Annual Congress of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

Family structure: Step families and child development

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Step family definition/types

DEFINITION

A stepfamily is a family where at least one parent has children who are not biologically related to their spouse.

TYPES

 \rightarrow Simple step family>> one member of the couple \rightarrow Blended family>> both members of the couple



Common stepfamily stressors/challenges

 shifts in the quality of parent-child relationships

 conflicting family cultures and expectations

 complex emotional responses to grief (a mix of anger, hurt, and love)

 responding to developmental needs of children

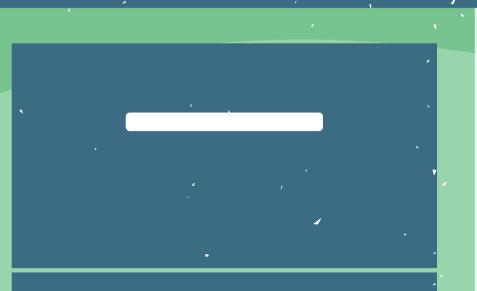
- family boundary ambiguity
- stepparenting issues
- uncertainty among children about how new stepparents should fit into their lives
- co-parental conflict.











Stepparent-child Parent-child Stepcouple

central stepfamily relationships

Challenges for children

•Guilt

- Poor self-esteem
- Regressive behavior

•Unfinished grieving: Many stepchildren are not only adjusting to a new family, but are simultaneously grieving the loss of the world they knew in a previous family (e.g., friends, schools, neighborhoods, and economic status).



Parent-child interaction

•The quality of family relationships may play a key role in promoting stepchildren's well-being.

Parent-child connectedness and parental emotional availability

•Stepparent-child closeness is negatively associated with higher risk for internalizing, externalizing, and academic problems



Bonding with new blended family

Children want to feel:

- •Safe and secure
- Loved and valued
- Heard and emotionally connectedAppreciated and encouraged
- •Limits and boundaries



Age differences: Young children under 10

- •Are ecocentric: they may believe they are cause of the change in their family
- •May adjust more easily because they thrive on cohesive family relationships.
- •Are more accepting of a new adult.
- •Have more daily needs to be met.
- •Feel competitive for their parent's attention.



Children aged 10 to 14

- May have the most difficult time adjusting to a stepfamily.
- Need more time to bond before accepting a new person as a disciplinarian.
- May think their parent will get back together
- May not demonstrate their feelings openly, but may be even more sensitive than young children when it comes to needing love, support, discipline, and attention.

Teenagers 15 or older

- May have less involvement in stepfamily life.
- Prefer to separate from the family as they form they own identities.
- May not be open in their expression of affection or sensitivity,
 - but still want to feel important, loved and secure.

Short tips

Let the kids know that you and your ex-spouse will continue to love them and be there for them throughout their lives.

•Tell the kids that your new spouse will not be a 'replacement' mom or dad, but another person to love and support them.



Remarriage relationship stability, commitment, and strengths :

the couple's emotional health and level of commitment to family success

General Areas of Assessment

Ex-Spouse Relationships and Co-Parenting:

Assessing the ability of ex-spouses to compartmentalize their anger and hurt from the past so as to cooperate on matters regarding the children

Parental Functioning :

parent-stepparent roles and cooperation

Loss Issues:

Indeed, stepfamilies are born out of loss. examining family rules about acknowledging and expressing loss, grief patterns, and behavioral misbehavior in children that frequently masks loss issues (for instance, "mad" may equal "sad").

Child's coping behavior

•Loss in an emotion that will not be denied. If left unexpressed and unrecognized, it will sabotage a stepfamily's integration process. A common by-product of loss is the fear of more loss; a by-product of fear is guardedness and/or anger. Protecting oneself from further pain by holding others at a distance is a common result of unexpressed grief. For example, a child who says, "You're not my dad, I don't have to do what you say" is declaring a loyalty to her biological dad. However, she is equally making a statement about loss: "You're not my dad and I miss him." Helping this child to express her grief and fears will go a long way to helping the stepfather to find his place in the child's life.



