

**IDENTIFICATION OF THEMES IN COMMUNICATION RELATED  
CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN NEWLY FORMED STEPFAMILIES**

by

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## ABSTRACT

### IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNICATION RELATED CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN NEWLY FORMED STEPFAMILIES

by Patsy Meisel

This study investigated themes of communication-related critical incidents occurring in newly formed stepfamilies. Both spouses of 26 couples who had formed a stepfamily within two years or less and had at least one child from a former union who lived with the stepfamily at least 50 percent of the time were interviewed. Twenty-five themes identified by the researcher were matched to critical incidents at a .85 reliability level by trained coders.

The importance and difficulty of the critical incident themes was learned through questionnaires returned by 30 respondents. The critical incidents mentioned with most frequency were: 1) talking about possible problems in making a stepfamily before marriage was not adequate planning for all the problems the couple actually have to deal with; 2) the stepparent feels left out when his/her mate reminisces with children about the past; and 3) the stepparents try to give advice to their stepchildren. The critical incidents reported to have the highest degree of importance to the stepfamily were: 1) family concerns over bringing together two sets of children who are very similar in age; 2) difficulty

managing financial matters and expanded living space because of two families coming together; and 3) talking about possible problems in making a stepfamily before marriage was not adequate planning for all the problems the couple actually have to deal with.

The critical incidents reported to present the greatest degree of difficulty were: 1) anticipating stepfamily problems prior to marriage was insufficient in terms of the number and/or intensity of issues that were actually confronted; 2) parents conversations with children torn by whom to spend time with on holidays, birthdays, and vacations; and 3) the new couple talk about added stress in their marriage because of children's adjustment problems.

The most critical issues were determined to be: 1) family concerns over bringing together two sets of children very similar in age; 2) anticipating stepfamily problems prior to marriage was insufficient in terms of the number and/or intensity of issues that were actually confronted; and 3) difficulty managing financial matters and expanded living space because of two families coming together.

Dedicated to the  
Two Men in My Life

To my father: who gave me the love of knowledge and  
who gave up so much in his life so that  
others could achieve and succeed. This  
one's for you, Dad.

To my husband: who made it all happen--chief "cook and  
bottle washer" for three years so that I  
could accomplish my dream. We make a  
"pretty good team."

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The stepfamily is not a new social phenomenon, but it is increasing rapidly. In 1980, one in every five children lived in a stepfamily (Cooper, 1987). Each year, more than one million couples are divorced, and four out of every five divorced people remarry within a three-year period. The annual increases in the divorce and remarriage rates in the last two decades indicate that stepfamilies may become the predominant family form in the United States (Esses and Campbell, 1984; Hamner and Turner, 1985). Even though the number of stepfamilies has been increasing rapidly, understanding of communication processes within this context is lagging behind.

Several difficulties deter understanding of stepfamily dynamics. Many stepfamilies try to adopt family roles based on a model of the biological nuclear family, which often are inappropriate and dysfunctional (Mills, 1984). Also, much is written about stepfamilies only from the clinical point of view. Therefore, the stepfamily is frequently described as being deviant and pathogenic in comparison to traditional, first-marriage families (Esses and Campbell, 1984). The numbers of relationships in stepfamilies and the newness of these

relationships also present communication issues not present in nuclear families.

Although empirical studies of family life present difficulties under any circumstances, the magnitude of communication issues in stepfamilies was deemed significant enough to warrant further study. Papernow (1984) indicates that particular stress is evident in the early years of stepfamily formation as virtual strangers attempt to integrate their children, their possessions, and their lifestyles. Because individuals tend to believe that their rules for living are not unique, the motives of those who do not follow the same rules are automatically suspect. Unfortunately, communication about these issues entangles children from previous marriages as well as the new couple and their former spouses.

In spite of the complications implicit in such a study, the belief that stepfamilies are not necessarily pathological but that they do have unique communication issues to which stepfamily members often attach great importance was strong motivation for further study.

A purpose of this study was to investigate non-clinical spouses in stepfamilies to determine the communication-related issues particular to them in the first two years of the reformation process. A second purpose was to investigate these issues in terms of the importance that parents and stepparents attach to these



issues and also to the difficulty they have in dealing with these issues. A comparison of this data with communication issues identified in therapeutic literature was done to identify issues common to all stepfamilies and to separate out those which are non-clinical specific.

## Review of Literature

A wealth of disparate material exists related to issues in stepfamilies, specific issues they face (such as abuse and interracial remarriage), and suggestions for improving stepfamily living. Research on stepfamily issues reported in articles is summarized here first dealing with general and then specific issues. A brief summary of each article is provided, including the type of family structure studied, information about communication-related issues gleaned from each source, and gaps and implications for future research.

### General Reviews of Stepfamily Issues

Several investigators have content-analyzed various types of stepfamily literature to identify issues faced in stepfamilies. These present a broad overview of what has been written in the field in the recent past.

Nolan, Coleman, and Ganong (1984) analyzed the contents of 26 introductory marriage and family textbooks to determine how much and what kinds of materials were included on stepfamilies. Only a handful of empirical studies were mentioned. Twenty of the books reviewed had devoted three pages or fewer to stepfamilies. In some instances, as little as one sentence was included. Sources of stress in stepfamilies were discussed by some authors. These included such issues as ex-spouses who had visitation rights, kinship terms (what to call the

stepparent and other new family members), lack of legal status for the stepparent, incest between stepfathers and adolescent daughters, money involving support payments, new roles and rules, family conflict, loyalty, complexity of relations, and bread and butter issues (where to live, etc.). While this study identifies stepfamily problems mentioned in textbooks, virtually no information is based on empirical studies and much is taken only from clinical literature.

Coleman, Ganong, and Gingrich (1985) reviewed 44 self-help books, 46 magazine articles, and 153 adolescent fiction books dealing with adolescents in stepfamilies. A variety of sources, including computer searches, were used to locate materials. The magazine articles were limited to the past 10 years. The self-help books focused mostly on problems in stepfamilies, primarily financial considerations and legal complexities. The adolescent fiction books provided a more balanced view of strengths and weaknesses in stepfamilies. The magazine articles and the self-help books give the impression that stepfamilies were battling against overwhelming odds, and the adolescent literature was limited to the child's point of view; although there were practical suggestions to the teenager on how to deal with certain stepparent problems.

Lagoni and Cook (1985) looked at how stepfamilies were portrayed in the popular literature between 1961 -

1982. They chose five of the leading parent-oriented magazines for analysis. Two magazines presented research-based articles while the other three focused on personal account articles. The articles tended to focus on the needs of children such as discipline, communication, and acceptance as well as on the ambiguity of the stepparent role. This article contained few specific instances or examples so the reader is left wondering what was included under such headings as "communication" and "legal issues."

Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1985) analyzed popular literature over a 40 year period (1940 - 1980). The researchers' goals were to assess whether problems reported in popular literature correspond to those discussed in professional literature and to explore the changes over time. The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature was used to locate articles in popular print regarding stepfamilies. Thirteen specific problems were identified in the articles: 1) child rearing or discipline; 2) loyalty conflicts; 3) stepparent's lack of parenting skills; 4) stepparent's feeling of exclusion from family interaction; 5) children's rejection of bonding; 6) communication; 7) role expectations; 8) sex life; 9) disagreements over children; 10) privacy; 11) visiting children; 12) supporting two households; and 13) acceptance of new kin. Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman found the popular literature more dependent on clinical

literature than empirical literature, so it may not adequately reflect the non-clinical population.

In 1987, Coleman and Ganong analyzed 11 stepfamily self-help books for children and adolescents. They reviewed and critiqued the books on several dimensions such as appropriate audience, author's background, issues identified, advice given, and strengths presented. There were nearly 50 different issues identified, but those most frequently mentioned were: 1) loyalty conflicts; 2) discipline; 3) myth of the wicked stepmother; 4) stepsibling conflicts; 5) myth of instant love; and 6) jealousy. None of these books contained references to clinical or empirical research; and they are only supposed to be used in conjunction with a therapist's help. Again, the non-clinical family is ignored.

Since 90 percent of stepfamilies are stepfather families (the mother usually is appointed the custodial parent even though judges declare joint custody), Robinson (1984), reviewed the research written about stepfather families. He examined the inconsistencies in the literature as well as the methodological shortcomings. The clinical literature, according to Robinson, identifies eight problems faced by stepfathers. They are: 1) uncertainty about their roles as fathers; 2) amount of affection to give stepchildren and how to show it; 3) discipline and enforcement of rules for stepchildren; 4)

money conflicts involving support payments; 5) guilt over leaving children in a previous marriage; 6) loyalty conflicts; 7) sexual or incest conflicts with adolescent stepdaughters; and 8) conflict over surnames.

While the problems identified by Robinson are quite specific and helpful to other researchers, Robinson also discovered that most studies used questionnaires involving the perceptions of only one member of a stepfamily. He found no longitudinal studies of stepfamilies to determine how problems change over time, and no comparisons of clinical and non-clinical stepfather families to determine significant differences and similarities.

Cooper (1987) examined sex role stereotypes of stepparents in children's literature from a bibliotherapy standpoint. The method, developed by Menninger during World War II, states that a person identifies with a fictional character and works toward solving his/her own problems based on what happens to the fictional character. Cooper states that research and writing on stepfamilies reveals six common themes in stepfamilies: 1) divided loyalties; 2) jealousy; 3) problems of discipline; 4) unrealistic expectations; 5) definition and clarification of roles; and 6) myths of instant love and the wicked stepmother.

Cooper chose to explore only the last two themes of the six listed above as they are revealed in popularly

read children's books. Her findings revealed that roles are stereotyped for males and females, and the stepmother's role is the most difficult one to deal with. While the study is focused and valuable for that reason, research in the other four areas would have added credibility to other studies dealing with the same issues.

Bernstein and Collins (1985) explored problems in stepfamily literature including how lawyers and therapists influence the remarriage process. The authors mention problems specific to stepfamilies which include:

1) complexity of the kinship network (this includes a lack of guidelines or social regulations which result in confusion and uncertainty); 2) unresolved emotional issues from past marriage and divorce; 3) children's adjustment to the new marriage, especially in accepting discipline from the stepparent; 4) unpredictability of child support payments; 5) the stepparent having responsibilities but no legal rights in the stepfamily. This article is unique in that it explores the connection between the therapist and the lawyer; although, again, it identifies specific clinical issues in the stepfamily.

Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman and Coleman (1984) surveyed happy and unhappy remarried couples about perceived agreement and disagreement on several issues. These include: 1) the discipline of children or stepchildren; 2) how the needs of children and stepchildren were met; 3)

handling of family finances; 4) money budgeted for food; 5) ways to spend extra money; 6) cleanliness of the household; 7) household tasks; 8) amount of time spent with ex-spouse; 9) friends; 10) ways of dealing with ex-in-laws; 11) ways of dealing with parents and/or in-laws; 12) amount of time spent with spouse; 13) how spouse shows affection; 14) sex life; 15) goals or things believed to be important; 16) job or work decisions; 17) recreation or free-time activities; and 18) religion.

The authors concluded that similarity between spouses on perceptions of issues is related to happiness in the marriage. This statement could be made about nuclear families as well. With the exception of discipline of stepchildren, needs of stepchildren, and ways of dealing with ex-in-laws, the questions did not deal with stepfamily issues. On these three items, there was significant differences in agreement between happy and unhappy remarried couples.

Esses and Campbell (1984) explored the challenges in doing research with stepfamily populations at each step in the research process. They mentioned that the biggest challenge is that stepfamilies are growing at a much faster rate than research or theory to explain this phenomena. Past research has used small samples or nonrandomly selected stepfamilies. They are not representative because most are white, middle-class people



seeking clinical help with their problems. Research tools are seldom standardized so their reliability and validity are questionable. There have been no longitudinal studies, and researchers tend to view stepfamilies as deviant and pathogenic in comparison to nuclear families. This article was helpful in showing the value of doing research for a growing population who have much need of the information to be gleaned from the studies.

To summarize this section, we can see that very little empirical research has been done with stepfamilies; most conclusions are drawn from the clinical literature which may not be representative of the non-clinical stepfamily; many issues have been identified in stepfamilies; much has been written by people who have been stepparents but have done no research; the adolescent's viewpoint is prevalent; and there are few standardized research tools.

#### Specific Reviews of Stepfamily Issues

The studies discussed above involved multiple issues. Those which follow deal with only one or two stepfamily issues, or with only special kinds of stepfamilies, primarily those with clinical problems.

Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) did a qualitative study to examine Cherlin's hypothesis of "incomplete institutionalization." The two-part hypothesis states

that: 1) remarried couples face problems from which no institutionalized solutions have emerged; and 2) second marriages with children run a greater risk of separation and divorce. They conducted 1 - 2 hour structured interviews followed by longer, open-ended focused interviews which elaborated on the information from the first interview. Their study corroborated Cherlin's first hypothesis but did not support the second. The authors speculate that divorced people who remarry are less committed than first marriage couples to the union for its own sake; therefore, lack of commitment may be the main reason for divorce in remarried families, not the presence of children. The authors did not ask about other problems encountered by these newly-formed families.

Pink and Wampler (1985) looked at cohesion and adaptability in stepfather-adolescent relationships. Twenty-eight stepfamilies with adolescents 12 - 18 years of age were compared to 28 similarly matched nuclear families. Questionnaires for all three family members were distributed and collected. Less cohesion and adaptability were reported for male parent-adolescent relationships in stepfamilies than for female parent-adolescent relationships. Marital satisfaction did not differ by family type. Length of remarriage, amount and quality of contact with the biological father, and adolescent gender were not related to stepfamily

functioning. The results of this study contradict the finding in most other studies on stepparent-adolescent relationships that female parent-adolescent relationships are more problematic. The researchers do indicate that stepfamilies need more help in securing feelings of togetherness (cohesion) and problem solving (adaptability) than nuclear families need.

Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli (1984) conducted a multimethod study involving both stepfather and stepmother families with children in the 9 - 12 age group. They looked at whether the sex of the stepparent in a family with pre-adolescent children had a major impact on the quality of the relationship within the stepfamily. A variety of standardized questionnaires were given to stepparents and children, and the stepparent and stepchild were asked to engage in two discussion tasks which were video-taped. They found that stepparent-stepdaughter relationships were more problematic than stepparent-stepson relationships. Small sample sizes limit the generalizability of the finding in this study (it was extremely difficult to locate stepmother families). The authors did not look for reasons why certain stepparent-stepchild relationships are not as successful as others. Their finding could be valuable to future researchers if the study is replicated.

Brand and Clingempeel (1987) conducted a multimethod-

multisource study with the 9 - 12 age group of children to examine how marital and stepparent-stepchild relationships are related to children's psychological adjustment. They administered a number of paper and pencil tests and video-taped two 10-minute sessions. One session involved the stepparent and stepchild; the other was between the husband and wife. The findings were interpreted from a family systems perspective.

