

**CHANGING UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS:  
KEYS TO EFFECTIVE STEPPARENTING**

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CHANGING UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS:

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE STEPPARENTING

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A Research Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

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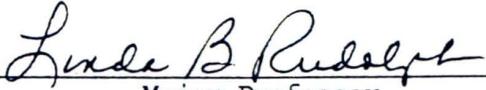
by

Cora Nancy Mills

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Cora Nancy Mills entitled "Changing Unrealistic Expectations: Keys to Effective Stepparenting." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Guidance and Counseling.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Major Professor

Accepted for the  
Graduate Council:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of the Graduate School

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	PAGE
1. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
Review of the Literature . . . . .	1
Purpose of Study . . . . .	17
2. METHODOLOGY . . . . .	19
Subjects . . . . .	19
Instrumentation . . . . .	19
Procedures . . . . .	20
3. RESULTS . . . . .	22
Table 1 . . . . .	24
4. CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	25
REFERENCES . . . . .	28
APPENDICES . . . . .	31

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### Review of the Literature

Family structure in the eighties is in a state of transition. With rising divorce rates and subsequent remarriages the number of people living in nuclear family structures has declined drastically. Currently, one out of five children is a stepchild (Visher and Visher, 1983), and demographers predict that by the end of this decade nearly 7 million children under age 18 will be stepchildren.

Growing awareness of these new family structures is evidenced by the attempts being made to label them. Terms such as "blended families," "disruptive families," "reconstituted families," "functional families," "sequential families," "restructured families," "co-parenting," "combination families," "multi-family," and "instant parent" are indicative of the search for new terminology to describe the families of the eighties. These efforts to label are evidence also of the attempt to avoid the stigma of "stepparent" and "stepchild." Prosen and Farmer (1982) believe that stepparent and stepchild have negative connotations reaching back to the tales of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella.

Kosinski said, "A stepfamily is defined as a family in which at least one of the couple is a stepparent," and he states that there are three basis types of stepfamilies:

- a. a stepmother with no children and a father and his children;

- b. a stepfather with no children and a mother and her children;
- c. a couple, each of whom is both a parent and a stepparent. (1983, p. 200)

The widespread belief in our culture that the nuclear family is the only viable family form is a factor that leads to the failure of our society to recognize the stepfamily as viable. According to Kupisch "the majority of authors have projected the stepfamily as a deviant family form, beset with problems and conflict, and less able to provide the appropriate child rearing environment" (1983, p. 3). Visher and Visher (1982) suggested that the major difficulty for individuals in many stepfamilies lies in the expectation that this type of family is the same as the biological family, leading to unrealistic and unattainable expectations and goals that can result in pain and stress for those involved.

There is a lack of valid research in stepfamily relationships which limits our current knowledge and understanding of cultural, structural, and emotional aspects of stepfamilies. In light of the increasing number of individuals living in the stepfamily situation and the stresses experienced by these individuals, it would seem essential that the field of knowledge concerning these family relationships be extended to facilitate understanding of these new family forms.

There is growing interest in studying stepfamily relationships as evidenced by the increasing number of authors from different fields who are writing about the subject. The literature abounds with statements referring to the complexity of stepfamily structure. However, a

review of the literature shows that little solid research has been done in the area.

Most authors share the opinion that unrealistic expectations are a major factor contributing to the complexity of this family unit. Capaldi and McRae found that "unrealistic expectations in stepfamilies stem from the assumption that the stepfamily will function the same way as the original family, overlooking the fact that the very nature of the blended family makes this impossible" (1979, p. 45). Because of the complexity of stepfamily structure and the resulting difficulties, these families present unique problems that require future research.

The general tendency in our society to view stepfamilies as comparable to intact or nuclear families leads to many difficulties. According to Jones, "stepfamilies and steprelationships are recurring entities in American society. Society's tendency to place a premium on the nuclear family creates a burden for the stepfamily and the relationships therein" (1978, p. 217). The stepfamily structure is more complex than the nuclear family structure and clear-cut models for these families have not been firmly established. From their study of stepfamilies, Visher and Visher state that "stepfamily structure is more varied than intact family structure, and role definition for such families has not been established in this society" (1979, p. 17).

According to the literature, the most important difference between step and nuclear families is the existence of a biological parent elsewhere. Atwell, Moore, and Nowell contend that, "the biological parents and stepparents share the responsibility for defining their new roles and building a workable relationship with

one another from which they and the children will all stand to gain" (1982, p. 217). Divorce causes adults and children to experience disruptions in primary interpersonal relationships. Dealing with these losses in a satisfactory way is essential to the development of good stepfamily relationships. There is a positive correlation between the emotional well-being of children in stepfamilies and the feelings the step and custodial parents have about the absent biological parent.

Research by Sirulnick (1980) lends further support for the importance of clearly defined roles of the parenting adults as well as the development of a strong co-parental alliance for effective stepfamily functioning. In her study of four stepfamilies, using a case study approach, Sirulnick found that the extent of involvement and degree of flexibility between the children's two households had a profound effect on stepfamily members. It was found that continued contact between ex-spouses helped family members confront their identity as a stepfamily, thus allowing for realistic assessment of their situation.

Maintaining a relationship with both biological parents is important in the establishment of realistic expectations and attainable goals for stepparents and stepchildren. The results of a study by Reaves (1982) involving 110 families supports the importance of cooperation between the step and the noncustodial parents. Reaves examined the impact of noncustodial parent interaction with the stepfamily on stepfamily satisfaction and stepchild self-esteem. The result of the investigation revealed that the best predictor of the mother's contentment with the stepfamily was her satisfaction

with noncustodial financial support. Additionally a relationship was found between the stepchild's self-esteem and the degree of interaction between the mother and the noncustodial parent. The self-esteem of the child was also related to the stepfather's satisfaction with the noncustodial parent's financial support of the child.

