

EFFT and Blended Families Building Bonds from the Inside Out

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Participants will:

- learn the unique challenges facing step-families
- understand step-families through an attachment lens
- learn how to work with step-families using EFT
- observe a couple struggling with step-family issues

Common Challenges

Unique Family Structure

- Flexible boundaries - structural issues key challenge for step families. "Where do I belong?"
- Simple or complex

"Insiders and Outsiders"

- Biological ties take precedent
- (Inclusion, Control, Intimacy)

Family Identity

- Development of shared values, interests, experiences
- Different family members from different cultures
- Identity takes time: 4 – 7 years

Common Tasks

Adjusting to loss and change

- Average length between divorce → remarriage
- (< 4 years)

Forming a parenting coalition

- Navigating boundaries of influence and intimacy

Developing solid bond as a couple

- Negotiating priorities of chosen and biological relationships

Common Tasks

Negotiating different developmental needs

- Adolescence: Turf issues, need to chose, identity

Forming new traditions

- Family rituals = meaning – "telling our story"

Openness to changes in family composition

- Recognizing needs for inclusion and flexibility

Stepfamilies in Therapy

73% of families sought help within first 3 years of remarriage. (Pasley, et al, 1996) Study of 292 stepfamilies found that stepfamilies thought therapy was most helpful when it included:

- **Affective Support:** Validation of feelings, gaining a sense of control, gaining a sense of acceptance.
- **Clarification of Issues:** Identifying problems, perspective taking, gaining empathy for self and others.
- **Security:** therapy provides a "safe place to express feelings, a structure to be heard, and an opportunity for one's feelings to be recognized by an authority.

Working with Stepfamilies

Focus on marital and parental subsystems

- Normalize emotional, social, economic realities
- Focus on marital dyad = parental coalition = "we are in this together" look for cycles to come between
- Focus on flexibility before cohesion

Family adjustment most influenced at step level

- Promote stepparent support of parenting role
- Explore new roles
- Validate need for a larger view of family – accessibility

Make room to resolve grief over losses and changes

- Reduce loyalty conflicts and putting the kids in the middle

Attachment Lens

Attachment theory provides a distinct approach to conceptualize the needs and dynamics of stepfamily life which include:

- Issues of Belonging: The fundamental family need is to be loved, to be accepted, and to belong.
- Issues of Loss: The recognition of patterned responses to loss and continued attempts to re-establish contact. (Universal sequence: Protest → Despair → Detachment)

Attachment Lens

Attachment Theory - Universal Sequence

- Protest – active searching for AF
- Despair – passivity and sadness
- Detachment – emotional separation

Impact of Divorce on Children

(Hetherington et al, 1998)

- Academic difficulties
- Externalizing behaviors
- Internalizing disorder
- Reduction in social responsibility and competency
- Lowered self-esteem
- Relational difficulties with parents, siblings, and peers

Stepfamilies and Loss

Stepfamilies are "born of loss" (Visher & Visher, 1994).

Differences in loss (Hazan & Shaver, 1992)

- Loss by Death
 - Goal is "adaptive degree of detachment"
 - Process: Cognitive acceptance → emotional acceptance → identity change
- Loss by Estrangement
 - Voluntary loss – may include vacillation
 - Recovery of lost attachment figure is possible
 - Previous attachment bond can only be broken by an extended period of time and distance

Stepfamilies and Loss

"Loyalty conflicts in the aftermath of loss... the perpetual plot line of step families." (Doherty, 2004)

- Adults must accept the loss of the previous marriage
- Children may experience a fear of abandonment and lack of control leading to withdrawal and/or conflict
- Adolescent competing developmental needs
- (Personal Autonomy -----Family Cohesion)

Complex Attachments

Competing attachments - chief challenge is balancing the need for connection.

- Parents must balance the needs of their new relationship(s) with the needs of their children
- Children need to stay attached to their biological parents and make room for a parent's new bond with another adult

Attachment Frame

Helps parents better understand and support children's need for connection to both biological parents, thus reducing loyalty conflicts through addressing parent's own attachment related fears.

- Promotes bonding interactions and new patterns of accessibility and responsiveness particularly for biological parents and children.
- Reframes tensions in a couple's relationship as a normal response changes in a developing family.

EFFT Approach

Treatment Focus

- Therapist reframes the presenting problem in light of interaction patterns and felt attachment related emotions.
- Therapist helps members strengthen attachment bonds through the reciprocal sharing of attachment-related needs and wants.

EFFT Approach

Goals for the Therapist

- Identify patterns or cycles of escalation in dyads and triads that are secondary responses to underlying attachment related affect.
- Focus parent's awareness and experience of children's attachment related affect and corresponding attachment needs and wants

EFFT Approach

Goals for the Therapist

- Help family establish bonding interactions and means to engage new patterns based on security.
- Help remarried couple establish more secure patterns of interaction between partners – attachment rituals.

EFFT Approach

Identifying the Cycle

- The powerful "Ex"
 - Importance of boundary between "Ex" and developing stepfamily
 - Separating mediation from treatment
- Competing attachments
 - Competing needs of the couple and children from a different family
 - Abandonment for child = rejection of the stepparent.

EFFT Approach

Identifying the Cycle

- Positions are shaped by underlying experience – behaviors to cope when threatened or vulnerable.
- Pursuers and withdrawers
 - Pursuer:
 - Critical demanding parent
 - Child exploiting a guilty overwhelmed parent
 - Withdrawer:
 - Acting out child: (internalizing or externalizing)
 - Placating parent: focused on pleasing rather than parenting their children

EFFT Approach

Emotion Focus and Reframing the Cycle

Identifying underlying feelings and framing cycle in terms of attachment needs / wants.

- Therapist explores interpersonal position and the emotions that inform these positions.
- Therapist focuses on eliciting / expanding underlying emotions.
- Therapist frames the cycle as the enemy of the family's efforts to connect with each other.

Stepparent	Child	Biological Parent
Rejected	Abandoned / Alone	Guilt / Shame
Inadequate	Afraid	Alone / Overwhelmed
Afraid to fail	Inadequate	Afraid of failure
Excluded	Not important	Invisible
Afraid - scared	Judged / Criticized	Not important
Judged - criticized	Excluded	Desperate

EFFT Approach

Facilitating sharing of emotional experience

Therapist practices:

- Validation to normalize emotional experience
- Reframing to identify stuck cycles as common pattern in the family's "transition."
- Strengthening bonds in couple and parent child relationships through addressing attachment needs and wants.
- Clarifying the role of the stepparent with stepchild(ren)

Couple Challenges

First two years major period of adjustment

- Structural changes have emotional impact
- Fears about intimacy and stability – security

Developmental timing

- Out of sync – Competing developmental needs

Spillover from step-parenting relationships

- No clear roles
- Divided loyalties

Resolution of ties to former partners

- Relational fall-out - High conflict history
- Guilt/Shame - Impact of divorce
- Obligations - Financial settlements

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