BUILDING STRONG
STEPFAMILIES: IT’S A PROCESS

Remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience.
--Samuel Johnson--

Transcending Johnson’s tongue-in-cheek cynacism demands a process of merging experience with hope. While divorce rates are higher on second marriages, the truth is that many adults and children do make things work out better the second time around.

Remarried...blended...reconstituted families, like all other family groups, become strong as their caring, communication, pride, unity, and community ties help heal and build on the past and move into a shared future.

FAMILY CARING
* Sensitivity to member needs for affirmation, trust, support
* Unconditional acceptance, affection
* Emotional closeness, warmth
* Positive attitude about step relations
* Seeing “instant love” as unrealistic
* Unity, love by example in couple

FAMILY COMMUNICATION
* Frequent, open, clear, direct expression of feelings, experiences, goals, dreams, joys, and sorrow
* Responsibility for feelings, actions
* Discussions of values and beliefs
* Parent modeling of negotiation and compromise
* Acceptance that understanding each other takes time

FAMILY PRIDE
* Commitment to one another and unique family traits
* Integrating and inventing rituals and traditions

FAMILY UNITY
* Time together
* Commitment to something greater
* Shared values and goals
* Parent agreement on discipline
* Coping strategies to handle stress
* Problems framed as opportunities
* Strong parenting coalition (residential and non-custodial)

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY TIES
* Connections to practical, emotional support network
* Involvement in community institutions (school, church, local groups)
* Openness to new relationships

Stepfamilies who focus on these traits as “ways to get there” rather than “points of arrival” can turn their fondest hopes into practical reality.

Traits description adapted from S.F. Duncan & G. Brown (1992). RENEW: A program for building for building remarried family strengths. Families and Society, 73, 149-158. RENEW was piloted by and is available from AL Cooperative Extension as a 6-session hands-on workshop or home study program.

PARTNERS ON CHINOOK:
WY Dept. of Education
WY Dept. of Family Services
WY Dept. of Health

ROUNDUP ON THIS EDITION

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Feedback or requests for resources or training welcomed.
For more resources on family life education check out the UW Extension Family Life World Wide Web site, “Dreamcatcher” at www.uwyo.edu/ag/ces/family/dream.htm
Research Briefs
New Findings on Stepfamilies

Preparing for Remarriage
Remarried (100 males, 105 females) described their primary way of preparing (59% = living together; 25%M & 38%F = counseling; 2%M & 8%F = support group). Written material was more often sought and found helpful than friends, counselors, or support groups (esp. women). Most agreed they were overly optimistic, naive relative to issues and needs (often learned too late). Non-cohabitants had fewer parenting problems. Advice to counselors: reach out to single adults, group gatekeepers; teach via popular media; cite readings for parents, kids; examine own attitudes and training about stepfamilies; think prevention.


Stepfamilies and 4-H
A survey of 220 MO 4-H parents found single- and step-parents (<10% and 19% of sample) had more difficulty attending meetings and supporting projects, but viewed child benefits as did other parents. State, regional, and local 4-H staff appreciated barriers (lack of time, transportation, money, social stigma). Some leaders saw study as attack on 4-H; others proposed flexible rules (fewer required meetings, alternate project formats) to accommodate all family structures.


Piloting Stepfamily Resources
119 AL Extension educators, placed in continuing education two formats (& control group) on remarried families (unique family styles; meeting member needs; building solid marriage; defining stepparent roles; deciding on discipline; extended stepfamilies; economic issues). Evaluation measure of 14 vignettes/multiple choice items at six levels of Bloom taxonomy revealed significant gains (50% to 62% correct) for the group using written materials (vs. audiotape, control groups).


Stepfamily Training Effects
Ten female and four male stepparents (late 30s, w/teens) participated in 4-6 hr. communication (attending, listening/responding to content and feelings, self-awareness genuineness) and parenting (rules, consequences, family meetings, integration) sessions. Post-tests revealed improvements on communication skills, desirable parenting (accepting/responding to child feelings), but no decrease in undesirable parenting (threats, preaching, ignoring) or in family cohesion. Scores in relation to a comparison group (mostly dads) were favorable. Notes key issues (complex adjustments, myths, skill needs) and recommends dyad/family programs, stronger recruitment and varied content and delivery options.