Starks (1983) found similar results in her study of 10 volunteer stepfamilies who identified themselves as successful in the stepfamily relationship. The study took place in a small university community in mid-Michigan. All participants were white, had been together for at least two years, were in the middle income bracket, were high school graduates, and most were college graduates. All were stepfather families except one in which both adults brought children into the marriage. One basic factor contributing to success in stepfamily relationships that emerged was the lack of animosity between the stepfamily and the absent biological parents.

Clinsempeel (1981) found that quasi-kin relationships affect the marital quality of stepfamilies. Clinsempeel divided 30 stepfamilies into groups with high, moderate, and low frequencies of contact with quasi-kin. His results indicate that stepfamilies who maintained moderate frequencies of contact with quasi-kin exhibit better marital quality than those stepfamilies who maintained either high or low frequencies of contact. Clinsempeel used role strain as the intervening variable.

The literature shows that role strain is a result of unrealistic expectations and pervasive myths concerning steprelationships. The most well known of the myths are the "wicked stepmother" and "instant

love." Because much of the folk literature of our culture makes reference to the "wicked" or "ugly stepmother," stepmothers commonly have unrealistic expectations of themselves. Visher and Visher state that to varying degrees, depending on their personality and particular stepfamily constellation, mothers/stepmothers expect themselves to:

1. Make up to the children for the upset caused by the divorce or death in the original family.
2. Create a close-knit family in an attempt to return to square one (the nuclear family).
3. Keep all members of the family happy and contented.
4. Be living examples that the wicked stepmother myth is untrue.
5. Love their stepchildren instantly and equally to their natural children, and receive love from their stepchildren instantly. (1979, p. 50)

When a woman, therefore, assumes the role of stepmother, she is at once enveloped in a hostile atmosphere created by folklore. Smith contends that, "Even though adults know that there is much fantasy in folk literature, still it exerts great control over them; it makes them receptive to and prone to exaggerate any slight misstep of the substitute mother" (1953, p. 24).

Many times women entering stepfamily relationships attempt to dispell the wicked stepmother myth by providing instant love. According to most writers, instant love does not exist. Love takes time to develop and grow and is not a prerequisite for happiness in a stepfamily. A recent article by Kaercher states, "stepparents with unrealistic expectations feel rejected when they don't receive

'instant love' from stepchildren. Others blame themselves because they don't feel the genuine affection they sincerely want to give a stepchild" (1985, p. 67). Trying to overcome the myth of wicked stepmother with instant love leads some women to become like the stereotype of the wicked stepmother.

Stepfathers have not entirely escaped myths associated with their role in the stepfamily. There are stories of the "cruel stepfather," but generally these appear in adult literature and are not prominent in children's fairy tales. However, stepfathers also have problems when they create unrealistic expectations for themselves. Visher and Visher outline a variety of important general psychological tasks and specific problem areas requiring active coping efforts on the part of stepfathers. These are:

1. Joining a functioning group and establishing a place for himself. (This is the reverse of the situation faced by the woman who marries a man who has custody of his children.)
2. Working out rules regarding family behavior.
3. Handling unrealistic expectations both on his part and on the part of the new family.
4. Dealing with feelings of guilt about his previous family, if he is a father.
5. Money.
6. Adoption, naming, and inheritance questions with reference to his stepchildren.
7. Sexuality in the stepfamily. (1979, p. 89)

Although stepfathers tend to have different expectations placed on them than do stepmothers, they share some of the same unrealistic expectations. These unrealistic expectations come both from within and from outside the marriage. The tendency to believe in instant love and that love will conquer all often makes stepfathers, as well as stepmothers, blind to the complexity of the situation. Gardner (1984) cautions stepfathers about "coming on strong" and trying to develop deep, loving relationships immediately.

The expectation of "instant obedience" is another unrealistic expectation which is a difficult issue for stepparents, especially stepfathers. Lutz (1983) found that stepchildren shared this perception. In her study of one hundred and three 12-18 year old adolescents living in stepfamilies, issues pertaining to divided loyalties and discipline were perceived as stressful by the greatest number of adolescents.

Stern's study discussed the importance of the concept of stepfather-friend and discipline in the effective intergration of a new stepfather into a mother/child family. According to Stern,

The process of the stepfather becoming a friend to the stepchild is crucial to effective integration. A child who has a stepfather-friend is more willing to cooperate in the rules of the house, and to accept the discipline of the stepfather. A willingness to be disciplined is essential, and this willingness can only be based on mutual respect and friendship. Discipline based on nothing but fear of punishment will inevitably be defeated or undermined by the child. Discipline is accepted

because the person being disciplined wishes the approval of the person enforcing rules, and a positive relationship underlies the wish for approval. (cited in Visher and Visher, 1979, p. 95)

Research by Anderson (1982) on the effects of stepfather and stepchild interaction on stepfamily adjustment supports Stern's views. Anderson studied 110 middle-class, white stepfamilies. A stepfather, mother, and target child in each family filled out an extensive questionnaire. Three variables were found to be significant predictors of stepfather satisfaction in stepfamilies. They were the support he received from his wife for his involvement in disciplining a target child, his communication with a target child, and the time he spent with a target child. These variables were related in a positive way to his stepfamily satisfaction. A positive relationship was found to exist between the mother's support of the stepfather's discipline and her stepfamily satisfaction. The target child's self-esteem was predicted by the stepfather's supportive interaction with the child, and a positive relationship was found between supportive interaction and self-esteem.

