Joining a Blended Family:
A School-Based Intervention to Support
Adolescent School Achievement
A Research Paper
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The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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By:
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June, 2010
Abstract

This research paper addresses the issues related to blending families during adolescence and the struggles that result in the areas of parental relationships, gender issues, ethnic considerations, behavioral issues, and ultimately how academic achievement is affected. Adlerian thought is applied to this complex, modern-day issue of blending families. A school-based, small-group curriculum is introduced as an intervention to address how students are coping with the added stress of joining a blended family. The implications for school counselors are discussed as school counselors play a vital role in assisting these students with coping strategies during this potentially challenging adjustment.
Joining a Blended Family: A School-Based Intervention to Support Adolescent Achievement

The incidence of divorce in our society is profound, which leads to more and more children not only dealing with the impact of divorce, but also working through the negotiation of joining a blended family as divorced parents are remarrying. Studies reporting on the effects of joining a blended family have been neglected for some time, primarily for the reason that it has been assumed that remarriage was generally beneficial for children (Jeynes, 2000). Finally, more attention and research is being focused on how children are handling the often complex task of fitting into a new family.

As adolescents are working through the complexity of joining a blended family, often education lacks priority in their lives. In particular, adolescents may not only withdraw from their friends at school, but they may lack the attention and focus needed to succeed in their classes. School-based resources need to be provided to allow students to work through their concerns and refocus their energy on education.

This paper will consider specific aspects that address adolescent development and how adolescents are affected socially, emotionally, and academically when faced with the challenge of joining a blended family. A school-based, small-group intervention is introduced as a way to help support adolescents with normalizing the experience of joining a blended family. The program also seeks to help adolescents understand why this seemingly common event has such an enormous impact on every aspect of their lives.
Prevalence of Blended Families

Blended families defined. In America today, many children are being affected by the prevalence of blended families. Blended families are formed in various ways. “Most stepfamilies are created after a remarriage but, with the increase in cohabitation, many stepfamilies are formed without the legal sanction of matrimony” (Bray, 2001, p. 127). Families may also join together as a result of illness or death of one or both parents, a single parent marrying for the first time, or through adoption. Regardless of how the new family structure is formed, the impact on adolescent youth is undeniable.

The blended family can be defined as parents who are entering into a committed relationship, either through marriage or cohabitation, each having children of their own who will be living in the joint home on at least a part-time basis. Children, as well as new partners, are being integrated into a new family structure under these circumstances (Wilcox Doyle, Wolchik, & Dawson-McClure, 2002).

Most people are aware that individuals marrying today have a 50% chance of divorce. Many do not know the breakdown of that particular statistic. First marriages account for 40% of divorces. Second marriages account for 60% of divorces and 73% of third marriages end in divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). About 75% of those who divorce will eventually remarry (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). Not all divorced couples who will be entering into a remarriage or cohabitation have children, but children are often part of this transition.

Current issues. Adolescents who have experienced a divorce, and whose parents have remarried, have changes in many aspects of their lives. When an adolescent’s parent remarries, there is a new parent in the home who may influence and enforce the rules of the household. The
adolescent previously only had to answer to one parent. “Mothers experience re-partnering as a romantic adult who is gaining a partner…Adolescents, in contrast, experience their mother’s re-partnering as a child with a potential new parent-figure entering their day-to-day world as well as the world of their mother” (Silverberg Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon, & Korn, 2004, p. 27). The difference in perception between the mother and adolescent can create different expectations in the outcome of the new family relationships. This can contribute to behavior issues with adolescents as well as other children in the household.

Step-siblings are another consideration for adolescents who are in blended families. When step-siblings are introduced into the family, there is an adjustment to the new dynamics between the children. For example, an adolescent who was an only child may suddenly become the oldest, youngest, or middle child in the larger family unit. There will be a shuffling of responsibilities and roles when the entire family is together.

To further complicate the family structure, there will often be varying compositions of the familial unit at various times. For example, a family may have involved non-custodial parents with whom the children may live on a set schedule. It may only be on certain weekends or weekdays that the entire family unit is participating in activities together. This poses a particular challenge for adolescents who are naturally working through issues of adolescence in figuring out who they are and where they belong. “So many children feel that the changes in their family lives had not been fully explained to them—that they were confused by the situation and that they had not been given a chance to ask questions” (Dunn, Davies, O’Connor, & Sturgess, 2001, p. 285). In households like this, there is constant change in family roles, family structure, and the level of family stress. Confusing struggling adolescents further, these changes
JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY

may be occurring with both of their biological parents, causing adolescents to endure these changes in both homes, working through family structure issues with both parents in two separate family units.

The temperament of the child will have much to do with how these multiple changes are going to be handled. “Children who have easy temperaments; who are intelligent, socially mature, and responsible; and who exhibit few behavior problems are better able to cope with their parents’ marital transitions” (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998, p. 171).

Adolescents who are generally handling life in a positive, responsible fashion will be more likely to have a more positive outlook on the prospect of joining a blended family because they are better adjusted socially and emotionally. The opposite is true for adolescents who lack in social and emotional maturity.

