Although stepfamilies are an old family form, there has been an exponential increase in their numbers because of the rise in the divorce and remarriage rates in the United States. It is estimated that there are between 15–20 million stepfamilies in the United States, and the number continues to rise each year. The most common type of stepfamily is the divorce-engendered stepfather family, in which a man, who may or may not have been previously married, marries a woman who has children from a previous marriage or relationship (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Bray & Kelly, 1998). Most stepfamilies are created after a remarriage but, with the increase in cohabitation, many stepfamilies are formed without the legal sanction of matrimony. Most of the research and clinical writings are about stepfamilies with minor children (Bray, 1999; Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

In 1979, as a young and somewhat naive psychology intern working on my PhD in clinical psychology, I was assigned the case of the Sampson family, a mother and her two children, Buddy and Jessica. Ms. Sampson came to the clinic because she feared that her children might be developing problems because of her recent remarriage. The visit was precipitated by a conflict over helping with the dishes. When Mr. Sampson asked his stepson, Buddy, to lend a hand, he refused: "I don't have to do what you say 'cause you ain't my real daddy." Until that moment Ms. Sampson had felt that all was well in her new family and that she had made the "right" choice for herself and her children. Somehow this incident called into question her decision, and she was afraid that she might be "ruining her children's lives."

Because I was inexperienced and uneducated about stepfamilies, I simply consoled her during the first visit. Then I went to the library to find out more about the subject. My search did not take very long, because there was very little in the literature about divorce-engendered stepfamilies, and there was a paucity of research. So I decided that I would treat the Sampsons like a "regular" (i.e., nondivorced nuclear) family, because there were now two parents and children.

Over the next few sessions I consulted with Ms. Sampson about her fears and her parenting. I
worked briefly with the children around their problems with their family. Mr. Sampson, the new stepfather, did not come to therapy. The message he sent was that it was Ms. Sampson's problem and that she and the children had to take care of it. Ms. Sampson occasionally brought up issues about her ex-husband and the children. I usually brushed over these incidents to focus on the "real problems" in her new family. After several sessions Ms. Sampson stopped therapy. She seemed to be feeling better, and the conflicts had ceased. I assumed that they were doing OK.

In the clinic where I worked, two staff members—Carol Brady, PhD, and Joyce Ambler, MSW—noticed that children from divorced families and stepfamilies were overrepresented in the clinic. We decided to write a research grant proposal to develop a prevention program to help stepfamilies cope with their unique stresses and changes. The grant proposal was soundly rejected by the federal agency. The scientific reviewers thought the program was interesting and innovative; however, they said they could not fund a program when it was not clear that there was a need for it and when there had been no systematic research to study stepfamilies and demonstrate how they are different than other types of families. One reviewer asked, "Are there enough children in these kinds of families to warrant such a program and if so, why do stepfamilies need any different treatment than other types of families?" We shook our heads in disbelief. Our own experience had taught us that stepfamilies are unique and need special programs, but we did not have the time and energy to do the basic research without support.

About a year later, Ms. Sampson called me and requested an appointment. At this point I had completed my PhD and was a postdoctoral fellow in a family therapy training program. At the first session I was eager to find out what had happened to the family. Ms. Sampson was also quite eager to let me know what had happened and how my interventions had created all kinds of changes, both positive and negative, in her family.

The precipitating incident for consulting me was a lawsuit her ex-husband had filed because he now wanted to see his children, after not having seen them during the last year. Ms. Sampson had previously filed a lawsuit for nonpayment of child support of her children. Mr. Sampson, the stepfather, did not understand why his stepchildren were suddenly acting distant and more difficult to parent after he had developed such nice relationships, especially with Buddy, over the last 2 years. Ms. Sampson told me that she had tried to follow my advice and become a "regular" family and that if her ex-husband would just "leave them alone" everything would be A-OK. The children stated that they were excited to see their "real dad," but their mother and stepfather made it difficult for them to do so. Buddy said that he sort of liked the idea of having two dads and did not understand what all the problems were about. Sarah also wanted to see her father because she still wasn't too sure about Mr. Sampson.

Fortunately, at this time I had a supervisor who knew about stepfamilies and was also a family therapist. When I told him about the history of this case he just chuckled and told me, "Well, I guess you're ready to learn that there's lots of kinds of 'regular' families and what's 'regular' for nuclear families is certainly not 'regular' for stepfamilies." I read some new articles and a book by Emily and John Visher, pioneers in working with and writing about stepfamilies. I was amazed to find out what is "regular" for stepfamilies and how this can be very different than "regular" for other kinds of families (Visher & Visher, 1988).

