

Characteristics of Blended Families:
A Review of Three Marriage Enrichment Programs

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Within the United States, the divorce rate is relatively high, with 52-62% of all first marriages ending in legal divorce, with 75% of divorced persons remarrying (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Out of every 100 remarriages, 43% involve a previously divorced spouse and 60% will eventually end in legal divorce. About 65% of remarriages involve children from previous relationships and form blended families. Blended families are formed when children in a household share only one or no biological parents. The presence of a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling constitutes a blended family (Kreider & Fields, 2005). Families with stepparents or adoptive parents are an increasingly large component of two parent families (Kreider & Fields, 2005). In 2001, 5.4 million children lived with one biological parent and either a stepparent or adoptive parent (Kreider & Fields). Marriage enrichment programs receive support due to the empirical evidence that healthy marriages benefit children raised within these marital relationships (Parke & Ooms, 2002). Recently, political figures have begun to emphasize the desire to encourage the availability of programs utilized to strengthen marital relationships. This child-centered perspective has allowed the present presidential administration to propose an initiative for marriage enrichment (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham & Lamke, 2004).

There is a growing need to serve this population. There are many unique aspects of blended families that require further integration into present program designs, such as PREP, PREPARE/ENRICH, and PAIRS. Marital research currently relies on the newlywed couples and first-married couples for analysis (Hawley & Olson, 1995), which result in becoming inadequate for couples unique needs (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). The purpose of this article is to review the current literature on the specific aspects of blended families and to examine the curriculum of these programs for their

presence. In a framework for marriage educators, Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby (2004) state, “Programs will be more attractive if they integrated skills geared toward specific blended family issues that addresses the challenges of remarriage” (p. 552).

The evidence is overwhelming that marriage programs that provide marriage-skills training help couples increase marital happiness, improve their relationships, reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills and marital stability. It is because of these benefits that marriage enrichment programs are receiving more financial support from the government (Larson, 2004). The federal administration has set aside two percent of federal funds (or \$300 million) in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Act for specific programs to strengthen marriage as part of welfare reform (Fagan, Patterson & Rector, 2002). In an effort to keep this funding, it is a goal of practitioners to make marriage education more attractive and flexible so more couples benefit from participation.

The number of married couple participating in these programs is vague, including those remarried couples forming blended families. It is a difficult task considering the aspect of remarriage is not considered in government’s definition within the family life cycle (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). The authors stated that “remarriage could be included, but is not treated here as a separate topic of discussion” (p.462). A question proposed by Bowling et al. (2005) deals with the challenge of marriage educators, practitioners and researchers regarding the definition of marriage and how the present marital constructs used within these programs apply in cases of nontraditional partnerships. It was suggested by Larson (2004) that there should be less use of “shotgun

approaches” (p.423) in marriage education, assuming that all couples need the same intervention, when it is highly unlikely (Hartford, 2004).

There are differences between first married and remarried couples (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Ganong and Coleman (1994) identify these differences through the following: remarrying age tends to be older, previous marital experience, children from a previous relationship (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). Research suggests that the characteristics of blended families include creating and maintaining a solid group identity as a family (Banker et al., 2004), reducing inter-group bias and achieving family harmony to reduce couple conflict (Banker & Gaetner, 1998), marital and parental role negotiation (Bray, 1999; Stewart, 2005), and a lack of societal norms to follow (Gamache, 1997; Sager et al., 1981), in addition to areas of interest for all couples, such as communication skills (Portrie & Hill, 2005) and conflict and stress management (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Durana (1994) stated it is important to work on clarifying interaction in current marital relationships, yet at the same time to appreciate and understand “how experiences from the past relationships can be transferred to the current relationship in very deceptive and disruptive ways” (Paolino & McCrady, 1978).

The unique challenges that remarried couples face when forming a blended family requires consideration within the realm of marriage education, even though the nuclear family has been the template for families within our society (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Blended families are hidden behind the nuclear family, which is seen as the highest in relation to other family forms (Levine, 1997). Marriage programs are designed with the nuclear family as the template because it has dominated our conceptualization of the family over the years (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Levine, 1993), even though less than

fifteen percent of the households in the United States fit the profile of the traditional family consisting of a married single-earner male with an unemployed wife and children (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002). Yet, the measurement tools utilized in these programs also are designed from nuclear family assumptions and tested in primarily nuclear family samples (Gamache, 1997; Hawley & Olson, 1995; Schilling et al., 2003; Halford, Saunders & Behrens, 2001; Durana, 1994; Durana, 1996; Fowers & Olson, 1989; Olson & Fowers, 1993).

