

Stepfamily Education: Benefits of a Group-Formatted Intervention

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Abstract

This program evaluation was conducted by interviewing 40 low-income participants in a relationship education (RE) program for stepfamilies to determine specific benefits of a group-formatted intervention. The benefits that were most often identified were learning from others and having personal stepfamily challenges normalized. Participants also reported the group format facilitated social support. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to share their own approaches and solutions with the other stepfamilies. Identifiable benefits of group-formatted stepfamily education are delineated as are implementation considerations for working with large groups of low-income stepfamilies. Specifically, recommendations regarding trust and logistics are provided.

Keywords

group interventions, program evaluation, relationship education, remarriage, stepfamily

Due to the high rates of remarriage in Western countries, an emerging number of articles consider the educational needs for couples living in stepfamilies. As reported in previous articles, couples in stepfamilies often feel a lack of social support from others, increased distress over time, and greater perceptions of instability (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009; Stewart, 2005). Although reviews of the literature (e.g., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008) have been conducted on specific components of stepfamily interventions, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the advantages of participating in stepfamily relationship education (RE) offered in a group format.

Social Support

In the literature, social support emerges as a necessary component of effective stepfamily RE groups. In a study by Michaels (2000), a focus group interview was conducted to provide preliminary evaluative information on program effectiveness for a multi-couple intervention. The participants included eight remarried couples with a mean age of 38 years, who participated in the Stepfamily Enrichment Program. The program was designed to help stepfamilies successfully negotiate the process of family formation. An emerging theme from this study was change following the group experience. Participants reported that the group discussions “initiated closeness within the group” (p. 65). Consequently, participants felt a sense of camaraderie among members. Furthermore, participants liked the atmosphere the group provided and gave opportunities to share their experiences in a structured environment. In other

words, members established a level of trust that allowed them to talk personally and honestly.

Less perceived social support from immediate family members (Kurdek, 1991) and less support from parents and in-laws (Cebello, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004) often exacerbates the risk of divorce, which is already high for remarriages. An increase in social support can be achieved by providing a group-formatted intervention for couples and their children. Because remarriages are often characterized by social isolation (Booth & Edwards, 1992), it is important that these families have an opportunity to communicate with others who are going through the same process.

In a study conducted by Nicholson, Phillips, Whitton, Halford, and Sanders (2007), 73 stepfamily couples were recruited for a study that hypothesized that the active skills training and opportunities for social support provided by the group intervention would be associated with better outcomes than in the self-directed program. Although none of the families participating in this study identified social support as a reason for seeking intervention, social support received from this preventative program was reported as a benefit of having participated. The group format helped participants normalize their experiences and social support was provided as a result of having participated in the group.

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By participating in a group-formatted RE program that educates and processes the information with its participants, awareness, understanding, and knowledge is gained. The participants are enabled to share this information and encourage each other in its application. This same process is not readily available, if a group format is not offered.

Sharing Experiences

By participating with others in a group format, members are able to hear others experiences and share their own. Families who have been part of a stepfamily longer than others are able to offer valuable tools for newly formed stepfamilies. It has proven to be helpful to listen to others and to think about what they are saying and how it might apply to your family. Although most people are anxious talking in a group setting, within a few sessions people find they begin to talk in the group and will, in turn, most likely gain support for speaking up in the group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This opportunity to share experiences serves to reduce group members' sense of isolation and validate their experiences (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). These interactions lead to a strong cohesion among the participants. This cohesion is the start of a newly found social support system for these stepfamilies. In Michaels' study (2000), the sharing of experiences was noted to have created a bond between members. Participants reported that they felt they were not going to be judged negatively by other members but rather supported. Being able to share experiences and process one's feelings and reactions to these experiences during group intervention has been found to be a potential benefit (Whitton et al., 2008). Participants were able to leave the group with a more comprehensive understanding of the environment around them and ways to help them deal with problems that may arise.

Feedback From Others

According to Michaels (2000), feedback from those going through similar situations was viewed as extremely helpful. Furthermore, interaction gave group members an opportunity to experience new ways of behaving and learn more about interaction with others. Although feedback can potentially be difficult to receive, group members came to trust and accept one another and generally experienced feedback and confrontation as positive. It is rare to find people who will gently point out how you might be behaving in ways that hurt yourself or others, but this is precisely what the group setting can offer. It provides a different viewpoint from non-stepfamily members who may not understand what a stepfamily incorporates (Michaels, 2000). For this reason, participants in Michael's study reported appreciation for the helpful feedback they received from other members of the group as they offered words of advice without judgment. In similar fashion, group therapy also offers an opportunity to give and get immediate responses about concerns, issues, and problems affecting one's family. It is believed that group members benefit by working through personal issues in a supportive, confidential

atmosphere and by helping others to work through theirs (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