The results revealed that stepmother families experienced better stepmother-stepson relationships than stepmother-stepdaughter relationships, resulting in better stepson adjustment and high marital quality for the couple. In stepfather families, both stepsons and stepdaughters were better adjusted, and there was high marital quality. The authors speculate that daughters who have lived with fathers prior to remarriage may take on a "wife-like" role which is severely threatened by the new stepmother. Also, there is a possibility that more frequent visits between the stepdaughter and her mother may create loyalty conflicts for the girl and her stepmother. Stepfamily problems may be related to the sex of the stepchild.

Crosbie-Burnett (1984) tested the family theory which states that the center of the marital relationship is the happiness of the couple. She surveyed 87 upper-middle-class Caucasian mother-stepfather families with one or two

adolescent children to assess family happiness, marital happiness, and aspects of stepparent-stepchild interaction. She found that stepparent-stepchild relationships had a greater effect on stepfamily happiness than the quality of marital satisfaction. This indicates that stepfamilies need their own norms and rules which differ from nuclear family standards.

Clingempeel and Brand (1985) studied quasi-kin relationships (those relatives who are involved in a stepfamily but are not really related to one another), structural complexity, and marital quality in stepfamilies. Husband-wife discussion tasks were videotaped. Two major findings were reported: 1) persons from simple stepfather families (involving only one set of stepchildren) registered higher marital quality than people from complex families (involving two sets of stepchildren); and 2) people who had moderate contact with quasi-kin had better marital quality than either high or low frequencies of contact. It appears, from this study, that too much blending of families compounds the problems faced by the stepfamily, but those issues are not identified in this study.

Demaris (1984) used a 32-item questionnaire to study marital satisfaction between people in first marriages vs. those in stepfamilies who had cohabited prior to marriage or remarriage. He found no significant differences. The

cohabitation issue, therefore, was not considered in the present research.

Coleman and Ganong (1984) examined high school and college students' attitudes toward marriage, marriage roles, and divorce. The 72-item questionnaire revealed that stepchildren do not differ in their attitudes from children in nuclear families and that stepchildren are not adversely affected by their parent's remarriage. The data are from a nonrandom sample because of difficulty in locating stepchildren; and the subsample was quite small in some categories (especially stepmother families).

The authors speculate that attitudes toward marriage may be more complex than imagined, and these attitudes may include influences from media portrayals, cultural myths, religious influences, and observations of friends, siblings, and other acquaintances. The challenge for future researchers is to explain why there is no difference in attitude among these populations.

Ganong and Coleman (1984) reviewed 38 empirical studies in books and journals on the effects of remarriage on children. According to the authors, few conclusions can be drawn from the studies because few variables have been included in more than one study; even then the results were measured differently. There is conflicting evidence regarding self-image, psychological adjustment, and personality characteristics in children from

stepfamilies when compared to children from nuclear families. From this study it appears that stepchildren do not differ significantly from children of nuclear families regarding such issues as academic achievement, social skills, and attitudes toward marriage. The conclusions from the empirical literature do not support the conclusions emanating from the clinical literature, according to Ganong and Coleman.

Two studies explored specialized problems in clinical stepfamilies. One, conducted by Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) reviewed the available data regarding physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in stepfamilies. Moving into a position of authority too soon and meeting resistance from other family members was identified as one reason for physical and emotional abuse in stepfamilies. This information is taken from the clinical literature and involves only reported cases of abuse. It is highly doubtful if abuse would be discussed in non-clinical families. It appears that abuse is an issue which arises in families having problems severe enough to seek therapy.

Baptiste (1984) described problems faced by racially/culturally intermarried stepfamilies. He claimed that white Americans: 1) believe that a person should marry his/her "own kind" and those intermarriages are doomed to failure; 2) because each partner brings a racially/culturally different view of reality into the

marriage, they have more conflict than their homogeneous counterparts; and 3) the children in racially/culturally mixed stepfamilies face special problems not present in homogeneous stepfamilies. Based on this finding, no racially/culturally mixed stepfamilies were interviewed in the present study.

Baptiste also found that typical problems of stepfamilies include boundaries, family management, discipline, relationships with ex-spouses, kinship relationships, children's acceptance, love and trust for a stepparent are imbued with new meanings in a racially/culturally mixed stepfamily. The author neglects to mention the number of racially/culturally mixed stepfamilies were involved in the study. All cases were taken from therapy literature and may not be representative.

#### Conclusions About Research Methodology

This review of literature indicates the following about the extant research on stepfamily relationships and problems: 1) much writing is based on clinical literature rather than on empirical studies; 2) the studies do not reflect the non-clinical population; 3) no comparisons are made between clinical and non-clinical populations; 4) few are longitudinal studies; 5) generalizations about communication in stepfamilies do not emerge from the research; 6) much research is from a single point of view,



usually the adolescent child of the stepparent; 7) it is difficult to locate stepmother families; 8) the popular literature and self-help books provide merely anecdotal accounts of problems stepparents face; and 9) children's literature stereotypes males and females as stepparents.

#### Methodology Implications for This Study

The following implications from this review of stepfamily literature were applied in this study:

1) It is important to tap into available data using more than one method of study. Therefore, this study gathered narrative accounts of critical incidents in stepfamilies through unstructured and structured interviews. The results then were complemented through questionnaires which listed themes of critical incidents and ask the participants to rate the incidents that occurred in their stepfamily for importance to the marriage and difficulty in dealing with the issues.

2) Much research on stepfamilies is conducted from a single point of view, usually that of the stepchild or the stepfather. Because such methods are less strong, every attempt was made to interview both spouses in stepfamilies.

3) While many problems were discussed in the literature, only a few issues appeared with any degree of regularity. No study described how newly formed stepfamilies communicate about issues particular to their

family type. Because this study is communication oriented, the interviewer focused on issues faced by the newly formed stepfamily.

4) The non-clinical family rarely was studied. In this study, families selected for interviews had not sought clinical help in adjusting to stepfamily life. The issues from these non-clinical stepfamilies were then compared to communication-related issues which were reported to occur in clinical stepfamilies.

#### Conclusions About Content

Many issues are discussed in the literature. The more important ones are as follows: 1) stepparent-stepchild happiness is more important to stepfamily happiness than marital satisfaction; 2) the stepmother's role may be more difficult for children to handle than the stepfather role; 3) blending of families with two sets of children compounds stepfamily problems; 4) cohabitation does not affect marital happiness in stepfamilies; 5) stepchildren often resent stepparents who move into a position of authority too soon; 6) children from racially/culturally mixed stepfamilies face additional problems; and 7) disagreement on stepfamily issues may be directly related to stepfamily unhappiness. Most of these issues were incorporated in the interview protocol (see Appendix D).

#### Specific Issues in Stepfamilies

To clarify the multitude of types of stepfamily issues identified in the literature reviewed, grids were prepared which separate issues into categories. Only issues mentioned by more than one writer were incorporated into the structured portion of the interview in the present study. It is believed that frequently mentioned issues are those which are most likely dealt with in stepfamilies.

The general categories of stepfamily issues identified are: 1) conflict between spouses; 2) conflict with ex-spouse; 3) individual parent and stepparent issues; 4) stepparent-stepchild conflict; and 5) children's issues. Tables 1 - 5 list the issues identified under each heading and the source in which they were identified.

Several of the issues identified in the review of literature pertain to nuclear families as well as stepfamilies. Because these issues are not specific to the stepfamily, they were not considered in this study. Those excluded were listed in the literature as: family adjustment, family management, privacy, sex life, friends, religion, jealousy, unrealistic expectations, expression of unmet needs by spouses and children, goals or things believed to be important, recreation or free-time activities, job or work decisions, household tasks, cleanliness of household, and handling of family finances.

The most prevalent couple issue was discipline of stepchildren. It was mentioned by eight of the eleven studies which dealt with problems faced by the new couple who have remarried. No other problem was mentioned more than once.

Among ex-spouse issues, supporting two households was the most frequently mentioned problem, followed by impact of quasi-kin, visitation arrangements, where the children should attend school, and trying to resolve the past after divorce.

Six individual parent or stepparent issues were mentioned by more than one researcher. The most frequently written about was the ambiguous role of the stepparent. This was followed by the myth of instant love from stepchildren, being unable to share the past with the parent and his/her children, having responsibility for stepchildren but no legal rights, incest with adolescent stepdaughter(s), having few or no parenting skills, and being considered the wicked stepmother by the stepchildren.

Two frequently mentioned stepparent-stepchild issues were what to call one another, and what to call other new family members who are not actually related but are now part of the extended stepfamily. The changing boundaries in a stepfamily and the importance of bonding prior to discipline were also important issues in this category.

Three important children's topics were being unsure about who is okay to love now that parents are divorced, wanting their original, nuclear family to re-unite, and resenting the new stepparent.

Table 1: Individual Parent or Stepparent Issues

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Ambiguous role of stepparent	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					
Wicked stepmother						X		X				
No skills to parent	X											
Incest--stepdaughter		X			X							
Guilt, leaving own children					X							
Responsibility but no rights		X							X			
Non-parent role										X		
No validation from spouse											X	
Affection to stepchildren					X							
Rescuing stepchildren											X	
Unable to share past	X						X				X	
Myth of instant love						X					X	X
Someone to share load											X	
Withdrawal of spouse											X	

A=Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman (85)  
 B=Nolan, Coleman & Ganong (84)  
 C=Coleman, Ganong & Gingrich (85)  
 D=Esses & Campbell (84)  
 E=Robinson (84)  
 F=Cooper (87)  
 G=Lagoni & Cook (85)

H=Clingempeel & Ganong(87)  
 I=Bernstein & Collins (85)  
 J=Mills (84)  
 K=Papernow (84)  
 L=Coleman & Ganong (87)

Table 2: Stepparent-Stepchild Conflict

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
What to call one another	X	X	X	X							
Changing boundaries			X	X							
New family relationships					X	X	X	X			
Bonding before discipline			X							X	
Quality of new relationships											X

A=Nolan, Coleman & Ganong (84)  
 B=Robinson (84)  
 C=Baptiste (84)  
 D=Papernow (84)  
 E=Pink & Wampler (85)  
 F=Clingempeel, Brand  
 & Ievoli (84)

G=Brand & Clingempeel (87)  
 H=Crosbie-Burnett (84)  
 I=Mills (84)  
 J=Giles-Sims & Finkelhor (84)  
 K=Esses & Campbell (84)

Table 3. Children's Issues

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Don't know who is okay to love	X	X	X	X	X	
Stepsibling conflicts	X					
Same role for father and step						X
People who dislike 1 another						X
People disagree & still love						X
Resenting step-parent		X			X	
Jealousy toward new family					X	
Wanting to reunite parents					X	X
Indifference toward step					X	

A=Coleman & Ganong (87)

B=Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman (85)

C=Nolan, Coleman & Ganong (84)

D=Cooper (87)

E=Papernow (84)

F=Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich (85)



Table 4: Conflict With Ex-Spouse

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Supporting 2 households	X	X	X	X	X		
Visitation arrangements	X	X			X		
Where children go to school		X			X		
Resolving past with ex-spouse					X	X	
Contact with ex-family					X		
Impact of quasi-kin	X	X		X			X

A=Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman (85)  
 B=Nolan, Coleman, & Ganong (84)  
 C=Robinson (84)  
 D=Bernstein & Collins (85)

E=Papernow (84)  
 F=Baptiste (84)  
 G= Clingenpeel & Brand  
 (85)

Table 5: Conflict Between Spouses

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Discipline of stepchildren	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Cohabitation before marriage									X		
Problems from former unions					X						
Simple family--better quality										X	
Decisions about more children											X
Ways to deal with ex-in-laws								X			
How spouse shows affection								X			
Amount of time with ex-spouse								X			
Amount of time with spouse								X			
How to meet child needs								X			

A=Coleman & Ganong (87)

B=Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman (85)

C=Robinson (84)

D=Cooper (87)

E=Bernstein & Collins (85)

F=Lagoni & Cook (85)

G=Baptiste (84)

H=Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman & Coleman (84)

I=Demaris (84)

J=Clingempeel & Brand (85)

K=Papernow (84)

## CHAPTER TWO

### Statement of the Problem

The purposes of this study were to identify the themes of communication-related critical incidents that occur during the first two years in stepfamilies and to determine the difficulty and importance of these themes.

The major research question was:

What are the themes of communication-related critical incidents reported by spouses in newly formed stepfamilies?

Related sub-questions were:

- A. What percentage of respondents reported experiencing each kind of critical incident?
- B. What is the relative importance of each kind of critical incident?
- C. What is the reported degree of difficulty of each kind of critical incident?
- D. What is the relative "criticalness" (combining importance and difficulty) of each kind of critical incident?

### Definition of Terms

Stepfamily: The term "stepfamily" is usually used interchangeably with blended families, reformed families, and reconstituted families. Hamner and Turner (1985) point out that stepfamily most frequently means that a mother and her children have combined with a stepfather to

make a new family; but the stepfamily might also be a stepmother, father, and his children; or a mother and father who bring together two sets of children from previous unions. The commonality among all these types of families is that at least one parent and a child or children from another union are brought together with a stepparent to form a new family. Galvin and Brommel (1982) expand the definition to include adopted or foster children, but these are not considered in this study.

Critical Incident: In forming a new family, new "rules" must be created, either tacitly or verbally negotiated, so that all members understand the boundaries within which they operate. Everyone in the reformed family spends much time learning, arguing, and discussing these issues. In the process, a series of "critical incidents" occur which often are perceived distinctively by various family members.

The term "critical incident" was first used by John C. Flanagan (1954) who described the technique as essentially a "procedure for gathering certain important facts . . . in a defined situation" (p. 335). He expands the definition by saying that these incidents describe what an observer saw, heard, or felt during the experience, and these incidents are usually revealed in a narrative fashion. Flanagan also mentions that this process should be a "gathering of facts in a rather

objective fashion with only a minimum of inferences and interpretations" (p. 335). Finally, he explains that these incidents should be elicited fairly soon after their occurrence in order to insure accuracy of accounting. In this study, critical incidents were gathered from couples who were completing the first two years of making a new family unit. Both husband and wife were interviewed. To elicit critical incidents, each respondent was asked to recall particular times in his/her new marriage when s/he was puzzled about what to do or how to respond in a new situation.

Importance: was operationalized as respondents' reactions to a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "no importance" to "very important," inquiring about the significance of each critical incident theme.

Difficulty: was operationalized as respondents' reactions to a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "not difficult" to "very difficult," inquiring about how easy or hard the individual perceived it was to deal with each critical incident theme.

Criticalness: was calculated by multiplying the importance and difficulty scores for each theme.

## Pilot Study

A pilot study of three couples was done to identify and minimize problematic elements in the research procedure. A newly married stepfamily was located through contact with a graduate student. This family then provided names of two additional families who also consented to be interviewed.

Both spouses in each couple were interviewed separately. Each began with unstructured questions inquiring about how the couple met and came together, issues they anticipated and discussed prior to marriage, and issues that they dealt with since the marriage. After the unstructured portion of the interview, each person was asked a series of structured questions based on the review of literature which inquired about issues reported to be important to stepfamilies. The interviews were tape recorded for analysis at a later time.

Subjects were asked to critique the interview after it was administered. This process helped identify questions which were confusing or redundant. A content analysis of these interviews also was done to pilot coding procedures, especially to identify new theme areas not identified in the literature review (See Tables 1 - 5).