For many apparent reasons, school suddenly appears to take a back seat for many of these adolescents. Students going through extensive physical and emotional growth also endure an enormous amount of stress at home when dealing with the issues of joining a blended family. “The act of parental remarriage does not help the already depressed levels of academic success experienced by children from divorced single-parent families” (Jeynes, 2002, p. 111). According to Jeynes (2002), the depressed levels of academic achievement following a divorce are often attributed to: lack of access to both parents, a decline in monetary stability, and residing with a non-parental figure when families have blended. There is the potential for an adolescent to suddenly have a new step-sibling attending the same school or, perhaps, was already a student at the school before their parents began dating. This can pose an interesting dynamic, depending
on the relationship between the two students prior to the family merger, which can also impact
the students’ ability to focus on academics during the school day.

**Considerations of Adolescents Joining Blended Families**

**Adolescent development.** Typical adolescent development is almost contradictory to
what a blended family is trying to accomplish when the family blends during the child’s
adolescent years. Adolescents are working toward independence and seeking to develop their
own social groups. Teens want to feel as if they are gaining more control over their lives
through the choices they are making and, ultimately, they are preparing to leave their families.

Often times, a family who is blending is working to integrate each family member into
the new family unit. The adolescent often feels forced to participate, although he/she feels a
need to pull from the family to gain independence. Early adolescence is often a more difficult
time for remarriage to occur, possibly because having a stepparent around complicates the
feelings of gaining autonomy and concern about sexuality that an adolescent is already
experiencing as a part of normal development (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). “The
problems of adolescence are seen as resulting from difficulties the adolescent and his/her family
are experiencing in negotiating the developmental tasks of adolescence: establishing constructive
autonomy through the individuation process and developing intimate relationships and mutually
validating connections with the parents and peers” (Bray & Harvey, 1995, pp. 122-123).

Generally, blending a family during adolescence provides an unstable environment for
adolescent growth and development. Establishing a stable step-family can take up to 3-5 years
due to the amount of time it takes many members of the family to properly adjust to the changes.
“Adolescents may suddenly become upset about the divorce or treat the stepparent with anger
and resentment, despite a good relationship before the remarriage. These changes indicate the emotional divorce has not been resolved completely and needs additional work” (Bray & Harvey, 1995, p. 127). A proper emotional divorce, simply stated, means that the members of the family have successfully mourned the loss of the family they once had. These sudden emotional outbursts can be disruptive to the sense of belonging teens may feel within the blended family as it separates them emotionally from what is going on with the rest of the family. As adolescents in this situation are preparing to be on their own, they often move on without establishing a sense of belonging in the new family because of the time it takes the family to settle into a routine and stability.

**Addressing maladjustment.** Adolescents who do not adjust well to blending into a new family face potentially significant challenges. Poor adjustment to this situation can lead to problems not only in school, but outside of school, particularly if the teen is poorly monitored. Often behavior problems are exhibited at home as well, increasing the already elevated level of stress in a blended household. In a study conducted by Wilcox-Doyle, et al (2002), adolescents rated discipline as the most stressful area related to joining a blended family.

Academically, adolescents who have made the transition into a blended family exhibit lower levels of achievement in school. “On average, adolescents who live in stepfamilies are at risk for poorer academic outcomes than are adolescents who live with both biological parents, regardless of the family structure pathways they have followed” (Harker Tillman, 2007, p. 413). It has been thought that an adolescent who has experienced a relatively recent parent remarriage would experience a more depressed level of academic achievement than an adolescent who has
been living in their blended family for a longer period of time. Studies have shown that this assumption is unfounded (Jeynes W., 2000).

There are important considerations to assist adolescents through this turbulent time. Adolescents who have a confidant, either an adult or a peer, tend to handle the stressors of the transition better. The establishment of these peer relationships often begins with the relationships within the family unit, particularly the child-mother relationship. “In high-risk family settings, such as complex stepfamilies, warm, supportive child-mother relationships may be especially important for positive peer relations” (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001, p. 284). Additional resources to help adolescents with the transitions are teachers and counselors in their school.

Another positive influence on adolescents can be the relationship between the them and their step-parents. “A good relationship with the stepfather (an indicator of parenting style) resulted in a positive influence over adolescents in terms of substance abuse and behavioral/emotional problems” (Willetts & Maroules, 2004, p. 129). Although it is certainly recognized that the transition into a blended family is significantly stressful for all involved, some families do experience less stress than others “and that difference typically hinged on the quality of the adolescent’s relationship with the stepparent” (Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme, & Felker-Thayer, 2005, p. 186). A poor relationship with the teen’s other biological parent, or lack of a relationship with that parent due to abandonment or death, often has a negative impact on the quality of the relationship with the stepparent. Adolescents who saw their other parent consistently often had a more positive relationship with their stepparents (Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme, & Felker-Thayer, 2005).
Part-time status. More frequently, joint custody and joint parenting time of children are awarded to parents who choose to divorce. In the past, it was more often assumed that the mother would have custody of children with visitation awarded to the father. Today, it is often presumed that joint custody will be awarded to eliminate the need for supervised or unsupervised visitation rights for the non-custodial parent (Lowenstein, 2002). As a result, children are constantly adjusting to the dynamics in each household as they travel back and forth between the two households.

The parenting schedule is something that adolescents need to feel they have some control over. The frequency of the move between households during the school week needs to be kept in consideration when looking at what is best for the adolescent. However, with this in mind, it is important to note that adolescents in joint custody situations are better adjusted than adolescents who are in sole custody situations. “Although the period from early childhood through adolescence is marked by many developmental tasks and changes, it may be that ongoing positive involvement with both parents at any of these ages can prove beneficial” (Bauserman, 2002, p. 98).

