



1st International Conference on
Strong Blended Families
UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS

6-7 FEBRUARY 2025

VALLETTA, MALTA

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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INVITED SPEAKERS



Patricia L. Papernow

Director of the Institute for Stepfamily Education, USA

Surviving and Thriving in “Blended Families”: A Clinician’s View of What Works and What Doesn’t for Creating Strong Stepfamilies

This keynote address is presented by an internationally known expert on stepfamilies, Dr. Patricia Papernow. The keynote address integrates 45 years of clinical experience with the most current research about stepfamilies, including very recent findings about the wide range of positive stepparent roles and what supports (and doesn’t) wellbeing in stepchildren. Dr. Papernow will review what makes “blended families” so different from first-time families. As she often says, navigating a stepfamily with a first-time family map is a bit like driving on the Los Angeles freeway with a map of the city of Indianapolis: Frustrating, very anxiety-provoking and lots of accidents. A more accurate map with good “driving directions” can make a huge difference!

Dr. Papernow will share her “map” of the 5 challenges stepfamilies create for repartnered couples, for parenting and stepparenting, for children, for forming a new family identity, and for cross-household relationships. For each challenge, she will describe her three-level framework for helping stepfamilies: I. Psychoeducation (evidence-informed) about what’s normal, what works and what doesn’t to meet stepfamily challenges, II. Teaching key communication practices, and III. Healing intrapsychic and family-of-origin old “bruises” that may be driving reactivity. Along the way participants will gain a good overview of current research and learn some tools for effective intervention.



Dawn O. Braithwaite

*Willa Cather Professor of Communication Studies
Emeritus Professor, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA*

Turning Points in Finding What Works: Communication to Create Positive Stepfamily Relationships

Stepfamilies are especially reliant on communication to co-create relationships and expectations. From the field of family communication, our research teams seek to understand how stepfamilies are socially constructed over time in interaction and experiences. We identify turning points and developmental pathways stepfamilies follow. Turning points are important events that result in either positive or negative relationship. First, we described 15 turning point types and identified five stepfamily developmental patterns (trajectories). In recent years we studied turning points and patterns in stepfamily relationships perceived as positive overall. Second, we studied turning points that adult stepchildren identified in positive and resilient stepfamilies. Third, we studied the role of forgiveness adult stepchildren perceive. Fourth, we studied turning points identified by stepparents in overall positive relationships with stepchildren. The presentation ends with practical applications for professionals and stepfamily



Lawrence Ganong

*Emeritus Professor of Human Development and Family
Science and Nursing at the University of Missouri, USA*

Research on What Works in Childrearing in Blended Families

I share selected findings from an extensive review of research about what works in childrearing in blended families. Effective stepparents build positive emotional connections with their stepchildren by trying to get stepchildren to like them. They do this by spending one-on-one time with stepchildren, having fun, working together on projects, providing care, giving them money and other resources valued by stepchildren, taking the side of stepchildren in disagreements with others, and talking with them a great deal. Choosing activities to do together is easier when stepparents and stepchildren share interests, but when they do not, letting the stepchild choose leisure-time pursuits and giving children some control over how often they do things alone with stepparents enhances bonding. Stepparents' affinity-seeking efforts are more effective when they engage in these efforts over longer periods of time and when they try to establish friendships with stepchildren before attempting to discipline or set rules for them.

What parents do is critically important for the development of a positive family environment. Researchers have focused on parenting linked to positive outcomes for children and closer parent-child relationships: (1) maintaining close parent-child bonds, (2) establishing appropriate communication boundaries, (3) exercising parental control (4) and supporting stepparent-stepchild relationships. Preserving close ties with children requires maintaining regular contact and involvement. Protecting one-on-one time is particularly critical in maintaining parent-child closeness. Children benefit from regular displays of warmth and affection from parents. Another aspect of effective parenting is establishing appropriate parent-child boundaries regarding how much and what information is shared with children. Effective parents manage informational boundaries with children by creating personal privacy rules about: (a) what is appropriate information to disclose, (b) not talking badly about the other parent, and (c) keeping children out of parental conflicts. Effective parents in blended families monitor their children and are the main disciplinarians. Finally, parents' support the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.



THURSDAY, 6 FEBRUARY

The Malta Blended Families Study

Angela Abela, *Professor in Child and Family Studies, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta, Malta*

Suzanne Piscopo, *Professor in Home Economics, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta*

Sue Vella, *Associate Professor of Social Policy, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta, Malta*

Allison Zammit Said, *Clinical Psychologist and Family Therapist, Visiting Lecturer, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta, Malta*

This ongoing study seeks to understand the processes that family members living in blended families navigate and the complexity of the relationships involved. Only families who see themselves as “doing well” were interviewed to put the focus on what works among blended families. Mothers with children from a previous relationship, the biological fathers of these children, the stepchildren and their current stepfathers were interviewed. In all 26 family members, including 7 mothers, 7 stepfathers, 8 stepchildren and 4 biological fathers, were invited to relate their ‘story’. The data was analysed by adopting a narrative method, which allowed us to focus on the stories of a number of blended families. The theoretical frameworks informing the analysis included a systems, resilience and attachment perspective. In particular, the Family Resilience Framework by Froma Walsh and sensitive and consistent caregiving, which is central to children’s resilience, were considered key processes helping us to answer one of our research questions -- how resilience manifests itself in the stories of each family member interviewed. Resilience was demonstrated through a number of transformative processes that took place in the face of adversity and was further strengthened by a virtuous cycle of positive, affirming relationships and by capitalising on the added resources of the expanded family. Despite the parents’ efforts, the bonding process with the biological father following a traumatic separation, or the relationship between stepfather and daughter, was at times a delicate endeavour. Efforts at being sensitive and consistent towards the children and stepchildren, as well as the importance given to the couple relationship were running threads in the interviews. Many sought support from therapists and found this reflective space to be safe and helpful. Nevertheless, all our families had adjustment challenges, even if often transient. Recommendations for policy practice and further research are also put forward.



ORAL PRESENTATION | SESSION 1

What Works in Remarrying and Repartnering in Stepfamilies (online)

Lawrence Ganong, *University of Missouri, USA*

Marilyn Coleman, *University of Missouri, USA*

Caroline Sanner, *Virginia Tech University, USA*

This presentation focuses on research findings regarding what works for remarried or repartnered cohabiting couples in blended families. A fundamental finding is that individuals who are confident in their abilities to resolve problems as a couple and who are optimistic that their relationships will last, had more successful repartnerings. Individuals who hold these beliefs are more open to discussing problems with partners and communicate more clearly.