Finally, a questionnaire was created, administered, analyzed, and compared to the interview results to assess its efficacy.

### Interviews: Methodology

The interviews required approximately 45 - 60 minutes for each subject. People were very willing to discuss the critical incidents in detail as well as to answer the prepared questions based on the literature.

The critiques of the interviews revealed two insights related to the process: 1) the subjects did not think of critical incidents sequentially, so they were unable to say which issues were discussed at what point in their formation of the new family; and 2) the subjects indicated that most of the prepared questions were "right on target" except questions regarding who disciplines children. Every interviewee indicated that discipline for children rested with the natural parent rather than with the stepparent. However, their taped comments refute this claim, so the question was retained.

### Interviews: Content

Two new themes not mentioned in the stepfamily literature emerged from the pilot study interviews. One theme dealt with talking about significant changes in social status (living in a more expensive or poorer neighborhood as a result of the new marriage). The second theme dealt with the family's difficulty in handling a severe illness. Both themes were incorporated in the interview protocol for the main study.

### Questionnaires: Methodology

Communication-related critical incidents were transcribed on cards. A theme topic was assigned to each one, and cards were code numbered and filed according to theme area.

A 17-item questionnaire was constructed with themes identified from the interviews and the literature review. These questionnaires were sent to the six subjects who had been interviewed within two weeks of the completion of the interviews. All six questionnaires were returned within one week's time.

Data were analyzed for frequency of occurrence of an issue in a stepfamily, importance of the issues to the marriage, difficulty in dealing with the issues, and relative criticalness of the issue.

Overall, the communication-related critical incidents described in the interviews were similar in nature and relative criticalness to the questionnaire results. In other words, if an issue was described in great detail during the interview, that issue also was marked very important and very difficult to deal with on the questionnaire.

After questionnaires were returned, the researcher called four of the subjects (two were unavailable because of vacation) for a telephone interview regarding the questionnaire. Questions were asked about the phrasing of questions and pertinence of questions asked. The four



participants revealed that the questions as they were phrased had caused them to think "long and hard" about how important and how difficult issues were to them. They also indicated that they understood the wording of the questions. The rating scale was confusing with number three (3) representing "no opinion." Therefore, a "not applicable" item was added to the scale.

## Main Study Methodology

Data to answer the research questions were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and follow-up questionnaires with both spouses in 27 stepfamilies.

### Subjects:

The criteria for selecting subjects were: 1) there was at least one stepparent; 2) the family contained at least one child from a former union; 3) the child or children resided with the couple at least fifty percent of the time, because children who visit on holidays and summer vacations do not present the same kinds of problems as regular residents in the family (Hamner and Turner, 1985); 4) the couple had been in this new marriage for a period of six months but not longer than two years; long enough to experience the "blending" process, yet short enough to make recall of that process likely; and 5) both spouses should be of the same race because mixed-race marriages have been shown to exhibit very special problems based on cultural differences which only complicate the study (Baptiste, 1984).

Twenty-seven couples participated in the study. This sample was deemed large enough to cover comprehensively all the issues that arise in stepfamilies. The stepfamilies resided in two medium-sized midwestern cities; Lawrence, Kansas and Makato, Minnesota.

In Lawrence, marriage records were examined from the

year 1985 to 1988 at the County Courthouse and people were identified who might have been married more than once. State law prohibits the public from access to information concerning previous marriages; however, the ages of marriage license applicants is recorded. The researcher looked at names and ages of applicants. Names which appeared to be culturally different were excluded from the list. Those people whose ages were twenty-eight or over were recorded (in the United States, the majority of people marry for the first time before the age of twenty-five) if they listed a local address at the time of registration. The choice was based on the assumption that at least one member of the couple might be marrying for the second time if the age was approximately twenty-eight to forty years. These names were checked against a local telephone book. A letter was sent explaining the research project and a stamped, self-addressed postcard was included if the couple would consent to an interview. The blind mailing contained the names of 225 couples. The return rate was approximately 10 percent -- 26 couples replied. The couples who responded were contacted for an interview time. Only 16 couples were available to be interviewed during the time allotted for the Kansas project. Those who agreed were scheduled for interviews in their homes at their convenience. Every effort was made to interview both spouses in the stepfamily. They

were interviewed separately.

In Mankato, a list was obtained of single parents who had belonged to a social group between the years of 1982 and 1988. The group, known as "Support for Single Parents," met at a local church but was not church affiliated. One of the group members had kept records of couples who had belonged to the group and had later married. Approximately 30 members had remarried and 15 of those were randomly selected. They were contacted by telephone, the research project was explained, and 11 couples agreed to be interviewed. The same procedure as above was followed.

### Interviews

The tape-recorded interviews took place separately and privately with each spouse in the couple's home. Because of the sensitive nature of the information sought, the interview took on a comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere soon after the interviewer's arrival (Bradburn and Sudman, 1979; Ellen, 1984; Spradley, 1980). The non-critical attitude of a good listener was established so the interviewee did not worry about being judged by the interviewer (Friedman, 1983; Mishler, 1986). The purpose of the research was discussed, the interview process was described, and the subject was encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of the questioning which was not understood. Confidentiality was assured, and the consent

form was presented for the subject's signature. The interview protocol is located in Appendix D.

The first portion of the interview was open-ended. Participants were asked to describe the progression of the relationship after their initial meeting, and incidents in which they felt confused, frustrated, or unsure. Then the interviewer continued to ask about issues which came up in the marriage up to the present time. The subject was asked to freely recall as many communication-related critical incidents as possible. While the subject was recalling these incidents, the interviewer took notes on these incidents and assigned each to a tentative theme category. At the end of the interview, these theme areas were described to the interviewee to see if the interviewer was accurately understanding the critical incidents described. When the interviewer believed that a new critical incident was being described, the incident was rephrased and the interviewee was asked if the incident had been described accurately. Then the interviewee was asked if the theme of the incident appeared to be as described. This accuracy check procedure was used with eight different incidents in as many different homes. In all eight instances, the interviewees concurred that the interviewer was understanding the incidents accurately.

The second portion of the interview was structured.

Specific themes identified in the review of literature were mentioned. Only themes mentioned by more than one author were included in the structured portion of the interview. There were a total of 20 themes included in the structured portion of the interview (see Table 6). The subjects were asked if each theme arose in their relationship, and if so, how. To avoid redundancy, only themes not previously reported in the open-ended portion of the interview were mentioned in the structured portion. The general plan for the structured interviews is provided in Appendix D. Analysis of Interview

The interview tapes were content-analyzed to discover critical incident themes. Those incidents which appeared to match themes identified in the literature were transcribed on cards with a heading which matched those themes in Table 6. The critical incidents with emergent themes were given a temporary heading and also transcribed onto cards. When all interviews were complete and all tapes had been transcribed onto cards, all cards were separated according to themes and re-read. At this second reading, cards were re-assigned theme headings, and cards with emergent themes were regrouped also. One month later, the cards were re-examined by the researcher, themes were re-checked for accuracy and the seven new emergent themes were identified as they appear in Table 7. They are listed according to frequency of appearance in

the interviews. At this point it was determined that themes from the literature referring to the wicked stepmother (2 studies) and where the children should go to school (2 studies) had not emerged in this researcher's interviews. In addition, the theme areas identified as ambiguous role of the parent (7 studies) and changing boundaries (2 studies) could be subsumed under other theme areas such as stepparents attempting to reconcile differences with stepchildren, the role of the stepparent in disciplining the stepchildren, and stepparents who try to give advice to stepchildren. It was also noted at this time that two themes which emerged in the pilot study (changing socio-economic status and impact of severe illness on stepfamily) were to be subsumed under the headings of "difficulty in managing financial matters" and "talking about possible problems before marriage was not adequate planning for all the problems which the couple had to deal with."

Two colleagues were asked to review the revised theme headings and the corresponding critical incident cards. They were helpful in establishing a communication focus to many of the theme headings which are listed in Table 8. This table combines re-phrased themes from the literature and the emergent themes.

Five graduate teaching assistants were trained to code critical incidents to theme areas. They were first

given examples of three critical incidents from three different theme areas, and it was explained what characteristics of the critical incident caused it to be placed in a particular theme area. Questions were answered and clarifications made. Next, the coders were given randomly selected critical incidents and a list of the 25 theme areas. The coders were asked to read the critical incidents and match them to the theme areas listed which they did for .85 reliability. The researcher believes that this process facilitated greater reliability (Krippendorff, 1980) for the study. Development of Questionnaire

After the coding of themes was completed, a questionnaire was devised, which included all of the themes identified in the interviews. It was administered to every person who was interviewed with the exception of the two subjects who had already separated from their new spouses at interview time (both the male and female were in counseling at the time of the interview so they did not meet the non-clinical specifications of this study). This provided a means for assessing the extent to which each theme occurred in the lives of the entire subject population.

The questionnaire asked whether each theme identified in the interview occurred in the respondents' stepfamily. Each subject also was asked to rate each theme in two



additional ways: 1) how important the issue was in his/her new family; and 2) how difficult it was to deal with. The responses on importance and difficulty were given on a five-point Likert-type scale.

The question like the one below was given as an example:

<u>Importance</u>	<u>Difficulty</u>
1 = no importance	1 = not difficult
2 = little importance	2 = little difficulty
3 = some importance	3 = some difficulty
4 = important	4 = difficult
5 = very important	5 = very difficult

Important

Difficult

1	My spouse wants to spend the holidays	1
2	with his/her family every year, but	2
NA	3 I want to go to my family on alternate	3
4	years.	4
5		5

Subjects were asked to circle numbers representing the degree of importance and degree of difficulty in dealing with each item. If a particular issue did not occur in that stepfamily the respondent was asked to circle "NA" and move on to the next item on the questionnaire.

Items which were conceptually the same were grouped together, so that the respondent did not have to shift mental gears too frequently (Bowers and Courtright, 1984).

The questionnaires were mailed within three months after beginning interviews. A brief letter reminded the participants of the interview and requested that each person interviewed answer and return the questionnaire in a stamped, addressed envelope. A complete questionnaire is located in Appendix E.

#### Analysis of Questionnaires

When the results of the questionnaire were tabulated, the frequencies were recorded for each question answered. Next, the means were figured for the degrees of importance and difficulty of each question answered. The means of importance were multiplied by the means of difficulty for each question to determine relative criticalness of the issue.

Table 6: Themes Identified in Review of Literature

<u>Themes Identified</u>	<u>Frequency of listing</u>
1. Discipline of stepchildren	7 studies
2. Ambiguous role of stepparent	7 studies
3. Supporting two households	5 studies
4. Don't know who it's okay to love	5 studies
5. Unsure of what to call one another	4 studies
6. Impact of quasi-kin	4 studies
7. New family relationships	4 studies
8. Visitation arrangements	3 studies
9. Unable to share the past	3 studies
10. Myth of instant love	3 studies
11. Wicked stepmother	2 studies
12. Parental responsibility but no legal rights	2 studies
13. Where children go to school	2 studies
14. Resolving past with ex-spouse	2 studies
15. Resenting the stepparent	2 studies
16. Wanting parents to re-unite	2 studies
17. Changing boundaries	2 studies
18. Bonding before discipline	2 studies
19. Relying on ex-spouse for help	
20. Children keeping score of time and money spent on them	

Issues 19 and 20 were added because anecdotal accounts indicated that they were pertinent although no empirical studies reporting them were located.

Table 7: Themes Emerging from Pilot Study and Interviews

<u>Themes Identified</u>	<u>Frequency of Appearance</u>
1. No information about how to be a stepparent	38
2. More problems than could be anticipated before marriage	35
3. Bringing two families together (where both the new spouses had children) created greater space and financial demands (bigger house, bigger car, more storage, etc.).	14
4. Adjustment problems of children created unanticipated stress.	14
5. Children and stepchildren of the same age brought together.	10
6. Changing socio-economic status	1
7. Impact of severe illness on stepfamily	1

Table 8: Revised and Combined List of Themes

The researcher determined that some communication-related issues identified in the literature were very specific (where the kids should go to school) and some were broad (discipline). From the interviews, the following list was compiled to include as many categories as emerged.

Individual Parent and Stepparent Issues

1. Guilt over leaving children from previous marriage with the other biological parent.
2. Stepparent feels left out when his/her mate reminisces with children about the past.
3. Stepparents difficulty in expressing love to their stepchildren.
4. Parents whose communication with biological children is strained because children resemble other parent.
5. Parents "giving permission" to their children about whom to love.
6. Stepparents' helplessness concerning responsibility for stepchildren but no parental rights.
7. Spouses' efforts to keep everyone happy in the new blended family.
8. Spouses who compare the difficulty of being parents to that of being stepparents.

Stepparent-Stepchild Conflicts

9. Children who don't want to share their parents with new spouses.
10. Family conflict over differing rules within a house or between houses.
11. Stepparents attempting to reconcile differences with stepchildren.
12. What to call the new stepparent.

Adult Perceptions of Children's Issues

13. Parents expressing concern over children who perceive favoritism in the new family.
14. Stepparents who try to give advice to their stepchildren.
15. Complaints about perceived inequities of time and money spent in a family.

16. Children's condemnation of stepparent for faults which the children forgive in their biological parent.
17. Children who want their biological parents to reunite.
18. Parents who describe conversations with children who are torn by who to spend time with on holidays, birthdays, and vacations.

#### Conflicts with Ex-Spouse

19. Continuing to talk with ex-spouse over issues involving children from that former union.
20. Conflict over dealing with child support payments.

#### Conflict between Spouses

21. Discussion with spouse about role of stepparent in disciplining stepchildren.
22. Talking about possible problems in making a stepfamily before marriage was not adequate planning for all the problems the couple actually have to deal with.
23. Difficulty managing financial matters and expanded living space because of two families coming together.
24. Family concerns over bringing together two sets of children who are very similar in age.
25. The new couple talk about added stress in their marriage because of children's adjustment problems.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Data Analysis and Results

Two types of data were obtained from this study of spouses in newly formed stepfamilies: qualitative data from the interviews and quantitative data from the questionnaires. Communication related critical incidents reported in the interviews were transcribed in narrative form and themes were extrapolated from them. Questionnaire data were analyzed to provide nomothetic data regarding frequency, importance, difficulty, and relative criticalness of each theme.

#### Analysis of Interviews:

Critical incidents were transcribed on cards. The cards were divided into types according to themes. When new themes appeared, they were filed under temporary headings. Later, all critical incidents were thoroughly reviewed and assigned theme headings. The frequencies of themes are reported. Prototype critical incidents for each theme area were selected and paraphrased or provided verbatim.

#### Analysis of Questionnaires:

A questionnaire was constructed covering all themes of critical incidents reported in the interviews. These questionnaires were sent to all interviewees. They were asked to identify which communication-related critical incident themes occurred in their stepfamily, how

important the each theme was and how difficult it was to deal with.

When questionnaires were returned, the data were compiled and reported in the following ways:

- 1) Frequencies of theme occurrence were summed and ranked;
- 2) Means of importance ratings were tallied and themes were ranked by importance;
- 3) Means of difficulty ratings were tallied and themes were ranked by difficulty;
- 4) Relative criticalness was determined by multiplying the importance and difficulty means for each theme.