The ability to create consistent rules for all children in a blended household is a challenge itself. From an adolescent’s perspective, if both parents are remarried, the child has potentially four sets of rules to adjust to, one from each parent figure involved. “Clear and enforceable rules are needed, and including the adolescent in establishing rules is important” (Bray & Harvey, 1995, p. 126). It is imperative that the parents are working together to provide the most consistency possible to create clear boundaries for the adolescent. Consistency is important so children will gain a sense of safety and concern for their well-being. This will help in increasing
the overall sense of safety and harmony in the home. Naturally, children in their teen years will challenge and push back against rules. By working to create harmony in the home through cooperation, equal status for the children, and personalization, stepfamilies are able to create an environment where children are able to feel more like they belong in the family unit as a whole (Banker & Gaertner, 1998, p. 320).

**Gender considerations.** Gender issues within a blended family are prominent, especially for female adolescents. A girl who has been the recipient of her father’s adoration has the challenge of accepting another woman into his life when he remarries (Bernstein, 2003). For girls, “the increased importance of physical attractiveness, the onset of puberty, and changes in relationships with parents pose challenges to girls’ self-esteem and may cause disruptions in identity, school competence, and family and peer relationships” (Skaggs & Jodl, 1999, p. 148). If left unaddressed, this could lead to withdrawal and behavioral issues with the child.

In the other household where the resident parent is the mother and she remarries, the relationship between the step-father and daughter has the potential to be the most uncomfortable. There is higher instance of sexual abuse between step-fathers and daughters than there is between biological fathers and their daughters. “The incest taboo is diminished due to the absence of a biological connection between stepparent and child, which may contribute to the higher incidence of sexual abuse” (Bray & Harvey, 1995, p. 124). The boundaries are also ambiguous between step-siblings because there is not the same issue of relational taboo that would be represented between blood relatives. The issues of gender and sexuality in developing adolescents complicates the ability of the step family to function as a cohesive unit.
**Ethnic variables.** Most of the research on blended families does not focus on diversity issues or cultural issues around this topic. However, there are ethnic variables to be considered when working with adolescents and blended families. For example, the elevated instance of single parent households in African-American families needs to be examined more closely. An interesting study was conducted that indicated that black adolescents perceived their families to be more flexible than did white adolescents (Tanner, 1992). Another example highlighted the study looking at the expectations adolescents had of their parents following remarriage. Two Asian children in the study thought the mother should give priority to the stepfather’s needs instead of the children (Moore & Cartwright, 2005), reflecting the cultural differences in Asian families to give final respect and authority to the male in the household. School counselors would benefit from exploring different cultural perspectives when engaging with children on the issues of blending families.

**Cohabitation vs. remarriage.** When considering what is best for the children while making the decision to re-partner, many parents do not account for whether it is actually better to remarry or to cohabitate with their new partner. Focusing specifically on education for adolescents, whether a parent decides to remarry or cohabitate with their new partner can impact outcomes. “Across the academic outcomes, the disadvantages of divorce/separation are particularly pronounced for youth who have also transitioned into a cohabiting stepfamily or a single-father family” (Tillman, 2007, p. 414). The cohabitating couple has an underlying sense of impermanence. It is much easier to give up and move out from this type of relationship when the couple faces the challenges of living in a blended family.
From the perspective of what is best for the children, marriage may provide children a stronger sense of permanence and stability. “In particular, individuals are more likely to accommodate in relationships in which they have a high level of commitment” (Preece & DeLongis, 2005, p. 59). When considering adolescents specifically, there is conflicting research demonstrating whether the decision to remarry or cohabitate influences adolescents either way. One study reports, “In terms of delinquency, substance abuse, and behavioral/emotional problems, maternal remarriage in and of itself has no beneficial effects on the well-being of adolescents. Instead, parental involvement and parenting style are important for the well-being of adolescents in both cohabiting and married step-families” (Willetts & Maroules, 2004, p. 129). This is an area that needs further studying.

**An Adlerian Perspective**

**Three tasks of life.** Alfred Adler’s common sense approach to understanding human development offers a unique perspective when applied to the issues of today. As Adler was developing his theories, families were mostly intact, with both the mother and the father residing in the same home. Children were not commonly negotiating familial relationships the same way they are today.

According to Adler, each individual is striving for balance in three areas or tasks of life: work, love, and social life. “The three ties in which human beings are bound set the three problems of life, but none of these problems can be solved separately. Each of them demands a successful approach to the other two” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 131). It is no surprise that an adolescent who is struggling extensively to fit in at home, would also find difficulty performing at work, which for a child is school. In order to assist a student who is struggling at
school, a counselor or teacher would need to work collaboratively with the parents at home to create a solution that is going to impact both areas of the student’s life.

The three areas are interconnected. Focusing only on one area would be futile. If an adolescent has also endured a move during the family transition and is now attending a new school, the student will certainly be working very hard to become re-established in all three tasks of life.

**Family atmosphere.** According to Dreikurs (1964), the family atmosphere is one of three factors in children’s external environment that will impact their development. The family atmosphere is set by the relationship between the parents. This would also be true in a blended family. The relationship between the biological parents, as well as the relationship between the biological parents and step-parents, would be the basis for which the family atmosphere would be set.

In a nuclear household, the relationship between the parents sets the tone for all of the relationships in the family, including the relationships between the children. This would not seem to apply as readily to children living in blended families. Children in blended families are influenced potentially by two sets of parents in two separate households. Even if one household were to provide a stable, friendly, and cooperative environment, the adolescent may spend half of his or her days in a household with a very different family atmosphere. Both environments will influence the development of the adolescent.