Individuals in satisfying remarriages have learned from their past romantic experiences. They understand themselves better, are more aware of their contributions to past relationship problems and have a clearer sense of the kind of partner they want to be. They are more aware of their emotional triggers and how they reacted to their ex-partners. They exhibit greater sensitivity to the new partner's insecurities and needs for support. These satisfied repartnerers intentionally respond differently to their new partners and communicate differently than in prior relationships. They are more willing to address relationship problems. Greater self-awareness also leads satisfied individuals to seek partners who are different from past partners.

Satisfied remarried and repartnered couples frequently share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns about the relationship, discuss personal problems with partners, and say what they want clearly. Being able to positively reframe events and behaviors also is related to relationship satisfaction.

Among the topics that satisfied remarried couples address clearly include: (a) expectations about marital and stepfamily roles, (b) childrearing, and (c) ambiguity surrounding family membership. Couples who clearly communicate their thoughts and feelings about roles for a new partner in childrearing, deciding who will discipline children from prior relationships, and discussing household rules and expectations for how children will behave are more satisfied with their remarriages, feel more supported by their partners, and have fewer marital disputes. Communicating supportive messages about coparenting stepchildren reduces defensiveness and promotes mutual problem-solving. Couples who spend more time together having fun are happier in their remarriages, more committed, and more trusting of their spouses. Sharing housework more equally and sharing decision-making are related to relationship satisfaction. Couples who agree on a money-management strategy that works for their families' needs are the happiest, regardless of whether that involves one shared account or multiple accounts. Remarried couples who agree on how childrearing responsibilities will be negotiated are happier than those who disagree.



Stepfamily Assessment Tools

Brian Higginbotham, *Utah State University, USA*

Francesca Adler-Baeder, *Auburn University, USA*

Yasumitsu Jikihara, *Osaka University, Japan*

Carina Santos, Mariana Martins, *University of Porto, Portugal*

Shinji Nozawa, *Meiji Gakuin University, Japan*

Study Background:

We will present on two stepfamily-related assessments designed to help clinicians/practitioners and researchers. First, the Remarriage Belief Inventory (RMBI; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008) is a seven-factor, 22-item instrument that measures an individual's beliefs regarding remarriage/stepfamily topics. Second, the Revised Questionnaire for Couples in Stepfamilies (RQCS; Schramm & Higginbotham, 2009), which uses 22 items to assess four domains of stepfamily difficulties. This presentation will highlight the original development and the subsequent international efforts to adapt these assessments into Portuguese (Santos, Higginbotham, Costa, & Martins, 2023) and Japanese (Jikihara, Nozawa, Ando, Satoko, Higginbotham, Schramm, & Adler-Baeder, 2023). Other translations include Polish (Kotodziej & Przybyła-Basista, 2014) and Urdu (Razaq, Kahn, Qurratulain, Bakhsh, & Ayub, 2024).

Aim/Objectives:

We will present the development of the original assessments, the process of adapting them for international usage, and practical uses for those who work with stepfamilies.

Research Methods:

We will review the research methods used by the American, Portuguese, and Japanese teams, respectively. We will highlight the international samples and methods used for the different validation studies, including dyadic confirmatory factor analysis (Garneau, Adler-Baeder, & Higginbotham, 2016).

Results:

These validated stepfamily assessments have been translated, utilized, and published in multiple languages. Examples of findings we could highlight include the associations with measures of marital quality. Additionally, results from causal invariance tests indicated that associations did not differ by stepfamily type or years married. We can also review the implications of the different studies, which include using the tools in different countries to identify, understand, and address dysfunctional beliefs in remarital relationships in different parts of the world.

Conclusion:

The RMBI and RQCS are available to help clinicians and researchers understand what works in blended families. The assessment developers can answer questions and collaborate on adaptations to other languages.



Marital Relationships in Blended Families living together or separately from children from previous marriages

Elena Chebotareva, *Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, HSE University, RUDN University, Russia*

Liya Sudakova, *Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, Russia*

Study Background:

Studies of blended families show that children from previous marriages have a great influence on the relationships in new families. The place of their residence can be one of the determining factors in the quality of marital relationships

Aim/Objectives:

We conducted an empirical study to identify the characteristics of marital relationships in blended families living together or separately with children from previous marriages.

Research Methods:

The study sample consisted of 77 people (25 to 50 years old.) who were remarried (6 years on average) and had children from previous marriages (under 10 years old.). 34 respondents lived separately from their children from previous marriages, 43 - together with such children.

"Typical Family Condition" (Eidemiller & Yustitskis), "Family Communication" (Sizanov), "The spouses' interaction in conflict situations" (Karelin).

Results:

The study showed that the quality of interpersonal relationships in blended families is characterized by mutual understanding, trust, assistance, but by a slight resemblance in attitudes. They prefer to avoid conflicts. The most conflict-prone areas in these families include issues of power, status, and rules. Spouses living with children from previous marriages have a higher level of general dissatisfaction, family anxiety and mental stress than spouses living separately from children from previous marriages. The style of conflict solving in families living together with children from previous relationships is more destructive, but also more open.

For blended families living together with children, the psychological well-being of the family is mainly associated with the spouses' ability to resolve conflicts constructively. And for those living separately from children, the level family well-being is mainly associated with the quality of spousal communication.

Conclusions/Implications:

The results of the study allow us to identify the focus of psychological assistance to blended families more clearly, in particular, it emphasizes the importance of correcting the family hierarchy, teaching spouses more open behavior in conflicts, communication skills.



Patterns of Supracoparenting in Stepfamilies: A Qualitative Analysis of Coparenting Teams

Marion Adamiste, Marie-Christine Saint-Jacques, Sylvie Drapeau, *Université Laval, Canada*

Study Background:

Coparenting initially referred to the relationship between two parents of a child regarding their involvement in the child's rearing and well-being. In the context of stepfamily formation, this relationship may extend to a coparenting team consisting of three (two parents and a stepparent) or four adults (two parents and two stepparents). These relational configurations refer to supracoparenting, a term that describes how the two coparental subsystems, mother-stepfather and father-stepmother (in a heterosexual configuration), collaborate in the best interest of the child.

Aim/Objectives:

The main objective of this study was to explore the dynamics within these supracoparenting teams.