The aim of the current program evaluation was to explore, through in-depth interviews, participants' feelings about and their reactions to the group-formatted nature of a stepfamily RE program. To evaluate underresearched topics, Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2000) specifically recommend interviews to understand "the experiences, perceptions, and reflections of stepfamily members" (p. 1302). The current evaluation was designed to add to the existing literature in several ways. First, although there is literature about group-formatted educational courses, most of these interventions excluded children from participation. Second, the sample was drawn from a larger project with a low-income sample and had a significant number of Latinos participating. Third, because of the semistructured design of the interview protocol, respondents were able to speak freely about perceived benefits from participating in a group format rather than using a survey or standardized instrument. This richness of participants' responses can illuminate "mechanisms underlying some of the trends, patterns, and relations found in quantitative work" (Coleman et al., 2000, p. 1302).

Method

The current program evaluation is part of a larger project (Higginbotham, n.d.) that explored the experiences of participants and facilitators with *Smart Steps* (Adler-Baeder, 2007), a stepfamily RE program. The *Smart Steps* program was provided in collaboration with multiple community agencies serving low-income European American and Latino stepfamilies. The curriculum addresses the prevalence of stepfamilies, difficulties frequently faced by stepfamilies, and relationship skills. The larger project focuses on varying aspects of the participants' and facilitators' experiences with the course (e.g., Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010; Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010). The current evaluation focused exclusively on how the participants benefited from taking the class together with other stepfamilies. The program offered concurrent classes for adults and children (ages 6–17). A nursery was provided for children under the age of 6. Adults met in one room and youth met in another (or two depending on the number of youth and size of the facilities). Adults and youth met in their respective classes for approximately 90 min and then were joined together for a 15- to 30-min family activity.

From a pool of 230, interviews were conducted with 40 adult participants (30 from English-speaking classes and 10 from Spanish-speaking classes). The sampling procedure was consistent with the recommendations of Bamberger, Rugh, Church, and Fort (2004) for studying groups who are difficult to reach and for designing evaluations within "real-world" budget, time, and data constraints. Because the classes were offered around a large Western state and the logistical challenges associated with coordinating face-to-face interviews, a convenience sample was ultimately drawn of participants

who were willing and able to have a 30-min interview directly after the last session of the 6-week course. With limited input from class facilitators, and after reviewing attendance records to see who consistently attended classes, the project manager identified 40 potential interviewees. These individuals were then asked to participate in the interviews. Last minute replacements had to be substituted, if the identified participant did not attend the final session. The project manager had no prior knowledge of the participants' feelings about the courses. The age of the 40 interviewees ranged from 22 to 47 years with a mean age of 36 years. Forty-three percent were male and 57% were female. Education ranged from ninth grade to completion of graduate school with the mean years of education being 1-year post-high school graduation.

The interview questions of interest for this program evaluation were those related to the participant's experiences with the stepfamily course in regard to meeting in a group setting with other stepfamilies. Examples of the questions include What was your experience of taking this course with other stepfamilies? What was the best part of the stepfamily course for you?

Due to the educational nature of the intervention, data were analyzed using the procedure described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Researchers (one faculty member and one research assistant) identified coding categories regarding the general evaluation question. The researchers then developed coding categories reflective of the themes described by the participants, namely, the benefits they received by taking the RE course with other stepfamilies in a group setting. The coding was done independently by each researcher and the coding schemes were then compared. When the researchers identified differences in the coding categories, the researchers went back to the data and developed a consensus about which categories best reflected the participants' responses. The final coding categories were then used to code the data. The findings in this article reflect the coding categories best reflected by the participants' responses.

Findings

Participants received multiple benefits from their participation in the group-formatted stepfamily RE course. As parents attended these courses with their children, they were given valuable and salient tools to use with their families. The benefits identified most often by participants were learning from others and normalization of being in a stepfamily. For many, the classes also provided social support and the ability to teach others. One participant reported "Some of the questions participants asked, you could give a textbook answer to. Some of them, the textbook answer was not going to appease the person who brought it up." The participant went on to say that at any time there were three or four others in the room that could jump in and "show a path forward" hence, providing a "light at the end of the tunnel."

Learning From Others

An important benefit participants identified from attending the stepfamily course was learning from others. One participant

stated, "For me the best part was the interaction between the other participants and getting other peoples' input on their prior experiences." Another participant stated, "We would talk and share and everybody was getting a lot out of it because we were sharing with each other . . ."