No recent efforts have addressed the aspects of blended families within current mainstream marriage programs. Therefore, the main goal of this review is to examine the education curricula in three marriage enrichment programs: PREP, PREPARE/ENRICH, and PAIRS targeting aspects unique to blended families.

Method

I searched for articles and literature related to the specific issues, challenges and dynamics of remarried couples in blended families, as well as published empirical research articles on each marriage enrichment program from PsychINFO, ERIC, and Expanded Academic databases. First, I reviewed the literature and identified the prevailing factors affecting couple satisfaction in blended families. Secondly, I gathered more articles from the bibliographies that pertained to the topic of unique characteristics of blended families, as well as program research. Next, I studied the programs' websites for elements of the challenging aspects of couples in blended families advertised as part of the program. Finally, I analyzed the empirical research on PREP, PREPARE and ENRICH, and PAIRS for the unique dynamics of couples in blended families.

Reviewing the Literature

To build a basis for reviewing literature on blended families, I only searched articles that pertained to aspects of the remarried dyad in blended families. Because the couple system reflects both individuals, and these aspects, the whole is independent (Larson, 2004). Too often, marriage education has ignored the “self in the system” (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002, p. 247). Secondly, websites for each of the programs were examined to see if the aspects targeted in the literature were highlighted in the purpose section of each program. However, a small amount of articles were obtained, mostly due to the fact there was an abundance of nonpublished dissertation abstracts, which would indicate a need for the inclusion of such articles in peer-reviewed journals for increased access to the research population.

The findings are organized in the following way. Following a summary of research themes regarding the unique aspects of couples in blended families, I then provide evidence of the inclusion of the main research themes for couples in blended families. Studies of children in blended families were included regarding the ambiguity of parental roles (Robinson, 1990), which can lead to conflict (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

Results*Characteristics of Blended Families*

The review resulted in an extensive list of factors of couples functioning in blended families. Themes were identified and subcategories were utilized to examine program content. There are three main themes, or characteristics found throughout the

literature. The issues of conflict management and communication skill training are aspects that were involved in all three marriage programs (Bowling, Hill & Jencious, 2005; Jakubowski et al., 2004). Due to the prevalence of these skills in marriage programs, these two skills are not targeted in this research study.

Creating an Inclusive Social Group Identity

From a social categorization perspective (Banker et al., 2004), when divorced separates the first-married couple, and remarriage to a new partner occurs, the biologically related parents and their children who come together in that remarriage do so as two separate “in-groups” (p.268), with little common history (Robinson, 1990). From Robinson’s perspective, cooperative interaction may increase positive outlook of out-group members and reduce intergroup bias (see Allport (1954) for details about the contact hypothesis), transforming two groups into one (Banker et al., 2004). Banker and Gaertner (1998) found that the more a blended family was perceived as one group, the greater the stepfamily harmony. Furthermore, Briathwaite, Baxter & Harper (1998) discussed the positive influence on how members of blended families interact and develop their families by examining ritual enactments. Rituals that were successfully carried through were ones that valued both the old and new families. The element of inclusion in groups must be addressed when a relationship is formed and as it grows and develops (Hof & Miller, 1981).

Boundary Management and Attachment to Former Family Members

Through the family stress theory (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989), the concept of boundary ambiguity was developed by Boss (1987), which refers to a state when family members are uncertain in their perception who is in and who is out of the family or who is supposed to perform certain tasks within the current family system. Remarriage can be defined as a stressor event because it changes the family boundary by adding or taking away one or more members, forming a newly constituted family. Boundary ambiguity has more to do with perceptions than actions, which is how it is separate from inclusive social identity as a family. The rituals and actions demonstrated by the family help shape the outlook of the members. The continued involvement with former spouses definitely complicates family interactions (Cole & Cole, 1999). In boundary ambiguity, the perceptions held by the members can cause conflict (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Gold, Bubbenzer & West (1993) suggest that the resolution of the emotional conflictual relationships between ex-spouses has an impacting influence on the marital dynamics of the blended family. They further state, “An ongoing relationship between ex-spouses, either in terms of closeness or conflict, has been shown to interfere with feelings of marital intimacy in the current marriage” (p.91).