Research Methods:

A qualitative approach was employed, with 16 Canadian stepcouples, including both mother-stepfather and father-stepmother dyads, participating in semi-structured interviews.

Results:

Three patterns of coparenting team functioning were identified: cohesive, non-cohesive conflictual, and non-cohesive unbalanced. Cohesive teams provide mutual support and rarely experience conflict. Conversely, non-cohesive conflictual teams frequently engage in conflicts and lack mutual support. Lastly, non-cohesive unbalanced teams display low levels of both conflict and support (unilateral support), with asymmetrical engagement between the two households of the child.

Conclusions/Implications:

These findings suggest that balanced engagement between households is crucial for effective supracoparental functioning. The results will be discussed in light of recent research, offering directions for future studies and interventions.



ORAL PRESENTATIONS | SESSION 2

Blended Families, Chosen Families, Institutional Families – new templates of ‘family’ in mental health services

Maeve Malley, Jimmy Tse, Hanyan Wang, Kyra Tal, Naureen Whittinger, Lucy Hickeyja, *Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, United Kingdom*

Study Background, Aims, Objectives:

Blended families can form when two people, with a child or children from prior relationships, live together in a shared household. It also includes a partner with a child from a previous opposite-sex relationship now being in a same-sex relationship (Gonzales, 2009). Historically, blended families may have been seen as less valid than biological families. It is relatively recent that they are recognised as successful and no less ‘natural’ than biological nuclear families.

Chosen families consist of individuals who intentionally select each other to play important roles in their lives. This type of family can be understood as a group of people to whom a person is emotionally close, considering them as family despite not being biologically or legally related (Kim & Feyissa, 2021). Chosen families, associated particularly with those outside the mainstream, and particularly with LGBTQ+ contexts, have demonstrated a level of resilience, and consistency over the lifespan of individuals, which may lead to as great a sense of support and solidarity as nuclear families (Weston, 1991; Rosa et al., 2020; Levin et al., 2021).

Similarly, the idea of institutional family is one we have developed to consider the relationships and structures formed by those who use, or who work within, mental health services.

Research Methods/Results:

We interviewed members of our ‘institutional’ family within community mental health settings and would like to discuss the themes extrapolated. Using thematic analysis, we systematically identified and analysed patterns within the data to uncover significant themes that reflect the experiences and perspectives of our service users.

Conclusions/Implications:

We believe that these ‘families’ may form because of the perception that mental health services provide help and nurturance in contexts where people may feel inadequate or ‘less than’. We see this human tendency to form connections as one of the therapeutic factors within these services which is worth acknowledging and supporting.



Yours, Mine and Ours: A resilient and systemic perspective of a Blended Family

Martina Saliba, *Systemic Family Psychotherapist, Malta*

Study Background:

Blended families have become increasingly common worldwide, yet research on how these families adapt and thrive over time remains limited (Abela & Grech Lanfranco, 2014; Kumar, 2017; NCFR, 2017; Perry & Fraser, 2020). Most studies have focused on negative outcomes and are often limited to one perspective, such as a mother, father, or child, rather than a systemic family-wide view (e.g. Dupuis, 2010; Travers, 2021).

Aim/Objectives:

This study addressed this gap by exploring the developmental transitions and experiences of all members of a blended family.

Research methods:

Using a qualitative, narrative case study approach, this research provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics, interactions, and patterns within the family system that contribute to or hinder the blending process.

Results:

The findings reveal that blending a family is not a singular event but an ongoing process that unfolds over time, influenced by past experiences and future life cycle stages. Challenges such as role confusion, split loyalties, and lack of external support were common, but the family demonstrated resilience by negotiating roles, maintaining open communication, and drawing on their religious beliefs for hope. Importantly, the study highlights the lack of support for blended families within the Maltese context, with therapy proving beneficial in helping family members navigate their new roles and relationships.

Conclusions/Implications:

The study concludes that a systemic approach is essential when working with blended families, both therapeutically and within broader societal contexts. By acknowledging the unique challenges and emotional complexities faced by these families, practitioners can help them see themselves as a "normal blended family" rather than an "abnormal nuclear family." This approach fosters more satisfying relationships, open communication, and a deeper understanding of each family member's contribution to the collective narrative.



Emotions as Barriers and Gateways to Learning in Students from Families Transitioning to a Blended Family Structure: A Scoping Review

Rosienne Camilleri, Erika Galea, *University of Malta, Malta*

Study Background:

Family transitions, including divorce and the formation of blended families, cause significant emotional challenges for children that can impact their learning and academic performance (Brown, 2010; Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Schools often remain uninvolved during these transitions, yet the effects on school-aged children's behaviour, engagement, and achievement are known to be significant (Anthony et al., 2014). The emotional turbulence that accompanies these family changes affects cognitive processes crucial for learning, such as attention, motivation, and self-regulation (Raver & Blair, 2016). Additionally, these transitions may disrupt children's social development and overall well-being, particularly during periods of adjustment (Hadfield et al., 2018).

Aim/Objectives:

This preliminary exploration serves as the foundation for a systematic review aiming to examine how emotions act as both barriers and gateways to learning for students experiencing transitions from intact families to those affected by divorce or blending. Through an initial scoping of existing literature, we sought to identify dominant themes and methodological gaps in studies addressing emotional influences on learning during family transitions. By exploring how emotional experiences across home and school contexts shape educational outcomes, this work lays the groundwork for synthesising evidence on resilience-building and growth in these challenging circumstances.

Research Methods:

Our preliminary findings highlight the dual role of emotions: while negative emotions can hinder academic success, supportive environments can foster emotional resilience, enabling students to transform challenges into opportunities for growth. This stage of inquiry informed the development of a robust search strategy to be used in the forthcoming systematic review. Preliminary searches have identified key databases (e.g., PsycINFO, Scopus) and inclusion criteria spanning empirical studies, theoretical papers, and meta-analyses published between 2010 and 2024.

Conclusions/Implications:

The insights gained from this exploration will guide the systematic review's aim to generate actionable recommendations for research and interventions supporting students from transitioning family structures, with an emphasis on blended families.

Keywords:

Emotions, learning, family structure, transitions, preliminary review, blended families.



ORAL PRESENTATIONS | SESSION 3

Does Joint Physical Custody Harm the Stepfather-Child Relationship?