TheoryBase
Remarried Family Formation

Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (The changing family life cycle: A context for family therapy, Gardner, 1988) provide a developmental task framework widely used by therapists and educators:

STEP 1: Entering new bond
PREREQUISITE ATTITUDES:
-Recovery from loss of first marriage (overcoming grief, guilt, anger, false longing)

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES:
-Recommitment; readiness to deal with ambiguity, complexity

STEP 2: Understanding and preparing for new marriage and family relationships
PREREQUISITE ATTITUDES:
-Accept own, partner, children's fears about remarriage, family

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES:
-Cultivating openness in the face of pseudomutuality
-Plan for emotional, financial, coparental responsibilities
-Plan to help children deal with fears, loyalty conflicts
-Establish new and maintain old extended family bonds

STEP 3: Remarriage and reconstitution of family
PREREQUISITE ATTITUDES:
-Resolve prior attachments and ideal of intact family

-Accept and cultivate healthy stepfamily, open boundaries

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES:
-Open relationships to allow inclusion of stepparent(s)
-Make room for children with biological, non-custodial parent, grandparents
-Begin developing traditions, experiences, bonds to build stepfamily identity
**Distribution of Marriages by Marriage Order**  
*(Percent, USA/Wyoming, 1994)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1985</th>
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<tr>
<td>First marriage, bride and groom</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>54.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>First marriage bride/Remarriage groom</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarriage bride/first marriage groom</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarriage bride and groom</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
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**Distribution of Marriages by Age, Sex, and Previous Marital Status**  
*(Percent, USA, 1994)*

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<th>Previous Divorce</th>
<th>&lt;20</th>
<th>20-</th>
<th>25-</th>
<th>30-</th>
<th>35-</th>
<th>45-</th>
<th>65+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remarriage</td>
<td></td>
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<td>/F</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
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<td>20.6</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/M</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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**First Marriage Dissolution and Years Until Remarriage for Females**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ALL</th>
<th>1yr</th>
<th>2yr</th>
<th>3yr</th>
<th>4yr</th>
<th>5yr</th>
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<td>1970-74</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>45.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980-84</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>49.7</td>
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**Clinical Perspectives:**

**Predictors of Transition Difficulties for Remarried Families**

1. Wide discrepancy between family life cycles of blending families
2. Denial of prior loss and/or short time between marriages
3. Failure to resolve intense relationship issues of first family experience
4. Lack of awareness of emotional difficulties of children in remarriage
5. Inability to give up ideal of intact family and move on
6. Efforts to draw firm boundaries around new family
7. Exclusion of or combat with biological parent or grandparents
8. Denial of differences within the new household
9. Shift in custody of children near time of remarriage


**Stepchildren are more likely than biological children to live in lower-income families:** 29% of children in intact families (vs. 39% of step-children) live in families with incomes under $30,000

26% of children in intact families (vs. 24% of step-children) live in families with incomes over $50,000

About 7 million stepparents live with their stepchildren (5 mil. stepfathers)


---

When our relatives are at home, we have to think of all their good points or it would be impossible to endure them.  
--George Bernard Shaw
Facts: Finding Yourselves as a Family

Stepping Through Predictable Stages of Adjustment

Early Stages: Finding Yourselves Together

- Key Tasks: Accepting that love is not instant, loss and strain are still present, stepfamilies are unique; Making real relationships work on a practical level (vs. comparing, idealizing, working too hard); Creating individual, couple, and parent-child time to relax and heal; Transitioning from single/parent to shared household roles

- Key Tasks: Accept negative feelings of children (resentment, confused loyalties), biological parent (overload), stepparent (rejection); Taking time to talk out/work through adjustments; Support remarriage and parenting roles separately; Investing in positive experiences which moderate losses and disappointments, aid relaxing and togetherness