The themes were rank-ordered according to relative criticalness.

#### Interpretation of Results:

Comparisons of themes reported by respondents in this study were compared to those reported in clinical literature. These results indicated similarities and differences between clinical and non-clinical stepfamilies.

The results of this study provide information about and communication issues faced by people as they create



blended or stepfamilies.

Generalizations derived from this study provide the beginnings of grounded theory regarding communication challenges facing people forming stepfamilies.

## Interview Results

### Critical Incidents

Twenty-five themes were identified through the interviews. Sample critical incidents are provided below to illustrate each theme area. Many incidents are paraphrased for the sake of brevity. Short quotations are included where appropriate.

#### Individual Parent and Stepparent Issues

1. Theme: Spouses who compare the difficulty of being parents to that of being stepparents.

Frequency: 20 women; 18 men

Subject: Woman who is not a parent and tried to be a stepparent.

Critical Incident: When we first got married, Marty (husband) was working the night shift, so when his son ran away and came here to live with us, I was the one who spent every evening with him. I told Marty that it was like trying to live with a stranger in the house. The boy was restless and ran all the time. When I would try to find out where he was going, he got real resentful. I know I didn't love him, but I cared what happened to him. I don't know if I want kids if things are going to be that bad with my own.

Subject: Woman who has given up being a

stepparent.

Critical Incident: I think I'm a kind, understanding person. Paul (new husband) told me he thought I was wonderful with my children. But when I try to be the same way with his children, they make sarcastic remarks or mutter something and walk away. It's not my fault Paul didn't get along with their mother, but it seems like I'm getting blamed for it. They (stepchildren) sure don't treat their dad the way they treat me. Maybe when they grow up and go away we can make a life together. I'm telling my children to never get involved in a stepfamily.

Subject: Man who talks to spouse about differences in being a parent and a stepparent.

Critical Incident: Sue is really big on communication. She wants to talk about everything. So I said that I might as well try talking to her kids. I never much talked to mine except to get them in line. But I don't think you can raise stepkids the way you raise your own kids. They don't write books on how to be a parent, and they sure as hell don't write books on how to be a stepparent. I think they'll resent me no matter what I do.

Subject: Man who has never been a father but is trying to be a stepfather.

Critical Incident: I had a real concern about how to be a stepfather. I got advice from my dad about how to be a boy and how to be a man and a father. But there was nobody to give me advice on how to be a stepfather. I've been around kids all my life, but that's not the same as being a dad. And being a stepfather is not like being a dad, because there's always someone else to fill that role. But I wonder how Chuck (stepson) would feel if Becky (his mother) and I had a baby.

2. Theme: Stepparents difficulty expressing love to their stepchildren.

Frequency: 17 women; 10 men.

Subject: Stepfather who can't talk to stepson yet

Critical Incident: When Gary left to go see his dad this past summer, I cried. I couldn't say, "I'm a better dad to you than your real dad will ever be." But we're buddies. I think he knows that we do things together his dad would never do with him. When he gets older we'll talk about all this.

Subject: Stepfather who shows affection to girls.

Critical Incident: I don't really say anything

to Carol's girls in words, but Sheri (8 year old) sits on my lap to watch TV in the evening. I always give her a kiss and a hug before she goes to bed at night. I think she knows how I feel. I go to all her school events.

Subjects: Stepmother who finds stepchildren distant.

Critical Incident: I don't really know Bob's children as well as I'd like to. His two middle children are very polite to me. One gave me a hug the other day and she initiated it. Was I ever surprised. The 13 year-old bakes with me sometimes. I think she likes that. She acts like she feels at home.

Subject: Stepmother who can't express caring

Critical Incident: Early in the marriage, Paul said, "Don't expect to touch my children. That's unnatural." And he was right. Gary sleeps with a picture of his mother in his arms. That's how enmeshed he is in her life. I don't know what he'll do when he goes to visit his mother this summer. She's remarried and Gary was used to sleeping in the same room with her when he visited her.

Subject: Stepmother who has mixed feelings

Critical Incident: Jay (stepson) is awfully glad

that Neal and I got married. He even told me once that he liked me, but we don't really talk about it very much. His sister Lisa won't have anything to do with me. But she's much closer to her mother than Jay is. Even when Jay is supposed to be staying with his mother, he's over here with us.

3. Theme: Spouse's efforts to keep everyone happy in the new blended family.

Frequency: 17 women; 7 men

Subject: Couple who try to keep the husband's ex-wife happy at holiday time.

Critical Incident: We tried to keep Karen (ex-wife) happy but that's impossible. Now we decide what the two of us want to do at Thanksgiving or Christmas and we do it. It may make her (Karen) mad, but we just say, "That's too bad." Of course, we always explain why we decided to do things the way we did.

Subject: Woman who justifies to her new husband the way she treats her own children.

Critical Incident: Larry (new husband) thinks I'm too lenient with my kids, especially the older one who's about to be a teen-ager. And since I'm the mediator or peacemaker, I feel like I always have to explain my thinking on the

problems to Larry. I can't radically change the way I've always treated my children.

Subject: Stepmother whose communication to child seems unnatural.

Critical Incident: Sometimes I have to ask Bill (stepson) to pick up stuff. His room gets too messy. And I worry about how to say it to him. I fret so much about it that by the time I finally say something, it doesn't come out natural. It's like I'm pleading with him or asking him to do something he shouldn't have to do, just so we don't have another fight on our hands.

Subject: Stepmother who gets no support or help from her husband.

Critical Incident: The other day I came home from work and Lisa (stepdaughter) was in her room crying because she was so unhappy here and wanted to be with her mother. And I thought, "Who are we making happy in this house?" But when I talk to Chuck (new husband) --he's a workaholic -- he says, "That's why I married you --to take care of things like that." He expects me to take care of his children and make them happy. I think there's a lot of taking going on in this house and very little giving.

Subject: Husband who had to choose between being with his daughter and his new wife.

Critical Incident: Just last May, right after Mary and I were married, I went to Chicago with my daughter. Ann was graduating in economics -- that's what I do too. I wanted her to meet some people I knew and maybe get an interview for a job out of the deal. We just got to Chicago. We were getting ready for the first meetings when Mary called and said her father had died that morning. I told Ann I was pulled two ways. I wanted to be with her, but I needed to go home to be with Mary.

Subject: Husband who recognizes a new responsibility in his new family.

Critical Incident: I definitely see that as my role -- trying to keep everyone happy. I told Janet (new wife) that I was much more aware of trying to do that because of being married before. I want her kids to get along with mine. I want everyone to like it here. It's in my nature I guess. If I don't work at this new marriage, it isn't going to work, so I try very, very hard.

4. Theme: Stepparent feels left out when his/her mate reminisces with children about the past.



Frequency: 14 women; 9 men.

Subject: Man who believes his wife is careful to talk about the past when he's not around.

Critical Incident: Diane and her boys usually don't talk about the past when I'm around. I saw some pictures once of her when the boys were little. I think I was more interested in seeing how she looked then than anything. If I do hear her talking to the boys about when they were little, I think, "I wish I could have been there to share all that."

Subject: Man who raised his children alone.

Critical Incident: For my boys, the "good ole' days" was when we all lived alone, before DeAnn and I were married. The twins were only two and Mike was three when Julie (first wife) took off, so there isn't much remembering to do about that time. DeAnn says sometimes she wishes I could go back to the "good ole' days" with my boys. She says it sounds like too much fun to be true.

Subject: Mother with sons from first marriage.

Critical Incident: When my boys and I reminisce, I try to make sure that Gary (present husband) isn't around. And Gary is the same way with me. He takes his kids out for a Dairy Queen sometimes in the evening. That's when they talk about the

past. The kids need that time with their dad and my boys need a private time with me.

Subject: Woman whose husband denies feelings about her past life.

Critical Incident: Ron would never admit it to me, but he hates it when I reminisce with my boys. He told me once he wasn't at all interested in hearing what happened in my life before he met me, but I think he feels left out. I'm just the opposite. I ask his girls to tell me what their dad was like before, because the past is past--so what?

5. Theme: Parents whose communication with biological children is strained because children resemble other parent.

Frequency: 13 women; 8 men.

Subject: Mother who resents behaviors of child who is similar to ex-spouse.

Critical Incident: My youngest son is so much like his father. His father spends most of his life being unhappy, and my son does too. I finally said to Jed, "You can be whatever you want to be. You can be miserable or you can choose to be pleasant and take advantage of what we have here, but you're the one who makes the choice." I've already made up my mind that when

Jed is 14 or 15 he's going to live with his dad and that's okay.

Subject: Mother who notices resemblance of son to his father.

Critical Incident: You know, that just happened this morning. I don't know if it's traits so much as a look that Jim gets in his eyes--like his dad does when he's going to do something irresponsible. I wonder if I look for those things in Jim, or if they're really there.

Subject: Father who sees his daughter as similar to his former wife.

Critical Incident: Shana (daughter) stays in a sorority during the school year now. Then she goes home to be with her mother instead of living with me like she used to. Shana's not getting along with her mother. She's too head strong. They're too much alike. She'll be back to my house.

Subject: Father who sees his son as like the mother.

Critical Incident: It happens especially with my teen-age son. It's the way he's non-communicative--like his mother. I have to pry everything out of him--just like I couldn't get my first wife to talk to me. When I ask him

questions and he doesn't answer, I just keep talkin' 'til I can get him to talk back to me. It bothers me but I don't say nothin.'

6. Theme: Stepparents helplessness concerning responsibility for stepchildren but no parental rights.

Frequency: 11 women; 7 men

Subject: Stepmother who resents the communication her stepchild has with her biological mother.

Critical Incident: Jill's mother (husband's former spouse) talks to Jill about asking us for all kinds of things we can't afford. Then I have all the responsibility for getting her to these activities, but I don't have any say-so. I told Dan (new husband) that it wasn't fair for a natural parent who gave up the claim to her daughter, to try to change the course of our lives. There's nothing you can do.

Subject: Mother who explains why her new husband doesn't adopt her children.

Critical Incident: Phil (new husband) tells me he would feel better about adopting my children, but we really can't do that. My first husband was killed, so my kids get social security which we really need to live. If Phil adopted them, we'd have to give that up. Sometimes Phil says,

"I have this tremendous emotional investment in your children, but they won't ever be mine."

Subject: Stepfather who has tried to adopt his stepchildren.

Critical Incident: "Quite frankly, it irritates the hell out of me. It's not a problem; it's an irritating factor." I told Claudia that I fell in love with the total unit here, not just her, but I have no rights. She and I talked about my adopting the girls, but her "ex" hates me so much he'd probably go to jail before he'd let me have the rights to those girls.

7. Theme: Parents "giving permission" to their children about whom to love.

Frequency: 10 women; 4 men

Subject: Mother who tries to talk about fairness and equality of love which children should feel for both parents.

Critical Incident: When we were first divorced, I tried to be real open with the kids about what was going on. By that, I mean their father's dating other women and all. But I said, "You never have a replacement for your parents, whether either one of us gets married or not." But David (youngest son) still worries about not getting to spend enough time with his father.

Subject: Mother with a secretive daughter

Critical Incident: When Lloyd (present husband) and I first got married, I'd hear Cammy on the phone with her dad, whispering, "I love you too, Dad." So I said, "Cammy, children are supposed to love their mother and their dad. You don't have to whisper about that."

Subject: Mother who wants child to love stepparent more than biological parent.

Critical Incident: When Ed and I got divorced, I really relied on Sheryl (daughter) for my leaning post. I told her everything her dad had done to hurt me. I get really upset when she spends a weekend with him and has a good time. I say, "Hey, have you forgotten what he did to us? You've got a new dad now who cares about you. Just don't you forget that."

Subject: Stepfather whose relationships with stepchildren were split on gender lines.

Critical Incident: In our family, Kay's children have had a rough time with knowing who to love from the very beginning. You see, Kay's husband only loves his boys. He doesn't care anything at all about his daughters. So the girls liked me from the very beginning. Now the youngest boy is starting to like me too. He told his dad that we

do things together, and for some reason that's okay with his dad. But boy, nobody better ever tell him that his oldest boy likes me.

Subject: Stepfather who worries about his stepson's divided feelings.

Critical Incident: I don't know if Dusty (stepson) realizes it or not -- probably not -- but his dad didn't really bond with him until after the divorce. When all four parents show up at his school programs, I can see the torment in his eyes. He goes to be with his dad; then he comes to be with us. He is so confused. And his mother tells him about all the grown-ups in his life who love him, but I can tell from what he says that Dusty doesn't see it that way yet.

8. Theme: Guilt over leaving children from previous marriage with the other biological parent

Frequency: 4 men; 1 woman

Subject: Father whose first wife lives several miles away with his children from a first marriage.

Critical Incident: I talked to my new wife about how my children from before could be a source of grief for me. I have to do the best I can--not living with them day to day, I don't know what their problems are. But I'm their dad, ya' know and when they call I have to go. As

they get bigger, they reach out a little more.

Subject: Mother who had very limited income when she divorced and had to leave her children with their father.

Critical Incident: My husband now thinks I have enough to do with his three kids. He doesn't realize that it's not like my own. I like them and all but it's not the same. I know my children will come to live with me when they're old enough to choose. My first husband is an alcoholic. The only reason he got the children was because he makes so much money. They (the children) call on the phone when he's gone with his girlfriend; sometimes they cry and say they wish I was there. I wish so too.

#### Adults' Perceptions of Children's Issues

9. Theme: Parents who describe conversations with children who are torn by who to spend time with on holidays, birthdays, and vacations.

Frequency: 19 women; 10 men

Subject: Mother who talks with sons about choosing where to go for holidays.

Critical Incident: The longer Jason (oldest son) is with his father, the more upset he is when he comes home. He said he hates having to choose who to be with on holidays. But his little



brother is still too young. Brian (youngest) says he just wants to be here with us because this is where he knows everyone.

Subject: Stepmother whose stepchildren told her they would not return.

Critical Incident: When Mark and Andrea left last month to go East to their mother's for vacation they said they wouldn't be coming back. I believe them but their father doesn't. I said, "Listen, when Mark takes his computer and Andrea takes her dog, that means they're not coming back." Their mother was always calling them to tell them how much she missed them. They they cried, and told her how unhappy they were here.

Subject: Woman who argues with ex-husband about what he does with their son on holidays.

Critical Incident: Last year, Jeffy calls the day before Thanksgiving and says he wants Kevin for the holiday and I said, "Too bad. We've made plans and besides, the last time you took Kevin, you left him with your mother so you could go play ball with the guys." He came home and said you must not love him very much because he could have watched you play ball and you didn't even want to take him.

Subject: Man describes his daughter's unhappiness when her mother moved the family overseas.

Critical Incident: The divorce decree said that Mindy and Chris were supposed to go to Europe with their mother for a year while she taught there. Chris adjusted okay, but Mindy was so miserable. She'd wait until her mother went to bed, then call me long distance and cry and tell me how homesick she was. I tried to convince her to make friends over there. Then she started calling her friends here in town and talking for an hour or more. Her mother got a horrendous phone bill and that was the last straw. She shipped Mindy back to me on the next plane.