Anja Steinbach, *University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany*

Lara Augustijn, *Rogator AG, Germany*

Vera del Bel, *University of Cologne, Germany*

Objective:

This study examines whether the quality of the stepfather-child relationship differs among sole (SPC) and joint physical (JPC) families and compares the association between the father-child and the stepfather-child relationship across the two physical custody arrangements.

Background:

An increasing number of families opt for JPC after separation or divorce. Because children in JPC families spend more time with their biological father than children in mother SPC families, the question arises whether JPC affects the quality of the stepfather-child relationship.

Research Method:

We investigated 279 SPC and 182 JPC stepfather families with children aged 1 to 14 from the Family Models in Germany study. OLS regression models and interaction effects were estimated.

Results:

The quality of the stepfather-child relationship was generally high in both SPC and JPC families and did not differ between the two arrangements. The father-child relationship was positively, albeit weakly, associated with the stepfather-child relationship in both arrangements, indicating spillover effects.

Conclusion:

Practicing JPC does not affect the quality of the stepfather-child relationship.

Implications:

This study does not provide any evidence that JPC is an ill-suited physical custody arrangement when considering the quality of relationships in stepfamilies.

Keywords: family relationships, joint physical custody, post-separation families, sole physical custody, stepfamily, stepfather.



Change in roles and responsibilities of stepparents over time

Marie Christine Saint-Jacques, Hans Ivers, Nathalie Ste-Marie, *Université Laval, Canada*

Study Background:

Stepparents are among the most common social parents in the family setting of today's children, and yet they receive little social or legal recognition (Goubau and Chabot, 2018; Saint-Jacques and Adamiste, 2023). This lack of recognition can have consequences both in day-to-day family life and in the event of the stepcouple's separation (Hans, 2002; Mason, et al., 2002; Monribot, 2023; Motte, 2019).

Aim/Objectives :

What are the role and responsibilities of stepparents? Which parent figures are seen as having legitimate authority to raise the children in a stepfamily? To what extent does the length of time the stepfamily has been together influence how the stepparent's role is perceived and exercised?

Research method(s):

The data are extracted from the *Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents and Stepparents in Québec* (Saint-Jacques et al., 2018). Analyses were based on a subsample of 854 repartnered parents and 270 stepparents that participated in one or more of the three measurement times. The variables measured related to changes in stepparent status, family roles, the sharing of tasks, responsibilities and decision-making between the biological parent and the stepparent, legitimization of parent figures, co-parenting within the couple, and financial support. We used a multilevel (hierarchical) analysis of variance.

Results:

Stepparents contribute to the collective task of childrearing. They are social and economic resources. The diverse roles and responsibilities of stepparents can vary with the length of time the stepfamily has been together. A minority of respondents said they would maintain ties with their stepchildren in the event of the couple's separation.

Conclusions/Implications:

The biological parent is generally the most involved parent figure and often the final decision-maker. Some stepparents are highly invested in their stepchildren's lives. Should family law recognize plural parenthood in the best interest of the children?



Experiences of young people and (step)parents living in blended families: a Dutch perspective

Janneke Metselaar, Magda Hengst, *NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands*

Claudia Vrijhof, Mariska Klein Velderman, *Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research, TNO, Child Health (department), Netherlands*

Study Background:

For many children in Dutch society it is more and more common to grow up in blended families. Blended families are fundamentally different from first-time families and relationships in blended families are often complex. Families can consist of several family members with unique, and sometimes conflicting roles. For example, a biological parent, stepparent, biological children, stepchildren, and shared children can all be included in the same household. In addition to this complexity there is a lack of clear norms, boundaries, roles, and expectations to regulate family attitudes and behaviours in blended families. Family structures in these families create several challenges, for instance insider/outsider positions, struggle with losses, loyalty binds and change and issues of parenting.

Aim/Research methods:

Based on semi-structured interviews held with young people, biological and stepparents, we will share experiences of blended family members residing in the Netherlands, with a focus on their struggles and support needs. These concern for instance getting used to the new family structure, finding a role within the family, conflict of loyalty, emotions of grief, issues in communication, conflict management and (step)parenting.

Results/Conclusions:

In daily practice many clinicians rely on their training in first-time family models. This is not only often unhelpful, but this can also be destructive. The outcomes of literature research and interviews show us that it is important to be aware of the differences between blended families and first-time families.



Conjugal Relationships Among Québec Stepparents: What Have We Learned Over Time?

Caroline Robitaille, Ste-Marie Nathalie, *Université Laval, Canada*

Study Background:

After a separation, many parents repartner and eventually establish a new cohabiting union. The new conjugal relationship obviously opens up opportunities, but it also comes with challenges, in particular because the conjugal experience is affected not only by factors both within and outside the family (Blyaert, Van Parys De Mol and Buysse, 2016; Ganong, Jensen, Sanner, Russell and Coleman, 2019), but also by the roles played by the parents and stepparents (Rouyer, Baude, Biargues-Joubert and Monribot, 2018). Moreover, this experience is likely to evolve over time.

Aim/Objectives:

The proposed paper aims to document the evolution of repartnered parents over time and the contribution of varying factors to the conjugal experience.

Research Method:

The results are based on data collected at three measurement time points in the *Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents and Stepparents in Québec, Canada* (Saint-Jacques et al., 2018). Analyses were based on a subsample of 988 repartnered parents. The variables measured related to adjustment to stepfamily living, dyadic adjustment and areas of tension. A multilevel (hierarchical) analysis of variance was used.

Results:

The anticipated results will build on and qualify the results of an initial study based on data collected at the first measurement time point, when parents were newly repartnered (Robitaille et al., 2023). Adding a new time perspective, with some of the stepfamilies studied being up to six years old, will provide a better grasp of the evolution of family transitions and make it possible to examine how conjugal adjustments and areas of tension change over time based on such factors as the characteristics of the respondent parent and the family, relationship quality, co-parenting and how long the stepfamily lasts (Robitaille et al., in progress).

Conclusions/Implications:

This study builds on the data collected in a recent survey conducted in Québec, Canada, which has a high rate of common-law couples as well as public policies that support parenthood and work-family balance. The quality of the data collected allows us to examine the role of time, a variable rarely considered in studies. It also highlights other factors that influence conjugal unions and can be supported. Understanding them better will lead to targeted services that are more responsive to stepcouples' needs.