Middle Stages: Beginning to Blend

- Key Tasks: Giving up fantasies; Showing empathy for children's loyalty binds and stepparent "outsider" role; Prioritizing time and leadership for couple; Limiting impact of ex-spouse

- Key Tasks: Remove power struggles by emphasizing common ground; Allowing permeable boundaries (for transitions in and out); Finding constructive roles for stepparent, ex-spouse; Cultivating empathy and problem-solving skills

Later Stages: Feeling Like a Family

- Key Tasks: Practice open communication which transforms blaming relations in conflict resolution and problem solving across biological subsystems; Expand and deepen nurturing parent roles, sibling bonds

- Key Tasks: Early identification and problem solving (w/appreciation of challenge, lower anxiety); Extended activities to build family identity and cooperation; Accepting losses and planning for long-term needs (shared child, college, retirement, extended family contact)

---"Fast" Transition: 4 years/"Typical" Transition: 7 years---

Stepparenting that Works

1. Respect stepchild bonds with absent parent

2. Competition with or put-downs on the same-sex parent strains a child's loyalties and erodes trust in the remarried family.

3. Remarried partners must work together

4. Understanding partner and child experiences as "insider" or "outsider" and encouraging a blending which meets member needs is a learning process.

5. Use differences as sources of strength

A stepparent's new ideas, interests, or role may create conflict, but even that can be used to build understanding and family strengths.

6. Make wise use of generational differences

Playing the "friend" role may help build trust early, but "role model" and "teacher" relationships facilitate richer sharing across generations, without competition with absent parent.

5. Negotiate comfortable roles with stepchildren

Stepfamily closeness, roles, and discipline come from mutual negotiation and trust, not just stepparent preference or effort.

6. "Intimate outsider" may fit better than "parent substitute" Instead of trying to replace an absent parent, a supportive but slightly more distant role may allow a stepparent to become a resource and confidant in time.


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TEACHING TOOLS FOR FAMILIES

Transition Keys for Stepfamilies

Family Rituals
routine and repeated events with special meaning and order which build family identity and continuity in a changing world

Stepfamilies can set a direction for acceptance, togetherness, problem-solving, and fun by their discipline of living together.

Three levels of rituals

Everyday: regularities around mealtimes, bedtimes, discipline, leisure, transitions between homes which shape immediate security and growth

Traditions: weekly family times, summer vacations, extended activities (club participation), visits w/extended family, birthdays, anniversaries

Celebrations: major events marking cultural identity (religious or ethnic observances) or developmental change (weddings, births, entering new school, recognizing achievements or losses, funerals) and which define member status and connect family with the larger culture

Common Patterns of Remarried Kinship Networks (processes of family reorganization)

Expanded--sustained relationships with relatives from previous marriages plus current stepkin; open communication, extensive flexibility in roles and contact; inclusion vs. hostility

Contracted--segregation of family unit from major portions of kin network (i.e., ex-spouse/non-custodial parent, grandparents); restricted contact and communication or hostility between segregated parties

Substituted--new spouse/parent take places of those lost by death, desertion, divorce

What can you do to make a difference?

How can your everyday rituals help create a predictable and consistent pattern of events for children in transition?
-What adjustments will accommodate different ages and interests?

How can redecorating help create special places and memories for children to feel more at home in their new stepfamily?
-How can the experience of planning or working together build trust and cooperation among step-parents/siblings?

How will you handle conflicts between siblings or with parents?
-What ground rules will promote respect and problem solving?
-How can fairness and caring be experienced for all members?

What traditions are important to each unit of the stepfamily?
-Should this tradition continue as a separate or shared event?
-What role should other members have in supporting old traditions?

What new traditions would be fun and rewarding for our stepfamily?
-(How) should new traditions be timed to include all members?
-How could new traditions build self-esteem and togetherness?
-How can new rituals and traditions help us learn together?

What practical or emotional stresses come with approaching a major celebration, such as a wedding, as a stepfamily?
-How can we keep the focus on the person/event we want to celebrate so that our own tensions don't get in the way?
-How can we anticipate and negotiate events ahead of time in order to reduce tensions and create an enjoyable celebration?