Reframing

Reframing a child's opposition as an expression of fear and loss instead of "my wife's spoiled kid" takes blame out of the equation and invites stepparents to feel empathy for the child.
Another effective reframe helps soften a stepchild's fear that drawing class, to a stepparent, is equivalent to between their biological.

parent: This can result in confused responses or emotional opposition

close to a stepparent is equivalent to betraying their biological

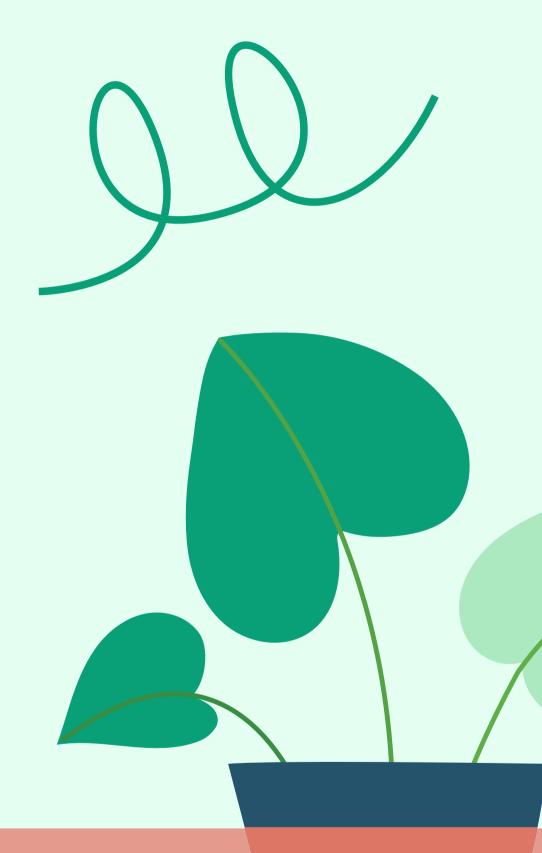
Potential interventions

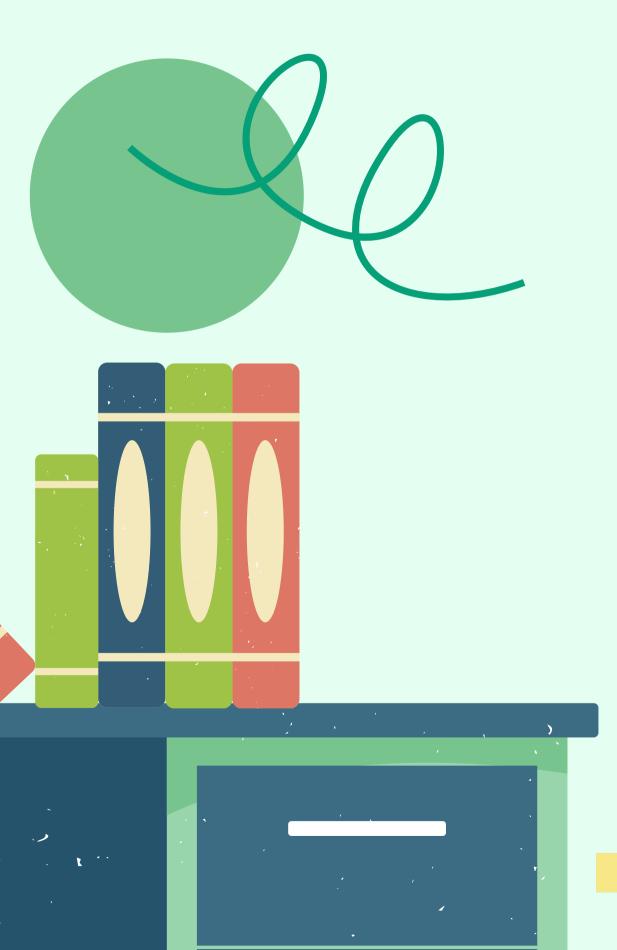
- •Psychoeducational interventions that normalize stepfamily development/reduces stigmatizing
- •Processing the past and present emotional experience of family members is necessary
- •Grieving the past and promoting awareness of each individual's loss provides a basisfor building coherence between a family's past and future •Clarifying boundaries within the remarried family: Caught between past family ties and the new commitments>>Stepfamilies need guidance as to what to expect from one another and the roles adults will play in the developing stepfamily >> Tensions emerge as a remarried couple navigates theco-parenting demands of former spouses and the expectation of biological children:



Emerging roles of step parent in a stepfamily: How to set boundaries







The baby-sitter role

•A general prescription is that stepparents start with the baby-sitter role and progress slowly (often over a period of years) to the others.

•pre-stepfamily parenting >> Baby-sitters have power to manage children only if parents give them power. Biological parents must pass power to stepparents shortly after remarriage so that children will understand that stepparents are not acting on their own authority, but the parent's authority. They might say, "I know Sarah is not your mother. However, when I am not here, she will be enforcing the rules we have all agreed on. I expect you to be courteous and respect her as you would a teacher or coach."