In reading the articles, I learned that it was estimated that 20%–25% (it is up to 40% now) of all children in the United States would live in a stepfamily before they reached age 18 (Glick, 1989). During their childhood and adolescence, millions of children would be directly involved in the breakup and reorganization process as their family changed from a first-marriage nuclear family; to a postdivorce, single-parent family; to a stepfamily. Many children would be involved in repeated family changes because of their parents' multiple divorces and remarriages (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1998). Multiple marital transitions in stepfamilies remind me of the quote by Will Rogers: "I guess the only way to stop divorce is to stop marriage."

After I completed my postdoctoral fellowship, I
took a faculty position in the Department of Psychology at Texas Woman's University in Houston. In 1982, I again decided to study stepfamilies because of their increasing numbers following the "divorce revolution" in the United States. This time I worked with Joyce Ambler and Sandra Berger, both social workers. We all agreed that this type of research was sorely needed so that prevention and intervention programs could be developed for stepfamilies. Thus, we embarked on conducting basic developmental research on the nature of stepfamilies and how children grow and adjust within them. Using my research expertise and Joyce and Sandra's clinical experience, we designed a study to investigate how stepfamilies functioned during the first 5 years after remarriage. We submitted a grant proposal to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the National Institutes of Health and, after a couple of revisions, we were funded to begin the project (Bray, 1988; Bray & Berger, 1993).

We examined what a "normal" stepfamily looks like and how it operates. Our goal was to understand and document the family life cycle of such families and how they differ from nuclear families. Furthermore, we studied the impact of life in a stepfamily on individual functioning, such as social and emotional adjustment, and how extended family relationships develop in stepfamilies. Finally, we wanted to know what factors determine whether a stepfamily succeeds or fails.

When we began the Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies (DIS) Research Project in 1984, we made several naive assumptions about what we would find in our study. On the basis of our understanding of divorce and remarriage at that point, we assumed that life in a stepfamily would be initially stressful, involve several short-lived changes for children and adults, and that children would respond to these changes with increased behavioral problems. We were partially correct in this assumption, but we grossly underestimated the amount of change, both positive and negative, that families experience after a remarriage. Changes often included moving to a new residence, usually better than the previous one, because of the increased income available with two adults in the family. For children, this move was usually quite stressful, because it entailed losing old friends, changing schools, establishing new peer and family relationships, and especially getting accustomed to a new stepparent in the home. We also underestimated the influence that children had on the remarriage. As Herbert Samuel stated, "It takes two to make a marriage a success and only one to make it a failure." In the case of stepfamilies, it takes at least three, as the children had much influence on this.

We also naively assumed that within a year, or at most two, stepfamily relationships would settle down, adapt, and become quite similar to those in nuclear families. In addition, we believed that children's adjustment would improve and that there would be few differences between children in stepfamilies and those in nuclear families after a couple of years in a stepfamily.

We were wrong about several of our hypotheses. We found that it takes longer than a year for stepfamilies to adjust. There continue to be unique aspects of stepfamily relationships and marriages, different than those in nuclear families. Stepchildren continue to have more behavior problems than children in nuclear families, although these problems are not as pervasive as some researchers claim (Bray & Berger, 1993). The adults sometimes had a difficult time understanding the changes that occurred after the short-lived honeymoon wore off. As Peter DeVries said, "The difficulty with marriage is that we fall in love with a personality, but must live with a character."

We then began a longitudinal follow-up study in late 1988, which continued through 1992. In the meantime, I had moved to the Department of Family Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. There we refocused the project to examine how health and well-being are affected by the special stresses associated with stepfamilies' lives.

In following these families over time, we found that stepfamilies change in unique ways compared to nuclear families. Children's adjustment continues to be affected by these particular stepfamily relationships. Stepfamily life is influenced by the developmental changes of children, especially during adolescence. Successful stepfamilies were good at making "lemonade out of lemons" or, as George Bernard Shaw said, "If you cannot get rid of the family skel-
eton, you may as well make it dance.” We were particularly surprised by some of our findings, because they were different than what we had expected and different than some of the prevailing myths about the impact of divorce and remarriage. This chapter draws on the theory and research on stepfamilies from the DIS Research Project and my clinical experience in working with stepfamilies. A summary of the findings of the DIS Research Project can be found in Bray (1999), Bray and Berger (1993), and Bray and Kelly (1998).

DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK FOR STEPFAMILIES

Stepfamilies are evolving interactional family systems that appear to have their own developmental cycle. There are unique normative issues and tasks that occur during the stepfamily life cycle that differ from those of first-marriage families (Bray, 1993, 1999; Bray & Berger, 1992, 1993; Bray & Kelly, 1998; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Whiteside, 1982). Relationships in stepfamilies change over time and are affected by previous individual and family experiences, developmental issues within the stepfamily, and developmental issues for individual family members. Marital and family experiences during the first marriage, separation, and divorce may have a great impact on the functioning of the stepfamily (Bray & Berger, 1992; Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Thus, the multiple developmental trajectories of family members and the stepfamily life cycle are important to consider in understanding the functioning of stepfamilies.

Forming a stepfamily with young children is likely to be different than forming a stepfamily with young adolescents, and different than forming a stepfamily with adult children, because of the discordant developmental needs of family members (Bray, 1995). The stepfamily life cycle and individual developmental issues may be congruent, or they may be quite divergent. The developmental issues are congruent in new stepfamilies with young children because both the children and the stepfamily need close, cohesive family relationships. The centripetal forces of stepfamily formation coincide with the need that young children have for affective involvement and structure. In such cases, the stepfamily is moving to develop a cohesive unit, while adolescents are moving to separate from the family. Adolescents want to be less cohesive and more separate from the family unit as they struggle with identity formation and separation from the family of origin. In this case the developmental needs of the adolescent are at odds with the developmental push of the new stepfamily for closeness and bonding. Stepfamilies are usually less cohesive than first-marriage nuclear families, although their ideal level for cohesion is remarkably similar to that of nuclear families (Bray, 1988; Bray & Berger, 1993; Pink & Wampler, 1985).

A DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEMS APPROACH TO TREATING STEPFAMILIES

A useful approach for working with stepfamilies is based on the developmental systems model described above (Bray, 1995; Bray & Harvey, 1995). Helping family members understand the context of stepfamily life through psychoeducation about divorce and remarriage is an effective intervention to normalize the experiences of family members and promote a context for change. The remarried family system comprises the current residential stepfamily and includes links to the nonresidential parent’s extended family system and the stepparent’s extended family system. In addition, relevant issues from the previous marital and divorce experiences—particularly unresolved emotional problems and attachments—and issues from the family of origin are central concerns. Differentiating the unique issues encountered by stepfamilies from the expectations based on a nuclear-family model is a frequent part of the normalization process in psychoeducation. In addition, it is useful to educate family members about developmental issues and sequences for all children so that their problems are not labeled as having been created by the stepfamily. Strategic–intergenerational interventions are also used to facilitate change in family patterns, interactions, expectations, and meanings (Bray & Harvey, 1995; Williamson & Bray, 1988). These interventions are designed to consider the interactions between the life cycle tasks of the stepfamily and the individual family members.
CASE EXAMPLE

Joe and Sarah Boyd are a remarried couple who were referred for family therapy by Sarah's lawyer. Sarah had consulted her lawyer because she had "had enough of Joe and his son and daughter-in-law, and was tired of playing second fiddle to them." The Boyds had been married for 10 years. The lawyer suggested that the couple try family therapy before proceeding with a divorce, because each spouse indicated that he or she would prefer to be married if the couple could work out their problems. This was the second marriage for each of them. Joe had been married to his first wife for 14 years and had two children from that marriage. One of his sons had died at age 8. Joe had been divorced for 5 years before marrying Sarah. He ran a small business and was quite successful, although it required considerable time and energy. He often had to work 6 or 7 days a week.

Joe's remaining son, Jerry, had returned to the area and had worked in the family business for about 6 months. The plan was for Jerry to take over the business, after his father retired. However, in a later session it became clear that this was an area of contention between Joe and Sarah. Jerry was married to Cindy, and they had a year-old baby. Cindy had grown up in another state, so she had no family in the area. Joe described his son as strong willed but somewhat immature. Sarah, however, described Jerry in much harsher terms, such as "bull-headed, stupid, childish, and manipulative." Joe reported that during his adolescence, Jerry had a drug problem and an unstable work history. His hope was that Jerry would now settle down, because he felt caught between his wife and his son. He said that he did not understand why Sarah was so "worked up about everything." Jerry was his only surviving son, and he didn't want to lose him, too. His first son had died from a childhood illness. You could see the pain and grief in Joe's eyes when he talked about the loss of his young son and the possibility of losing the woman he loved. He did not understand why his wife was upset, neither did he appreciate the depth of her anger and resentment.