However, when roles and boundaries are clearly defined, results suggest that greater amounts of wife contact with the former spouse is associated with higher levels of remarital quality (Stewart, 2005; Weston, 1990). In addition, mothers who perceived their former spouse to be a supportive coparent are more likely to have greater relationship satisfaction (Madden-Derech & Arditto, 1999). Blended families level of solidarity is connected to their ability to negotiate and communicate about boundary

management, role identification, conflicts and expectations (Portrie & Hill, 2005).

Therefore, the element of boundaries between former spouses and nonresidential biological children need to be addressed in marriage enrichment programs within the communication realm of skills training.

Role Negotiation and Realistic Expectations

Many blended family roles and expectations are relatively unfamiliar to those entering a blended family (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). There is an increase in the number of familial roles, including parent and marital roles. The authors continued to suggest “how the stepfamily is viewed by stepfamily members is critical to the negotiation of stepfamily life and is ultimately critical for the success or failure of the remarried family” (p.108). Members within a blended family attempt to recreate roles similar to a nuclear family (like they had before in a previous marriage) because it is easier to deal with than the complexity of blended families and because they are supported by family and friends and society in general (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). There are no norms or appropriate social structures for supporting parental or remarried roles in a blended family for members to follow (Levine, 1997; Gamache, 1997). Levine (1997) comments that members of stepfamilies are trapped in a very interesting situation. “They have to succeed at something without knowing what succeeding in that particular situation is, since there is no societal model to follow” (p.125). Consequently, it is very crucial for marriage enrichment programs to address this issue in the curriculum in some form to fulfill this important dynamic of remarried couples in blended families.

Program Design

Criteria

I applied the procedure utilized in Alder-Baeder & Higginbotham (2004) as a guide for illustrating the results. Based on the literature, I identified five criteria for assessing PREP, PREPARE/ENRICH, and PAIRS:

1. Inclusion of the explicit research-based themes (see Table 1)
2. Inclusion of the subcategories within themes.

Table 1 summarizes the evaluation of the aspects of remarried couples in blended families suggested by research themes and each program’s content. A blank cell indicates that the program did not include that aspect of blended families at all. A 1 indicates a mention of at least two subcategories related to one theme or one specific theme. A 2 indicates that at least two of the themes or subcategories were included in the program’s content. A 3 indicates that all three research-based themes were included in the curriculum of the marriage enrichment program.

Table 1
Thematic Coverage in Reviewed Marriage Education Programs

Program	Theme		
	<i>Theme 1</i>	<i>Theme 2</i>	<i>Theme 3</i>
PAIRS	1		1
PREP	1		1
PREPARE/ENRICH	1		1

Note: Blank= Not included in the program; 1=some reference to one specific theme or two subcategories; 2=discussion of two themes; 3=discussion of three themes

Program Information

PAIRS. The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills Program (Markman & Stanley, 1988) is a psychoeducational program designed to increase self-knowledge (Jakubowski, 2004), strengthen attachment and emotional bonds for couples and families (*PAIRS* website). In regards to attachment, there is no mention of attachment to former spouses, or setting appropriate boundaries to maintain a healthy marriage, one can assume that the goal is to develop attachment with their current first-time married spouse. The aspect of role negotiation is the final part of the course and involves creating a “mutually pleasurable contract” (Durana, 1994, p.67). However, remarried couples marital roles are different from first-married couples marital roles (Stewart, 2005).

The program is offered in several formats of two-day workshops, four-day workshops, and 16 weekly three-hour sessions. The skills included in the content of the program are commitment (tied with inclusive solidarity model), communication and creative uses of conflict (Jakubowski, 2004). It is a unique program in the field because it combines therapy and marital enrichment through interpersonal skills training and explores relationship dynamics (Durana, 1996). However, it is an empirically untested model within the field, with existing studies having a poor sample of remarried couples (Jakubowski, 2004; Durana, 1994; Durana, 1996). There are several needs addresses in various programs for special groups (i.e., military, wellness, unmarried parents, faith-based programs, and programs for youth and children (*PAIRS* website)). However, remarried couples in blended families are not included.

PREP. This is a researched-based program, which is unique in this aspect (Bowling et al., 2005). Categorized as a premarital program, it teaches skills necessary for a good marriage, such as effective communication, conflict management, as well as preservation and enhancement of commitment and how to be a team (Fagan, Patterson, & Rector, 2002). In the review of empirically supported marriage enrichment programs completed by Jakubowski et al. (2004), the researchers rated PREP as efficacious (see article for other two category descriptions), meaning supported by at least two empirical studies, by different research teams with a control or comparison group. In the PREP website, the area of financial problems is one that is not specifically covered within the content of the program. Other behaviors that are beyond the scope of PREP are couples dealing with domestic violence, any type of substance abuse, or other compulsory behaviors.

