

## **BUILDING STRONG STEPFAMILIES AROUND THE WORLD**

### **Moderator: Dr. Patricia Papernow**

In my work teaching about stepfamilies all over the world, I have come into contact with many folks who are doing a wide range of important work for blended families. In this keynote panel, presenters will give us a sense of the breadth and depth and variety of the work that is being done in the US, Finland, Canada, Singapore, Denmark, Belgium, and Israel. They'll each tell us briefly what they're doing, what they are most excited about, where their growing edges are, and what challenges they face. They will describe a number of extensive national-level programs as well as efforts to integrate an understanding of stepfamily dynamics that is both evidence-informed and culturally appropriate into clinical work.

I am proposing this panel in place of my keynote. I had lots to share in my keynote, but this feels very important for this conference. To be successful this panel would require adding at least 30 minutes to the keynote program slot. That gives 8 presenters about 8 minutes each with time for very quick introductions. Then a half hour for questions. That makes lunch a little later, but we will have just had snacks at 11:15. My workshops and webinars very often break for lunch at 1 or 1:15.

This proposal begins with an overview, followed by more detailed descriptions of each presenter's work. If this panel is accepted, we'll turn the detailed descriptions that follow this overview into a handout for participants with contact information on all presenters.

### **Overview of the Panel**

#### **1. SMART STEPS (U.S. and INTERNATIONAL)**

Smart Steps is a leading evidence-based psychoeducation and skills program created especially for stepfamilies. Presenters are Francesca Adler-Baeder (Director, Stepfamily Association of America, Smart Steps creator and researcher), Brad van Eeden-Moorefield (Professor, Montclair University working with Francesca to refine core elements and update the program), and Brian Higginbotham (Utah State University – 20 years of experience running Smart Steps and conducting efficacy research). They will introduce the program, share two decades of experience presenting Smart Steps to diverse populations, describe efficacy research and their current growing edges.

#### **2. STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATION of FINLAND (SUPLI)**

Heidi Karvonen will describe Supli's impressive and comprehensive programs: An 800-hour training for a wide range of professionals, a 5-week training program for stepfamilies using National Health Service staff that Supli has trained as stepfamily coaches, and a wonderful on-line app they have developed for stepfamilies. Supli also sponsors many activities gathering stepfamilies to do fun things together, and they are involved in research and political action.

#### **3. STEPFAMILY SOLUTIONS (U.S.)**

Cameron Normand is building a central resource center for stepfamily services. She has assembled a board of leading experts in the field (many will be at the conference). She has taken over the *Stepfamily Magazine*, an online publication featuring guest writers who help disseminate research-based information. She hosts a *Stepmom Diaries* podcast which now has almost 100 episodes and reaches 1000s of stepmoms each month. She runs a yearly on-line Stepmom Summit in which she brings together a couple dozen top academics, clinicians, and experts to present on stepfamily topics reaching between 1000-1500 stepmoms. Most recently,

with the input of her expert panel, she has started an evidence-based Stepfamily Coach Academy to certify stepfamily coaches. Next is doing more on the political and wider educational front.

#### **4. SINGAPORE: PPIS VISTA SAKINAH**

Mardiana binte Mohd Isa, Senior Social Worker and other staff will describe the wide range of services that PPIS Vista Sakinah provides for both children and adults in the remarried Malay Muslim community in Singapore. These include: Remarriage preparatory courses for couples, enrichment programs to strengthen stepfamily relationships, as well as workshops and group work for children in remarried families. They will describe some of the challenges created by forces that speed couples into remarriage (no intimate relations or cohabitation before marriage and a housing shortage where housing is only available to married couples and singles over age 35). And they will share their efforts to engage community stakeholders in improving the lives of remarried families.

#### **5. Alberta, CANADA: JOURNEY COUNSELING**

Dr. Charles Coleman and Amy Corbett of Journey Counseling have trained their entire staff in working with stepfamily dynamics. This gives their clinic the unusual strength of being able to work collaboratively with different therapists focusing on various subsystems in the family. They will share some examples. In addition, over the past 6 years they have also provided 17 Smart Steps workshops serving 40 stepcouples, at first in the weekly format, but then adjusted to a 10-hour week-end format that works better for busy stepfamilies.