Subject: Father who tries to explain former wife's rules about birthday gifts.

Critical Incident: Jenny really buys nice gifts for Gar's birthday but she won't let him bring them back to this house where he lives. Gar says he can't understand why he gets these wonderful toys that he only gets to play with once a month. Sometimes, he says he wishes he lived with Jenny when he gets an especially wonderful gift. I know it's Jenny's way of trying to bug me, but I tell him it's because he

needs toys at both places.

10. Theme: Stepparents who try to give advice to their stepchildren.

Frequency: 16 women; 9 men

Subjects: Parents who still split along family lines.

Critical Incident: Gary's kids still go to him. Mine still come to me. Gary's daughter will come and say, "Mom, is it okay if I stay all night at Jodi's tonight?" But she will be looking at Gary the whole time. After 18 months, we're still two families in this house.

Critical Incident: The kids say that it doesn't matter to them who they go to for advice, but Cory can walk in the room, look at me, and ask her dad if it's okay for her to stay over at a friend's house.

Subject: Stepfather who tries to give advice to stepchildren without "permission."

Critical Incident: I told Judy that I raised my kids the way I wanted to and she could do the same. Sometimes I try to show her boys an easier way to do somethin.' Like the other day, Clint was tryin' to repair a fence and he had the wrong kind of nails, so I told him what to do and he thought I was intrudin' on his

territory. Can you beat that?

Subject: Stepfather who helps children even though they go to mother for help.

Critical Incident: I try to help the kids with their 4-H projects. I know more about building things than their mother. They still go ask her instead of me, but they're looking out of the corner of their eye the whole time--like they know I'm the one who's going to help them.

11. Theme: Spouses and children who complain about perceived inequities of time and money spent in a family.

Frequency: 13 women; 5 men

Subject: Spouse who keep score

Critical Incident: He (new husband) did a lot with my boys before we got married. We went camping and to Six Flags--things like that. My boys thought it was great. Then we got married and all that stopped. He has no interest in their activities. He does what he wants to do.

Subject: Wife who see her son treated differently from her stepson.

Critical Incident: Right after we were first married, Alan and I bought a new pair of shoes for each of our sons. Two months later, Alan's son asked for and got another new pair. When my son asked if he could get a second pair, Alan

said, "My God, you just got a new pair of shoes." It's a lot easier to see what your spouse is doing for his children than your own.

Subject: Children complaining to parents about perceived inequities.

Critical Incident: Carly (Jack's former wife) and her new husband take very expensive and elaborate vacations. They usually take Jack's children. Of course, my kids see this and want to know why they can't go to the Caribbean. I try to tell them that we must be happy that Clint and Ty got to go such wonderful places and we should talk to them about it when they come back. I think that's the best way to handle it.

Subject: Grandparents who don't give equally.

Critical Incident: The worst part is when somebody on the outside buys expensive Christmas presents for the others. Grandparents are supposed to keep things equal, but they're really guilty of uneven gifts in this family.

Subject: Former husband buys far more for his children than the stepmother can buy for the stepdaughter.

Critical Incident: My first husband was and is very wealthy. He gives my kids two or three hundred dollars worth of clothes at a time when they go to see him. Then my kids come back, and

Lori (stepdaughter) says, "Where's mine?"

Kids are very aware of who has what.

12. Theme: Children who want their biological parents to re-unite.

Frequency: 10 women; 3 men

Subject: Stepmother describing a scene between her new husband and his son.

Critical Incident: When Robert and I first started going out, Bobby asked his dad if he didn't still love Marsha (first wife). Robert stammered and was real unsure how to answer Bobby, so I said, "Bobby, sometimes people love one another but don't want to be married to each other anymore." I don't know if Bobby was old enough to understand that. After Robert and I had been married about a year, Bobby stopped asking about his mother and father getting back together.

Subject: Mother describing her oldest son's reaction to divorce and remarriage.

Critical Incident: Tom (oldest son) took the divorce a lot harder than Bud (younger son). He never quit talking about when Jeff (first husband) and I would get back together, even after I married Eliot. Tom finally stopped asking when Jeff remarried. He said he suddenly

realized that we were never going to be together again. He must have cried every night for a month.

Subject: Father describing his daughters' reactions.

Critical Incident: My girls were so resentful when we got divorced. They were in high school and they said that none of their friends' parents were divorced. Finally, Jeannie (first wife) told them that she wanted a divorce because she'd been cheating on me while we were married. It turns out they both knew it and they still wanted me to hang around.

13. Theme: Children's condemnation of stepparent for faults which the children forgive in their biological parent.

Frequency: 9 women; 3 men

Subject: Stepmother who gets compared to a mother she has never seen or talked to.

Critical Incident: I don't know Steve and Karen's mother, but I know she doesn't have any faults. Her children tell me constantly. It doesn't matter whether it's the right way to prepare a meal or buying clothes for them. According to them, their "real" mother does a better job. When I tried to talk to their

father about it, I didn't get any support either. You see, she left him and he wants her back. He said, "Well, she really is a good mother. If I'd been a better husband, she wouldn't have left. I'll never find anyone like her again. How do you fight that?"

Subjects: Son who never mentions his father's not showing up for his soccer games.

Critical Incident: Sometimes Brian (son) calls his dad to come to one of his soccer games. He can hardly play for watching for his dad in the stands. Lots of times his dad doesn't get there and Brian never mentions it. If Don (stepfather) gets called out of town on business and misses one of Brian's games, Brian nearly always comments on the fact that Don never misses one of his own son's baseball games. Well, Don has more time in the summer away from his work, but Brian doesn't see that. I'd like to tell Brian that his father doesn't show up very often but I don't.

Subject: Sons who don't notice father's drinking but give their stepfather a bad time about it.

Critical Incident: Sometimes Carl doesn't pick up his boys until two hours after he says he will on a Saturday afternoon, and we can all



tell he's been drinking when he gets here. It really scares me to let the boys go with him. They're (the boys) so glad to see him that they don't say anything, but they're old enough now to notice drinking in the car while they're going out to go sailing with their dad. But if Jerry (stepfather) has one glass of beer at a picnic, my boys are all over him, giving him lectures about driving and drinking and alcoholism and everything else. I wish they said some of those things to their dad. Jerry doesn't even have liquor in the house.

14. Theme: Parents expressing concern over children who perceive favoritism in the new family.

Frequency: 7 women

Subject: Stepdaughter who keeps track of family.

Critical Incident: Evidently we keep things pretty equal around here. We certainly try. If we didn't we'd hear about it in a hurry from Rachel (stepdaughter). She's the most vocal of the children. She doesn't hesitate to let us know about anything that she thinks needs fixing. One of my boys was having problems with school work. She heard about it at school, came home, and told me I'd better take care of things.

Subject: Woman who sees husband being unfair.

Critical Incident: My husband thinks he's being fair to everyone, but he's not. He spends a lot more time with his son than mine who's the same age. Right now, Carl (husband) is coaching his son's Little League team. My son had asked him the past two years to do that, and Carl said he was too busy at the office. Now my son wants to know how come Carl has the time. What can I say?

#### Conflict Between Spouses

15. Theme: Talking about possible problems in making a stepfamily before marriage was not adequate planning for all the problems the couple actually have to deal with.

Frequency: 16 women; 19 men

Subject: Woman whose husband talked to her children differently after the marriage than before.

Critical Incident: I'm a real straight forward person. I've always said, "Well, I don't like this or I don't want you to do that." And that seemed okay with Larry. He'd laugh at me and go do something with my boys, like camping or hunting, and we all thought that it was great. I thought I made it clear that I wanted a home and a family life for my boys, but we got married and Larry never did another thing with

my boys except yell at them because they didn't help enough with the chores. I think he let us all down and it's too late now.

Subject: Woman who was unable to convince her husband before marriage about the problems they might face.

Critical Incident: We didn't talk as much as we should have. I tried to tell Judd that it was going to be more than he expected, but I couldn't convince him. He was determined to make a home for me and the kids, partly because his first wife had taken the children and moved so far away. But then his son came to visit for Christmas and decided to stay. We had no way of knowing what was going to happen. But it has certainly created more problems.

Subject: Woman who has already talked with husband about getting a divorce because of the problems.

Critical Incident: There have been times already when we've talked about getting a divorce. It's not that we don't like one another, or that we don't like living together. But we have just taken on this impossible task. And it really is impossible, but we really do value our relationship. I've taken classes in family living and I really though I knew about all

this. But it's different when you're living in it.

Subject: Husband who worried about how his stepson would deal with the conflict between households.

Critical Incident: I remember wondering how Gary (stepson) would adjust to feuding households. His father was very insecure about being replaced by me, and we knew he'd probably make incredible demands when we finally got married. But no one was really prepared for the open hostility that developed. I mean we couldn't even agree on what time Gary should be put to bed for heaven's sake.

It's stuff like that that keeps the house in constant turmoil and you wonder if things will ever mellow.

Subject: Husband who thought that their similarities would outweigh the differences.

Critical Incident: We're so much alike. We were both struggling to make it on our own when we met. I remember one night, I was coming out of daycare with my kids. Dana was ahead of me. She was carrying one kid and two more were hanging on her, and she stopped to hold the door for me. I said, "Hey, woman, you've got it all." And I still think that. But we don't

even get to sit down to talk to one another most nights until 10:30. Then all you can talk about is how you're going to get through the next day. It's rough.

16. Theme: Discussion with spouse about role of stepparent in disciplining stepchildren.

Frequency: 12 men; 19 women.

Subject: Woman who doesn't want to discipline her teen-age stepchild.

Critical Incident: It's just something I don't feel that I can do. Kyle doesn't cause any problems. A couple of time I thought he should do something like make his bed or pick up the mess in the kitchen when he cooks. But I just tell Ron (the father) and he sees to it that Kyle does what I ask.

Subject: Parent who wants child to bond with stepparent first.

Critical Incident: Phil's relationship with Ken (new husband) needed to evolve without discipline as I saw it. I'm sure if I wasn't here and Phil was getting out of line, Ken would say something; but we've pretty much reserved that role for me--at least for now.

Subject: Husband who admires the way his new wife handles discipline of his children.

Critical Incident: Jill (new wife) just sits down and talks to people about what's going on. That never happened with my girls before. Their mother saved up everything and dumped it all at once. They didn't quite know what to think when Jill took over. They said, "Does she always tell everyone exactly what she's feeling? I don't know if I can handle that."

Subject: Wife who resents the way her new spouse disciplines.

Critical Incident: Sometimes Sonny (new husband) makes a big deal out of nothin.' Like the other night, I put Josh up to bed and he was whinin' for his stuffed animal. Sonny said, "You're too big for that, and I'm not gonna' go look for no stuffed animal." So I said, "Bull--if that's all it takes to get him to sleep, he's gonna' have his stuffed animal." And I got it for Josh.

Subject: Mother who sides with daughter against stepfather.

Critical Incident: Just the other day the kids were horsing around. One of them knocked a lamp off a table and broke it. Immediately, Larry (stepfather) blew up and he said, "You'll pay for that out of the clothing allowance I give you." My daughter didn't break the lamp on purpose. It

could have happened to anybody. I wouldn't have handled it that way. It was a major blowup.

She's not paying for the lamp.

Subject: Stepfather who name calls when he disciplines his stepsons.

Critical Incident: I was devastated when Ron first got mad at my kids and cussed them out. They'd never been called such names ever. They thought Ron hated them and they cried. Ron and I had a loud discussion over that issue. He almost never slips anymore and calls them names.

Subject: Stepfather who disciplines and deals with resentment.

Critical Incident: I got some flak from the oldest boy for awhile when I tried to correct him. He'd give me a real hateful glare or he'd mouth back to me. I finally just told him that behavior wasn't acceptable.

Subject: Stepfather who doesn't tolerate backtalk.

Critical Incident: Sometimes the oldest girl talks back to me and I just look at her and say, "Your dad wouldn't let you talk to him that way." One day she sorta' smiled and said, "You're right."

Subject: Stepfather who challenges stepson.

Critical Incident: The kid just won't behave so I swat him. He told his dad. So one night Kevin wouldn't finish his supper so I swatted him again and he said, "My dad said you didn't have no right to hit me." So I said, "Yeah, well you go get him (the father lives one block away) and we'll talk about that." That was the end of that conversation.

17. Theme: Difficulty managing financial matters and expanded living space because of two families coming together.

Frequency: 9 women; 5 men

Subject: Wife and husband had different perceptions of "togetherness."

Critical Incident: Rolf (new husband) thought it was wonderful to have all these children together for meals and watching TV. He'd gather everyone to go pick out a video movie, then we'd all have to sit in the same room to watch it. I finally told him that my idea of relaxation was being alone. That I couldn't stand all the noise and commotion that five kids make. I need my own space. He said he felt rejected, but I couldn't stay healthy that way.

Subject: Couple whose first goal was finding a large house.



Critical Incident: I know this sounds crazy but we didn't even consider getting married until we could find a big enough house. When you have four kids your primary need is a room for each of them and lots of neutral territory where everyone can do their own thing. I was looking through the paper one day and told Mike we should go see an open house that had five bedrooms and four bathrooms. We did and here we are.

Subject: Woman who changed the original financial arrangements agreed on before marriage.

Critical Incident: We had originally agreed to pool our resources before we got married. Well, I'm widowed so I had a lot more resources to pool than my husband did. When I found that out, I said I didn't see why I should have to pay for his kids' clothes or entertainment. His wife could send him money if he didn't have enough. Then he pointed out that he had provided this big house that we're in and I said that it obviously wasn't big enough or my daughter wouldn't have to share a room with his little girl who's spoiled rotten and won't share anything with Melanie (own daughter). Well, it's obvious. The longer we live

together, the more separate we've become.

Subject: Husband whose job created a financial burden for the new family.

Critical Incident: When we were planning to be married, I wrote my wife a letter and said, "I'm afraid to take on the burden of a wife and two little children." Then two days later, I called her and said, "Don't pay any attention to that letter. I have to marry you." I explained that my profession doesn't allow for a very free life style, and we've had a real financial struggle. You see, we also had two more children of our own. When Claire's father died, he left her some money which allowed us to buy a larger house and that helped.

Subject: Husband who was able to build on to the house they owned.

Critical Incident: Jane and I re-did this old house so all our kids could have their bedrooms and bathrooms and even their own living room and TV upstairs, out of the traffic area. But it still wasn't enough. So I built a three story barn on the back of our lot. I'm self-employed, so I store all my tools on one floor, the kids have a huge playroom on the second, and we have a hobby room on the third. If we didn't have

room to get away from one another once in a while, we probably couldn't live together as a family.

18. Theme: The new couple talk about added stress in their marriage because of children's adjustment problems.

Frequency: 10 women; 4 men

Subject: Wife and husband who differ on his appearance in his daughter's wedding pictures.

Critical Incident: One of Jack's daughters got married last summer. When it came time to take family pictures she insisted that her dad be in the pictures with her mother. I said to Jack, "Why did you do that? You're not a family. You haven't been for eight years. Why pretend that you are so that some silly pictures can be taken? That's ridiculous." He didn't see my point at all. He thought that it really didn't make any difference. Well, it makes a difference to me.