They learned tools that would help them in all of their relationships including ex-partners or current partners. They learned about family and couple relationship issues and parenting issues. They learned ways of increasing positive interactions in these relationships. One participant stated the following about the tools learned in the stepfamily course:

I would definitely recommend it and one of the big reasons is that just by sitting in this room with all these families . . . just knowing that that's what they're facing in their family and then knowing there are tools available. Hopefully, everyone here will be able to go out and do things a little differently that will help if things aren't working the way they were doing them.

Another participant stated that having learned communication skills helped them better express themselves to ex-partners and current partners.

Couples also learned problem-solving skills in the course. Talking through the problems that participants had in the past or were experiencing at the time and ideas on how to solve those problems was a way that participants were able to share information with one another. One participant stated the following:

When myself or my fiancée would bring up an issue that we were dealing with we'd get different ideas from different couples. I really found that very beneficial because we're learning from each other. You know, we're sharing ideas with them, they're sharing ideas with us.

Many participants did not have someone that they could turn to or could relate to in addressing relationships in stepfamilies. Some participants described how the hardships stepfamilies experienced were different than those other families experienced:

I'm the only one divorced in my family so I don't have a lot of support or knowledge from my family to help. So coming here has made me realize, okay, there's a lot of other people I can speak to and talk to that will know more about this than anybody in my family. I mean, for most problems I go to my parents, but this, I don't feel like they have the knowledge that I need. So, I think this class is a very good resource of information.

One participant stated, "We were able to value which marriages or which families were trying to unite, the ones that were really trying to be a family with love, and those that were divided. . . ."

It is often difficult to merge two families together. This challenge was best described by one participant who stated:

Combining two families and taking their ideas and their failures and their success and trying to integrate them into our home, realizing that maybe their success won't be our success, but nevertheless being able to combine everybody's ideas and put them together, was helpful.

Participants also reported that the course helped their marital relationship. They talked about dealing with ex-partners and the problems that came about from the addition of significant others into their family life. However, learning what others did in this same situation proved to be valuable for the couple relationship.

Another benefit of attending the stepfamily course was learning from others about how to handle difficult situations with their children. One person stated, "It was good because I got to know other ways to live and treat the stepchildren. . . . It helped families have different perspectives on what worked and what did not work with their children and provided them with the opportunity to try these new ideas in their home." For example, one participant stated the course offered different options on how to solve problems with children (e.g., children not wanting to do chores). Another participant stated the following:

It has been really good to have the input from other families that are going through some of the same things that we are struggling with. Hearing others and . . . The things that they've done to make the kids feel that this is also their family even though they are only there part of the time and things like that has been really good.

Another participant in the course stated:

I learned from other families. Even though they are just starting with small children, but I learned from them. I learned what they are doing now with their children and things I could have done a long time ago. One believes that we have to fight the battle to move forward with our children without help, but there is help.

Participants learned from the others in the group. They learned skills including communications skills and how to solve problems. They used these tools to enhance their family, couple, and parent/child relationship. This course gave these stepfamilies a stronger foundation from which to build a solid family.

Normalization

As participants described the benefits of the course, they often talked about the realization that there were many other stepfamilies in addition to themselves. They talked about how they often did not feel comfortable talking about their family issues in social situations for fear of rejection by others. This course provided a safe environment for participants to come together, open up about the problems they encounter, and talk about those problems with one another. In addition, couples talked about how they learned that the problems they experienced

were not unique to them but were evident in most stepfamilies. Finally, these participants talked about how their children also experienced being "normal" as they interacted with other children who were from stepfamilies.

Realizing there were many other stepfamilies in society helped couples feel like their families were not unusual. One participant stated:

I think if everybody realized how many people are actually parts of a stepfamily, in one way, form, or another. . . . You don't need to feel like "I'm messed up and I'm kind of an out-cast from society because I'm part of this stepfamily."

Another component of normalization for the participants was learning that they were not the only stepfamily who was experiencing problems. One participant reported, "I was able to see that it was not only my family who has problems or had problems, but it is all stepfamilies that have problems." Participants were able to open up about their situation and feel comfortable sharing this information, knowing others could understand. After several weeks of the course, problems no longer seemed as enormous as they once did but were easier to handle. Another participant stated:

Oh, it was wonderful because it was nice to know that my situation isn't unique and it was nice to know that there were other people out there experiencing some of the frustrations and some of the difficulties that I, too, was experiencing. And that helps relieve so much stress and pressure because if I know that somebody else is going through the same issue. Then we could sit and we could talk and we could converse and, you know, maybe come up with a solution or at least something to try. It's just been wonderful.