1st International Conference on

Strong Blended Families

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS

6-7 FEBRUARY 2025 • VALLETTA, MALTA



FRIDAY, 7 FEBRUARY

PANEL

Building Strong Step-Families Around the World

Moderated by Patricia Papernow

U.S and INTERNATIONAL

Smart Steps

Francesca Adler-Baeder, *Auburn University, Alabama*

Brad van-Eeden-Morefield, *Montclair State University, New Jersey*

Brian Higginbotham, *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.

FINLAND

Supli (Stepfamily Association of Finland)

Heidi Karvonen, *Stepfamily Association of Finland, Finland*

The presenters will provide the background to, and content of, the Step-App programme.

In 2002, Supli – the Stepfamily Association of Finland, starting to train professionals to work with stepfamilies, a role it has continued to provide to professionals in both the public and private sectors through its 30-credit programme. Supli also offers counselling; runs peer-supported groups and events for stepfamilies and advocates on their behalf; and works within a multiprofessional network.

CANADA

Journey Counseling

Charles Coleman, *Registered Psychologist and Clinic Director, Canada*

Amy Corkett, *Registered Psychologist, 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



SINGAPORE

PPIS Vista Sakinah Center for Remarriage and Stepfamilies

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

Azita Abdul Aziz, *Senior Director, PPIS Family Services, Singapore*

Kamariah Yusoff, *Centre Manager, PPIS INSPIRASI*

The presenters will discuss PPIS Vista Sakinah, its mission and programmes, and its focus on child centricity throughout our work with couples, from the first point of contact before remarriage, through post-marriage.

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. Its mission of VS is to strengthen, rebuild and foster resilience and Sakinah (tranquility) in remarriages and stepfamilies, providing practice-based quality intervention that prepares and enriches remarriages and stepfamilies.

DENMARK

Institute for Stepfamilies

Janne Leth Førgaard, *Family Counselor, Edu-Therapy Specialist™, Couples Therapist,*

Stepfamily Coach, Denmark

The presenter will explain her work to educate Danish stepfamilies and professionals, through her publications and specialist podcast for stepfamilies. She will also cover a three-day stepfamily course for professionals, and her clinical work with individual clients, mainly stepmothers.

BELGIUM

Barbara Lavrysen, *Clinical Psychologist, Couples and Family Therapist Trainer, and Supervisor at Context UPC KU Leuven Staff member in Clinical Psychology*

The presenter will discuss her work on integrating an understanding of stepfamily dynamics into established evidence-based systemic family therapy models.

With a focus on ABFT (Attachment Based Family Therapy) with struggling adolescents and EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) Hold Me Tight workshops for couples, presenter discusses her goal (and challenge) to pass evidence-based stepfamily information to colleagues and graduate students so that stepfamilies are not treated with first-time family therapy models.

ISRAEL

Stepcouple Relationships During an Ongoing War & The Unique Challenges in Ultra-Orthodox Stepfamilies

Sigal Kaplan, *Family Counselor, Specialist in Blended Families*

The presenter discusses stepcouple relationships during an ongoing war, in relation to the events of October 7, 2023 which caused a nationwide crisis.

Blended families, already facing challenges in establishing a sense of belonging, experience greater strain in times of war with differing impact on roles and bonds within and beyond the stepfamily. She also focuses on the unique challenges within ultra-orthodox stepfamilies, examining the impact of factors such as collectivism, stigma, matchmaking, emotional intensity upon family members.



POSTER SESSION

P_01 | Lessons Learned from a Dual-Delivery Format Stepfamily Education Program

Kay Bradford, Brian Higginbotham, Joshua Turner, Esra Sahin, *Utah State University, USA*

Study Background:

In Utah (United States), Stepfamily Education is implemented statewide through a dual-delivery format, allowing participants to attend in-person or virtually. Both options offer the same curriculum, and have the same time requirements, group-dynamics, and instructors.

Aim/Objectives of Study:

This study examines the preliminary outcomes of a dual-delivery stepfamily education program. Emphasis is placed on outcome differences between in-person and virtual participants in the areas of partner conflict resolution, healthy coparenting, and personal development.

Research Methods:

Data were collected at pre- and posttest between 2021 and 2024. A total of 1,666 participants completed the program (54.5% completed virtually). Pre- and posttest comparisons for the entire sample were made through paired samples *t*-tests, while comparisons between in-person and virtual participants were made through independent samples *t*-tests.

Results:

Partner Conflict Resolution

After completion, participants were better at working out differences, felt more respected by partners, reported improvements in disagreeing respectfully, and decreased frequencies of bringing up past hurts in arguments. No differences were found between in-person and virtual participants.

Healthy Coparenting:

After completion, participants reported they were better at working with their partner as parents. No differences were found between in-person and virtual participants.

Personal Development:

After completion, participants reported less nervousness, hopelessness, and worthlessness, while feeling more confident in their efforts. No differences were found between in-person and virtual participants.

Conclusions/Implications:

Participants showed improvement on several key measures. No differences were found between in-person and virtual participants, suggesting that both delivery models are effective in delivering stepfamily education. Findings provide support for the viability of different delivery models of stepfamily education. Lessons learned relate to costs, recruitment, scheduling, and staffing.

Keywords: Conflict resolution; co-parenting; online vs in-person education



P_02 | A Multidisciplinary Approach to Understanding Stepfamilies: Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents and Stepfamilies in Quebec (LSPSQ)

Marie-Christine Saint-Jacques, Elisabeth Godbout, Caroline Robitaille, *Université Laval, Canada*

Amandine Baude, *Université de Bordeaux, France*

Study Background:

Parental break-up is no longer an end in itself, but rather often the first step in a series of family transitions. This is evidenced by the fact that 36% of parents form stepfamilies within two years following separation; after six years, the percentage rises to 53%.

Aims/Objectives:

The Canadian research partnership *Séparation parentale, recomposition familiale* developed the LSPSQ to fill in the knowledge gaps with regard to families. We will discuss the design and implementation of this longitudinal study. The focus of the poster will be on stepfamily issues.

Methods:

The originality of the study lies in its multidisciplinary approach and the fact that it is built on a research partnership that brings together researchers (N=30) and community organizations (N=18). We will present the approach and describe the components. We will present the methods adopted to promote its use by the international scientific community.

Findings:

The study is constructed from a perspective of a participatory research strategy. It draws on a stratified sample of 1,551 respondents representing 56,000 Québec parents that have been separated for less than 24 months and have at least one child under age 14. The LSPSQ is designed to document the first six years following parental. The study includes a second sample consisting of 271 stepparents.