The literature suggests that stepfathers, especially when they have not had children in a previous marriage, fare better than stepmothers who have not previously experienced motherhood. Factors contributing to this difference include: stepfathers usually have to make fewer changes than stepmothers, there are more unrealistic expectations attached to the stepmother's role, and stepmothers must overcome the prevailing myths of wicked stepmother. However, Capaldi and McRae indicated, "All steppeople have expectations as they enter

the stepparent relationship. They harbor hopes, dreams, fears, and information about what it will be like" (1979, p. 7). Unfortunately, some of their hopes, dreams, fears, and information are unrealistic and interfere with the new relationships.

Problems occur when members of the stepfamily enter the new venture with unrealistic expectations. Adults and children alike must keep expectations in the proper perspective. Love is not a requirement for happiness in a stepfamily and stepparents do not have to play roles of "supermom," "superdad," or "superkid" in order to make stepfamilies successful. Felkner believes, "it is very risky for us to expect love to happen. Perhaps it is better if we make our goal mutual respect and tenderness" (1981, p. 164).

The roles of individuals in stepfamilies are usually ill-defined. Family members bring past family histories with them and these histories affect the definition of roles, rights, and responsibilities. The new adult family member does not immediately have to assume the parental role associated with his/her gender. Women entering stepparent relationships do not have to assume the role of mother, nor do men in stepparent relationships have to become the father. Visher and Visher emphasized, "The couple in a stepfamily have more chance for success and a reduction of tension if they are sensitive to the child and to the role most appropriate for the stepparent. This role can also shift as the stepfamily establishes new interpersonal bonds and shared traditions" (1979, pp. 217-218).

A strong couple bond appears to be the foundation upon which a well functioning family is built. According to Visher and Visher (1982), children in stepfamilies benefit from the role model provided by a good couple relationship. They state:

A most important gain is the opportunity for adults to have a couple relationship of deep emotional meaning and for children to have the opportunity to see a couple working together, thus providing them with a model for their own future adult relationships. (1982, p. 20)

Research also indicates that stepparents who are secure and self-confident in their marriages and their work are better role models. Atwell et al. (1982) found that highly competent stepparents derive satisfaction from other areas of their lives and serve the children more as positive adult role models than simply as parents.

While some adults are able to maintain security and confidence and work through problems in steprelationships, others cannot cope with the stress they find in the stepfamily. According to Prosen and Farmer (1982) this stress and strain is seen in the current redivorce rate of 44% in stepfamilies where children are involved.

Unrealistic expectations contribute to the stress that strains many of these marriages to the breaking point. Professionals in the fields of medicine, mental health, law, and education are concerned with helping these families reduce the stress and achieve the viable status they deserve. Bundy and Gumaer suggest that "disrupted and nontraditional family structures present unique and multiple problems for most children and their parents, necessitating greater understanding, more complicated analyses, and subsequently more complex solutions" (1984, p. 6).

Herndon and Combs discuss the need for greater understanding of stepfamily structure by the medical profession. They state:

Current family medicine literature has only recently begun to pay attention to normative patterns of family structure other than those of the nuclear family. Since census figures indicate that stepfamilies are on the increase, it seems advisable for family medicine educators to prepare residents who are able to work with the types of families they are likely to encounter. (1982, p. 922)

Mental health professionals are working with increasing number of stepparents and stepchildren. A variety of intervention strategies are being used in individual, group, and family counseling to help members of stepfamilies develop realistic expectations and set attainable goals. One method they have found especially helpful in working with stepfamilies is group counseling. Six goals for working with these groups were formulated by Prosen and Farmer. These goals are:

1. To increase knowledge of the structural and cultural differences between stepfamilies and intact nuclear families.
2. To increase awareness of the positive and negative effects of remarriage on all members of the stepfamily and ways to change negative to positive.
3. To enhance acceptance of the stepfamily situation and the building of positive attitudes towards new roles of family members.
4. To increase an awareness of the need for the remarried couple to invest efforts toward the bonding of their relationships with the custodial and visiting children.

5. To increase biological and stepparent competencies in communication skills and the application of discipline strategies effective in the unique stepfamily situation.
6. To provide social support to help parents and stepparents reduce their role burdens and increase the effectiveness of their parenting. (1982, p. 396)

A review of the literature indicates that many times the courts have fostered unrealistic expectations of stepfamilies through their custody decisions. Much of the present research points out the positive aspects of joint custody. Beeson reports, "Parents awarded joint custody are generally satisfied with the arrangements, a continuing relationship with both parents is important for children, and children in joint custody generally adjust well" (1983, p. 1). Currently, however, few states encourage such arrangements.

Evidence of the need for all elements of society to work together in understanding families in transition is seen in the following recommendation for advising courts about the best interests of the child in custody hearings. Charna's work (cited in Beeson, 1983, p. 12) suggests that professional training and education is needed in child custody decisions. Referring to these decisions, he says, "It should be interdisciplinary, not solely a legal or psychological one." Alexander's study (cited in Beeson, 1983) supports an interdisciplinary approach. He suggests that interdisciplinary committees be made up of specialists including educators, mental health professionals, clergy, lawyers, and trusted adults from outside the family.