#### **6. DENMARK**

Janne Leth Forgaard is building services for stepfamilies in Denmark. She has developed a 3-day training for professionals that she gives twice a year and she has launched a podcast about stepfamilies. She provides counseling for stepmoms and for couples. She is working on starting a research program looking at stepfamilies in Finland.

#### **7. BELGIUM**

Barbara Lavrysen is a family therapist, clinical supervisor and a member of the University of Leuven faculty who works with stepfamilies and has been training professionals in Belgium. She has also been collaborating with colleagues to integrate stepfamily dynamics into two evidence-based family therapy programs: ABFT (Attachment Based Family Therapy) a very effective family therapy modality for suicidal and depressed adolescents and EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) “Hold Me Close” workshops for stepfamilies.

#### **8. ISRAEL**

Sigal Kaplan is a family counselor, specializing in counseling blended families, with a certification in EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) and post-divorce Parent Coordination. She will describe the impact of the war on Israeli stepfamily relationships. She has also just completed an extraordinary series of workshops and an interview study with Hassidic stepfamilies. She will also describe the unique and complex challenges that Ultra-Orthodox religious values create for stepfamilies.

# **1. SMART STEPS**

**Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., CFLE**  
**Auburn University, Alabama**

**Brad van-Eeden-Morefield, Ph.D., CFLE**  
**Montclair State University, New Jersey**

**Brian Higginbotham, Ph.D., LMFT**  
**Utah State University**

The presenters will provide a background on the development of the Smart Steps for Stepfamilies program that is used for primary prevention and family life education.

Originally developed in 2002, the presenters will discuss the research-based framework for program content, early formative evaluations, and recent updates to the curriculum informed by both research updates and practical lessons learned from over 20 years of implementing the program.

Featured will be the experiences and results from a statewide initiative to offer the program for diverse stepfamilies, as well as global partnerships for its translation and adaptation in different countries.

## 2. SUPLI (STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATION OF FINLAND (Supli))

Heidi Karvonen

Stepfamily Association of Finland, StepApp-specialist and Stepfamily Counselor

### Programme for Stepfamily Counseling

In 2002 Supli started systematically training professionals to work with stepfamilies. Supli now provides education for professionals from both public to private sectors working with families including therapists, psychologists, educators and professionals from child protection services, criminal care, parishes, and many other public and private organizations. The 30-credit programme takes a year to complete and consist of 800 hours of studying. The multi-modal education consists of theoretical lectures and literature as well as action-based methods such as psychodrama and sociodrama work. Most importantly, the voices of the different members of stepfamilies and different kinds of experiences of stepfamily life are woven into the training.

### StepApp-programme

Development of the StepApp-programme started in 2018. The programme consists of three components: The StepApp coach training, StepApp coaching for stepfamilies and the StepApp mobile application. The programme is run by Supli in agreement with the wellbeing service counties.

- **StepApp: Coach training for professionals**

The StepApp-coach training is a 9-week program that consists of 5 full-day live trainings every other week along with on-line and independent studying. The topics of the training days are 1 Stepfamily as a family, 2 Parenting, 3 Children and youth, 4 Relationship and 5 Future and becoming a family. The 8-credit programme consists of 216 hours of studying altogether. The StepApp- coach training is directed for a wide range of health care, family and social workers of the wellbeing service counties in Finland. Finland is divided to 21 wellbeing service counties, and Supli currently has an agreement with three of them to train their staff, and for them to provide the working time of their public social service and health care staff for the StepApp-coaching. Supli is in negotiations to start cooperation with several more of the wellbeing service counties.

- **StepApp: Coaching for stepfamilies**

The StepApp programme includes a 5-week coaching for stepfamilies. It is run by the trained coaches in their localities or online. This is integrated into the public family and healthcare services. Each of the five coaching sessions that take place once a week are 1,5 hours long and consist of a short lecture, exercises and peer discussion. Each coaching session has its own theme 1 Stepfamily as a family, 2 Parenting, 3 Children and youth, 4 Relationship and 5 Future and becoming a family. Coaching groups consist of two trained coaches and from 3 to 7 stepfamily couples.

- **StepApp Mobile application**

Supli has developed an on-line application that brings the family together during those five weeks of the StepApp- coaching to work both independently and together in a fun gamified environment. The application has information, questionnaires, videos and different kinds of

## **FINLAND, continued**

exercises. While the coaching sessions are only for the couples to attend, the children and youth of the stepfamily join the coaching through the mobile application.