Sarah stated that she wanted help with "how to deal with Joe's insensitivity to me, especially about his son and daughter-in-law, and to improve our communication in our marriage. She continued angrily,

I feel betrayed, used, and ignored by Joe. Joe, Jerry, and Cindy are the Three Musketeers and I am always the odd person out. I'm sick of it and won't stand for it anymore. Jerry and Cindy know how to play Joe like a well-tuned fiddle. They know all the right strings to play and Joe does whatever they want and whatever he pleases without considering my feelings!

Joe seemed startled by Sarah's strong statement.

Sarah added, "Dr. Bray, I don't want to force Joe to choose between me and his son, so if things can't
change then I will just leave." On the clinic intake form Sarah indicated that her satisfaction with the marriage on a scale of 1 to 10 was a 1, whereas Joe indicated that his satisfaction was a 7. Clearly, he was completely unaware of Sarah's level of unhappiness.

Later, when I asked Sarah what had attracted her to Joe, she said,

I fell in love with him early in our dating and knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. However, looking back I didn't realize that it was a package deal, and I would have to put up with his son, his crazy ex-wife, and now his manipulative daughter-in-law. It's just too much.

This stepfamily was unusual in that they had been married for 10 years and they had adult children who lived outside of the home. Yet their problems were similar to those of many newer stepfamilies that struggle with the stress of blending two families with minor children (Bray, 1995; Bray & Harvey, 1995). The family was undergoing a developmental shift that was due to the recent return of Joe's remaining son, which stimulated unresolved family issues. In addition, the patterns of relating that had developed during their early years of marriage were being challenged with the new problems. Each spouse had angry and hurt feelings left from earlier times when the children were younger and lived with them.

On the surface, Joe seemed to brush off his own concerns and hurt. After I scratched the surface a little, it became apparent that he was afraid that if he opened up the issues that bothered him, he would have another great loss—either his son, his wife, or both. This fear prevented him from facing and dealing effectively with these issues. The couple seemed to be caught in a thick fog of the past that kept them stuck in dysfunctional patterns and prevented them from creating a workable future.

Sarah felt that Joe had been disloyal to her after Jerry's return and entry into the family business. This loyalty issue had escalated considerably in the last 6 months. For example, when she and Joe saw Jerry and Cindy at a restaurant and Joe went to speak to them, Sarah saw this as yet another example of disrespect and disloyalty. She told Joe to ignore them and not to speak to them. Furthermore, Sarah was very concerned about her husband turning over the family business to a son who could not manage it, which might affect their retirement. Both Joe and Jerry felt that this was not Sarah's concern, because the business predated Joe and Sarah's marriage and Joe had made other financial investments to ensure an adequate retirement for Sarah. However, Sarah countered that she did have a vested interest in the business, because her salary was being used to support the family and she helped out with the business when needed. She saw this as yet another example of how her husband was siding with his son against her. Although Joe had a strong commitment to save the marriage, Sarah was beginning to show signs of developing a pervasive negative perception of the marriage. She was highly critical and sarcastic with Joe. These types of interactions and "recasting" the marriage as totally negative are strong predictors of later divorce (Bray & Jouriles, 1995; Gottman, 1994).

I complimented the couple on dealing with these important issues and assured them that these were the types of concerns that typically arise in stepfamilies. I did this to normalize their concerns, provide information about stepfamilies, and set the context for making changes. Joe listened carefully, while Sarah tended to "yes, but" me about my attempts to normalize the situation.

At the end of the first session, I asked each of them to do homework. Such assignments continue the therapeutic process between sessions and speed the therapy. It was apparent that Sarah had significant emotional wounds from Joe's past behavior, that Joe was not aware of the hurts or how deeply Sarah felt about them, and that they did not have the skills or the context to productively resolve them. Their homework was to write a history of their marriage and to make a list of the hurts that each one had from the other. They were to independently prepare their marital histories and list of hurts and return next week prepared to discuss them.

At the beginning of the second session, they were visibly more relaxed, but not for long. Sarah stated that she had done her homework, and showed me many pages of handwritten notes. Joe
said he “sort of” did his, to which Sarah responded, “See, he says he is interested in saving our marriage, but he won’t do anything.” Joe replied, “I just had too much to do this week at work.” Sarah retorted, “You had time to go out to lunch with Jerry and Cindy, didn’t you!” For Sarah, this was yet another instance of how Joe put his work and relationship with his son first and their relationship second.