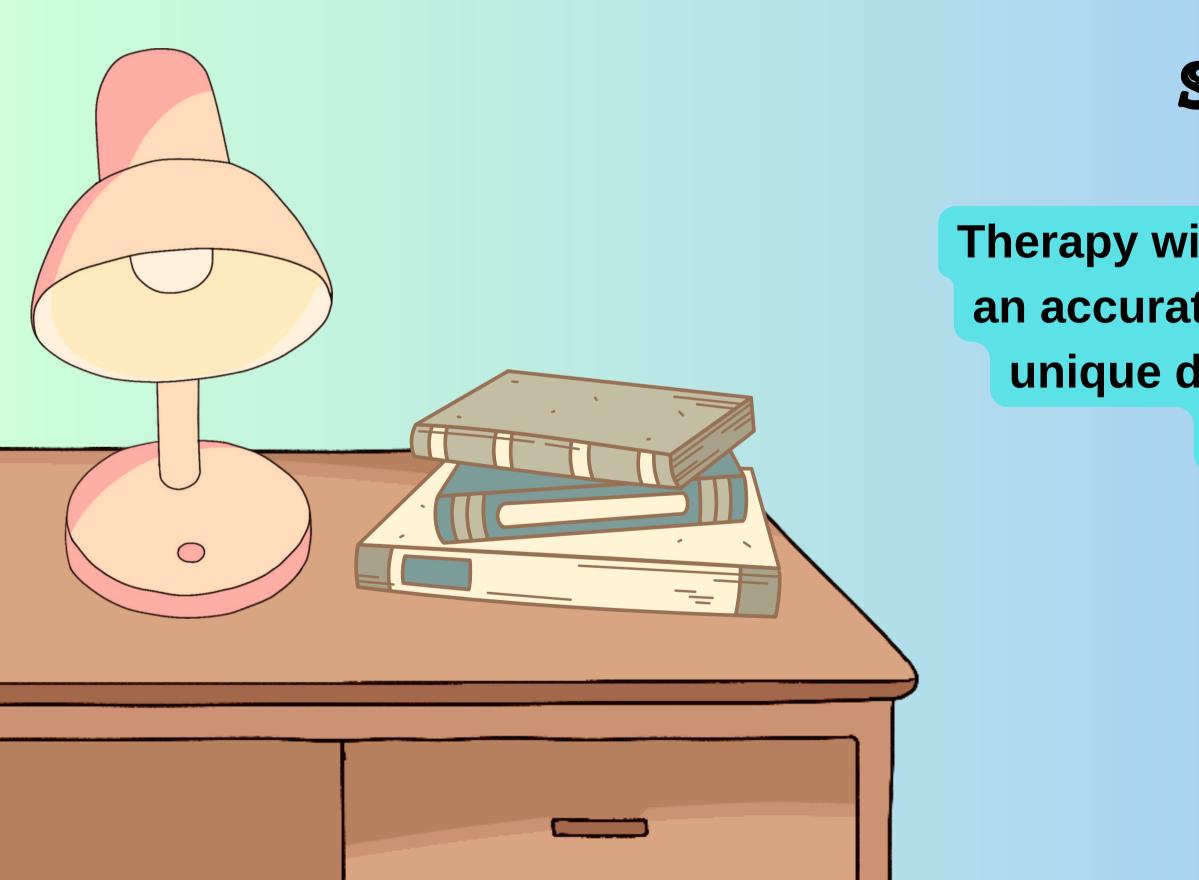
After a moderate relationship has developed, stepparents can move into the "uncle or aunt" stepparenting role. An aunt is not a full-fledged parent, but carries power through her extended family kinship. Stepparents can gradually gain a basic level of respect that allows children to accept them as extended family members by marriage. Stepparents become can more authoritative: clearly communicating limits and encouraging family discussion of rules. Furthermore, as personal bonds deepen, shows of affection and appreciation can become more common

The "uncle/aunt" role



The "parent" or stepparent role

• Eventually, some stepparents will gain "parental" status with some stepchildren. Younger children, who have a large window of attachment, tend to grant stepparents parental status much more quickly than adolescents. It is quite common to be considered a baby-sitter by an older child, an aunt by a middle child, and a parent by the youngest child. This ambiguity can be confusing so be sure to help parents and stepparents develop into a solid parenting team.





Therapy with stepfamilies requires an accurate understanding of the unique dynamics stepfamilies experience.