### **Other activities of Supli:**

- **Peer supported groups and happenings for stepfamilies:** Couples cruises and hikes, weekends for bonus mothers or stepfamily fathers, online chats, peer groups for specific topics – multicultural stepfamilies, childlessness in stepfamilies etc.
- **Intervention for neurodivergent couples living in a stepfamily**
- **Multiprofessional networking and co-creation:** Supli works in close collaboration with a multiprofessional network. Supli uses co-creation and co-development strategies. The interventions, programmes and stepfamily work that Supli offers are developed together with professionals (including family therapists) and the focus group (including all stepfamily members).
- **Counseling:** Supli provides stepfamily counseling and guides clients to those therapists that have been trained as stepfamily counselors.
- **Advocacy:** Supli works to influence stepfamily rights and representation through media, organization cooperation and political discussion.
- **Research cooperation**

### **- Challenges**

The funding of Supli is sensitive to the political and financial situation of the country. The rise of conservatism seems to have a polarizing effect. Yet the knowledge and understanding of the diversity of families is increasing. There is work to be done both in the systemic level and in the attitudes and understanding of professionals and decision makers, but there is also a great trust in the approach of Supli and its flexibility and attitude of learning.

### **3. JOURNEY COUNSELING CANADA**

**Dr. Charles Coleman, PhD, RMFT-S, Registered Psychologist and Clinic Director  
Amy Corkett, MC, Registered Psychologist  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

Journey Counseling in Alberta, Canada, has trained our entire staff in working with stepfamilies, including both formal training and ongoing supervision. This gives our clinic the unusual strength of being able to work collaboratively with different therapists focusing on various subsystems in the family.

For the past six years, Journey Counseling has also been providing regular Smart Steps programs. We have now provided 17 Smart Steps trainings reaching over 40 couples. We began by offering the six-session weekly format. After the first four, we moved to a 10-hour week-end format that works better for busy stepfamilies. We experienced a lot of success as participants shared significant breakthroughs in their relationships and one couple decided to postpone moving in together for several years. About half of these couples have continued to seek counselling services after attending our workshops

## 4. SINGAPORE

### PPIS Vista Sakinah Centre for Remarriage and Stepfamilies

Mardiana binte Mohd Isa, Senior Social Worker, Vista Sakinah,

Azita Abdul Aziz, Senior Director, PPIS Family Services, Kamariah Yusoff, Centre Manager, PPIS INSPIRASI

[vistasakinah@ppis.sg](mailto:vistasakinah@ppis.sg) Blk549 Woodlands Drive 44 #01-86 Singapore 730549

#### PPIS Vista Sakinah

Singapore population is about 75% Chinese, 13.5% Malay/Muslim, 9% Indian & 3% others.

PPIS Vista Sakinah is one of the 7 family services of PPIS (the Singapore Muslim Women's Association). It is the only agency that provides services to the Malay/Muslim stepfamilies in Singapore.

PPIS Vista Sakinah (VS) was set up in 2011 as a specialist center to reach out to, prepare and support Malay/Muslim remarriages and stepfamilies in Singapore. VS is an offshoot from another PPIS agency, As-Salaam Family Support Centre, a Divorce Support Specialist Agency. That agency saw divorcees contemplating remarriage and many already in remarriages with stepfamily issues and concerns.

Our mission is to strengthen, rebuild and foster resilience and *Sakinah* (tranquility) in remarriages and stepfamilies. We aim to provide practice-based quality intervention that prepares and enriches remarriages and stepfamilies. We have staff of 9 of whom 5 are practitioners.

#### Some cultural background:

Singapore is a small country (719.1 square km) with a population of 5.92 million and an extreme shortage of available housing. As a result, only married couples & singles above 35 years old qualify for housing ownership. In addition, remarriage is acceptable in Islam, but cohabitation before marriage and intimate relationships outside of marriage are deemed sinful and against community norms. As a result, Muslim couples in Singapore often move very quickly (often too quickly for their children) into remarriage.

#### PPIS Vista Sakinah provides three core areas of service:

- Remarriage preparatory courses to prepare remarrying couples for stepfamily challenges and dynamics. The course has 2 parts - Couple Session and Workshop. Topics include role and responsibilities of spouses/parents, past baggage, hopes and expectations, stepparenting and managing finances.
- Enrichment programmes to strengthen stepfamily relationships. VS organizes support groups for the different subsystems in the family (husbands/wives, parents, children) and/or family bonding activities.
- Activities to support children's adjustment into stepfamilies.