The study is structured around three themes: 1) family transition trajectories and experiences of adults and children; 2) needs and experiences relating to the main psychosocial and legal services; 3) family transitions through the lense of the law and public policy, including opinions on the roles and responsibilities of stepparents. By way of illustration, some of the many results of the study will be presented.

To facilitate international comparisons, the metadata produced to support use of the databases and study data are available in open access.



P_03 | Stepfamily Relationship Quality and Youth Well-Being Over Time: Stages of Adolescence as a Moderating Influence

Todd Jensen, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA*

Background:

A stress-and-support perspective and emotional security theory highlight the roles of high-quality caregiver-child and couple relationships in promoting youth well-being, particularly in the context of stepfamily formation. Whether associations between stepfamily relationship quality and youth well-being vary across specific stages of adolescence is less clear.

Aims:

The purpose of the current study is to assess associations between stepfamily relationship quality and change in youth well-being over time distinctly across early (ages 11-13), middle (ages 14-16), and late (ages 17-20) adolescence.

Methods:

The sample included 1,493 adolescents (48% female) in the United States from Waves I and II of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health who were living in stepfamilies. Measures included composite scores for stepparent-child, parent-child, and couple relationship quality, as well as youth depression, delinquency, and physical health symptoms. Multiple group comparison analysis (weighted) in a structural equation modeling framework was applied, with stage of adolescence specified as a grouping variable. Separate models were estimated for male and female youth.

Results:

For female youth, parent-child relationship quality was negatively associated with physical health symptoms over time (invariant). For male youth, stepparent-child relationship quality was negatively associated with physical health symptoms over time (invariant), and parent-child relationship quality was negatively associated with depression (invariant) and physical health symptoms (invariant) over time; however, association between parent-child relationship quality and delinquency over time was non-significant during early adolescence, and became significant (and negative) and pronounced through middle and late adolescence (See Figure 1).

Conclusions:

High-quality stepfamily relationships can promote youth well-being over time; however, among male youth, the role of the parent-child relationship in shaping behavioral health is dynamic across stages of adolescence. Efforts to leverage the parent-child relationship to promote youth behavioral health in stepfamilies might be especially fruitful among males in middle and late adolescence.



P_04 | A Latent Trajectory Analysis of Stepfamily Education

Kay Bradford, Brian Higginbotham, *Utah State University, USA*

Bryan Spuhler, *University of Southern Mississippi, USA*

Study Background:

Relationship education (RE) helps strengthen couples' relationship quality, but less is known about participant differences, and RE's potentially differential impact on relationship quality.

Aim/Objectives of Study

RE may work differently for different participants. Through the lens of prevention science, we used latent trajectory analysis to identify relationship quality trajectories. We then examined RE's differential effects on relationship quality trajectories and the predictors of those classes, with a focus on risk and protective factors.

Research Methods:

Pretest, posttest, and booster/follow-up data came from remarried participants in the six-week Smart Steps program, who provided responses within the relationship quality variable across all three time points ($n = 777$, 344 men, 433 women). Growth mixture modeling was used to identify latent trajectories; latent class analysis was used to identify predictors of membership. Analyses were conducted separately for men and women to avoid bias from non-independence of data.

Results:

Two classes emerged for both men and women: 'High and Rising' (74% and 65%, respectively) and 'Mid and Rising' (26% and 30%, respectively). A third class, 'Low and Falling,' emerged for women only (5%). For both men and women, 'Mid and Rising' had higher levels of agreement with their spouse on financial matters and lower levels of agreement on parenting and on commitment at pretest vs those in Class 1 ('High and rising').

Conclusions/Implications:

Participants were best described via differing classes of relationship quality. There was a gendered difference: more men were in the 'High and Rising' class (74% vs 65%, respectively) while more women were in 'Mid and Rising' (30% vs 26% respectively). While the high and rising class remained largest, it was less so for women. This corresponds to lower relationship quality for women – which also held true for their gains in this RE program.



P_05 | An Overview of Research Findings from the Utah Remarriage Quality and Stability Project

J.Scott Crapo, Joshua Turner, Kay Bradford, Brian Higginbotham, *Utah State University, USA*

Study Background:

We have a unique, multi-year data set that gives insight into the early years of remarriage and blended families that has yielded longitudinal information about what works in their families, including the impact of post-divorce, pre-remarital cohabitation, the interplay of parenting and stepparenting difficulties, and the impact of finances on perceptions of spousal behavior and sexual intimacy.

Aim/Objectives:

Our objective is to present various research findings from this data set that give an overview of what worked for these blended families, and the challenges they face, as they established their (step)families in the first years of their remarriages.

Research Methods:

Data were gathered from couples in the first year of their remarriage. Remarried couples were identified through the review of marriage licenses issued in 2006, and surveys were sent to all remarried couples in April 2007. Couples that fit this criteria ($n = 4,886$) were mailed an invitation to participate. A total of 2,042 participants responded to the survey. Follow-up surveys were sent in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

The findings to be presented used a variety of statistical analyses, including dyadic latent growth curve, multi-group actor-partner interdependence model, hierarchical regression models, and dyadic latent mediation.

Results:

In general, we found evidence to support the universal and gendered importance of financial security, father and stepfather involvement, and the importance of deliberate cohabitation decision-making.

Conclusions/Implications:

Blended families are complex, and the factors that influence them are equally complex. However, there are things that can be done during the early years of establishing a blended family that can have positive, long-term effects on family functioning and stability.



P_06 | Profiles of Coparenting Dynamics in Stepfamilies: The Stepparents' Perspective

Marion Adamiste, Tamarha Pierce, Hans Ivers, *Université Laval, Canada*

Diane Dubeau, *Université du Québec en Outaouais, Canada*

Study Background:

In Canada, 5% of families are stepfamilies, a figure that rises to 10.8% in the province of Quebec, representing approximately 140,000 stepfamilies (Statistics Canada, 2021). The Quebec Separated and Blended Parents Survey (ELPSRQ) was developed to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of these families. It represents the first large-scale provincial study to incorporate the perspective of stepparents, an innovative aspect, as stepparents are rarely included in research on coparenting in stepfamilies, despite often being actively involved in the upbringing of their partner's children.

Aims/Objectives:

This study aims to assess six specific dimensions of coparenting: levels of support, conflict, engagement, agreement and disagreement on child-rearing, division of labor, and triangulation.

Method:

The final sample consisted of 201 stepparents (31% men and 64% women) who had been in a relationship for less than four years and were living with their partner's child for at least 20% of the time. A latent profile analysis revealed three distinct profiles.

