other, catch up on a daily basis, know the partner’s likes and dislikes, and know their deepest dreams, beliefs, and fears. They plan fun times together, too. Couples who have a deep friendship are more likely to always be respectful towards each
other, even when they disagree. They can weather marital storms much easier than a couple that has not developed mutual admiration. The couple may need professional advice if they are no longer in tune and experience serious relationship problems.

5. A stepparent living with a stepchild has the same legal rights as the biological parent.
The answer is false. Stepparents are often surprised that they do not automatically have permission to sign parental consent forms for school and medical purposes. The child’s parent may want to provide the stepparent with a limited power of attorney to help protect everyone, especially in the event that an emergency occurs when the biological parent is not available. Furthermore, the stepparent has no legal ties to a stepchild if the biological parent dies or the couple divorces. Estate planning and will writing are also delicate matters for stepfamilies. An experienced attorney should be consulted to discuss such issues.

Activity 3
There are many people outside the immediate family that provide support, comfort, and joy for the stepfamily. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, current and former in-laws, former spouses, and perhaps teachers, clergy, and leaders of children’s activities are all part of stepfamily life, but may also be sources of tension and stress.

Think about ways that persons outside the stepfamily can be supportive. Talk about grandparents, living absent parent(s), school personnel, and community leaders (i.e. youth group, religious group, civic club).

There are many sources of support for stepfamilies. Sometimes persons outside the stepfamily do not realize what might be helpful or detrimental.

Grandparents and Absent Parents
Parents of the absent parent and the absent parent themselves may have to deal with strong feelings of anger and grief toward members of the new stepfamily. Remaining neutral and flexible may be huge tasks but will serve the best interests of the child.

Likewise, the adults within the stepfamily can aid in solid stepfamily growth if they are not openly hostile and negative about absent parents and related friends and relatives. Maintaining a business approach, rather than showing strong emotions, can be helpful when relations are strained.

Grandparents may find that spending time with their grandchildren can be an invaluable source of support to the children but have to realize that fault finding of family members will not help the child or stepfamily adjust. If a grandparent has a specific problem that needs addressed, it can be discussed privately with the parent, respecting stepfamily boundaries.

Schools and Community Groups
Schools and community groups need to be sensitive to the situations of stepfamily members. It is helpful when schools or community groups recognize that a child may have two households. Parent-teacher conferences, parental forms for both parents, and community organizations that recognize various family types can help ease some stepfamily stresses.

Summary
Partners forming stepfamilies expect joy, peace, and happiness that may have been lost in earlier relationships. That is usually not the case with new stepfamilies. There are many differences, personalities, and difficult situations. This is normal. Learning to positively handle conflict enables the stepfamily to move toward the happiness the partners are seeking. Stepfamilies must work at being both understanding and flexible, developing a style of their own. At the same time, support from others can help build lifelong bridges to stepfamily stability and commitment.

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