From an Adlerian perspective, Ballou (2002) believes that ultimately adolescents want to feel a sense of belonging. Belonging is something that is especially challenging to establish within a blended family. How the family responds to the challenge will ultimately determine
how well the adolescents will adjust. “Mostly, teens raised in a democratic atmosphere at home and at school learn to feel encouraged and optimistic, because they know how to gain appropriate recognition and control over their lives” (Ballou, 2002, p. 161).

**Birth order relationships.** Adler spent a significant amount of time discussing how the children’s psychological position in the family impacted their growth and development. Adler theorized that the order in which children were born into a family would have an impact on how they would grow to perceive and respond to the world as adults. Generally, children held the position of an oldest, middle, youngest, or only child with each category identifying with common characteristics and traits.

When viewing birth order as a variable in blended families, it is important to keep in mind that “It is not, of course, the child’s number in the order of successive births which influences his character, but the situation into which he is born and the way in which he interprets it” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 377). When speaking of a blended family, it is the psychological placement of the adolescent in the new family that will matter most, not the particular order in which he or she was born into their biological families.

When a family blends, there is going to be a sense among the children of feeling ousted from their previous standing in terms of birth order. All of the children are going to go through this during the family merger. Dreikurs (1964) states each child will influence the role and personalities of the other children in the family. When considering an adolescent working through a new role in a blended family, as well as experiencing numerous other physical and social/emotional changes, it is not surprising that adolescents may have a more difficult time adjusting to the new family circumstances.
Implications for School Counselors

Professional school counselor’s role in modern schools. Through the years, the role of a school counselor has evolved gradually into the comprehensive leadership role it is today. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has been instrumental in creating a more structured role for the professional school counselor in schools. Through the development of the ASCA National Model, the professional school counselor now has an outline for implementing a comprehensive school counseling program, guidelines for proper activities for counselors, and specific domains that are appropriate to include as part of a comprehensive program.

According to the American School Counselor Association (2005), there are three areas, or domains, that are important to develop when implementing a school counseling program: Academic Development, Career Development, and Personal/Social. Small-group counseling provides support to students under the Personal/Social domain. Three competencies are addressed with this type of intervention: Competency A1 Acquire Self Knowledge, Competency A2 Acquire Interpersonal Skills, and Competency B1 Self-Knowledge Application. Group activities are a part of an overall school guidance curriculum to “conduct planned small groups outside the classroom to respond to students’ identified needs or interests” (American School Counselor Association, 2005, p. 41). Providing successful intervention strategies, such as small-group counseling, creates a supportive atmosphere where students can share feelings, explore common misperceptions, and reduce feelings of isolation (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985).

Group counseling in schools. Small-group counseling in schools can be very effective in helping students cope with the challenges they face. A study specifically on the effects of group counseling for children of divorce reported, “Program children made significantly greater
adjustment gains than controls. Specifically, teachers judged them to have shown significantly greater reductions in shy-anxious and learning problems…and improved more both on total competence and specific competencies such as peer sociability, frustration tolerance, compliance with rules, and adaptive assertiveness” (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985, p. 608). Through the implementation of an effective blended families group in a school setting, it can be anticipated that similar results would be achieved.

School counselors can be instrumental in assisting children through issues that are impacting their lives at school and at home. “Providing services for children of divorce in the course of a regular school day promotes a sense of normalization for their experience” (Schreier & Kalter, 1990, p. 58). By extending the education of students beyond academic skills, school counselors are able to reduce the incidence of aggression, substance abuse, and depression (Van Velsor, 2009).

Following is a group intervention designed to be used in a middle school setting. The group would consist of six to eight members of varying grade levels and gender. The members would be qualified to participate through teacher recommendations, parent recommendations, or by request. The members would need to be currently living in a blended family or in the process of merging into a blended family.

Before the group begins, the school counselor should meet with each student individually. Gain an understanding of each student’s unique circumstances and let him or her know what the group aims to accomplish. The school counselor should allow each student to decide if participating in the group may be beneficial for his/her own social, emotional, and academic growth. “The group leader should be comfortable with his or her own issues about
divorce. Self-disclosure should be limited to promoting group rapport and cohesion” (Brigman & Goodman, 2008, p. 175).

**Introduction to Stepping Forward Group Intervention for Middle School Students**

This group intervention is structured to occur over the course of 10 weeks. The group should consist of 6-8 students who are currently joining a blended family or who already live in a blended family situation for either a short or long period of time. Stepping Forward group should be announced verbally to students at back to school events, highlighted in notes going home, and acknowledged on the school’s website to have the best group candidates possible. The group members can be self-referred or referred by teachers or parents.

The purpose of the group is to assist students with the changes associated with joining a blended family. It has been shown through empirical research that “adolescents can be assisted by peers in the recovery from the pain that may result when parents divorce” (Studer & Allton, 1996, p. 33). The same can also be said in helping these students work through the issues of joining a blended family.

Based on the research discussed throughout this paper, the group addresses such things as understanding the dynamics of relationships within the family, both with parents and new siblings; understanding how their own development gets in the way of the anticipated cohesiveness within the family; coping skills in handling the levels of emotions and conflicting feelings they may have; and finally how to take care of themselves in the midst of all the change.