Findings:

The "supportive" profile (71.8%) is characterized by high levels of support, low conflict, and low triangulation. The "conflictual" profile (19.9%) is marked by very low support, high conflict, and limited triangulation. Finally, the "triangulated" profile (8.3%) shows low support, high conflict, and high levels of triangulation. No significant differences were found between profiles with regard to engagement and agreement on child-rearing practices. The strengths and limitations of this study will be discussed in the conclusion of the presentation



P_07 | Relationship Dynamics between New Couples in Blended Families and Their Previous Partners: a Case Study from in North Macedonia

Avirovic Bundalevska, *University St. Cyril and Methodius, North Macedonia*

Study Background

Blended families in North Macedonia are a growing social phenomenon, reflecting broader shifts in marriage, divorce, and family structures. In traditional Macedonian culture, family values emphasize stability, close-knit ties, and long-lasting marital unions. However, with social changes and a gradual shift toward more flexible attitudes about marriage and divorce, blended families—those that combine children and parents from previous relationships—are becoming more common.

Aims/Objectives

This study examines the relationship dynamics between new couples in blended families and their previous partners, focusing on the unique challenges faced within the Macedonian cultural context. Traditional values around marriage and family roles often complicate post-divorce interactions, affecting co-parenting, financial responsibilities, and emotional boundaries.

Findings

This research highlights how cultural expectations influence these relationships, revealing that tensions with previous partners can impact the stability and satisfaction of new unions. Effective co-parenting arrangements, clear communication, and well-defined boundaries with former spouses emerged as crucial factors for reducing conflict and promoting a harmonious blended family environment.

Conclusion

The findings suggest a need for targeted support and counseling services to help new couples in blended families navigate complex relationships with previous partners while fostering stability in their current partnerships.



P_08 | Blended Families in North Macedonia: Exploring New Relationship Dynamics

Angelka Keskinova, *University St. Cyril and Methodius, North Macedonia*

Study Background

In North Macedonia, the concept of blended families—households that bring together children and parents from previous marriages or relationships—has gained increasing prevalence due to shifts in social norms and divorce rates.

Aims/Objectives

This study explores the dynamics of new couples within blended families in the Macedonian cultural context, where strong family ties and traditional values often influence relationship dynamics. Key areas of focus include communication styles, co-parenting challenges, integration of step-children, and the psychological impact of cultural expectations on the stability and satisfaction of these relationships.

Findings

Findings from our quantitative and qualitative research indicate that Macedonian couples in blended families often experience heightened pressures to harmonize traditional expectations with modern family structures, leading to unique relationship strains and adaptations. Effective relationship-building strategies, such as open communication, mutual respect, and shared parenting responsibilities, were observed to be essential for fostering cohesion and satisfaction in these relationships.

Conclusions

The study underscores the need for greater societal support and counseling resources tailored to blended families, which can help new couples navigate the complexities of these unions and establish healthy family environments.



WORKSHOP 1

Unleashing the Potential of Stepparent-Child Relationships to Promote Child Well-Being and the Functioning of Blended Families

Todd Jensen, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA*

Workshop Aim/Short Description:

The aim of this workshop is to interactively discuss, synthesize, and apply research focused on stepparent-child relational dynamics that can promote child well-being and blended-family functioning.

Learning Outcomes:

At the conclusion of this workshop, attendees will:

- Recognize numerous possible stepparent roles and patterns of stepparent-child interaction highlighted by research from various countries across the world.
- Understand how culture and context can shape stepparent-child relational dynamics.
- Identify strategies for using evidence-informed insights about stepparent-child relational dynamics to enrich future research and inform practice or policy approaches intended to benefit blended families and promote child well-being.

Workshop Description:

Consistent with the conference theme of “understanding what works” in blended families, this workshop will feature empirical findings related to the centrality of stepparent-child relational dynamics in promoting child well-being and the functioning of blended families. The workshop will begin with the provision of detailed overviews of research highlighting (a) the increasing prevalence of stepparent-child relationships across the world; (b) significant associations between stepparent-child relationship quality, child well-being, and blended-family functioning; and (c) key correlates and antecedents of stepparent-child relationship quality. In particular, stepparent roles and stepparent-child interactional patterns will be highlighted as malleable correlates of stepparent-child relationship quality.

A detailed summary of stepparent roles and stepparent-child interactional patterns highlighted by research from various countries across the world will then be presented. Leveraging a *think-pair-share* facilitation approach, workshop participants will be invited to reflect on the implications of various possible stepparent roles and stepparent-child interactional patterns. Such reflection will include a focus on the role of culture and context in shaping stepparent-child relational dynamics.

Using a small-group discussion format, workshop attendees will then explore and identify strategies for using evidence-informed insights about stepparent-child relational dynamics to (a) enrich future research and (b) inform practice or policy approaches intended to benefit blended families and promote child well-being. Key insights from small-group discussions will be shared and expanded upon among the full group of workshop participants. Participants will be invited to consider opportunities for international collaboration on these fronts.

This workshop is suitable for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who are interested in unleashing the potential of stepparent-child relationships to promote child well-being and the functioning of blended families. The didactic and interactive elements of this workshop could accommodate a large number of participants (e.g., 50). Abstract Keywords: stepparent-child relationships; stepfamily functioning; child well-being



WORKSHOP 2

Effective intervention designing through co-creation strategies – case StepApp-intervention

Heidi Karvonen, Kirsi Heikinheimo, *Stepfamily Association of Finland, Finland*

Workshop aim and learning outcomes:

The aim of this workshop is to provide the participants with understanding and practical applications of designing interventions using co-creation and co-development strategies.

The learning outcomes of the workshop are as follows:

- Participants understand how to utilize co-creation and co-development strategies for effective intervention designing for stepfamilies.
- Participants are able to apply co-development strategies in designing interventions for children in stepfamilies.
- Participants are familiarized with application and effect of digital interventions for stepfamilies.

Description of the main themes and format of the workshop

In the beginning of the workshop the participants will be given examples of co-creation strategies used in the Stepfamily Association of Finland and introduced to the StepApp-intervention, which is a unique example of a co-created intervention with the elements of research, professional help, peer supported groups and digital application.

To gain insight into the practicality of co-creation processes, this introduction will be followed by a short video greeting of professionals and youth that have been involved in co-creating the StepApp-intervention.