Educators are also examining their expectations and their understanding of stepfamilies. Shea (1982) suggests that educators' attitudes toward non-nuclear families are similar to the views held by society as a whole. Our culture has failed to understand and accept these new family forms.

Coleman, Ganuns, and Henry, presented the following suggestions to raise educators' awareness about stepfamilies:

1. Do not assume that stepchildren will have problems.
2. Watch language that reinforces negative connotations of being a stepchild.
3. Be sensitive to family name differences.
4. Know legalities regarding family forms (especially for noncustodial parents).
5. Consider providing parent education materials for stepparents, if needed.
6. Avoid promoting activities that put stepchildren in awkward positions.
7. Consider the positive aspects of stepfamily living.
8. Try to find classroom materials that represent stepfamily lifestyles. (1984, pp. 306-309)

Research by Prosen & Farmer (1982) lends support to the important role of the school in changing the way stepfamilies are treated in our society. They believe:

A primary target group for intervention is the school staff. In addition to faculty workshops on stepfamily issues, the administration and faculty can be encouraged to make needed program changes. An effort could be made

to include all sets of parents in gifts, notices, and invitations. The appropriate school personnel can ascertain how divorced parents wish to work out attendance at conferences and functions. Record forms need to be revised to include potentially two sets of parents.

(1982, p. 395)

The school counselor can play an important role in helping children in stepfamilies cope with changing roles and varying expectations. Herlihy (1984) focused on the role of school counselors in helping children of disrupted families make successful transitions and cope with new realities. The main purpose of counseling children should be to help them cope with the changes of transition until conditions stabilize. According to Poppen and White (1984) school counselors can help members of blended families cope with the complexities of their situation by consulting, by coordinating resources, and by counseling.

Research shows that individual and group counseling techniques are helpful for children dealing with the stresses associated with divorce and remarriage. Thompson and Rudolph suggest the use of peer counselors to help children going through the turmoil caused by a divorce. They state, "Other children who have experienced divorce can understand the child's feelings and perhaps offer suggestions or describe how they handled a similar situation" (1983, p. 308). Peer counselors may also be used to assist children coping with the transition to remarriage.

In addition to the assistance that can be provided by counselors and educators, parent education programs addressing the commonality of

stepfamily problems seem to be beneficial. These programs can include subjects such as: roles and conflict in loyalties, communication skills, problems of the stepchild, problems in marital interaction, and problems of visitation and the ex-spouse. A study by Nadler (1983) of 120 people contemplating or involved in remarriage supports the value of parent education programs. Nadler's group participated in a 6-session workshop focusing on the specific problems inherent in a reconstituted family. An evaluation questionnaire was completed at the end of the sessions. Most participants reported that they had changed their behavior toward their stepchildren and/or their partners, had learned new communication methods, felt more comfortable in the parenting role, and had improved relationships with their stepchildren and/or their spouses.

Brady's (1982) findings on the benefits of group educational experiences are similar to Nadler's. In Brady's study 32 remarried wives and 31 remarried husbands were given a short form of the Family Environment Scale to measure family climate. The participants were assigned either to experimental or waiting-list control groups. The stepparent educational sessions consisted of 4 weekly 1½ hour sessions that included 5 or 6 couples. The group educational experiences were described as beneficial by most of the stepparents. Also, as a result of the sessions the level of conflict experienced by the families decreased.

Movement toward greater understanding of the families of the eighties is evident in the review of the literature. Professionals from diverse fields have found that the structure of these families is different from that of nuclear families and more research is needed. Kupisch contends that:

Families evolve and change to accommodate needs of their members. The nuclear, intact family was the form most useful for a period of time during the mid 1900's for the white middle class. Cultural changes have precipitated changes in family form and these forms are no longer deviant or atypical; they are viable choices. (1983, p. 10)

Visher and Visher (1982) support the opinion of Kupisch. They suggest that if the stepfamily is accepted as a valuable and viable type of family, the same characteristics that create its challenges can also produce its rewards.

This view of the stepfamily as viable and valuable is further supported by Gardner. He takes a positive view of the stepfamily in his analogy of the Phoenix--the mythical bird of Egypt, reborn from its own ashes. Gardner believes, "A stepfamily can be a reborn family, reborn from the ashes of the old, dead marriage" (1984, p. 44).

#### Purpose of Study

Stepfamilies are viable and valuable family forms. With the help of an enlightened society, the positive aspects of living in step can be experienced by members of the stepfamily working together with realistic expectations and attainable goals.

The purpose of this study is to determine if parent education programs can be effective in helping stepparents change the unrealistic expectation which interfere with the establishment and maintenance of satisfying stepfamily relationships. The hypotheses for this study are:

- (1) Unrealistic expectations get in the way of stepfamily adjustment; and

- (2) Parent education programs can be helpful in changing these expectations, resulting in better family adjustments.

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology

#### Subjects

Subjects for the study were 10 adults living in steprelationships in Clarksville, Tennessee. The group included 3 couples and 4 stepmothers, with one stepfather couple, one stepmother couple, and one couple in which both adults brought children into the marriage. The average age of the participants was 38, and they had lived in steprelationships an average of 8 years. All subjects were Caucasian and all were classified in the middle-class of the socioeconomic scale. The male and female subjects all were employed outside the home with the exception of one homemaker. The ages of the biological and stepchildren living in the homes ranged from 3 years to 16 years, and there was an average of 2 children living in each home.