How do our rituals keep us apart/bring us together?

Can we see ourselves in one of the kinship patterns described?

How do our connections (or separations) build the strengths of our stepfamily unit? How do they add (or drain) energy or loyalty?

What changes in our family rituals might allow us to make room for more of our extended family? What benefits might we gain from getting to know a larger group of our relatives?
Remarried couples may carry the anxiety of disappointing relationships, the optimism of a second chance, or the ambivalence of both experience.

Handling (Step) Sibling Conflicts

Step-siblings face challenges of building new relationships with instant relatives find a new place.

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Keeping the Remarriage Flame Alive

Couples who make the most of their remarriage work on building...

Special Remarriage Strengths

Genuineness
-Honest sharing of feelings and concerns which overcomes fears of rejection, conflict, or breakup

Cohesion
-Couple unity which objectively works through conflicts, tensions, and distractions from children, relatives, ex-spouses

Financial Wisdom
-Realistic insights on financial needs and means, budgeting, and the meaning of money in family decisions

Time Together
-Routine and special times to retreat, refresh, and affirm the best possibilities of your chosen life together

Several predictable steps can help resolve conflicts while they're still small and teach children how to work things out for themselves.

Acknowledge Feelings
-When children know that their emotional experience is appreciated (without necessarily condoning actions), they tend to be more willing to cooperate on solutions which produce more cooperative relationships.

Avoid Comparisons or Blame
-Respect the individuality of each child and affirm his/her strengths (generally, as well as in difficult moments)
-Help each child focus on realities (i.e., shared room) and specific issues (i.e., privacy, shared toys) rather than arguing over things that can't be changed (i.e., family merger, custody arrangements) or general complaints (i.e., fairness)

Redirect Hostile Energy into Positive Directions
-Practical solutions such as "let's all clean up" and creative outlets like "draw a picture of your feelings" or "write a letter to your brother (sister)" can defuse emotions and focus children on positive choices.

Coach Positive Behavior in the Face of Anger
-Mediate while children express feelings, opinions in words (rather than fists)
-Guide children in brainstorming options for meeting each one's need, working together, showing respect, etc.
-Encourage the submissive child to assertively (firmly but respectfully) standing up to bullying behavior

Financial and legal issues in remarriage can be complex, not only because more parties are involved, but because of the legal obligations, practical limits, and emotional issues involved in joining of two families. Each partner brings to the marriage past experiences, old spending habits, past assets and debts, and sometimes legal and financial duties outside the relationship.

**PRACTICAL ISSUES**

**Everyday Decisions**
Responsibilities for support and custody are generally outlined in divorce/custody agreements. However, a custodial parent may make financial decisions (i.e., medical emergencies, braces for teeth, summer camp), then request support from a non-custodial parent. Agreement to consult on shared cost items can reduce frustrations and aid cooperation.

**Legal Rights**
A stepparent has limited legal rights for care and custody of stepchildren. For routine activities such as authorizing release of school records or activities, a note from the biological non-custodial parent may suffice. For decisions involving substantial liability (i.e., medical treatments), a formal document granting limited power of attorney is advisable.

**Dependent Status**
Stepparents may or may not be viewed as dependents for employer fringe benefit purposes. Checking into coverage and/or necessary arrangements to gain coverage should be done early.

**Child Support**
In general, biological parents (married or not) are legally and financially obligated to support children to 18 years. Support agreements are legally binding, but locating or coercing a non-paying parent may cost more than the lost support. Also, periodic revisions of support agreements may help accommodate changes in ability to pay.