Specifically, week three of the ten lesson sequence (See Appendix pp. 30-31) addresses the students’ ability to accept their current circumstances in joining a blending family. According to Dunn, et al, (2001), adolescents often feel confused and stressed by changes in the
family structure that they cannot control. Working through issues with biological versus step family relationships is an issue that can be prominent when joining a blending family. Lessons five and six (Appendix pp. 34-38) help the students discriminate some of the presenting issues in their family relationships as well as start them on the path to developing strategies to positively impact those relationships.

In preparation for the group, the group facilitator should meet with each student individually to set expectations for his/her participation in the group, making sure each student is a willing participant and has a need to develop the skills that are presented in the group. There may be occasions when there are siblings or stepsiblings who want to participate in the group. It may be best to have two separate groups, if time permits, to allow for the siblings to experience the group more authentically in separate settings. The group facilitator will need to use his/her own discretion in these circumstances.

Conclusion

There are an enormous number of variables that need to be considered when working within the context of blended families. There seems to be an indefinite number of combinations that become too complicated to explain and all efforts to simplify the complications seem futile. Every family structure is unique in the way family members relate to each other, the values modeled in the homes, the ages of the children and parents, the ages at which the parents were divorced, how often the children see their other parent, how amicable was the divorce, and the level of love and nurturing within the home. Each of these variables does impact how well a child is going to adjust to joining a blended family, and each of these variables is going to predict how well a child performs in schools.
Regardless of the fact that these variables exist in infinite combinations, school counselors can still work to impact the lives of these students through normalization of the experience in small-group interventions such as a “Stepping Forward” group. Students can learn from one another new ways to look at their own situations and the choices they can make to make it the best family life possible for themselves. Adolescents need the peer support as well as the support of neutral adults to help them sort through their perspectives, emotions, and learn new ways to cope with the life they are living.

The resilience of children cannot be forgotten in all of this concern over doing what is best for them. “That is, while a small group of children from disrupted families are often found to be functioning more poorly than peers from intact families, the vast majority are developing into competent human beings, functioning satisfactorily in most domains” (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005, p. 361). Children often find their way to the useful side of life.
References


JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY


Appendix

Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Counselor:</th>
<th>Subject:</th>
<th>Lesson:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Lietz</td>
<td>Stepping Forward Group</td>
<td>Week 1 of 10: “Getting to Know You”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Pre-Instructional Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductions. Set expectations and guidelines for group. Establish trust in group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials Needed:</th>
<th>Classroom Environment:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking piece; Group Information Form; writing tools; 3 small, soft balls; markers; large paper.</td>
<td>Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Lesson 1 Format/Instructional Procedure

**Anticipatory Set**: Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Introduce yourself and the purpose of the group. Introduce the talking piece that you have chosen. Going around the circle passing the talking piece to the left, have each student give an introduction with name, grade level, and one thing they enjoy doing for fun.

**Lesson Sequence**: Time needed: 15 minutes

Name Game: Using three small balls, or other small soft objects, play the name game to further establish name connections within the group. Beginning with one object, the object is tossed to another group member. When the person tosses the object, they say “Hi, [Name].” The person receiving the object responds “Thank you, [Name].” When the group is comfortable with names, toss in the second object so two objects are moving around the group at the same time. Add the third item when the first two objects are moving around the group well.

Next, the group needs to establish group guidelines. Go through the ground rules and write them on the large paper. This can be displayed during each group session. There are certain ground rules that should be included in every group:

- Confidentiality.
- Take turns talking.
- Active listening.
- Participation.
• You can pass.

The group can add any other guidelines they feel would be important. Ensure you have consensus as guidelines are being added. Keep the number of guidelines to a minimum.

Have the students complete the Group Information Form. Encourage them to write down any additional thoughts or feelings about the group that are not covered on the form. Collect the forms for future reference.

**Closure:** Time needed: 10 minutes

Using the talking piece, have the students share one thing they hope to gain from participation in the group. They can also choose to share one thought or idea about the survey they just completed.
Group Information Form

Stepping Forward Group

Name __________________________________________

Directions: Complete the statements below to the best of your ability.

I have a good understanding of what to expect from this group experience. True  False

The area(s) I struggle most with my parent(s) remarriage or cohabitation is:
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

One relationship in my family I would really like to change:
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Generally, I am feeling____________________ about my new stepfamily.
Generally, I am feeling ____________________ about participating in this group.

One area I want to be sure to discuss in this group is:
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

If there is anything at all that you have questions about, are uncomfortable with, or if there is anything else you would like for me to know, please write it here:
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

School Counselor: Cheryl Lietz
Subject: Stepping Forward Group
Lesson: Week 2 of 10: “My Story”

Pre-Instructional Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish trust in group. Gain understanding of each group member’s unique story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain agreement on group topics for future sessions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Materials Needed:
Group topic areas written and displayed, one red and one black marker for each student, blank paper, writing surface for students, talking piece.

Classroom Environment:
Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

Lesson 2 Format/Instructional Procedure

Anticipatory Set: Time needed: 10 minutes
Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student state their name and share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

Lesson Sequence: Time needed: 15 minutes
Talk with the group about various topic areas that you anticipate covering during the duration of the group. Refer to the topic areas that are covered in this lesson sequence, as well as any topics that were discovered in the student surveys from last week. Gain group consensus on these topics. The group members can add or subtract areas of focus to gain the most out of their time with the group.