Subject: Wife and husband who try to preserve their relationship in spite of children.

Critical Incident: Gary and I have tried to preserve our relationship in spite of the children who are constantly pulling us apart. We sat down one night and discovered that our worst problems revolved around the children's

problems. Gary said that children were always going to have problems and if we focused on that, we were going to, too. The first year was so rotten. I've heard it takes five years to make a new family. I hope not.

Subject: Husband who resents the time his wife spends with her children.

Critical Incident: Sharon is always gone with her boys. She says I can come along, but I don't like plays and music stuff. I told her they should be in something worthwhile like sports, and she said her boys were always going to come first, and I should have realized that when I married her. She's still upset because I took three days off from work when my first grandchild was born two weeks ago.

Subject: Father who tries to describe the composite problems that the family deals with.

Critical Incident: We really didn't know how complicated it would be to try to put four different personalities together. We constantly bicker about who says what to which kid. It's even more complicated than that. It's okay to say one thing to this kid, but it's not okay to say the same thing to another kid. Your kid does something and it's okay with you but it

bugs your new wife. Somebody is always yelling about the stereo being too loud, or there's wet towels on the floor, or somebody didn't do their chores. Then no matter what you fix to eat, somebody doesn't like it. Finally, my wife said that she was going to fix what we like to eat and the kids can do whatever they want to about food. I think our kids are really sick of one another.

19. Theme: Family concerns over bringing together two sets of children who are very similar in age.

Frequency: 6 women; 4 men

Subject: Woman who talked to children about "cultural" differences related to food.

Critical Incident: Okay, first you have to realize that I'm a beauty operator and my first husband was a truck driver. And here I am married to a minister now. How different can you get? So we've got four teenagers living in this house together who are as different as quiche and McDonald's burgers. So I finally called a family meeting and explained that everyone could just loosen up a little, including my kids. I told my husband I'd try to cook the gourmet meals once in awhile which he and his kids were used to, and they could eat

fast food with me and my kids once in awhile when I'd had a busy day. You'd think all teenagers live on junk food, wouldn't you? Not his kids.

Subject: Woman who had to teach stepchildren to be more independent.

Critical Incident: I had been a single mom for a long time so my kids knew how to do a lot of things. Dan's kids came from a very sheltered environment. They're all in fifth or sixth grade, but his kids couldn't do laundry, put their clothes away, set the table, cook, nothing. And my kids are used to saying whatever they think, right up front. They're not always very diplomatic and Dan had a real hard time with that.

Subject: Couple who decided to let the children deal with their own problems.

Critical Incident: The two sixteen year olds had pretty much started their life outside the house. They have different sets of friends, so they had some "serious discussions" over whose group of friends were the best. We had the biggest problems with our two fourteen-year-old girls. They're both pretty messy, and we couldn't stand the mess so we put both of them

in the basement rooms. They have to share a bathroom down there, and there have been some real shouting matches over their trying to live together.

Subject: Father who tries to communicate similarly with daughter and stepson.

Critical Incident: Lori (daughter) can do the exact same thing that Bill (stepson) does. I'll think it's funny or cute when she does it and I'll correct him. That's bad in more than one way. When I yell at Lori, she'll stop, correct, and go on; but Bill doesn't have any confidence. If I yell at him, we go into a downward spiral until I can think of something positive to say to him to give him back some confidence.

Subject: Father whose children live with their mother but go the same school as his stepchildren.

Critical Incident: Our four kids are essentially the same age, and they exist together when my boys come to visit. That's about all I can give it. My first wife lives near by so my boys go to the same school with Ellen's boys. They (father's sons) were really worried about what their friends would say when I married Ellen. They're very opinionated like their mother is. The competition and hostility doesn't get much

better.

### Stepparent-Stepchild Conflicts

20. Theme: Family conflict over differing rules within a house or between houses.

Frequency: 15 women; 9 men.

Subject: Stepparent making rules for all the children in the house.

Critical Incident: I've never liked animals around the house. I grew up on a farm and animals are for outside. Finally, I had to say, "We're getting rid of the cat." Well, if you could have seen those girls (his stepdaughters) and my wife. They still talk about the sad, sad eyes on the cat the day we took it away.

Subject: Father who raised his children differently from his wife.

Critical Incident: Denise babied her kids because their dad died when they were so young. My kids are tough. I insist on that. Like when I take them to the store, I expect them to buckle themselves in the car, lock the doors when we get to the store, and keep up with me when I'm walkin.' Denise's kids don't even know those kinds of things.

Subject: Stepmother who enforces rules for stepson.



Critical Incident: I finally put a sign on the refrigerator door which said, "You will report in at six every evening." Now Frank (the stepson) says that nobody trusts him. Well, as far as I'm concerned, he hasn't earned anybody's trust. He was showing up here at ten o'clock some nights instead of coming home after school and I had no idea where he was.

Subject: Parent who sees his ex-wife treat his son like an adult.

Critical Incident: We treat Rick like a five-year-old when he's with us. Diane (Rick's mother) treats him like her partner. She's never remarried so he has a more responsible role when he's with her. I try to talk to Diane, but she can't see my point at all.

Subject: Stepmother who sees her stepson's mother as un-cooperative.

Critical Incident: Julie (the mother) thinks that kids should let it "all hang out." So the kids can cuss or mouth off to her when they're there, and they can't do any of that here. We believe it's disrespectful in this house. Mike tried to talk to Julie about it, but she laughed and said we had the problem, not her.

21. Theme: What to call the new stepparent.

Frequency: 11 women; 7 men.

Subject: Parent who recalls her past with a stepparent

Critical Incident: I told Harold that I'd be real hesitant to ask my kids to call him anything but Harold. I had a stepfather when I was growing up and I had to call him "Dad." I was an adult before I felt comfortable doing that.

Subject: Biological parent who resents her child calling the stepmother "Mom."

Critical Incident: Carol got really upset when Martha (stepchild) started calling me "Mom" when Martha was at Carol's house. She told Kendall (former husband) that she wanted it stopped, and he said he couldn't do that. When Martha talks to me about her real mother, she calls her "Carol." I wonder what she does when she goes to visit Carol.

Subject: Stepfather who wants children to decide what to call him.

Critical Incident: My stepchildren knew me as Craig before they knew me as "Dad." They both asked me if they could call me "Dad." I told them they could call me anything they were

comfortable with except "Pop." I guess I don't feel old enough yet to be a "Pop."

Subject: Stepfather whose past with stepchildren resolved the issue.

Critical Incident: Our families (new wife and past wife) had known one another and been together for parties and picnics a lot before we got divorced. So when Ginny and I started going out, Rachel (the stepdaughter) got in the car one night and asked me what she was supposed to call me now that Ginny and I were going out. I said, "Well, you've always called me Ted; how about that?" I've been Ted ever since.

22. Theme: Children don't want to share their parents with new spouses.

Frequency: 11 women; 5 men.

Subject: Woman whose stepson misbehaves to show his resentment toward her.

Critical Incident: John's son has never wanted me here. We've gone round and round. He makes stink bombs in the kitchen before I get home from work. Last week he got poison ivy so he put calamine lotion all over his body and laid down on our new couch. Last week he locked Rachel (stepsister) in the laundry room and told her he was going to kill her. John says all

teen-agers are like that, but I don't believe it. I have two teen-agers and they aren't like that.

Subject: Woman who believes she has taken her step-daughter's role in the new family.

Critical Incident: Carrie kind of lost her role when Gus and I got married. She had been more like a mother or a wife to Gus. She had a lot of responsibility when she lived with just her dad. She says she's torn between being glad she doesn't have all the responsibility and being sad that I took away her role in caring for her dad.

Subject: Man whose daughter is too young to understand the time lapse in his new relationship.

Critical Incident: Michelle's mother and I decided last November to separate, but we continued in the same house without being together in order to get through the holidays. I finally moved out of the house in February and it was only two or three months before I started seeing Ann (present wife). Michelle said, "Dad, you just went from one woman to another. I don't think you even know what you really want." The time lapse wasn't understandable to her.

23. Theme: Stepparents attempting to reconcile

differences with stepchildren.

Frequency: 6 women; 5 men

Subject: Wife trying to deal with adult children who didn't want their father to remarry.

Critical Incident: Bob was divorced before he ever met me, but I can't get along with his daughters who are my age. They seemed real friendly when I first moved in. They even asked me to babysit. Then I found out that while I was taking care of their children, they were seeing a lawyer trying to take land away from their father. When Bob found out what they had done to me--to us, he told them never to come to this house again. Imagine, his own children.

Subject: Stepparent who is relieved to have her stepdaughter out of the house

Critical Incident: This summer Andrea has decided to live at her mother's instead of here. She has a boyfriend and she wanted him here at our house all the time. I resisted that and she didn't agree at all. She's very unhappy with me most of the time. I have to say that now that she's gone, things are a lot happier around here.

Subject: Stepmother who doesn't know how to build a relationship with her stepson.

Critical Incident: I have the hardest time with Luke. He doesn't want to be with the other children and he won't talk to me at all. He told me that he had a mother, and he didn't need another one. Frank (the father) says that Luke is a loner. I wonder if he tried to grow up too fast because his mother left when he was so little.

Subject: Stepfather tries to reach stepdaughter through her younger sister

Critical Incident: I have the most trouble with Judy's oldest daughter. I've tried talking to Sarah (a younger sister) about what's going on with Rachel. Sarah just says that things will get better when Rachel gets old enough to move out. I did convince Rachel to get a job. That's made things better. She's happier when she's busy.

#### Conflicts with Ex-Spouse

24. Theme: Conflict over dealing with child support payments.

Frequency: 13 women; 11 men

Subject: Woman whose present husband doesn't want to acknowledge the need for child support payments to supplement their budget.

Critical Incident: One of the hardest things in

our marriage is child support payments. Jim (present husband) wants me to stay home instead of working. And I can do that because my ex-husband gives me a lot of money for the boys. But if I say to Jim, "I used the child support check to make the house payment this month," he has a fit. He says he doesn't like taking money from Brant and we're not supposed to mention it.

Subject: Woman who tries to force ex-husband to pay child support.

Critical Incident: Child support? What's that? We don't get that at this house. All I ask for is \$140 a month. I told my "ex" that I found out how much he was making for the railroad and I could make him pay \$340 instead. He still doesn't pay. I finally told him he couldn't see our son if he didn't pay every month. That helped for awhile, but now he owes over \$300 again.

Subject: Ex-spouse who won't pay medical insurance for children.

Critical Incident: I had an agreement with my ex-husband that he would also pay all medical and dental bills for the three children. No matter how many times I call him, he still won't do it. It's such a hassle that Tim (new

husband) finally put my children on his medical insurance at work. My first husband also agreed to pay for the kids' college, but their father probably won't come through. And Tim says that children should pay their own way through college. I told him that kids don't have to go through such hardships to appreciate college, but he can't see it that way.

Subject: Father who pays child support for a child who lives with him.

Critical Incident: Donna (former wife) has got a pretty good deal. I pay her child support, but she calls up and says she doesn't have a babysitter so will Joyce (new wife) take care of Alan. And of course, you don't charge to babysit your own kid, so she's got the money and no responsibility. I told Donna that she should decide where she wanted to shop for Alan; I would open a charge account there in my name, and she could charge his clothes and stuff to me. Well, she had a fit and said to "butt out of her life." I know she blows the money I give her for Alan.

Subject: Father who wants former wife to pay him child support.

Critical Incident: She (former wife) runs off



and leaves the three kids with me so she can belong to some spiritual group in California and beg food off people in the streets. She does that for four years, then suddenly shows up in Topeka, calls me on the phone and says she wants full visitation rights and everything else. I told her, "Fine, you pay me child support, you can see your kids you deserted." I also told her to go get counseling so she could act normal. She's 35 and never has been responsible.

25. Theme: Continuing to talk with ex-spouse over issues involving children from that former union.

Frequency: 14 women; 7 men

Subject: Woman whose present husband is wealthy and very protective of his current family.

Critical Incident: Sometimes Darrel's first wife calls if their daughter is really sick--and I don't mind. But no, I would never call my former husband if one of his children was sick or in trouble. That just wouldn't work in our situation. You see, Darrel (present husband) has a lot of pride and he absolutely wants to know what's going on. Darrel would be hurt and offended if I consulted their father instead of him. Sometimes my son calls his dad to come to

see his football games; then Chip (the son) spends most of his time talking to his dad and Darrel gets very upset over that.

Subject: Woman whose first husband had little interest in his children because they were female.

Critical Incident: It would never dawn on me to rely on the girl's father to help with a problem. He was very disappointed that they were girls. He only made one attempt to see them after we were divorced. He called and asked me to bring them to where he was. When I got there, he called and said he couldn't make it. I had driven three hours and he couldn't make it. Never again. Louis (present husband) helps my girls when they have problems. He's their father now.

Subject: Father who can't get information about his son's medical problems.

Critical Incident: Well, you see, Jim (son from first marriage) was born with a cleft palate. It was repaired when he was first born, but he still has to go back to the Med Center for periodic check-ups. I pay for his hospitalization, but do you think his mother lets me know when he's having problems? I get the bills--then I have to call

her to find out what's going on if I want to know what the doctors say.

Subject: Mother whose second husband has grown children and is able to communicate with their mother.

Critical Incident: I was so envious of Dick (present husband) the other night when he called his wife in New York to tell her that Laura (his daughter) had her baby. I thought how nice it would be to talk to my "ex" about our boys, but I can't do that at all.

#### Summary of Critical Incidents from Interviews

The themes which emerged from the interviews were organized, after transcription, according to the five categories specified in Table 8. They were presented according to frequency. Individual Parent and Stepparent Themes have a total of 170 critical incidents. Both Adult Perceptions of Children's Issues and Conflict Between Spouses had 104 critical incidents each. There were 69 critical incidents reported in the category of Stepparent-Stepchild Conflicts, and 45 critical incidents reported under Conflicts with Ex-Spouse.

Several themes which emerged in the interviews were re-classified after analyzing the interview data. The following material is a comparison of themes identified by more than one author in the clinical literature with that of nonclinical stepfamilies interviewed for this study.

## Comparison of Individual Parent and Stepparent Issues

### Differences:

There were two themes identified in the literature which did not emerge in the interviews. First, the theme of the wicked stepmother was considered humorous by those interviewed, but did not fit their views of reality.

The second theme of incest with the stepdaughter of the family did not emerge because it was deemed too high risk for the interviewer to ask.

The theme described in the literature as the stepparent who has many responsibilities but no legal rights appeared in this study as having no parental rights. Many interviewees corrected that statement by explaining that they were the ones who made sure stepchildren participated in extracurricular activities but they were then replaced by the biological parent when presentation or competition took place and the child wanted his/her "real" parent to attend the various functions. These stepparents also viewed it as unrealistic that they might adopt their stepchildren.

Similarities: The theme in the literature which dealt with a stepparent feeling left out and unable to share the past with his/her new spouse and his/her children was described in the interviews. However, the literature described individuals who were very resentful, but the interviewees expressed regret that they had not

been able to share that time with the new family. They also indicated understanding that such reminiscing would take place.