#### We want to share:

Our mission and programmes

Our focus on child centricity throughout our work with couples, from the first point of contact before remarriage, through post-marriage.

How PPIS Vista Sakinah collaborates with the stakeholders in the community that interface with these clients to produce better outcomes for our clients. VS works closely with the Ministry of Social and Family Development and with the Registry of Muslim Marriages, particularly the marriage solemnizers or Naib Kadi.

#### Funding:

## 5. STEPFAMILY SOLUTIONS U.S.

**Cameron Normand**

J.D., CEO, Stepfamily Solutions [www.stepfamilysolutions.com](http://www.stepfamilysolutions.com)

I am a stepmom of four, one with special needs. I am originally trained as a lawyer, working in U.S. national politics on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. and for two of the world's largest movie studios.

I got trained as a stepfamily coach and realized the depth of the need! I started Stepfamily Solutions as an organization that provides a central place to gather resources to help all stepfamilies create a better everyday life.

*Here's what Stepfamily Solutions is doing so far:*

I have built a board of leading stepfamily experts, many of whom are here. They are key in supporting the mission of getting evidence-based resources to stepfamilies and amplifying the "good information" out there.

We now own *Stepfamily Magazine*, which is an online publication featuring guest writers who help disseminate research-based information. I host *The Stepmom Diaries* podcast, which now has almost 100 episodes and reaches thousands of stepmoms each month. We do a yearly online Stepmom Summit, which pulls together top academics, clinicians, and experts to present on stepfamily topics. These Summits have 22- 25 speakers and between 1000-1500 stepmoms.

With the input of my expert panel, I started an evidence-based Stepfamily Coach Academy. What I'm most excited about right now is growing this coach certification program and expanding our education efforts.

Unfortunately, there is a growing group of un-informed online 'influencers' in the stepfamily world who are putting out stepmom advice based solely on their own experience, *not* based on the solid research. Lots of it is misleading. Some of it is just plain bad. So, it is exciting that some of the coaches I've certified have started using their voices online to put out good, evidence-informed info.

One of the challenges is that stepmoms often ask coaches if they can recommend therapists. There are still so few therapists who have been trained in these issues. So I usually give them a list of a few questions to ask potential therapists.

With my policy background another growing edge is looking for ways to inject a stepfamily voice into the policy debates that impact us.

Overall it's an exciting time to be doing what we're all doing because there is so very much that needs to be done and so very many people that need help.

## 6. INSTITUTE for STEPFAMILIES DENMARK

Janne Leth Førgaard, Copenhagen, Denmark

Founder of [Ekstramor.dk](http://Ekstramor.dk) [Institutforsammenbragtefamilier.dk](http://Institutforsammenbragtefamilier.dk)

(Institute for Stepfamilies)

Family Counselor, Edu-Therapy Specialist™, Couples Therapist, Stepfamily Coach

**Working to  
educate  
Danish  
Stepfamilies  
and  
professionals**

Author of 2 books; *First Aid for Stepmoms* and *First Aid for Stepfamilies*



**Podcast:**

Have created a popular podcast for stepfamilies covering topics like:

- Conflict management
- Caring communication
- The child's perspective
- Economy\*
- Grief\*
- Stress\*
- Infidelity\*
- Narcissism\*
- Parental alienation\*
- Transition rituals
- Difficult stepmom feelings
- Siblings in stepfamilies

\*Expert interviews

**Professional  
training for  
therapists**

I have been teaching a 3-day stepfamily course for professionals twice a year – starting in 2023.

**How I work  
with clients  
in my office**

1:1 counseling primarily with stepmoms  
Couples counseling

## DENMARK, continued

**What works** Most of my clients are “easy” families who just need some knowledge, visual tools and psychoeducation about blended family life.