Blended Family Portrait: Pass out to each student a blank sheet of paper, one red and one black marker. Positioning the paper horizontally, each student draws a line down the middle of their paper. Label one side “Mom’s House” and the other side “Dad’s House.” If students do not have two separate households, have them title the page appropriately and use the whole page for the one household. Using the red marker, have the student draw figures representing the people in that house who are blood relatives to them. This would include their biological parents and biological siblings. Using the black marker, students will draw figures representing the people in that house who are not blood related, including all step parents and step siblings. Half siblings can be drawn half red and half black. Have students label their siblings with names and ages. It is best to have an example to share. Each student should place their own names on the back of their portraits; these will be used again in another lesson.
Once completed, regroup in the circle and have students share and explain their family portraits with the group.

**Closure:** Time needed: 10 minutes

Using the talking piece, have each student share how it felt to hear about other student’s families. What was one thing that surprised them the most about our group today?
JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY

Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

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<tr>
<th>School Counselor:</th>
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<th>Lesson:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Lietz</td>
<td>Stepping Forward Group</td>
<td>Week 3 of 10: “Conflicting Feelings”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-Instructional Planning

**Goal**
Establish trust in the group. Students will begin to gain acceptance of their circumstances.

**Materials Needed:**
Talking piece, dry erase board, markers.

**Classroom Environment:**
Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

Lesson 3 Format/Instructional Procedure

**Anticipatory Set:** Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

**Lesson Sequence:** Time needed: 15 minutes

Using the talking piece, have the students share one or two things they anticipated would happen when their new family merged. How were they feeling about the anticipated changes? Write on the board key phrases for what was anticipated. Label a feelings section and record the feelings that were experienced for each student.

Next, have each student share one or two realities about living in a blended family that was unexpected. How are they feeling about this unexpected reality? Record the realities they experienced and the feelings around those. The students may be experiencing happiness about new sibling relationships, but may also be feeling anger for various reasons.

Point out the contrast in feelings, especially if several students are feeling both positive and negative feelings at the same time. Acknowledge that this must be very confusing for them and that their feelings are not wrong.

This lesson will be continued next week. Now that we are aware of all of the feelings that are experienced when families are merging, we can talk about what to do with those feelings when we have them.
Closure: Time needed: 5 minutes

Due to the nature of the lesson this week, closure of the group will be for the purposes of enjoying themselves and building cohesiveness within the group. Today we will close with a game.

Boppity Bopp Bopp Game – Have the students stand up in a circle and select one volunteer to be in the middle. The person in the middle looks at another student and says “Boppity Bopp Bopp.” The person in the circle who is approached needs to say “Bopp” before the person in the middle is finished saying “Boppity Bopp Bopp.” If the student in the circle does not respond in time, that person switches places with the person in the middle. If the student in the outer circle says “Bopp” before the person in the middle begins saying “Boppity Bopp Bopp,” that student then would be in the middle of the circle.
JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY

Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject:</td>
<td>Stepping Forward Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson:</td>
<td>Week 4 of 10: “Handling Emotions”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-Instructional Planning

| Goal | Establish trust in the group. Students will discover ways to handle emotions. |

Materials Needed:
- Talking piece, feelings posters, tape, markers, bag of dirt.

Classroom Environment:
- Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

Lesson 4 Format/Instructional Procedure

Anticipatory Set: Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

Lesson Sequence: Time needed: 15 minutes

Share with the group the list of feelings that they developed during the last session together. Have a different feeling written or typed on a sheet of paper and tape these on the wall around the room. Brainstorm as a group different ways they can handle feelings. Have one person record the strategies on the feelings posters. Suggestions might be talking to someone, keeping a journal, writing letters, staying active, etc.

Demonstrate how they will not want to “sandbag” their feelings. Ask for one student to volunteer to carry the “burden.” Take the bag of dirt and label it with a negative feeling (anger, hurt feelings, sadness) and place it on the shoulder of the volunteer student. Talk about how that negative feeling, if kept inside, becomes a burden that gets heavier over time. It will be distracting and preoccupying, keeping you from being the best you can be while at school or with your friends. It is important to share the load with someone. Encourage group members to use the group as one place they can support each other. Eventually, the burden of the dirt begins to slip away right through our fingers (Schaller & Bradburn-Stern, 1997).

Closure: Time needed: 10 minutes

Using the talking piece, have each student share one strategy they will use in the next week to handle their emotions. On a scale of one to five, have each student share how comfortable they
JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY

are in the group sharing their feelings in this setting. Have them share at the same time on the count of three showing their comfort level number on their fingers. A rating of one is not at all comfortable; a rating of five is very comfortable. Invite the group to process what is or is not working at this stage of the group. What can the group do to make everyone comfortable to share?
JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Lietz</td>
<td>Stepping Forward Group</td>
<td>Week 5 of 10: “Managing Step Parent Relationships”</td>
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</table>

Pre-Instructional Planning

**Goal**
Establish trust in the group. Students will explore their individual relationships with their step parents to gain an understanding of the dynamics that may be part of their blended family.

**Materials Needed:**
Talking piece, Step Parent Dynamics worksheets, dry erase board, markers.

**Classroom Environment:**
Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

Lesson 5 Format/Instructional Procedure

**Anticipatory Set:** Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one strategy they used this past week to better handle their emotions. If necessary, help them remember what strategy they picked from the previous week that they were going to try to better deal with emotions. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

**Lesson Sequence:** Time needed: 15 minutes

We are going to talk specifically about the relationships each student has with their step parent(s). Using the Step Parent Dynamics worksheet, have the students work with a partner to complete this worksheet. Each pair shares with the group the advantages and disadvantages of living with some of these dynamics in their households.