**RELATIONSHIP ISSUES**

Money is a practical resource, but may be easily and mistakenly substituted for interpersonal resources such as affection, belongingness, or control. Feelings of guilt or resentment over split obligations (stepfamily and non-custodial children) and anxiety about replaying discord with ex-spouse heightens the emotional tone of discussions on finances. Conflicts over values (i.e., saving or spending, needs and wants) are intertwined with money issues and reach to the foundations of the remarriage relationship. Children are in a powerful position to play one parent against the other to their advantage. Couples who take time to heal the hurts of prior marital conflict, discuss values related to money, and communicate about the deeper concerns (i.e., self-esteem, togetherness, responsibility) which underlie money issues are more likely to handle them well. Many couples find a counselor, mediator, or financial advisor may help clarify issues and develop skills to handle challenges cooperatively.


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TEACHING TOOLS FOR FAMILIES

When adult children remarry, their parents can become instant grandparents...or extend the number and variety of their grandparenting connections overnight. Step-grandparenting relationships come with the same challenges, uncertainties, conflicts, and rewards typical of other stepfamily relationships.

Stepping Stones for the Grandparent

*Remember that relationships are built over time.* Your relationship and role as a step-grandparent will take time to develop. Communication and time spent getting to know, understand, and respect, and trust grandchildren.

*Your relationship to biological and step-grandchildren will be affected by family changes.* Including "new" grandchildren can be affected by their loyalties, relationships to step-relatives, and may strain your relationship to the grandchild you've known since birth.

*Recognize the vital role of grandparents and step-grandparents in today's families.* A majority of families are busier than ever. Intergenerational contact extends nurturing for children and gives them more realistic and positive views of older adults and aging.

*Find special niches for caring.* Reassurance and attention from a caring adult can help children cope better with the uncertainties of stepfamily adjustment. Support for non-residential children during family visits can provide a special message of esteem and concern.

*Create a grandparenting role that is comfortable for you and rewarding for your stepfamily.* Grandparents enrich families through storytelling, child care, practical aid, listening, and a variety of other ways that fit their own personalities and family members' needs.

*Learn about your stepfamily to better understand where to fit.* Thinking about step-grandchildren's ages, interests, and relationships with peers and other family members will help you decide how to become involved with step-grandchildren. Remember that as they adjust and change, your opportunities with them will also change.

*Share yourself.* Spend time one-on-one with each child; teach a game or skill; share jokes or stories; listen for their concerns or stories; talk about parent/child or stepparent/stepchild disagreements but avoid criticism—they'll work it out; offer companionship; share family history and traditions; be a positive role model; accept them as they are and know that it may take time for them to reciprocate.

Adapted from "Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies (1996)" by Gayle Price and Charlotte Shoup Olson, Kansas State University CES. Self-study guides for parents are available and guides for grandparents will follow later this year. Contact Dr. Olsen at (913/ 532-5773).

Grandparent relationships are more close and active for young adults in stepfamilies according to a study by Drs. Gregory E. and C.E. Kennedy (Journal of Remarriage & Divorce, v. 19, no. 3/4, 1993).

Step-grandchildren were significantly more likely than children of intact or single parent families to describe grandparents as "enjoyable...loving...comfortable...showing pride...and supportive." Stepgrandparents were no more likely to live in the same town, but typically spent more time than peers—in a variety of activities—with the grandchild.

You are a New Step-grandparent. What does this Mean?

You probably have many thoughts and feelings about this role, including:

#I'm not old enough or ready to be a grandparent. I'm still raising my own children.

#This interferes with my feelings and dreams about the birth of my first grandchild.

#Will my step-grandchild like me? Will I like my step-grandchild?

#What are the expectations of my son-or daughter-in-law?

#The relationship I have with my other grandchildren is great. I don't want it to change.

#Is it OK to feel differently about my grandchildren than about my step-grandchildren?

#I feel like I'm expected to treat my step grandchildren the same as my grandchildren, especially around gift-giving

#Will "our" family celebrations and traditions have to change?

These questions and thoughts often create feelings of resentment, frustration, uncertainty, sadness, loss, and confusion. Understanding the differences between stepfamilies and biological families may help you cope, adjust, accept, and define your role:

*Stepfamilies do not find "instant love"

*Stepfamilies are unique and not like first-time married families

*Conflict and change are normal

*Individuals in stepfamilies have different personal histories

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and Family Life, 1/97.
**Catch the Wind: Programming Resources, Public Policy, Key Issues**

**Programming Resources**

In addition to those cited above--

**Stepfamily Ass’n. of America**
www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/
215 Centennial Mall South, Suite 212,
Lincoln, NE 68508 (800-735-0329 or
402/ 477-7837). Widely acclaimed as the source for support groups and resources to help adults and children fac challenges and build strengths.