#### Instrumentation

The researcher developed a pre- and post-test questionnaire that contained twenty statements using a 7-point Likert scale. The statements were designed to assess the expectation level of the parents and stepparents in areas cited by literature as being of primary concern (see Appendix A). In addition, a Problem Checklist (Kupisch, 1984) was given as part of the assessment for the purpose of identifying specific problem areas (see Appendix B).

Permission to conduct the research through the school system was obtained from the Assistant Director of the Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools. The researcher visited each sixth and eighth grade class at New Providence Middle School for the purpose of passing out letters and informed consent statements which explained the research (see Appendix C). Students living in steprelationships were instructed to return signed informed consent statements to the guidance counselor. Fourteen statements were signed and returned, and the researcher contacted each by phone prior to the first workshop.

The workshops were held in the Reference Room at New Providence Middle School from 7-9 p.m. on May 9, May 16, and May 23. At the first workshop a pre-test was given to assess the expectation level of the 14 parents and stepparents participating. In order to identify specific problem areas, a Problem Checklist (Kupisch, 1984) was also given. A name tag activity was used as an ice-breaker for the group. Part one of Dr. Gordon's Parent Effectiveness Training film was viewed and discussed to help participants become aware of alternate ways of responding in parent-child relationships. Homework was assigned to help participants gain experience in using reflective listening, "I" statements, and to focus on positive aspects of their children and stepchildren.

The second workshop was held on May 16 with only 10 of the original 14 participants attending. Feedback from the homework assignment was shared by the group. Part two of the Parent Effectiveness Training film was viewed to introduce methods of

problem solving. After discussion of the film, participants were introduced to the case-conference (C-group) method of problem solving (Thompson and Poppen, 1975). Discussion topics used were based on those areas the participants had indicated as problematic on the Kupisch Problem Checklist. Group members were given a homework assignment that provided an opportunity for using the C-group method of problem solving. The group was instructed to list 10 personal needs and 10 needs they perceived other family members had. Areas of conflicting needs were to be used in problem solving.

At the last workshop, problem solving experiences were shared following C-group procedures. The group was then divided into triads for an activity planned to help participants develop some basic communications skills, demonstrate acceptance and trust, and to become aware of how perceptions and values color expectations. Rules and procedures for the Positive Focus Game were discussed and followed (see Appendix D). After discussion of the activity, the researcher reviewed the content of the three workshops including reflective listening, using "I" statements, and methods of problem solving. Although 14 participants were present, the post-test was administered only to the 10 group members who had attended all three workshops.

## CHAPTER 3

### Results

The data were analyzed using the non-parametric Sign Test to determine if there was significant movement as a result of the subjects' participation in the three workshops. Each statement on the pre-test and post-test questionnaire was compared individually to determine any movement that might have occurred as a result of the activities experienced by the participants in the workshops. The results are shown on Table 1.

Movement was significant on item 1 (see Table 1), "Love between children and stepparents is a requirement for happiness in the stepfamily" ( $p < 0.05$ ). Out of 10 workshop participants, six moved a total of 12 points toward more realistic expectations on this item.

No significant differences between pre-test and post-test ratings were found on items 2-20. Although the positive changes were not significant, the analyses showed that on items 2, 7, 10, and 15, which deal with the areas of discipline and loyalty, there were no unrealistic expectations indicated on either pre-test or post-test. On item 11, which concerned the development of affection, only one participant marked a response indicating an unrealistic expectation on the pre-test, and there were no ratings in the area of unrealistic expectations on the post-test.

The average gain reported on each item was 6 points toward the realistic end of the scale. Item 17, concerning the stepchild's/stepchildren's relationship with the absent biological parent, showed the highest number of points gained toward more realistic expectations.

Four participants demonstrated positive movement on this item, with one gaining 5 points, one gaining 6 points, and the other two gaining 1 point each for a total gain of 13 points. The results of item 18, "Stepchildren should love their stepparents," indicated that fewer people moved in this area than any other. In this area only one participant scored a gain of 1 point toward the more realistic end of the scale.

In summary, the results of the assessment showed that the subjects made positive and significant gains in one area (love is a requirement for happiness in the stepfamily) as a result of participation in the workshop. Although positive movement was reported in most areas (the 10 subjects moved a total of 115 points) these gains were not significant.

Table 1

## Expectations of stepparents

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Item	Probability (two-tailed test)
------	----------------------------------

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1	0.032 *
2	1.00
3	1.00
4	0.45
5	0.06
6	1.55
7	1.0
8	0.38
9	1.55
10	0.06
11	1.94
12	1.62
13	0.22
14	1.90
15	1.00
16	1.78
17	0.69
18	0.06
19	1.78
20	0.22

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## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusions

The findings of the present study are similar to those reviewed in the current literature. Many stepparents have unrealistic expectations about the stepfamily relationship that lead them to set unrealistic and unattainable goals (Visher and Visher, 1981).

These results corroborate the opinion held by most authors that the myth of "instant love" is one of the most prevalent unrealistic expectations held by stepparents. In the present study, responses on the unrealistic end of the scale were higher and more frequent on items 1, 8, and 18, which deal with the issue of love in the steprelationship. Group participants experienced significant movement toward the realistic end of the scale as a result of the three workshops on item 1, "Love is a requirement for happiness in the stepfamily." However, on items 8 and 18, "Stepparents should love their stepchildren," and "Stepchildren should love their stepparents," half of the participants indicated they held unrealistic ideas on the pre-test, and they showed no change on the post-test.

The researcher concludes that on a cognitive level stepparents may know that instant love does not exist. However, on an emotional level, they cannot admit this and feel that they should love their steprelatives. This idea can lead to cognitive dissonance and cause pain and stress in stepfamily relationships.