Not knowing who it was okay to love was originally seen as a children's issue, but the parents interviewed saw it as an issue which they talked about openly with their children so they understood that they could love parents and stepparents but in different ways.

New Themes: Four new themes emerged from the interview data. They were: 1) guilt that a parent felt about leaving children in a former marriage; 2) parents whose communication was strained with their own children because the child looked like and acted like the former husband/wife; 3) spouses who described the difficulty of being a stepparent compared to being a parent and feeling that no one had been able to prepare them for their task; and 4) trying very hard to keep everyone happy in the stepfamily without much appreciation for the effort.

#### Adult Perceptions of Children's Issues

Differences: The literature had described conflict between ex-spouses concerning visitation rules and regulations. However, the interviewees perceived it as a theme which children were very upset by especially regarding special times such as birthdays, holidays, and vacation time.

Similarities: Parents and stepparents described what

they perceived as much resentment from children regarding the new marriage. They are divided into four different themes which are: 1) favoritism in the new family; 2) complaints about inequities of time and money spent in the family; 3) resenting advice from stepparents; and 4) condemning faults in the stepparent that they are very forgiving of in their same-sex biological parent.

Another similarity to the literature was the theme of children wanting their original parents to re-unite.

#### Conflict Between Spouses

Similarities: Both the literature and the interviews provided much information about discipline in the stepfamily. There were eight studies dealing with this topic and 31 critical incidents reported in interviews. The interviewees reported a variety of ways of dealing with discipline. All agreed that it was discussed at length in their stepfamily.

New Themes: Four new themes emerged in this category. They were: 1) talking about problems before the marriage was not adequate planning for all the problems that arose in the new marriage; 2) added stress in the marriage because of children's adjustment problems; 3) difficulty managing financial matters and expanded living space because of two families coming together; and 4) family concerns over bringing together two sets of children of similar age.

Themes three and four were much more prevalent in families who had combined. Joint custody is much more prevalent today so that accounts for the emergence of these themes.

Families with teen-age children reported a much higher level of stress related to children's adjustment than families with younger children.

#### Stepparent-Stepchild Conflicts

Differences: The theme of bonding before discipline in the stepfamily literature was dropped from this study. All interview data revealed that stepparents thought this was a good idea and thought that they had tried to do this. However, only one stepparent actually was trying to carry through with the plan after 16 months in the stepfamily. All other stepparents admitted that they had abandoned the plan within one month after the marriage.

Similarities: All themes from this area appeared in both the literature and the interviews. What was referred to as new family relationships in the literature was described in interviews as children who did not want to share their parent with the new spouse. This theme was more prevalent in stepfamilies where the spouse had primary custody of the children (the children saw their other parent once a month or less) and had lived as a divorced person for several years. These parents excused the children for this response, saying that they had been

a family for several years without the other parent.

Deciding what to call the stepparent seemed to be more important in the interviewed families than what the literature calls "quasi-kin" (new aunts, uncles, grandparents who are not really related to the children). Those stepparents who expressed special fondness for stepchildren also wished that the children called them "Mom" or "Dad," but recognized that this was not realistic.

The theme of changing boundaries described in the literature evolved in the interviews as two different themes. They were: 1) conflict over differing rules within a house or between houses; and 2) stepparents attempting to reconcile differences with stepchildren. Theme one was most difficult for families with small children. The parents believed that the children were too young to learn two sets of rules when they travelled from one house to another. The conflict was described as very serious in homes where a stepparent attempted to change the rules already established in a family before his/her arrival in the stepfamily.

#### Conflicts with Ex-Spouse

Similarities: Talking with the ex-spouse about children from the former union was apparent in the literature and the interviews. The interviewee data revealed that the degree of involvement of the ex-spouse



in the children's lives was often a factor in how much and what kind of contact was made. Also, those people who had been divorced for a longer time expressed less hostility toward their ex-spouses regarding this topic.

Conflict over child support payments was often described with much anger, especially in families where there was more than one child and where the stepfamily was on a tight budget.

## Survey Results

The fifty-two stepfamily spouses were sent a questionnaire within three months of their interviews. The questions referred to the 17 rephrased themes from the structured portion of the interview and the eight new issues which had been identified from the unstructured portions of the interviews.

### Frequency

Each person was asked to indicate whether or not a particular issue was discussed in their stepfamily. If it was, the respondent was asked to identify the degree of importance and difficulty of each. Fifty-six percent (n=30) of the interviewees responded to the questionnaire. Table 9 on the following page lists each issue according to frequency and percentage.

### Summary of frequency results

The most startling finding revealed by the questionnaire results was that 20 of the communication-related issues identified in the interview data were reported as occurring in at least 50% of the stepfamilies.

### Importance

The participants reported the degree of importance of each critical incident theme on a five point Likert-type scale, with five indicating the most importance and one indicating the least importance of the issue. All scores from each answer were tallied and the mean was figured.

Table 9 Reported Incidence of Critical Incident Themes in Stepfamilies

Theme	(n = 30)	Frequency
1 My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate		30 (1.00)
2 My spouse and his/her children share a history that I'm not a part of When they reminisce, I feel left out		23 (.77)
3 I had thought that my stepchildren would come to me when they needed advice about something important, but they still go to my spouse		22 (.73)
4 The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated This added stress to our new marriage		21 (.71)
5 People talked to me about how to be a parent, but no one ever told me how to be a stepparent		21 (.71)
6 I'm in conflict with my stepchildren frequently I try to improve this situation, but I don't feel very successful		21 (.71)
7 When I remarried, I felt like I was marrying my spouse and his/her children It seems that I've accepted a lot of responsibility, but I don't have any parental rights.		20 (.67)
8 I seem to spend a lot of time trying to keep my new family happy as well as my own children, and I'm not sure that any of them appreciate the effort I make		20 (.67)
9 My stepchildren seem to resent me -- not for any reason except that I chose to marry their parent		20 (.67)
10 Bringing two families together was a major issue We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs.		20 (.67)
11 When I try to discipline my stepchildren, they seem resentful and appeal to my spouse to change my decisions		20 (.67)
12 One of my children looks like my ex-spouse, even talks like and acts like him/her. When I see this, I get irritated.		19 (.63)
13 We're on a tight budget in our family Checks for child support seem to be an issue that we discuss in our family frequently		18 (.60)
14 I give my stepchildren a good house and lots of important things I thought they would love me, but they don't and I feel hurt		18 (.60)
15 My rules for my children are different from my spouse's rules for his/her children This causes confusion and inconsistency for all of us.		18 (.60)
16 Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, and vacations		17 (.57)
17 My children appear confused about whom to love, now that I've remarried It was like I had to give them permission to love their parent and the stepparent but in different ways		17 (.57)
18 My children and my stepchildren seem to keep score of time and money spent on each set of children		17 (.57)
19 Sometimes I'm forced to choose between showing favoritism between my children and my spouse's No matter what choice I make, someone's children feel resentful		16 (.53)
20 My stepchildren seem to be unsure about what to call me. Sometimes they slip and call me Mom/Dad		15 (.50)
21 I don't want to inconvenience my new spouse with my children's problems so I contact my former spouse regarding issues such as discipline, illness, or school conferences		13 (.43)
22 My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age We wondered how they would live together in their new family		13 (.43)
23 My ex-spouse has faults which his/her children are very forgiving of, however, they condemn my new spouse for the same faults		11 (.37)
24 My children seem to long for a nuclear family They still ask why their other parent and I can't just get married again		9 (.30)
25 My children did not come with me into my new marriage I feel guilty about the time I spend in my new family and away from them.		8 (.27)

Table 10 reports the importance of each issue.

#### Summary of Importance Results

Sixteen of the 25 issues show a relatively high degree of importance (3.00 or higher). Although only 13 people responded to the question concerning the conflict involved in bringing two families together with children of the same age, it was ranked of greatest importance. Five of the newly identified issues ranked in the top five in importance. They were: 1) My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age. We wondered how they would live together in their new family (4.69); 2) Bringing two families together was a major issue. We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs (4.25); 3) My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate (4.00); 4) Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, or vacations (3.82); and 5) People talked to me about how to be a parent, but no one ever told me how to be a stepparent (3.76).

#### Difficulty

The participants also responded to the degree of difficulty in dealing with each theme on a five point Likert-type scale with five representing the greatest

Table 10 Reported Importance of Critical Incident Themes in Stepfamilies

Theme	Degree of Importance
1 My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age. We wondered how they would live together in their new family.	4.69
2 Bringing two families together was a major issue. We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs.	4.25
3 My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate.	4.00
4 Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, or vacations.	3.82
5 People talked to me about how to be a parent, but no one ever told me how to be a stepparent.	3.76
6 I seem to spend a lot of time trying to keep my new family happy as well as my own children, and I'm not sure that any of them appreciate the effort I make.	3.60
7 My children appear confused about whom to love, now that I've remarried. It was like I had to give them permission to love their parent and the stepparent but in different ways.	3.59
8 The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated. This added stress to our new marriage.	3.52
9 My children did not come with me into my new marriage. I feel guilty about the time I spend in my new family and away from them.	3.50
10 We're on a tight budget in our family. Checks for child support seem to be an issue that we discuss in our family frequently.	3.44
11 I'm in conflict with my stepchildren frequently. I try to improve this situation, but I don't feel very successful.	3.24
12 When I remarried, I felt like I was marrying my spouse and his/her children. It seems that I've accepted a lot of responsibility, but I don't have any parental rights.	3.20
13 I give my stepchildren a good house and lots of important things. I thought they would love me, but they don't and I feel hurt.	3.11
14 When I try to discipline my stepchildren, they seem resentful and appeal to my spouse to change my decision.	3.10
15 I don't want to inconvenience my new spouse with my children's problems so I contact my former spouse regarding issues such as discipline, illness, or school conferences.	3.08
16 My ex-spouse has faults which his/her children are very forgiving of, however, they condemn my new spouse for the same faults.	3.00
17 I had thought that my stepchildren would come to me when they needed advice about something important, but they still go to my spouse.	2.95
18 Sometimes I'm forced to choose between showing favoritism between my children and my spouse's. No matter what choice I make, someone's children feel resentful.	2.94
19 My stepchildren seem to resent me -- not for any reason except that I chose to marry their parent.	2.90
20 My rules for my children are different from my spouse's rules for his/her children. This causes confusion and inconsistency for all of us.	2.83
21 My spouse and his/her children share a history that I'm not a part of. When they reminisce, I feel left out.	2.57
22 My children seem to long for a nuclear family. They still ask why their other parent and I can't just get married again.	2.56
23 My children and my stepchildren seem to keep score of time and money spent on each set of children.	2.53
24 My stepchildren seem unsure about what to call me. Sometimes they slip and call me Mom/Dad.	2.13
25 One of my children looks like my ex-spouse, even talks like and acts like him/her. When I see this, I get irritated.	2.11

degree of difficulty and one representing the least difficulty. The means were calculated and Table 11 reports the difficulty of each theme.

#### Summary of Difficulty Results

Four of the first five most difficult issues were newly identified themes of critical incidents. They were: 1) My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems that we could anticipate (3.47); 2) Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, or vacations (3.35); 3) The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated. This added stress to our new marriage (3.24); and 4) My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age. We wondered how they would live together in their new family (3.23). Overall scores were lower for difficulty which may indicate that people believe that they are communicating about these issues with some degree of success. Ten of the 25 issues are ranked as above the mid-point in difficulty.

#### Criticalness

The means for both degree of importance and degree of difficulty for each question were multiplied to determine the degree of relative criticalness. The scores are rank-ordered in Table 12. A maximum score of 25 is possible if

Table 11 Reported Difficulty of Critical Incident Themes in Stepfamilies

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Degree of Difficulty</u>
1 My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems that we could anticipate	3 47
2 Visitation is a big issue for my children They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, or vacations.	3.35
3. The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated This added stress to our new marriage	3.24
4 My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age We wondered how they would live together in their new family	3 23
5 I seem to spend a lot of time trying to keep my new family happy as well as my own children, and I'm not sure that any of them appreciate the effort I make	3.15
6 People talked to me about how to be a parent, but no one ever told me how to be a stepparent	3.14
7 My children appear confused about whom to love, now that I've remarried It was like I had to give them permission to love their parent and the stepparent but in different ways	3.12
8. We're on a tight budget in our family Checks for child support seem to be an issue that we discuss in our family frequently	3.06
9 Bringing two families together was a major issue We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs.	3.05
10 I'm in conflict with my stepchildren frequently I try to improve this situation, but I don't feel very successful.	3.00
11 Sometimes I'm forced to choose between showing favoritism between my children and my spouse's No matter what choice I make, someone's children feel resentful.	2.88
12 My children did not come with me into my new marriage. I feel guilty about the time I spend in my new family and away from them	2.87
13. When I remarried, I felt like I was marrying my spouse and his/her children It seems that I've accepted a lot of responsibility, but I don't have any parental rights	2.85
14 My rules for my children are different from my spouse's rules for his/her children. This causes confusion and inconsistency for all of us	2.78
15. When I try to discipline my stepchildren, they seem resentful and appeal to my spouse to change my decision.	2.70
16. My ex-spouse has faults which his/her children are very forgiving of, however, they condemn my new spouse for the same faults	2.64
17 My stepchildren seem to resent me -- not for any reason except that I chose to marry their parent	2 60
18 I give my stepchildren a good house and lots of important things I thought they would love me, but they don't and I feel hurt.	2.56
19. One of my children looks like my ex-spouse, even talks like and acts like him/her When I see this, I get irritated.	2 32
20. I had thought that my stepchildren would come to me when they needed advice about something important, but they still go to my spouse	2 27
21 My children seem to long for a nuclear family They still ask why their other parent and I can't just get married again	2 22
22 I don't want to inconvenience my new spouse with my children's problems so I contact my former spouse regarding issues such as discipline, illness, or school conferences	2 15
23 My spouse and his/her children share a history that I'm not a part of When they reminisce, I feel left out	1 96
24. My children and stepchildren seem to keep score of time and money spent on each set of children	1 94
25. My stepchildren seem to be unsure about what to call me Sometimes they slip and call me Mom/Dad	1 87

a question is deemed very important and very difficult to deal with by all who answered the question.

Summary of Relative Criticalness

Six of the issues reporting high relative criticalness were newly identified themes in stepfamilies. They were: 1) My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age. We wondered how they would live together in their new family (15.15); 2) My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate (13.88); 3) Bringing two families together was a major issue. We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs (12.96); 4) Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, and vacations (12.80); 5) People talked to me about how to be a parent, but no one ever told me how to be a stepparent (11.81); and 6) The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated. This added stress to our new marriage (11.40).