I asked Sarah about her list. She said that, in writing it, she had learned a lot about their problems because she had written half a page of hurts about other family members and four pages about her husband. Joe was clearly taken aback by this. I asked her to highlight with an imaginary yellow marker the major areas of concern. As she related the incidents, many of them went back to the early years of their marriage. The issues reflected a combination of unhealed hurts and unrealistic expectations about stepfamily life.

The bulk of this session was used to explore Sarah’s concerns. Because she had completed her homework, we started with her list. I asked her to describe her feelings about each of her issues. Then I asked Joe to acknowledge and mirror Sarah’s concerns and inquire about anything he really didn’t understand. I asked him to describe his view of the situation and to explain what actions he had taken and what his intention had been. For example, Sarah said that she believed that Jerry was just using Joe for money. She felt that when Joe took Jerry out to eat, he was not only excluding her but also permitting himself to be used. I asked Joe whether he saw this the same way. Joe said that it never entered his mind that Sarah might see his dining alone with Jerry as excluding her. It also seemed only proper to him to treat Jerry to lunch and to socialize with him. He had intended no harm to Sarah. However, he could acknowledge now how Sarah could see it differently. This enabled me to help them to explore some of their different views of the situation. I then asked Joe to review Sarah’s list. Where he could see her hurt, even though he felt no intention to harm her, I asked if he could now apologize. Sarah was then able to forgive Joe for some issues, but she said there were others she could not. I added, “maybe not at this time, but in the future.” The same process was now repeated with Joe’s list.

Sarah also had very strong opinions and unrealistic expectations about many of the things that had happened. The struggle between her and Joe was over who had the “right” view about what happened. The problem was that they were confusing what had happened with their interpretations of what had happened, and they were locked into a “fight to the death” about having the “right” view. This struggle is a common one for couples, especially remarried couples. The struggle about being right becomes a struggle for survival, which deprives the couple of the love and positive aspects of having a thriving marriage (Bray & Kelly, 1998).

Later, when Joe and Sarah clashed about still another incident, I said,

I am impressed to hear how committed each of you is to being right about what happened. You each report a similar set of actions, but your interpretations of what happened and what the other meant is vastly different. I wonder what is more important, to be right or to get along with each other? You may need to choose.

Joe responded, “I don’t have to be right about it. I’ve told Sarah that I think her perceptions are valid and OK for her.” I believe she heard this as, “your opinion is wrong or doesn’t really matter.”

Sarah responded, “See, that is just what I mean. He keeps saying that, ‘It is just my perceptions’, but they don’t mean anything to him. He just discounts them.”

I said,

This is exactly what I mean. You two struggle as if your lives depended on proving that your view is the correct one, but each of you confuses what actually happened with your own interpretations of what happened. But the price of needing to be right is losing the love and compassion you have for each other. Is it worth that price? Again, what is more important—to be right or get along? I suggest that you consider the possibility that it might be more important for you to get along than be right about everything.
This frame helped the couple consider alternative views and particularly affected Sarah’s ability to listen to some of my ideas about stepfamilies. It facilitated positive communication between the couple and interrupted their escalating defensive communication cycle (Alexander, 1973). Sarah became more able to express her concerns to Joe in a context and manner that permitted Joe to hear her without being overwhelmed by her negative emotional expressions.

Gottman (1994) reported that when there is highly charged negative emotion between a couple, men tend to shut down, both psychologically and physiologically, and do not attend to the cognitive message that accompanies the negative emotional message. This is a way of coping with the unpleasant arousal state triggered by the interaction. As Joe got beyond this defensive stance, he could help Sarah to understand that he was “on her side.”

Both Joe and Sarah had unrealistic expectations about their stepfamily relationships. Like so many stepparents, Sarah expected Joe to feel exactly the same about her children as he did about his own. This is part of the “nuclear family myth” for stepfamilies: People expect stepfamilies to be just like nuclear, first-marriage families (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Holding onto these expectations makes it difficult to resolve stepfamily problems. Because Sarah was more overt and verbal about her concerns, she tended to be the initial focus of the therapy. However, I had to be very careful not to be perceived by Sarah as “on Joe’s side.” To do this, I had to deal with her concern about loyalty and being left out of her new family. When I tried to explore the history of this issue, Sarah said that although this might have been an issue in her first marriage and family of origin, she did not see it as causing her current problems. She wanted to focus on this marriage. To maintain a neutral stance, I asked Sarah to tell me if she thought I was siding with Joe and against her and told her that we could talk about it if she felt that such was the case. This seemed to allay her concerns.