5 essential touch points I use in my counseling

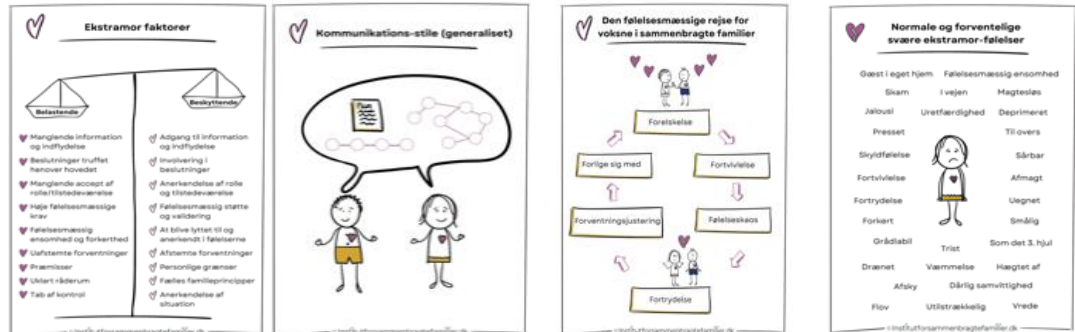
- #1 5 essential family differentiators
- #2 Emotional turbulence is inevitable
- #3 Personal limits and boundaries
- #4 The Mindset; 2 kinds of difficulties
- #5 Kindhearted conflict management & caring communication

**Challenges:** When I first started, I was particularly focused on giving the stepmothers a voice, as much of the attention in blended families is centered on the children and parents.  
**What doesn't work**

The downside may be “stepmom favoritism” that doesn't help the blended family as a whole.

In my counseling, I still do 1:1 sessions with stepmoms giving her a space for all the “forbidden and overwhelming stepmom feelings” – bearing the overall family in mind.

**Visuals** I use models and “visuals” in my work – here are a few examples



**Growing Edge** There is hardly any stepfamily research in Denmark and none is up to date. I'm in the process of contacting various researchers and professors hoping to collaborate on developing a research program in Denmark.

## 7. BELGIUM

### Barbara Lavrysen

Clinical Psychologist, Couples and Family Therapist. Trainer, and Supervisor at Context UPC KU Leuven Staff member in Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, KU Leuven (Belgium).  
Coordinator of the Postgraduate Training Program in Couples, Family and Systems Therapy

### **Integrating an Understanding of Stepfamily Dynamics into Established Evidence-Based Systemic Family Therapy Models**

I have been doing family therapy with stepfamilies and teaching grad students about how to work with stepfamilies. I have also been working with colleagues to integrate stepfamily dynamics into two established evidence-based systemic family therapy models: ABFT (Attachment Based Family Therapy) with struggling adolescents and EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) Hold Me Tight workshops for couples. My goal (and challenge) is to pass evidence-based stepfamily info to colleagues and graduate students so that stepfamilies are not treated with first-time family therapy models.

#### **What I am teaching grad students and working to help others to integrate:**

- Working in parallel to support the parent child and couple subsystem in stepfamilies. (Having a whole stepfamily in the room makes competition for attachment between subsystems: Parent-child, couple, and stepparent-stepchild.)
- Motivating the adults to bring in their children to talk about family transitions, what has been new and difficult since their parents recoupling.
- Helping the parent to fully hear and reach for the children
- Helping both partners to see and hold each other in their different roles in the stepfamily.

#### **Integrating an understanding of stepfamily dynamics into ABFT**

ABFT (Attachment Based Family Therapy) is an evidence-based, research validated systemic family therapy focused on a child or adolescent who is in crisis. ABFT work is divided into 5 tasks:

1) *The Relational Reframe*: Reframing “the problem” from the adolescent’s pathology to supporting more positive family relationships.

2) *Adolescent Alliance*: Working with the adolescent to help them tell a coherent story about how they got into this bad place. Helping adolescents put a voice to what has made it difficult for them to reach to adults (especially to their parent) for help and connection.

3) *Parent Alliance*: Working with the adult couple (parent and stepparent) to help them understand how their own family-of-origin history has made them hard to reach for. For stepcouples: Providing psychoeducation about normal stepfamily challenges, the differences between parenting and stepparenting, helping stepparents move out of discipline and focus on “connection not correction.” Encouraging stepparent to spend 1:1 time with stepchild to just get to know them.

## **BELGIUM, continued**

4) *Repairing Attachment*: In a first-time family, working with the child and his or her parents to repair attachment. In a stepfamily usually working with just the parent.

5) *Promoting Autonomy*: Helping the family work together on problem solving.