Discuss as a group ways these various dynamics can be managed. Acknowledgement of these dynamics will help the students become more accepting of their step parents and the roles they play in their lives. Record their answers on the board.

The students may have concerns they would like to share with their step parent. Introduce “When you ________, I feel ________. I would like it if you would __________.” Role play this with students if appropriate. If the student does not feel that their step parent will be open to hearing what they have to say, role play this phrase as a follow up: “Well, I hope you’ll at least think about what I’ve said.” Remind them to be polite when having these conversations and it will help lighten their load.
**Closure:** Time needed: 10 minutes

Just Like Me Game: Have the students sitting on chairs in a circle. The game begins with a volunteer student standing up and making a true statement about himself or herself. It can be a fact about things they enjoy doing, facts about their families, places they have visited or lived, etc. If that statement is also true for other members of the group, they also stand up and shout “Just Like Me!” Continue around the circle in order, with each group member sharing a true fact with the group.

To further elaborate on this game, ask the students what they can learn from this game that may apply to their blended families? (Having things in common with family members that are unexpected.)
Step Parent Dynamics

In this exercise, work with a partner to identify different dynamics (influences) you may have when dealing with your step parent. These may include things such as how well you get along with your step parent, if your parent and their partner are married or cohabitating, how your step parent handles discipline. Think of some pros and cons to some of the dynamics you have listed below.

My Dynamics
List your specific step parent dynamics or influences here:
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

Choose 3 from your list above and answer the following:

Dynamic:__________________________________________________________
What are some positives about this dynamic?

What are some negatives about this dynamic?

Dynamic:__________________________________________________________
What are some positives about this dynamic?

What are some negatives about this dynamic?

Dynamic:__________________________________________________________
What are some positives about this dynamic?

What are some negatives about this dynamic?
Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

School Counselor: Cheryl Lietz
Subject: Stepping Forward Group
Lesson: Week 6 of 10: “Managing Step Sibling Relationships”

Pre-Instructional Planning

| Goal | Establish trust in the group. Students will explore their individual relationships with their step siblings to gain an understanding of the dynamics that may be part of their blended family. |

Materials Needed:
Talking piece, Blended Family Portrait (from lesson 2), dry erase board, markers.

Classroom Environment:
Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

Lesson 6 Format/Instructional Procedure

Anticipatory Set: Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

Lesson Sequence: Time needed: 15 minutes

Challenge the students to remember each other’s family situation by having them match the Blended Family Photo to the student. Once they guess, return the project to the original student. Using their family portrait, each student will share what the relationship is like with each of their step siblings represented in the portrait. If there will not be enough time to share, such as very large families, have each of them share the most healthy relationship and the most stressed relationship in their family as an alternative.

Once completed, have the group create a list of qualities that create a positive relationship with their step siblings. Also create a list of qualities that result in negative relationships with their step siblings. Record the answers on the board.

Ask of the group: “What do you notice about the lists? Are there more negative relationship qualities listed? What can you do to create more positive qualities in the negative relationships that already exist?”
Closure:  Time needed: 10 minutes

Using the talking piece, have each student share one thing they learned about their relationships with their step families the last two weeks. It can be something surprising, interesting, or learning a new perspective. The second time around the circle, have them share one thing they can do to positively impact the relationships in their families.
### Pre-Instructional Planning

**Goal**: Establish trust in the group. Students will explore their roles as adolescents within their step family.

**Materials Needed**: Talking piece, paper, writing utensils, dry erase board, markers.

**Classroom Environment**: Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

### Lesson 7 Format/Instructional Procedure

**Anticipatory Set**: Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one thing they learned from last week that they can do to positively impact relationships in their family. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

**Lesson Sequence**: Time needed: 15 minutes

Have the students work in pairs to develop some ideas around these questions: What is the job of an “adolescent?” (To gain independence from family, to grow in peer relationships, to begin to think about and plan for their futures…) What is your “job” within your families? Some answers might be related to spending time with their new step family on family outings in lieu of spending time with their friends, or added responsibility of taking care of younger step siblings. It could be many things related to moving back and forth between different dynamics in each parent household. “How are your “duties” as an adolescent being impacted by your roles within your step families?” Have the student pairs record their answers on sheets of paper.

Open this topic to group discussion. Record answers on the board. Reflect on the challenges of being an adolescent and experiencing these conflicting roles within their families. Now that they are aware of these conflicting roles, discuss ways to resolve the conflict. “What has or has not worked for you in the past?”

Talk with students about the various techniques discussed in previous sessions. Can some of those techniques work to resolve this conflict? Encourage them to think broad within the limits of what they can control. If students have something specific they would like help on, such as
developing a specific plan to address an issue (such as gaining a reasonable amount of autonomy at home), have the group work together to problem solve with that student.