Although this was a difficult session, it appeared that the couple had adequate communication skills to discuss these issues on their own. However, the unspoken hurt, unresolved issues, and need to be right were still interfering with their communication. They were each avoiding dealing with underlying issues. I suspected that it had something to do with their unconscious protection of Joe’s feelings of grief at the loss of his son and his first marriage. Their homework was to schedule at least three meetings in which they would go over their list of hurts, as we had practiced in the session. If they completed this assignment, they were to tear the lists up and tell one another that they were forgiven. If they could not complete their lists, they were to bring them in for the next session. To promote positive interactions, they were also asked to invite each other to do something together just for fun. It could be something small, like listening to a joke, or something big, like having a date together.

The next session was to include Joe’s son and daughter-in-law. There was considerable resistance to having all of the parties in the room at the same time. It was apparent that a context needed to be set before the session. This situation was similar to the loyalty conflict discussed by Carter (1989) in which an inappropriate triangle is created among the parent, stepparent, and child. The stepparent asks, overtly or covertly: “Is the biological parent more loyal to the children or to me?” This type of question actually generates the problem, because it presumes that the stepparent and children are at the same hierarchical level within the family (Bray, 1995). Adults and children are in different categories, and this question is like comparing apples and mangoes. Making this distinction explicit can de-triangulate the situation and set a context for different relationships within the family.

To help Sarah and Joe prepare for this potentially difficult session, we discussed the need for family members to agree to treat each other with courtesy (Bray, 1995). We then discussed the difference between courtesy and respect. Respect cannot be demanded, it is earned, whereas courtesy is a given. I suggested that Joe tell his son and daughter-in-law that he expected them to treat “my wife” (not their parent or stepparent) with courtesy. The language is important. By not referring to his spouse as a step-parent, the expectations about parental roles and authority are subtly addressed. In addition, I recommended that Joe tell Sarah that he expects her to
treat “my son” (not “our children”) with courtesy. This process detriangulates relationships and sets the stage for resolution of other problems. He agreed to do this with his son and daughter-in-law during the next week.

Joe and Sarah also questioned whether Jerry would agree to attend the next session. Joe said that when he first mentioned the idea, Jerry said he didn’t need to see any “shrink” and that Sarah was the one who had problems and needed help. Joe felt that he should simply demand that Jerry come and even threaten him with the loss of his job. However, I felt that it was important to develop a different context for the session. I suggested that Joe invite Jerry and Cindy to come to the session as my “consultants.” He was to tell them that they would not be coming to receive help from me, but rather to help me help their father. I asked him to make it clear to them that this would be for only that one meeting.

All four attended the following session. All appeared apprehensive. The initial seating arrangement was quite telling. Jerry, Cindy, and Joe sat on one side of the room, and Sarah sat on the other side by herself. Before we started, I rearranged the seating to have Joe and Sarah together on a couch and Jerry and Cindy together.

I thanked Jerry and Cindy for coming and agreeing to help me help Jerry’s father and his marriage. I told them that I appreciated their commitment. Because they had known Joe and Sarah much longer than I had, they could provide valuable information for me in my attempt to be of help. This seemed to relax them.

To create a productive context, I asked Joe to restate his request that everyone treat the others with courtesy. Several important issues were then addressed. Some of the hot, unresolved topics were openly discussed for the first time. This enabled me to get a better picture of what had happened, to start the process of improving communication, and to offer alternative views that might be more productive. Several things became apparent: Sarah was on the outside of the relationship with the others, very angry, and openly hostile to Jerry and Cindy. Jerry was very angry and hostile toward Sarah. Joe did indeed make many decisions and commitments without consulting Sarah. He felt that this was not done in a malicious or power-oriented way, but as a style of just getting along and making decisions on the spot. He believed that Sarah did the same thing with her children and in their social relationships, so he thought it was OK for him to do it. This had been a major unspoken “rule” that they had never really negotiated.

The meeting was spent going over several incidents that had provoked conflict. This allowed each person to hear the others’ perspectives and resolve their concerns. In addition, it enabled Joe to take a clear position of alignment with his wife. Several times he was coached to support his wife when she raised concerns, rather than defend his son and daughter-in-law. This helped restructure the triangle in the family.

A major issue for Sarah was how Joe had handled remodeling their kitchen and how he had helped Jerry and Cindy remodel their home. She felt that he had put his son’s project over theirs and that Jerry and Cindy did not appreciate Joe’s contribution, and certainly not her own. This issue had arisen when Joe insisted that he had not taken Jerry’s side against Sarah. Sarah exclaimed,

> What about when you had the workers leave in the middle of our remodeling job to go work on their house? What do you call that? Our kitchen was a mess for a couple of weeks, while the men worked on their house!