I have been working with ABFT therapists and trainers Tara Santens and Leen Van Vlierberghe on where to provide the family with psychoeducation about the challenges their stepfamily structures is creating, how best to meet them within this task structure, and how and when to engage the couple (including the stepparent), vs. the parent alone in this task sequence. We are currently writing an article together on this.

### **Hold Me Tight Group: An exciting success**

EFT holds weekend “Hold Me Tight” workshops designed to help couples reach for each other and deepen their connection. I co-led a Hold Me Tight group for stepcouples with an EFT therapist, helping to integrate an understanding how stepcouple dynamics impact the couple process and the workshop process.

The group feedback was really exciting. Participants reported seeing themselves in their shared and unshared history as parents and stepparents, in a different but equally important role.

They reported seeing their partners (and ex partners!) as all collaboratively part of a stepfamily each with unique challenges

Participants felt helped to see their kids and stepkids’ experience and struggles.

As part of a concluding ritual, we asked the couples to send a postcard to their kids telling them about their HMT journey.

### **What challenges do you face?**

The first-time family therapy models still dominate the field. It remains a challenge to pass stepfamily info to students and colleagues in such a way that they replace first-time therapy models with models that address stepfamily challenges and needs.

## 8a. ISRAEL

### Stepcouple Relationships During an Ongoing War

Sigal Kaplan  
Family Counselor, Specialist in Blended Families

**National Trauma:** The October 7 events caused a nationwide crisis, leaving people feeling anxious, helpless, and uncertain. These events have led to a loss of trust in the government, and even in themselves. Blended families, already facing challenges in establishing a sense of belonging, experience greater strain in times of war.

**Survival Mode:** People are in survival mode, goal-oriented to protect themselves and their children.

**Parent-Child Bond:** In continuous wartime, children depend entirely on their parents for protection. Children cannot regulate their fear like adults so parents are children's main source of security. Strengthening the parent-child bond helps calm both the parent and the child.

**Outsider/Insider Dynamic:** In stepfamilies, the relationship between children and biological parents is already stronger, often leaving the stepparent feeling like an outsider. Parents are stuck insiders. The heightened parent-child connection that is necessary in this crisis intensifies the sidelining of stepparents and the "stuck insider" position of parents.

**Challenges with Ex-Partners:** Co-parenting relationship can become more difficult to manage as the crisis demands much more continuous contact between children's parents. , If the ex is hostile toward the new relationship, this further intensifies the stepparent's outsider experience.

**Routine and Certainty:** In normal times, certainty and routine, including reliable couple, parent-child, and stepparent-stepchild time are key to managing the outsider/insider feelings in blended families. War disrupts this. The stress and uncertainty deepens existing struggles.

**Feelings of Despair:** The sense of alienation for stepparents during continuous war leads to frustration, despair, and feelings of being second place, while biological parents may become defensive and focused on the children.

**Relationship Survival:** Although emotions are heightened during continuous war, it is important to remind couples that the relationship is not regressing or falling apart. The need is for adaptation to cope with an abnormal situation where intense emotions are expected.

**Emotional Flooding:** The continuous war brings constant feelings of alertness, defensiveness, and reactivity. It is helpful to remind everyone that all emotions during this time are considered normal responses to the traumatic situation.

#### PTSD vs. Stay at Home Parent

Today, we are already almost a year into this terrible event. Those who suffer the most are stepfamilies where one of the spouses is in the army. The spouse, usually the father or stepfather, who in Gaza is exposed to multiple traumatic events as a soldier. There is a huge distance in the experiences of a father or stepfather who returns after a few weeks and a stepmother or mother who has been left to run a household with children alone. This also has financial implications that add stress.

#### Dislocation

We are also seeing a flood of marital difficulties in evacuees who are moving between hotels. There is a lot of demand for couple therapists in hotels. I assume some of these are stepfamilies.

[www.sigalkaplan.com](http://www.sigalkaplan.com)

972-52-2309236

## 8b. ISRAEL

### The Unique Challenges in Ultra-Orthodox Stepfamilies

**Sigal Kaplan**

Family Counselor, specializing in blended families.

Certified EFT (Emotional Focused Therapy) therapist. Parent Coordinator for post-divorce families.

Teach *Divorce and Stepfamilies* at Kibbutzim College in Tel-Aviv. Consult to the Ogen Project, a mentoring program for children of divorce in schools.