**Closure:** Time needed: 10 minutes

Hand Tapping Game: Have the students gather around a round table or lay on their stomachs on the floor. Have each student place their right arm over their neighbor’s left arm on the table or floor so they are all interconnected. Everyone should lay their hands flat on the floor or table. Choose someone to start. The game is played by having everyone tap their hands in order clockwise around the circle. A single tap means that the order continues, if someone double taps their hand, the order reverses. If someone takes a turn out of order, the hand that went out of turn leaves the circle. Players stay in as long as they have at least one hand in play.
JOINING A BLENDED FAMILY

Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

School Counselor: Cheryl Lietz
Subject: Stepping Forward Group
Lesson: Week 8 of 10: “Take Care of You”

### Pre-Instructional Planning

| Goal | Establish trust in the group. Students will explore ideas of ways they can take care of themselves as they navigate through the stages of their unique family situation. |

### Materials Needed:
Talking piece, My Game Plan worksheet (p. 41), dry erase board, markers.

### Classroom Environment:
Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

### Lesson 8 Format/Instructional Procedure

**Anticipatory Set:** Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

**Lesson Sequence:** Time needed: 20 minutes

“How your family deals with their negative feelings can also influence how you deal with your negative feelings. Think of ways that your family deals with their anger, sadness, or hurt. What are some positive ways your family deals with these feelings? What are some negative ways they deal with these feelings?” Record their answers on the white board (Simmonds, 2003).

Each student will receive a worksheet entitled “My Game Plan.” Students will identify areas of their life that are triggers for making poor choices. These areas can include school, home, or peer relationships. Each student will come up with a set of coping skills that will work for him/her to navigate life when things are getting challenging. Allow approximately 5-8 minutes to complete the form.

Students can share with the group one area they identified as a trigger for them and the coping skill they will use when that circumstance arises.

**Closing:** Time needed: 5 minutes

Close the group by sharing appreciations with each other. Have each group member share verbally one thing they appreciate about the person to their left. The appreciation should be...
something that is not physical about the person, but a personality quality they have shared with the group. Rather than saying “you always dress great,” encourage the students to share what someone has meant to them in the group (i.e. “I really appreciate how you have opened up in the group. I have learned a lot from you.”).
**My Game Plan**

Identify areas of your life that are “triggers” for you. These are things that have, in the past, made you feel angry, sad, hurt, or annoyed (or any other negative feeling). These “triggers” can cause us to make poor choices and can include things involving our family, friends or school. The good news is that they are choices. Below, write down your top 3 triggers and positive ways you can deal with them in the future.

Trigger #1:
____________________________________________________________________________________

Positive ways to deal with Trigger #1:
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

Trigger #2:
____________________________________________________________________________________

Positive ways to deal with Trigger #2:
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

Trigger #3:
____________________________________________________________________________________

Positive ways to deal with Trigger #3:
____________________________________________________________________________________
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Small Group Lesson Plan

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Lietz</td>
<td>Stepping Forward Group</td>
<td>Week 9 of 10: “It Gets Better”</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Pre-Instructional Planning

| Goal | Establish trust in the group. Students will understand that transitions take time, help them to see beyond now and look to their future. Plan the party for the last session. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials Needed:</th>
<th>Classroom Environment:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking piece, dry erase board, markers.</td>
<td>Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Lesson 9 Format/Instructional Procedure

**Anticipatory Set:** Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

**Lesson Sequence:** Time needed: 15 minutes

Help the students understand that although things may seem challenging now, it usually gets easier with time. “It takes 3-5 years for blended families to settle into a routine and for everyone to adjust to the change. Why do you think this is true?” Have the students brainstorm ways they think their particular family situations will get easier with time. Record their answers on the board.

Have a discussion about ways they can positively influence their family environment. Be real about what they can or cannot control and assist them in finding solutions to perceived obstacles.

Begin planning for the end-of-group party that will take place next week. What type of snacks would they like, is there a particular activity they would like to participate in to end the group?

**Closing:** Time needed: 10 minutes

Using the talking piece, have each student share one thing they are looking forward to in the coming week. Have each person give an appreciation to one other person in the group of their choosing. If a student has received an appreciation, they cannot receive another. The last person to receive an appreciation is the group facilitator.
Middle School
Small Group Lesson Plan

School Counselor: Cheryl Lietz
Subject: Stepping Forward Group
Lesson: Week 10 of 10: “Group Closing”

Pre-Instructional Planning

| Goal | Successfully provide closure for all of the group members. |

Classroom Environment: Small group of 6-8 students seated in a circle.

Lesson 10 Format/Instructional Procedure

Anticipatory Set: Time needed: 10 minutes

The students can be seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. Using the talking piece, go around the circle and have each student share one high and one low from the past week. If an issue should arise that requires further exploration, address this issue within the group and complete the scheduled lesson another time at the group leader’s discretion.

Lesson Sequence: Time needed: 15 minutes

Share snacks commencing the group’s completion. Play a game to be chosen by consensus of the group. It can be either a game that has been played or something new. Once snacks are finished, rejoin the group into the circle.

Use the talking piece to have each group member share what has been important to him/her as a participant in this group. As the group facilitator, comment on the group’s level of cohesiveness and how each student has contributed to the success of the group.

Have the group members openly discuss support systems they will utilize after group is finished. How are they going to continue to practice what they have learned without the support of this group?

Closing: Time needed: 10 minutes

Have an open appreciation session to close the group. Anyone may speak out at any time and share an appreciation about any person in the group. The group facilitator will randomly appreciate each group member.
Before the students leave, have them complete a group evaluation sheet to be turned in to you.

Return to the students any activities that have been collected over the course of the group.
**Group Evaluation**

**Stepping Forward Group**

Circle the number that best describes your reaction to each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I felt accepted by the group.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I helped others feel accepted.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I learned more about my feelings.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I learned more about blended family situations.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel better prepared to deal with family dynamics.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I liked the experience of being in group.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Being in this group was helpful.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The thing I liked best about group was:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

If I could change anything about group, it would be:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

If I gave the adult leader a grade, it would be: ______________

Some topics I wish we had discussed more are:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________