Visher and Visher (1979) reported that role definitions in the stepfamily are usually ill-defined. The findings in the present study support this belief. Items 13 and 16, which deal with the role of the stepparent, showed that the subjects held unrealistic expectations on the pre-test and post-test.

Stepmothers who have not previously experienced motherhood have more unrealistic expectations and experience more difficulties in steprelationships than do stepfathers who have not had children in a previous marriage (Capaldi and McRae, 1979). Findings in the present study lend support to this opinion. The one stepmother in the study who had not had children of her own recorded more expectations on the unrealistic end of the scale on all pre-test items.

Expectations concerning discipline and issues of loyalty are also cited in the literature as factors that cause difficulties in stepfamilies (Lutz, 1983). However, the findings on items 2, 7, 10, and 15, which deal with these issues, showed that subjects in this study did not have unrealistic expectations in these areas.

The literature addresses the importance of a continuing relationship between stepchildren and their absent biological parents (Atwell, Moore, and Nowell, 1982). Results from items 9, 12, and 17 of the present study concerning relationships between the stepfamily and the absent biological parent indicated that these participants were aware of the importance of continued interaction.

The researcher found that this group did not report unrealistic expectations in several of the areas cited in the literature. The findings probably occurred because the average age of the parents

and stepparents participating was 38, and the number of years they had experienced the steprelationship (an average of 8 years). Perhaps younger parents and stepparents just entering the steprelationship would experience more unrealistic expectations.

Recent research in parent education programs, Brady (1982) and Nadler (1983) indicated that stepfamily relationships are improved as a result of participation in workshops addressing the complexities experienced in these situations. Although participants in the present study made significant gains in only one area, feedback from the subjects attending the workshops, indicated that stepparents benefit from programs of this kind. However, related research with larger samples and extended sessions would be of value in examining the extent to which unrealistic expectations contribute to the complexities found in stepfamily relationships and how these expectations can be changed.

28

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
Stepfamily Relationships

In this questionnaire you are asked to read each statement about stepfamily relationships and to make your judgements on the basis of your perceptions and feelings. There are no correct or incorrect answers.

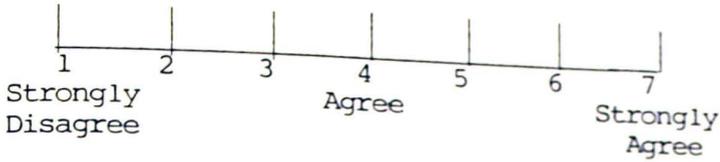
For each scale you may check 1 of 7 possible responses:

Example:

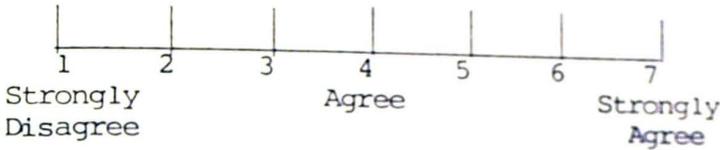
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree		Agree			Strongly Agree	

Circle the point or place an (✓) on the point which best describes your level of agreement with each statement. Mark one check on each scale.

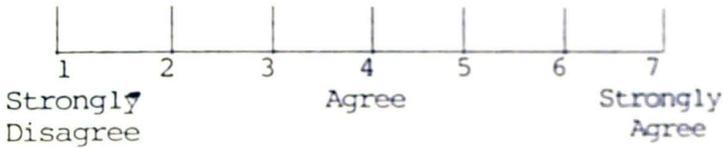
1. Love between children and stepparents is a requirement for happiness in the stepfamily.



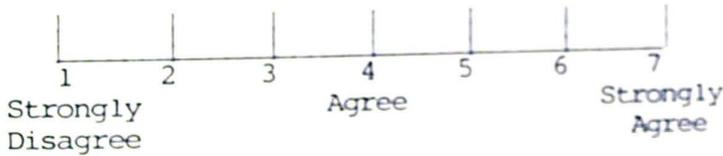
2. Good discipline leads to trust and caring in stepfamilies.



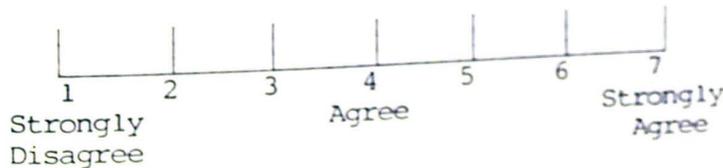
3. Stepchildren should show gratitude to stepparents.



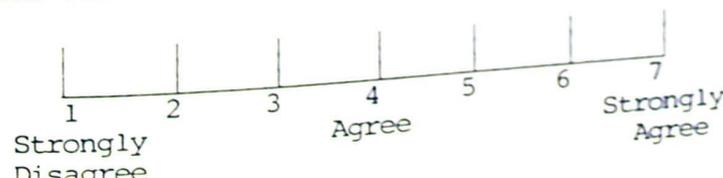
4. Stepparents have to be super parents in order to make stepfamilies work.



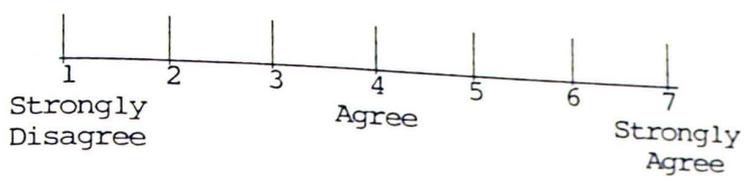
5. Marriage creates a tight-knit family.