Despite the proven effectiveness of the PREP program (Bowling et al, 2005), previously divorced people have not been included in current empirical studies (Schilling et al, 2003; Halford, Saunders & Behrens, 2001). Bowling et al. (2005) stated that there is evidence of discussions involving realistic expectations (the second goal) and attitudes and choices about commitment and strengthening of couple's bond (the third and fourth goal). There was no available evidence in existing literature on PREP describing the specific aspects of remarried couples within blended families within the bonding and expectations sections of the curriculum, leaving practitioners to assume that the detailed qualities within these two realms for remarried couples are omitted from the program. On the website, the PREP leaders proposed interesting research questions for the future that illustrate the need for continued research with PREP and blended families: Are these efforts effective for all couples? Are we able to reach couples at higher risk for marital

failure? Are some form of preventative education more effective for some types of couples (high or low risk couples)? First or second marriages?

PREPARE/ENRICH. This program is primarily designed as a premarital program containing two inventories, PREPARE and ENRICH. PREPARE is a 195-item inventory that assesses relationship issues such as marital expectations, personality issues, conflict resolution, financial management, sex, and parenting (Fagan, Patterson & Rector, 2002). Both inventories contain family-of-origin scales (assessing family cohesion and family flexibility) and two scales assessing the couple system (couple cohesion and couple flexibility) (Olson & Olson, 2000). As stated by the authors, the scales help to illustrate a connection between a person's family-of-origin (primarily birth family due to primary use with first-marriage couples) and the couple's relationship, since a person's family provides a frame of reference for evaluating the relationship. However, it is unclear and ambiguous if these scales can be used for the complex dynamics of the blended family (Gamache, 1997). From these inventories, five typologies of marriages are categorized: vitalized (most satisfied), harmonious, traditional (consisting of similar religious and marital roles), conflicted and devitalized (most at-risk) (Knuston & Olson, 2003). After the inventories are taken, discussion groups take place with workbooks focusing on growth, communication, conflict resolution, family-or-origin topics (not relating to coparenting, stepparenting or former biological family issues), financial planning and goal setting (Bowling, Hill & Jencius, 2005).

The dynamic of marital roles was discussed by Olson & Olson (2000) in which egalitarian roles were the main emphasis, not further concepts of role ambiguity within

the blended family (Stewart, 2005). Bowling, Hill & Jencius (2005) described the fourth goal of PREPARE/ENRICH is to discuss the impact families have on the relationship. The aspects of boundary ambiguity and forming a solid, cohesive, inclusive group identity is not mentioned in the literature, leading practitioners to believe that these aspects are not included in the content of the program. As in the research on PREP and PAIRS, there was lack of previously divorced members included within the sample of empirical studies of PREPARE/ENRICH (Fowers & Olson, 1989; Olson & Fowers, 1993; Olson & Olson, 2000), which does not allow for the generalizability of the results to a community sample which probably does contain remarried couples.

Overview of Findings

The three programs varied in their coverage of targeted areas, one with more included aspects of blended families than others (PREPARE/ENRICH), one with the ideas met (PREP), but not inclusive of specific aspects facing remarried couples within blended families, and one with weak attempts to accomplish these main research-based themes within the curriculum (PAIRS). I concluded that the attempt is evident in these programs to enhance skill training, marital intimacy, and marital quality for marriages, just in first-time marriages. As stated earlier, programs are designed with the nuclear family as a model (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Parasuranam & Greenhaus (2002) reminded practitioners and researchers within the field of marriage education that there is an exclusion of nontraditional families in research, with an over-emphasis in the intact nuclear family.

Conclusion

Since remarriages create an instant family with children from the start, marriage relations are uniquely different in remarried couples in blended families than in first marriages (Bray, 1999). The author goes on to state that the marital subsystem appears to affect the family subsystem differently in blended families than in first-marriage families (p. 261). Since the majority of divorced people remarry, and much of the annual marriage rate is attributed to remarriage (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004), nearly half of all marriages today are remarriages of one or both spouses (Hawkins et al, 2004), all of which require services provided for marriage enrichment. The programs PREP, PREPARE/ENRICH, and PAIRS, being three of the most nationally utilized and available mainstream programs, are recommended to include the three research-based themes of creating an inclusive social group identity, boundary management and attachment to former family members, and role negotiation and realistic expectations need to be included for the success of marriages and families formed by previously divorced spouses.

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