Another aspect of normalization participants identified was the experience their children had in the course. Parents indicated their children were able to relate to other children in the class and be more empathic toward their parents by the end of the course. One participant stated:

I think it's helpful for everybody, especially for the kids. They were kind of sad that it was over . . . they found some other friends that, again, were kind of like them, that they could relate to a lot easier than maybe some other friends that they have.

It is often difficult for parents to explain to their kids the commonality of being in a stepfamily. However, when children are able to open up and share their thoughts with their parents, it can be beneficial for all. One participant reported, "It opened up communication between my children and me. I think, it let them feel like there are other people out there [like them]."

The stepfamily course proved to be beneficial to participants in creating a sense of normalcy for both parents and children. It helped them realize that many people are part of a stepfamily, in one way or another. It also helped them to understand the frustrations they encountered are common in stepfamilies and there is no need to feel like their problems are foreign among

other stepfamilies. Finally, it was advantageous for both the parents and their children were able to join together and gain acceptance from others.

Social Support

Social support was frequently identified by members of the group as an integral part of the program and came from other members of the group as well as the instructors who facilitated the course. Participants also indicated social support extended beyond the classroom as the group members continued to connect with each other beyond the learning that took place in the course. This sharing of experiences led to the foundation of lasting friendships:

First of all, it's indispensable, because you develop a friendship after the class. You feel like you can talk about something that you didn't talk about in the class, and then you can share some things or deal with the stress, too—like calling friends. I have phone numbers that I didn't even ask people for, but that they gave me to keep in touch.

Another participant stated:

I think what we're longing for is the connection we make during the class and finding a way to keep it going. It's a support network now. We became a support group for each other and that's what we're looking for, a support group and I think that's a good idea.

Participants revealed that understanding how others were feeling as well as the sense that they were not being judged, but were understood, provided a sense of comfort and ease. A participant stated the following:

I guess for me, personally, [a benefit] would be meeting the other families. Hearing things that I went through, that I passed through, and say, "You know what, I know how that person feels, because I was there." I know how that lady's reaction is because I was there and getting to know the people that were in the class with me.

The stepfamily course provided a safe environment where people came together and became members of a group experiencing similar difficulties and obstacles within the family. A supportive connection was made among course participants, which proved to be an important benefit experienced by participants in the program.

Teaching Others

Some of the participants in the group stated that they enjoyed being able to teach others about being successful in stepfamilies. One participant reported being able to speak up freely to give others in the class advice:

I got to raise my hand and got to say, "Look, if you don't involve him, it's going to hurt his feelings. He feels valued when you say, 'Hey, our daughter, Jane, wants to go spend the night at some friend's house, what do you think?'" Don't just tell him, "By the way, Jane's gone off to spend the night at her friend's house." There is a certain value there.

Others reported how good it felt to be able to comfort others who were going through situations that they had been through in the past. One participant stated:

I would love to help another man that is going through this. Because I know how hard it was for me and I went through it eight years ago, and I can help. I mean I can't walk with him every day, no, but I can understand what he is going through because I walked it.

Teaching others appeared to provide participants with a feeling of empowerment, realizing that, in some ways, they had become experts at living in a stepfamily. The group format allowed for the opportunity to share their knowledge.

Discussion and Implications

Although the convenience nature of the sample limits generalizability of the findings, this program evaluation does begin to provide "insight" into the "experiences" of stepfamilies in group-formatted RE though "in-depth interviewing" (Coleman et al., 2000, p. 1302). The findings also provide a springboard for more rigorous evaluations. Furthermore, the findings of this program evaluation corroborate the assertions in the literature (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Michaels, 2000; Pill, 1981) that this format may help diminish the sense of isolation that group members often feel and raises awareness of the stressors other stepfamilies encounter. Group members then have the opportunity to learn and try new strategies within their stepfamily. What makes this situation unique is that it is a closed and safe system (McDermut, Miller, & Brown, 2001). The content of the group sessions is confidential; what members talk about or disclose is not discussed outside the group.

In group interventions, like the one used in this program evaluation, people meet face-to-face with one another and the facilitator/therapist to learn and talk about things such as communication, conflict management, and commitment. Group members also provide feedback to each other by expressing their own feelings about what someone says or does and offering alternate approaches that may be of use to other members. When people are able to interact freely with other group members, they are able to recreate the difficulties that brought them to the group in the first place. Robertson et al. (2006) posited that one of the benefits participants may experience from a stepfamily education course is the social support as well as the normalization from sharing experiences with others in similar circumstances. Such was the case with participants in the current study. Under the skilled direction of a facilitator, the group members themselves provided support, offered alternatives,

and gently assisted each through common stepfamily problems. In this way, alternative behaviors were learned and participants learned new interpersonal techniques and ways of interacting in a stepfamily. Many participants originally felt unique because of their problems and it was encouraging for them to hear that other people were having similar difficulties. Consistent with the review of literature of Whitton et al. (2008), the group format emerged as a means to normalize stepfamilies' experiences and provide social support.