In the interactive part of the workshop the participants take part in co-developing a digital intervention for children. In this part of the workshop the participants will share practical ideas of how to involve children in a co-creation process of a digital intervention; identify key questions related to the wellbeing and participation of children in stepfamilies; and manually design a child friendly digital exercise that addresses one or more of these questions

AND/OR

manually design an interactive digital exercise for the whole family, or between specific members of the family.



WORKSHOP 3

Stepfamilies, not second class, just different. Do we need new maps for new terrain?

Bente Barstad, *Modum Bad Psychiatric hospital and Course and Competence Center, Norway*

Søren Marcussen, *Center for Family development, Denmark*

Glenn Ringdal, *Modum Bads Course and Competence Center, Norway*

Background and goals for the project

Through our long experience as therapists, we have met many couples, single individuals and children living in stepfamilies. Modum Bad in Norway and the Center for Family Development in Copenhagen collaborate on the topic of stepfamily challenges, which we experience is under-communicated.

The goal is to empower couples to succeed in their new family project, through therapy, counseling and course activities. In this presentation, we want to share experiences and knowledge and invite to increased awareness and reflection about both the challenges and opportunities stepfamilies face.

Summary of the main points in the presentation

The stepfamily is a unique family form, that should not try to copy the first- time family if it is to succeed. What makes it a special family form and what implications does it have? The stepfamily encounters special conditions, which cannot be changed, but which the family must learn to accept and live with. What are some of these basic conditions, and what do we do with them when we cannot change them? There are several challenges that it is possible for the families to work on, so that both adults and children can thrive in the stepfamily. This is part of what this presentation will focus on.

What implication does the presentation have for practice.

Increased knowledge and awareness among professionals who work with couples and families who live in stepfamilies, facing the unique challenges this family form encounter.



WORKSHOP 4

Administering a Stepfamily Education Initiative: What works?

Brian Higginbotham, Kay Bradford, Phillip Estes, Kelly Kendall, Leslie Cup, *Utah State University, USA*

Francesca Adler-Baeder, *Auburn University, USA*

Aim:

The primary aim of this workshop is to share lessons learned and answer questions from attendees regarding the implementation of an ongoing, multi-site Stepfamily Education initiative. Consistent with the conference theme, we will focus on what works with the following learning outcomes:

- Attendees will learn funding and sustainability strategies
- Attendees will learn how to recruit and retain participants successfully
- Attendees will learn how to supervise educators and partnering organizations effectively
- Attendees will learn considerations for curriculum, delivery formats, and implementation
- Attendees will learn administrative best practices regarding oversight, travel, material management, data management, reporting, etc.
- Attendees will learn about research on Stepfamily Education participants

Main themes and format:

For nearly 20 years, Utah State University (USU) has implemented a statewide Stepfamily Education initiative. As part of this initiative, USU has secured over \$15 million USD, served over 15,000 participants, and published over 20 peer-reviewed articles.

Attendees will be able to ask team members questions and gain a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to implement an ongoing initiative.

Among the team members are the Project Director; project implementors and supervisors; business services staff and curriculum specialists.



WORKSHOP 5

From Struggles to Strength: Navigating Stepfamily Dynamics with Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT)

Tara Santens, Leen Van Vlierberghe, Barbara Lavrysen, *KU Leuven, Belgium*

Stepfamilies increasingly represent a significant portion of family structures worldwide. However, many therapeutic models remain anchored in traditional first time family structure, leaving clinicians without the necessary framework or tools to address the unique challenges stepfamilies face (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Papernow, 2018, 2023). This workshop invites clinicians to explore the synergy between Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT; Diamond et al., 2014) and stepfamily specific clinical guidelines proposed by Patricia Papernow. “Blending” both models leads to a valuable framework to effectively navigate stepfamily challenges.

Originally, ABFT was developed to support adolescents dealing with depression and suicidal ideation, focusing on repairing and enhancing attachment relationships within families. This focus aligns beautifully with the attachment needs in stepfamilies, where disruptions and loyalty conflicts often come to the forefront. Combining the ABFT principles and roadmap with Papernow’s model offers the therapist a deeper understanding of a subsystem approach — including biological parent-child relationships, stepcouple dynamics, and stepparent-stepchild interactions—facilitating healing in stepfamilies.

In this interactive workshop, participants will see a video demonstration of a real-life ABFT session with a stepfamily client. Participants will be invited to engage in a group discussion and to explore how this “blended” approach can be applied in practice.

The goal of the workshop is to inspire clinicians to think creatively about new ways to address stepfamily challenges, encouraging a shift from an individual pathology perspective to one that focuses on relational healing and connection. This workshop offers tools to enrich the existing therapeutic approaches and aims to contribute to stronger, more resilient connections within the stepfamily context.

Keywords: Stepfamilies, Adolescents' wellbeing, Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT), Repairing and strengthening connections, Subsystems approach, Clinical guidelines



WORKSHOP 6

A Phenomenological Study of the Challenges, Strengths, Resilience Factors, and Successes as Defined by Blended Couples in Stepfamilies Who Have Been Married Longer Than Five Years

Charles Coleman, *University of Calgary, Canada*

Background:

With blended couples divorcing at higher rates than first family couples, deficit comparative views by family theorists and researchers have allowed most studies to focus on the challenges and subsequent dissolution of these relationships.

Aims/Objectives:

Although family researchers are beginning to shift towards a normative adaptive perspective that seeks to learn how some of these families function well, very little is known about their lived experience and the strength and resilience factors involved in their longevity.

Method:

[This phenomenological study explored the first-hand experiences of blended couples who have been together for more than 5 years, using the normative adaptive perspective and guided by the theory of resilience and relational load. Specifically, participants shared their experiences with challenges, strength and resilience factors and successes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom with a sample of six blended couples who have been together for 5 or more years and who reside in the province of Alberta, Canada. Follow-up questions were also included to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Findings:

This study identified emerging themes including the challenges of adjusting to two family systems, improving parent-child relationships by accepting influence from each other, setting better boundaries to improve relationships with an ex-partner and choosing the fun and supportive stepparent role with stepchildren. Other themes revealed that working together as a team, effective communication practices and fostering open dialogue about issues helped couples turn on problems together and not on each other.

Implications:

The findings can help pre-marriage educators, marriage and family therapists, and clinician trainers guide would-be blended couple and those already in stepfamilies to understand and normalize the challenges faced and the best practices used to get past the most difficult years of stepfamily formation, thus fostering hope and realistic expectations of success.



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