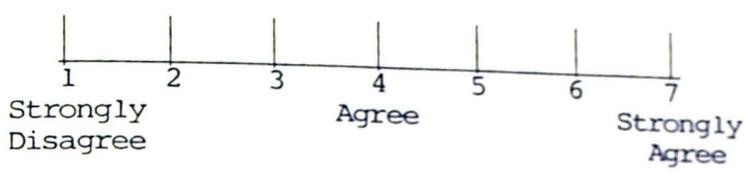
6. Family customs and expectations are the same in stepfamilies as in nuclear families.



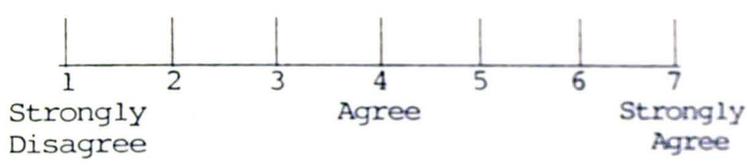
7. A stepchild should be able to express resentment toward the remarriage of their parent or parents.



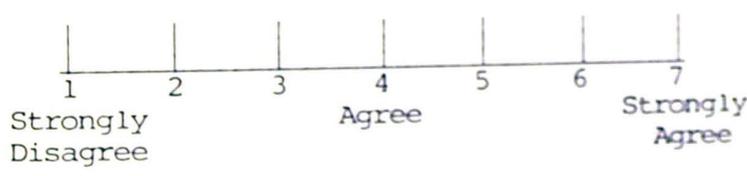
8. Stepparents should love their stepchildren.



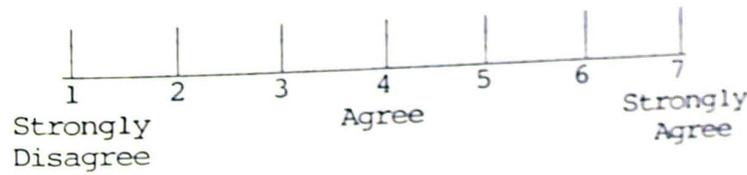
9. Levels of communication among family members is the same in stepfamilies as in nuclear families.



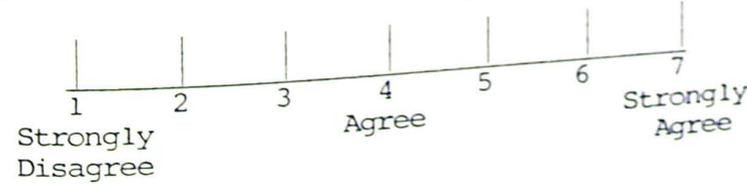
10. Loving someone means always taking their side.



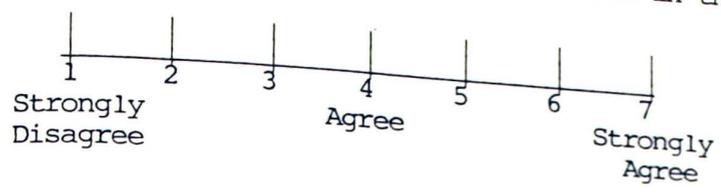
11. Genuine affection can only develop over time.



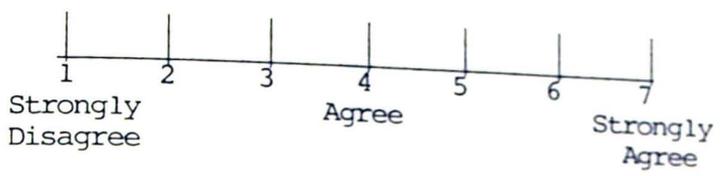
12. A spouses relationship with his/her ex-spouse has no effect on the family relationship.



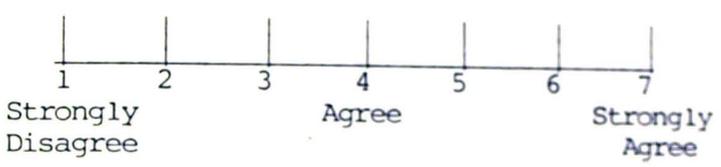
13. A stepparent should assume a strong parental role in the stepfamily.



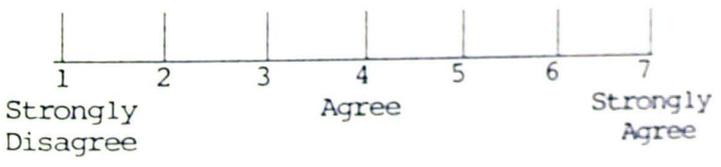
14. It is natural for a stepchild to feel some resentment toward the stepparent.



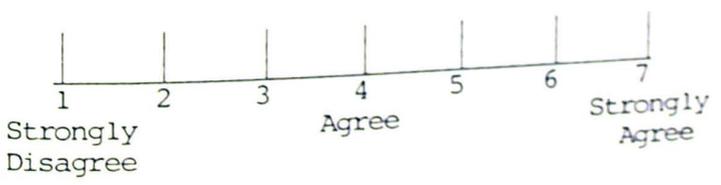
15. Children in stepfamilies should spend some time alone with their natural parent.



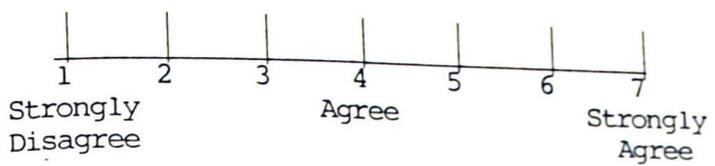
16. The role of friend is a good one for a stepparent to have with a stepchild.