For years, professionals have advocated for educational interventions as a cost-effective mechanism that prepares couples to face difficulties that may lie ahead (e.g., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). Clinicians have argued that couples who are remarried need education. Visher and Visher (1996), early leaders in the field of stepfamily interventions, argued that education is one of the highest needs for couples in stepfamilies. They also suggested that many couples would not need clinical interventions, if education on stepfamily dynamics were provided preventively. Furthermore, the literature points out that common therapeutic strategies are perceived as unhelpful by stepfamilies (Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003) because most problems encountered by remarried couples stem largely from preventable situations not individual psychopathology (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996). In light of these concerns about therapeutic interventions, the current findings regarding the perceived benefits of group interventions and the emerging literature that links better dyadic adjustment to stepfamily groups (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009), it appears there are ample reasons to continue efforts to provide and evaluate group interventions.

The current evaluation findings do not address nor discourage other formats of RE that, likewise, deserve future evaluation and consideration, including self-directed interventions and educational videos (i.e., Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2004). For example, Robertson et al. (2006) have recommended providing materials and exercises to parents so that they can go home and share them with their children. The findings of our program evaluation only suggest that with this relatively low-educated, low-income, diverse sample, there are perceptible benefits that are attributed directly to participating in a group-formatted family educational intervention such as learning from others, normalization, social support, and teaching others. Furthermore, by going through the process of the family educational intervention in a group format, participants were able to share their experiences and gain a better sense of understanding of the adversities that stepfamilies often face through discussion with one another. These benefits may not be as easily garnered through isolated, individualized, or independent interventions.

Implications for Practice

Despite the specific benefits that stem from group interventions, there are a number of programmatic considerations that must also be weighed in the balance. Although there appear to be clear benefits tied to a group-formatted stepfamily

intervention, there are a host of implementation obstacles. For example, recruitment and retention process can be long and difficult (Skogrand et al., 2010). According to Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004), attracting stepfamilies to marriage and RE is particularly difficult due to the challenges these families face on a daily basis. This includes stress, communication difficulties, financial conflicts, and parenting issues that are often experienced in greater measure by stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Low-income stepfamilies, in particular, may have difficulty paying for the cost of programs, finding transportation to program sites, and securing child care (Robertson et al., 2006). These same families may not feel they need for educational services or may feel the available marriage and RE services are too general to meet their specific needs (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). It has also been hypothesized that the complexity of the stepfamily structure, which often involves the coresidence of family members, could make it difficult for all family members to attend marriage and RE (Robertson et al., 2006).

If and when families are recruited, programmers must be prepared for the logistics of serving multiple families and potentially a large number of children. Staff is needed for a nursery, children's classes, and as facilitators of the adult classes. Space for everyone may be an issue for small community offices. In an effort to recruit and retain participants, particularly low-income families, child care is a must. Failure to advertise and provide child care and services for adult children may seriously constrain attendance and interest (Skogrand et al., 2010).

Additional reasons for not participating may include feeling that the program required too much family time, invasion of privacy, not feeling the need for the intervention, and other family members such as the father or children not wanting to participate in the family program (Higginbotham et al., 2009; Spoth, Redmond, Hoackaday, & Shin, 1996). Participant mistrust may also be present when large institutions or government agencies are implementing the program, particularly among ethnically diverse populations (Skogrand et al., 2009; Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). This can be especially difficult for a group-formatted intervention when discussion is a must for the group to succeed.

What the findings of this program evaluation show, however, is that if programmers can offer and get families to come to a safe and trusted location (i.e., an established community agency), participating in a group-formatted stepfamily intervention may lead to specific benefits. Many of these benefits may not be possible through individual interventions such as normalizing common stepfamily problems and providing participants with social support. Being part of a group-formatted family intervention provides participants the dual opportunity to be taught and to help teach others. In the current study, the sharing of personal experiences was particularly meaningful to couples. For a group that historically has felt marginalized and stigmatized (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), group-formatted interventions appear to be a welcome occasion for stepfamilies to collectively learn and strengthen each other.

Authors' Note

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: Funding for this research was provided, in part, by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Grant No. 90FE0129 and Grant No. 90YD0227.

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