Joe responded,

> The reason they left was because the materials to finish our kitchen weren’t ready, and our new appliances hadn’t come in. There wasn’t anything for them to do at our house, so I thought they could get started over at Jerry’s.

“I don’t believe you,” countered Sarah, “you just put it off to help Jerry and Cindy.”

Jerry inserted: “There she goes again, always thinking Dad is against her and for us.” Cindy added,
Come on Sarah, Dad (referring to Joe) was just trying to save us all money by having the workers stay busy. If I had known you were so upset about this, I would have had the workers not come, and waited 'til they finished with your house.

Sarah retorted: “Sure you would've, but your dad would never let you two go without, while I had to put up without a kitchen for weeks. See, Dr. Bray, how Joe takes their side and how Cindy plays up to him?”

At this point I stopped the process and thanked them for showing me how they interact. I said this was a good example of how our interpretation of events get in the way of getting along. I then asked Sarah to listen as Joe recounted what had happened. I asked Sarah to let me know if she had a question. When she raised the concern about not believing Joe, I asked Joe if he could show Sarah that the material and appliances were not available. He said that he would show her the dated invoices. Joe admitted that he should have consulted with Sarah before moving the workers and promised to do this in the future. This seemed to help her understand his point of view and made her feel included in the decision-making process.

I asked Cindy to describe her understanding of what had happened and for Sarah to listen and inquire about discrepancies. In the process, Cindy subtly indicated her appreciation for their help. I asked her to express her appreciation to Joe and Sarah in a much more explicit manner. Initially, Cindy balked. At that point I asked Joe and Sarah to explain their view, that help and gifts from Joe were really from both of them. After all, Sarah contributed to the family's income, and Joe and Sarah viewed all of these resources as “theirs,” not as separate funds. Cindy indicated that she understood this. However, Jerry stated that the money his dad gave him came from the family business, which predated Joe and Sarah's marriage. For that reason, he felt that he didn't need to thank Sarah for it. I decided to leave this issue alone for the present, because some progress had been made, and there were other concerns with which to deal. Another goal was to get Joe out of the middle of the relationship between Sarah and Jerry and Cindy. To achieve this, they came to an agreement about how and when they would see each other and agreed that Joe would consult with Sarah before he made social commitments with them. They also began to examine how the money issues between father and son affected them all. Despite the productive changes made during the session, it was apparent at the end of the meeting that Sarah and Jerry were still very angry with each other. Sarah remained skeptical about the changes and still felt very hurt by what had happened in the past. Although on the surface the issue was about money, it in fact represented the arena in which Joe and Sarah's underlying battle over loyalty was being fought. This became even more apparent in the following session.

At our next meeting, Joe said that he felt things had gone “reasonably well,” whereas Sarah appeared quite angry. I indicated that I felt that the session had gone well. Jerry, and especially Cindy, appeared willing to work to improve the relationship. But Sarah snapped, “She suckered you, too, Dr. Bray. That's the way she is with men, she always gets what she wants. I don't believe that you didn't see how she is.” The triangle was reappearing in the therapy session.

I asked the couple if they had completed their list of hurts. They had not. Sarah angrily stated that Joe had continued to betray her and that nothing had changed. I asked what had happened and she said that Joe had lunch with Jerry twice this week. Joe asked Sarah, “What's wrong with having lunch with my son, everybody has to eat, don't they?” Sarah retorted, “Did you pay for the lunches? The only reason Jerry has lunch with you is so that you will pay. Can't you see he is just using you—using us?!” I thanked Sarah for bringing this up and stated that this was a perfect example with which to start the session. I acknowledged Sarah's strong feelings and asked her if she was willing to let go of her hurt and anger and move forward. She indicated that she could not or would not do that. It appeared that Sarah felt “wronged” by Joe. Sarah experienced Joe's relationship with Jerry almost in the same way that a hurt partner views a mate's extramarital affair. In such a situation the offending spouse must undertake some penance to help heal the wrong. The
idea of penance was consonant with the couple's religious beliefs.

We spent most of this session discussing Sarah's concerns and clarifying the agreement between the couple about how and when Joe would see his son and daughter-in-law. I asked Sarah how she wanted Joe to make amends for the past. She wanted him to stop giving Jerry and Cindy any money for the next month and not to have any social contacts with them for that period. Joe agreed. This seemed to make a dramatic impact on Sarah. It helped her understand how committed Joe was to their marriage and to healing this situation. I also again normalized this situation as a typical stepfamily issue. I ended by complimenting them for developing a workable plan.