**Cornell Extension**

Building Strong Stepfamilies

**Iowa State Extension**


**NC State Extension**

Succeeding as a Stepfamily, by Sharyn Duffin (HE-398-1; 1993).

**Maryland Extension**

Stepparenting: Step by Step, by Billie Frazier (1990) can be acquired via Agricultural Duplicating Service, UW-CES, 6200 Sheridan St., Riverdale, MD 20737.

**The Stepfamily Solution**

www.publiccom.com/web/stepkid
c/o Elizabeth Einstein, P.O. Box 6760,
Ithaca, NY 14851 (607) 272-2552. Sells commercial educational resources such as Strengthening Your Stepfamily goal-setting/communication curriculum.

**Resources for Parents**


**Resources for Children**


**Resources for Adolescents**


**It’s the Law:**

Finding a Place for Step-relationships in Family Law

Family law often lacks clearly defined legal rights and duties for step-relationships (except via adoption). Areas of ambiguity include:

**Parent role:** Stepparent role not usually defined precisely; most recognize “in loco parentis” (functioning in place of a parent) or meeting “best interests of the child” principles interpreted by each court. This ambiguous and temporary status impedes bonding with stepchildren.

**Child support:** Only a few states obligate stepchild support (usually not after dissolution of remarriage; or only as long as children live with stepparents)

**Visitation/Custody:** If divorce occurs in the remarriage, step-parents often have few rights for visiting or obtaining custody of non-biological children.

**Alternatives:** The English system provides for joint legal custody of step and custodial (biological) parent, flexibility in handling the variety of relations


**School Policies Make a Difference for Stepfamilies**

Why special sensitivity?

*Remarriage can be stressful
*Abuse/neglect and school problems

more frequent in stepfamilies

*School personnel need to appreciate stepfamily uniqueness

Needed changes in views

*See ex-spouses as potentially cooperative vs hostile koparents
*Recognize non-residential parent involvement at any level
*Value additional parent figures
*Appreciate extended family and friendsupport

State Dep’ts./School Admin.

*Offer educational workshops on stepfamilies (in-service, recert.)
*Review of policy and curricula for insensitivity
*Analyze student data by family structure to track special needs

District Administrators

*Discourage use of negative labels (“broken families”)
*Review policy for all families’ convenience
*Update family data, legal info
*Offer report cards and conferences to custodial and non-residential parents
*Include stepfamily books in libraries for children, parents
*Sponsor support or educational groups for kids and families
*Train against stepfamily bias School Boards

*Seek input from all families
*Set/maintain sensitive policies and professional service for all School Professionals

*Aid learning about stepfamilies
*Identify and include key parent figures and student perspectives
*Facilitate discussion and support groups
*Develop effective referral and consulting networks

PARADOXES: A PARTING THOUGHT
This Marriage Will be (the Solution to Our) Biggest Problems

A fresh start is all we need...Problems follow wherever you go
*Stepfamilies often do find a fresh start, most likely after they've worked through past hurts and problems
He (she) needs a daddy (mommy)...But not like you
*A caring stepparent can extend and enhance support, when a child is ready to accept and relate to him (her)
We'll be one big happy family...Or two small lonely families
*Blending families (esp. after single-parent independence) doesn't happen instantly or without effort
We'll share our bills...We're as tight as ever and fight over money
*Joining forces can relieve and strengthen each unit, but also brings many difficult issues to work out
This will help us heal our hurts...This only reopens the wounds
*Love can heal wounds, but sometimes the process requires more pain, patience, and perseverance than expected

Our capacity to accept paradox,
to cope with dilemmas,
is the measure of our maturity
and its expectable consequences.

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