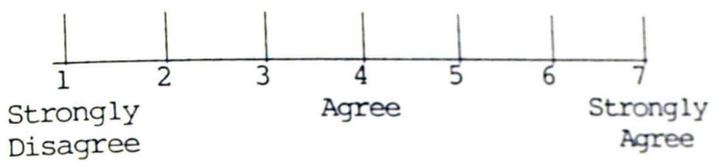
17. A stepchild's/stepchildren's relationship with the absent biological parent has no effect on relationships in the stepfamily.



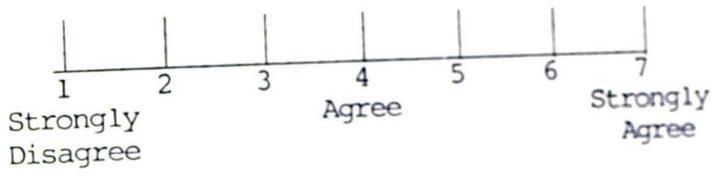
Stepchildren should love their stepparents.



9. Myths of cruel stepfathers and ugly stepmothers sometimes influence the way people see these roles.



20. Parents in stepfamilies need to be more strict than parents in nuclear families.



## Problem Checklist

Rate the degree to which the following issues are problems in your marriage and the family life.

- 0 not a problem  
 1 somewhat a problem  
 2 definitely a problem  
 3 a large problem  
 NA not applicable to my family  
 (such as having no biologic children or no stepchildren)

0	1	2	3	NA	Time for spouse alone
0	1	2	3	NA	Time for biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Time for stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Time for myself
0	1	2	3	NA	Money for biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Money for stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Money for leisure fun
0	1	2	3	NA	Money for personal items
0	1	2	3	NA	Discipline of biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Discipline of stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Problems of biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Problems of stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Arguments with spouse
0	1	2	3	NA	Abuse by spouse
0	1	2	3	NA	Abuse by biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Abuse by stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Acceptance by relatives
0	1	2	3	NA	Visitation schedule with biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Visitation schedule with stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Voice in family decisions
0	1	2	3	NA	Feeling accepted in the community
0	1	2	3	NA	Sexual activity with spouse
0	1	2	3	NA	Sexuality of the children
0	1	2	3	NA	Sexuality of the stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Communication with spouse
0	1	2	3	NA	Communication with ex-spouse
0	1	2	3	NA	Communication with spouse's ex-mate
0	1	2	3	NA	Communication with biologic children
0	1	2	3	NA	Communication with stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Communication with relatives
0	1	2	3	NA	Meeting family expectations
0	1	2	3	NA	Working on my career
0	1	2	3	NA	Sharing home responsibilities
0	1	2	3	NA	Maintaining friendships
0	1	2	3	NA	Sharing responsibilities for child care
0	1	2	3	NA	School progress of children
0	1	2	3	NA	School progress of the stepchildren
0	1	2	3	NA	Work situation with spouse

0 1 2 3 NA Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

0 1 2 3 NA Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the above issues is the biggest problem

Which of the above issues is the next biggest problem

## Informed Consent Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify and create an awareness of the role that communication and realistic expectations play in establishing and maintaining effective stepfamily relationships. Your responses are confidential. At no time will you be identified nor will anyone other than the researcher and her graduate committee have access to your responses. The information collected will be used only for purposes of analysis. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to terminate your participation at any time.

The scope of the project will be explained fully upon completion.

Thank you for your cooperation.

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I agree to participate in the present study being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Linda Rudolph of the Department of Psychology at Austin Peay State University. I have been informed in writing about the procedures to be followed and that there will be no risks or discomforts involved. The researcher has offered to answer any further inquiries as I may have regarding these procedures. I understand that I am free to terminate my participation at any time. I have also been told of any benefits that may result from my participation.

---

Name (Please Print)

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Signature

---

Phone

## APPENDIX D

## Rules For The Positive Focus Game

1. Rule of Focusing: The focus person is to be the absolute center of attention for the entire five minutes. The other two group members must do nothing to turn the group's attention to themselves. This means they cannot debate, disagree, express their opinion, or talk about their experiences. They must hold in all their ideas and opinions, and express them when they are the focus person.
2. Rule of Drawing Out: The other two people should do everything they can to draw out the focus person and find out as much as possible about what he thinks, and why he thinks this. This can be done primarily by asking questions. The questions should be ones that help the focus person clarify his ideas for himself and for the rest of the group; they should not probe to find out more than the person evidently wants to reveal. The questions also should not be designed to lead the focus person in a direction that the questioner thinks he should go, rather than in a direction that really helps the focus person clarify his thinking. If the focus person feels the questions are too probing, or lead him in a direction he doesn't want to go, he should state this.
3. Rule of Acceptance: The two questioners should try to accept the focus person completely and let him know that they are trying hard to understand his point of view. They do not have to agree with what the person says, but they must agree with his right to say it. Even if they disagree with what he is saying, they

should only give the focus person positive feedback by saying things like "I understand what you are saying," or "I can see how you feel that way" or just nodding and smiling. The only time to disagree with what the person has said is when it becomes your turn to be the focus person. It is difficult not to give negative feedback to someone when you strongly disagree with him, but it becomes easier each time you play this game. The questioners should be careful that they don't give subtle negative feedback through frowns, tone of voice, and the way questions are worded.