Ultra-orthodox religious values and practices create some formidable challenges for stepfamilies. The strict social structures within the Haredi community are intended to uphold the community's religious values. However, they can create difficult and often emotionally charged challenges about "who is family" that make painful dilemmas for stepfamilies trying to find a balance between adherence to tradition and developing healthy family relationships.

#### Key Takeaways:

- *Collectivist Culture vs. Individual Needs:* The Haredi community prioritizes the collective good and societal expectations over individual needs. This creates unique challenges for stepfamilies accustomed to more individualistic approaches.
- *Stigma of Divorce and Pressure to Remarry:* Despite the rising rates of divorce within Haredi society, they are still significantly lower than in the non-Haredi society—4% versus 16% (Kahaner & Malach, 2023) due to social stigma and pressure. This stigma impacts both parents and children, influencing remarriage decisions.
- *Matchmaking and Emotional Intensity in Second Marriages:* First marriages, often arranged through matchmaking, prioritize external compatibility over emotional connection. Second marriages, however, tend to involve greater emotional intensity and a focus on building deeper relationships.
- *Slowing down the pace is better for stepfamily adjustment vs.1)* Social norms in ultra-orthodox society see the institution of the family and its existence as a supreme value 2) The Halacha prohibits conjugal relations before marriage. These forces pull for moving quickly toward marriage.

#### The challenges faced by Haredi blended families, based on Dr. Patricia Papernow's model of 5 normal stepfamily challenges:

##### Insider and Outsider Dynamics:

Typically, the woman moves with her children, leaving behind her original community to live with her new husband and his children, becoming an outsider both at home and in the new community.

##### Children's Challenges:

**Loss for children:** Children experience the loss of a parent, the transition to a new home environment, and the need to adapt to new parental figures.

**Gender Roles and Role Models:** When a child loses a parent of their own gender, the loss is even more challenging because they need a role model of the same gender to fill that void. The gender-segregated nature of Haredi society makes this particularly difficult.

**Stepsibling Relationships:** The prohibition on closeness between unrelated opposite-gender individuals creates emotional complexities for stepsiblings.

### **Parenting and Stepparenting**

Traditional gender roles create tension, particularly for women, in navigating expectations of step-motherhood while respecting biological mothers.

### **Building a Shared Family Culture**

There are many ultra-orthodox sects. Integrating different religious practices and interpretations poses significant challenges, especially regarding child-rearing and household customs. Different sects often have different family traditions, community identities, and religious observances. This requires sensitivity and negotiation. Couples often seek guidance from religious authorities who do not necessarily understand the complexities of a blended family.

### **Ex-spouses are part of the family**

Biological mothers remain the primary caregivers for their children. In many divorced families, this can lead to power struggles and control issues, especially when many child-rearing responsibilities fall on them. However, biological mothers often appreciate having a new partner in their ex-spouse's life who shares the burden.

**Grandparenting:** Given that the average age of marriage is 15 to 18, many second marriages quickly lead to roles as grandparents. During Sabbaths and holidays, many children come with their families to spend time at the parent's home. Since travel is prohibited on the Sabbath, they stay for extended periods. This also creates difficulties that arise from the intensive hosting demands.

## **Challenges for Blended families in the Haredi Community Managing Separation Between Boys and Girls**

- Blended families in the Haredi community face a unique set of challenges when navigating the strict religious and social norms surrounding the separation of boys and girls, especially regarding physical contact and displays of affection.
- Because stepsiblings are not considered family in the Haredi community, it is forbidden for them to be alone together. This is reinforced by halachic traditions, such as keeping doors open or using separate exits, meant to discourage interaction and prevent inappropriate behavior.
- Despite these restrictions, many stepsiblings develop close bonds and see each other as brothers and sisters. This can create complicated situations, particularly for stepfathers who are expected to maintain physical distance from their stepdaughters, even while acting as a father figure.
- Stepfathers are able to hug their biological daughters over the age of 12 but not their stepdaughters. This can be emotionally difficult for everyone involved, especially since the stepfather might be called "Dad" and fulfill many fatherly roles.
- One rabbi was able to provide a nuanced perspective, suggesting that while initiating physical contact would be inappropriate, the stepfather could reciprocate if a stepdaughter initiated a hug. This highlights the need for deepening rabbinic understanding and potentially adapting traditional practices to meet the emotional needs of blended families within the Haredi community.