The next several sessions were spread out over a 2-month period. The couple continued to make steady progress. After the session in which Joe agreed not to see his son, there was a dramatic shift in Sarah. "Now," she said, "I can let go of the past and move forward." However, an issue arose that seemed to be a step backward. Without consulting Joe, Sarah had made some plans with her children. She had invited them over to the house on a weekend when Joe was planning some time alone with Sarah. She had also agreed to pay for some unexpected expenses that her daughter had incurred, again without consulting Joe. Soon after, Joe had dinner and a visit with his son and daughter-in-law, without first talking with Sarah. Sarah was very angry and concerned about this. I was concerned too, but for different reasons. Sarah felt it was a relapse: Joe was once again putting his loyalty to his son above his loyalty to her, willfully violating their agreement. I initially wondered if this was passive-aggressive behavior on Joe's part. Then, I began to consider the possibility that this was a return to their earlier escalating defensive communication cycle.

We used this session as a means to reclarify their agreement and to discuss Joe's concerns about Sarah and her children. Joe explained that his dinner with his son was not related to what Sarah had done, and he reminded Sarah that he had agreed not to have dinner with his son for a specific period of time, which had elapsed. He also stated that he felt he had a right to spend some money in any way he pleased and pointed out that Sarah did that with her children. This led to a useful discussion about how the couple would allocate their money and that each needed the freedom to spend some amount of money without checking with the other. Furthermore, Joe was upset because he felt that, when it came to the children, Sarah held him to a much stricter standard than herself. The remainder of this session and the next explored how they could deal with their children fairly while still being considerate of one another.

The final session was used to review what had been learned in therapy and how to deal more effectively with future issues. The couple seemed very content with their current situation and were able to discuss issues as they arose. There were no longer "off-limits" topics for them. Sarah appeared to have let go of her anger and resentment toward Joe. Joe indicated that Sarah still did not have a close relationship with his son and daughter-in-law but was willing to have social events with the family and to continue working to improve the relationship. In addition, Sarah reported that, rather than dreading these social events, she could now enjoy them. I suggested that they might want to have another session with the four of them, but they declined and stated that they had made good progress on the issues and wanted to handle the rest on their own.

We talked about warning signs to which the couple should attend that would signal approaching problems. Planning for dealing with future problems and how to handle relapses are important strategies for maintaining changes in couples (Bray & Jouriles, 1995). I agreed with their plans, and we concluded that we would have a final session in 6 months. I called the couple before the schedule final visit. Sarah said they were doing very well, enjoying each other, and didn't feel the need for a session.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

This stepfamily exemplifies many of the issues that stepfamilies face during their development and over the course of their life cycles. Although this family had been together for some time, they encountered and re-encountered various issues concerning loyalty, triangles, parent–child conflict, and marital conflict that are faced by all stepfamilies (Bray & Kelly, 2000).
What is striking about this family is how interactional patterns that developed during the early years of their marriage continued and evolved into problem areas for the couple. Their inability to discuss issues and maintain communication prevented them from resolving new issues and moving forward. Unresolved hurts and incomplete mourning of losses had a significant impact, even years after their occurrence.

Parenting issues, even with older children, tend to have a significant impact on stepfamily marriages. The direction of effects of parent–child problems and marital problems tends to differ in first-marriage families as compared with stepfamilies. In first-marriage families, problems in the marriage usually move downward and create problems with the children. However, in stepfamilies the problems tend to move upward. Conflict over how to meet the demands and needs of stepchildren is the frequent cause of problems in the marital relationship. This was clearly the situation with Joe and Sarah.

Money is often an arena of conflict for all families, but especially for stepfamilies. For Sarah and Joe, money represented loyalty and support. In stepfamilies with adult children the money issue is usually centered around inheritance and planning for retirement. Although adult children may be financially independent, they still have an interest in their inheritance, and this again adds to potential conflict and stress.

The developmental systems model I used with this family is typical of my work with stepfamilies. It addresses the developmental issues in stepfamilies and their intersection with individual life cycles. It informs both clinicians and clients about potential stress points or areas of conflict so that they can understand and, I hope, plan for them. A final point: Although we now know significantly more about how stepfamilies function and develop, we still need much more research, so that we can create effective prevention and intervention programs for these complex family systems.

References


