

EFFT and Blended Families Building Bonds from the Inside Out

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Common Challenges

Unique Family Structure

- Flexible boundaries - structural issues key challenge for step families.

"Insiders and Outsiders"

- Relations defined by biological ties.

Family Identity

- Development of shared values, interests, experiences
- Blending of different family members from different cultures
- Takes time

A Unique Blend

Father in a blended family of 2.5 years – 3 kids
14, 12 (hers) and 12 (his)

"It's part of becoming, you know, our family is melded into a family. But it's a very distinctive, clear concept of what's a family. Because Chris and I know that there's a family within our family and that's Amy, Doug, and Sally. And sometimes that's like there's a heart connection, there's a birth connection between those three. And we need to respect that. And then Chris and I, we have that. So sometimes its okay if we play on that a little bit. But then we also know that we have chosen to get together these three groups."

Common Tasks

- Adjusting to loss and change
- Negotiating different developmental needs
- Forming new traditions
- Developing solid bond as a couple
- Creating a parenting coalition
- Openness to changes in family composition

Stepfamilies and Therapy

A Stepfamily Perspective

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.
- **Setting:** that provides a "safe place to express feelings, a structure to be heard, and an opportunity for one's feelings to be sanctioned by an authority.

Stepfamilies and Therapy

Important Therapeutic Issues

- Focus on marital and parental subsystems
 - Normalize emotional, social, economic realities
 - Focus on marital dyad = parental coalition = we are in this together.
 - Focus on flexibility before cohesion.
- Stepparent relationship to step child key relationship.
 - Promote stepparent support of parenting role
 - Explore new roles
- Resolve grief over losses and changes in family.
 - Reduce loyalty conflicts and putting the kids in the middle.

Attachment Lens

Attachment Theory

Provides a helpful approach to conceptualizing the needs and dynamics of stepfamily life which include:

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

Attachment Bonds and Loss

Types of Loss (Hazan and Shaver,)

- 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

Loss and Loyalty Conflict

- Stepfamilies are “born of loss” (Visher & Visher, 1994).
- “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 experience a fear of abandonment and lack of control that often takes expression in withdrawal and conflict.
 - Adolescent children may present competing developmental needs. (Personal Autonomy vs. Family Cohesion)

Complex Attachments

Competing / Complex 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 parents new bond with another adult.

Attachment Frame

Using an 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 the couple’s relationship as a normal response in this developing relationship.

EFFT Approach

Treatment Focus

- Therapist reframes the presenting problem in light of interaction patterns and attachment needs
- 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 attachment related affect.
- Foster parent's awareness and experience of children's attachment related affect and corresponding attachment needs and wants
- Help family establish bonding interaction and new patterns that are based on increased accessibility and responsiveness.
- Help remarried couple establish more secure patterns of interaction between partners.

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 patterns of behavior a person takes when they feel threatened or vulnerable.
- Pursuers and withdrawers
 - Pursuer:
 - Critical demanding parent
 - Child exploiting an guilty overwhelmed parent
 - Withdrawer:
 - Acting out child: (internalizing or externalizing behaviors)
 - 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 to 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 open sharing of family members emotional experience and validating responses.

- Therapist encourages the expression of emotions and heightens emotion experience by supporting the listening partner.
- Therapist uses:
 - 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 step child(ren)

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