Table 12. Reported Criticalness of Critical Incident Themes in Stepfamilies

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Relative Criticalness</u>
1. My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age. We wondered how they would live together in their new family	15.15
2. My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate.	13.88
3. Bringing two families together was a major issue. We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs.	12.96
4. Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, or vacations.	12.80
5. People talked to me about how to be a parent, but no one ever told me how to be a stepparent.	11.81
6. The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated. This added stress to our new marriage.	11.40
7. I seem to spend a lot of time trying to keep my new family happy as well as my own children; and I'm not sure that any of them appreciate the effort I make.	11.34
8. My children appear confused about whom to love, now that I've remarried. It was like I had to give them permission to love their parent and the stepparent but in different ways.	11.20
9. We're on a tight budget in our family. Checks for child support seem to be an issue that we discuss in our family frequently.	10.53
10. My children did not come with me into my new marriage. I feel guilty about the time I spend in my new family and away from them.	10.05
11. I'm in conflict with my stepchildren frequently. I try to improve this situation, but I don't feel very successful.	9.72
12. When I remarried, I felt like I was marrying my spouse and his/her children. It seems that I've accepted a lot of responsibility, but I don't have any parental rights.	9.12
13. Sometimes I'm forced to choose between showing favoritism between my children and my spouse's. No matter what choice I make, someone's children feel resentful.	8.47
14. When I try to discipline my stepchildren, they seem resentful and appeal to my spouse to change my decision.	8.37
15. I give my stepchildren a good house and lots of important things. I thought they would love me, but they don't and I feel hurt.	7.96
16. My ex-spouse has faults which his/her children are very forgiving of; however, they condemn my new spouse for the same faults.	7.92
17. My rules for my children are different from my spouse's rules for his/her children. This causes confusion and inconsistency for all of us.	7.87
18. My stepchildren seem to resent me -- not for any reason except that I chose to marry their parent.	7.54
19. I had thought that my stepchildren would come to me when they needed advice about something important, but they still go to my spouse.	6.70
20. I don't want to inconvenience my new spouse with my children's problems, so I contact my former spouse regarding issues such as discipline, illness, or school conferences.	6.62
21. My children seem to long for a nuclear family. They still ask why their other parent and I can't just get married again.	5.68
22. My spouse and his/her children share a history that I'm not a part of. When they reminisce, I feel left out.	5.04
23. My children and my stepchildren seem to keep score of time and money spent on each set of children.	4.91
24. One of my children looks like my ex-spouse, even talks like and acts like him/her. When I see this, I get irritated.	4.90
25. My stepchildren seem unsure about what to call me. Sometimes they slip and call me Mom/Dad.	3.98

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Discussion

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify themes of communication-related critical incidents occurring during the first two years of forming a new stepfamily. Spouses of 26 stepfamilies were interviewed and 15 couples later completed questionnaires reporting the incidence, importance and difficulty of the 25 themes identified.

#### Method

Interviews were conducted in Lawrence, Kansas and Mankato, Minnesota. Fifty-four adults were randomly selected and contacted by examining marriage records and through records of a divorce support group. The interviews involved both unstructured and structured questions. The unstructured portion of the interviews asked the participants to identify and describe instances in the formation of their new family when they were unsure or puzzled by how to respond to a situation. The structured portions of the interview asked questions about 17 specific issues reported in the stepfamily literature by more than one researcher. A majority of these issues had been identified through clinical studies. A goal of this study was to determine whether similar issues occurred in non-clinical stepfamilies.

The interviews were tape recorded, analyzed to

identify themes of critical incidents, and each incident was placed on a 3 x 5 card. After all interviews were completed, the cards were then re-organized and themes were revised. Eight theme areas were identified which had not been discussed by more than one author in the literature. Questions were devised for the questionnaire based on the themes of the critical incidents revealed through the interviews. The 54 people who were interviewed were sent questionnaires on which they were asked to identify communication-related themes which occurred in their stepfamily, indicate how important the issue was and how difficult it was for them to deal with. The responses were based on a five-point Likert-type scale. There was a 56 percent (n = 30) return of the questionnaires.

Reliability for the interview data was measured in three ways. During the interviews, when the researcher heard what appeared to be a new theme of a communication-related critical incident, notes were taken. At the end of the interview, the participant was asked to verify or clarify the theme of that particular incident. Next, interview data was transcribed on cards in the form of communication-related critical incidents. After tentative themes had been assigned to the critical incidents, two people were asked to verify theme areas as belonging to one of five categories determined through analysis of the

review of literature. When there was agreement among the three on assigning themes to categories, five graduate teaching assistants were trained and asked to read randomly selected critical incidents and assign them to theme areas which had been determined earlier. The average agreement rate for the five coders was .85. This degree of reliability was deemed adequate.

### Findings

Seven new themes for critical incidents were identified through interviews in the pilot study (see Table 7). However, two themes (changing socio-economic status and impact of severe illness on stepfamily) were later collapsed into the broader category of financial issues involved in bring two families together.

Interviews also revealed that stepfamilies with two sets of children of approximately the same age had far more communication-related issues to deal with than stepfamilies with only one set of children living with the new family. Most stepfamilies, whether they contained one or two sets of children in the shared living space talked frequently about the discipline issues with children which seemed to cause added stress to everyone concerned. This theme may be related to talk about needing additional living space.

Questionnaire results indicated evidence of the incidence, importance, and difficulty of the new theme

areas identified from the interviews. In fact, every participant indicated that their new stepfamily presented more issues to deal with than they had been able to anticipate or prepare for prior to marriage. The questionnaire also revealed the highest degree of importance related to three of the five new theme areas revealed through interview data. They were: 1) My new spouse and I have children who are similar in age. We wondered how they would live together in their new family; 2) Bringing two families together was a major issue. We had to talk about how much more living space we would need and how we could take care of financial needs; and 3) My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate.

The issues which were considered to be the most difficult to deal with were: 1) My new spouse and I talked before marriage about possible problems we might have in making a new family, but there were more problems than we could anticipate; 2) Visitation is a big issue for my children. They are torn two ways when it's time for birthdays, holidays, or vacations; and 3) The adjustment problems for our children took longer than we anticipated. This added stress to our new marriage.

#### Interpretation

It was very evident from the interviews and from the

questionnaire results that many communication-related critical incidents were occurring in these non-clinical stepfamilies. More were occurring in families with two sets of children, and the degree of importance or impact on all family members was expressed. However, two observations were made: 1) the nonclinical stepfamilies were talking to someone in the family about these issues, frequently to everyone who was concerned; and 2) the stepfamilies who had been reformed for eighteen months or more were able to recall vividly the issues they had dealt with earlier, but most indicated that they believed their stepfamily was far less stressed by the issues than they had been at the beginning. Both these observations suggest that nonclinical stepfamilies find communication helpful in dealing with the issues.

As an interviewer, I was impressed with the candor of the interviewees. In many environments, an interviewer gets the impressions that participants are telling the interviewer what they think the interviewer wants to hear. This was not the case with these stepfamilies. They appeared to be genuinely interested in adding to knowledge in this area. Many expressed a feeling of frustration related to getting more information about stepfamilies.

#### Limitations

This study was confined to two middle-sized Midwestern towns, and did not include larger cities or

different geographical regions of the country.

A larger, less homogeneous group might produce different findings.

There was no racial balance in this study. Although the researcher had no way of knowing beforehand what the race of participants would be, small, middle-sized Midwestern towns have few black, Indian, or oriental couples in stepfamilies whose names might appear in the general pool of participants. One Mexican-American family responded to the request for interviews.

Subject selection was problematic because only those agreed to be interviewed were included even though measures were followed to contact a wide range of respondents. One must wonder about those families who were contacted and refused to be interviewed. Would their responses have been different?

No children in stepfamilies were interviewed for this study. Research indicates that the impact of divorce and remarriage is felt strongly by the children involved. When dealing with children's issues in this study, only the perceptions of the adults interviewed could be recorded. Their perceptions may differ greatly from those of children in the stepfamilies.

Only 56 percent of the adults in stepfamilies interviewed replied to the questionnaire, although all had been asked and agreed to participate when asked during the

interviews. Again, the representativeness of these responses is questionable.

#### Implications for Future Research

A future study should encompass a broader population which would include stepfamilies from different geographic regions, minorities, and those families on federal or state assistance programs.

It would be a definite advantage to interview all members in a stepfamily over the age of six. Children's perceptions of communication-related critical incidents would add another dimension to the study.

Training sessions and/or workshops for potential stepfamilies could be based on the findings of this study. Providing a checklist of issues that commonly are dealt with in new stepfamilies might eliminate some of the stress involved in the early stages of a remarriage.

The interview and questionnaire instruments developed for this study may prove helpful in the future to researchers investigating communication in stepfamilies.



## Appendix A: Approved Consent Form

The Department of Communication Studies supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided so that you may decide whether to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate you are free to withdraw at any time.

The study is concerned with the kinds of incidents in stepfamilies where adults are unsure about what to do, how they reach decisions about what to do, and what results occurred. You will be asked to tell me about these incidents, and later I will send you a questionnaire concerning these and other similar issues. I will be tape recording our conversation. Your personal account and the questionnaire will be identified by code number only.

Your participation is solicited, but strictly voluntary. Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study. Be assured that your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. We appreciate your cooperation very much.

Sincerely,

Patsy Meisel  
Principal  
Investigator  
507-388-4234

-----  
Signature of subject agreeing to participate

Appendix B: Letter Form

Dear :

I'm writing to ask for your help in my doctoral research at K. U. on family communication. I hope to learn the challenges which stepfamilies or blended families face as they form a new family group. This knowledge should help new families in the future handle the first years of their lives together more effectively.

I located your name from a list at the Douglas County Courthouse of people who have been married since 1985. I had no way of knowing if your family is a stepfamily, or whether you have children from a former marriage living with you.

If you are a stepfamily, would you be willing to talk to me about some of your experiences over the past few years?

Your comments would be completely confidential. No names will be used in this study, and you will be completely free to share with me only what you choose. The families I have already interviewed have described the experience as pleasant and personally satisfying.

For my research to be worthwhile, I'm trying to interview all couples in the Lawrence area who have been married since 1985 and have a child or children from a previous marriage living with them. If your family is one of these, please return the enclosed postcard.

If you know a stepfamily who might participate also, please include their name and address.

I would be very grateful for your cooperation. I will call to set up an appointment at your convenience as soon as I receive your postcard.

Sincerely,

Patt Meisel  
Stouffer Place 6-5  
Lawrence, KS 66044  
Phone: 842-9013

Appendix C: Post Card Form

☐: Yes, I would be willing to talk with you.

Name:

Address:

☐: Yes, I know another blended family.

Name:

Address:

#### Appendix D: Interview Form

My name is Patt Meisel. I'm a graduate student in communication studies at the University of Kansas. I need your help with my research. I'm especially interested in stepfamilies. I want to ask you some questions about what happens in your new family. If you have any questions about my questions, don't hesitate to stop me or clear up what it is you think I'm asking you. I'd like to tape our interview so that I can check my notes later for verification. I assure you that you will not be identified by name to anyone else. Is that agreeable to you?

#### Open-ended Interview

1. Tell me how you two met and came together.
2. Tell me about how your relationship progressed.  
(As incidents are described, interviewer asks, "Did you have any difficulty with that?" or "What decisions did you have to make?" or "Were you confused by how to respond?" or "Were you frustrated or unsure about how to react?"
3. What were some issues that came up early in the marriage?  
(As issues are described, interviewer asks, "Can you tell me more about that?" "What was the topic?" "What did s/he say?" "What did you

mean by that?" "How was that handled?" "How d  
you feel about that?" "When did this occur?"

### Structured Interview

There are other issues which some stepfamilies have indicated that they deal with. Now I'd like to ask you if any of these occur in your new family. (These questions are asked only if they have not been revealed at an earlier point in the interview).

#### Couple Issues:

1. Disciplining your children/stepchildren
2. Talking about possible problems before marriage
3. Difficulty financially in bringing two families together
4. Bringing two sets of children together who are similar in age
5. Adjustment problems of children adding stress

#### Ex-Spouse Issues:

6. Support payments
7. Consulting ex-spouse over child issues

#### Parent and Stepparent Issues:

8. Feeling responsible for stepchildren but not having any legal rights.
9. When your spouse and his/her children joke or reminisce about time prior to your relationship.
10. How your stepchildren feel about you. How they express their feelings to you?

11. Trying too hard to keep everyone in the new family happy.
12. Assuring children about who it's okay to love
13. Guilt over leaving children from a past marriage
14. Greater difficulty in being a stepparent
15. Difficulty communicating with child who resembles ex-spouse

Stepparent-stepchild Issues:

16. Children resenting time parent spends with new spouse
17. Being unsure about what to call one another.
18. Trying to reconcile differences with stepchildren
19. Different rules between houses or between children and stepchildren

Adult Perceptions of Children's Issues:

20. Children who perceive favoritism
21. Wanting parents to re-unite
22. Perceived inequities of time and money spent in the new family
23. Resenting advice from stepparents
24. Condemning stepparent for faults they forgive the same-sex biological parent
25. Confusion about where to spend holidays, birthdays, and vacations.

I'd like you to tell me some things which have happened in this new family which you feel good about.

Is your spouse or your children aware of these times also?

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. What you've told me has been very helpful. Within a few weeks, I'll be sending you a questionnaire which I'd like you to fill out and return to me. It's another way of gathering information, and some of the same topics will be on there which we've talked about today; but please go ahead and answer them again.

## APPENDIX E: STEPFAMILY QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: Below are some issues which are commonly discussed in stepfamilies. Please read each one and rate each according to its importance or influence in your new family and also according to how difficult it is to handle. If a particular issue does not come up in your family, circle "NA" (not applicable) in the left hand margin and move on to the next question. Use the five- point scale on each side of the issue for answering.

### Rating Scale

<u>Important</u>		<u>Difficult</u>	
1 =	no importance	1 =	not difficult
2 =	little importance	2 =	little difficulty
3 =	some importance	3 =	some difficulty
4 =	important	4 =	difficult
5 =	very important	5 =	very difficult

### Sample Question

<u>Important</u>		<u>Difficult</u>
	1 My spouse wants to spend the holidays with	1
	2 his/her family every year, but I want to	2
NA	3 take turns going to my family on alternate	③
	4 years.	4
⑤		5

Notice that in the sample question, number 5 was circled in the "important" column and number 3 in the "difficult" column. From these answers, we can assume that this problem is very important to the respondent and somewhat difficult to handle.

### Questions

	<u>Important</u>		<u>Difficult</u>
1.			
	1	My children did not come with me into	1
	2	my new marriage. I feel guilty about	2
NA	3	the time I spend in my new family and	3
	4	away from them.	4
	5		5
2.			
	1	I don't want to inconvenience my new	1
	2	spouse with my children's problems so	2
NA	3	I contact my former spouse regarding	3
	4	issues such as discipline, illness, or	4
	5	school conferences.	5
3.			
	1	My stepchildren seem to resent me --	1
	2	not for any reason except that I	2
NA	3	chose to marry their parent.	3
	4		4
	5		5



4.	Important		Difficult
	1	My spouse and her/his children share	1
	2	a history that I'm not a part of.	2
NA	3	When they reminisce, I feel left out.	3
	4		4
	5		5
5.	Important		Difficult
	1	When I try to discipline my	1
	2	stepchildren, they seem resentful and	2
NA	3	appeal to my spouse to change my	3
	4	decisions.	4
	5		5
6.	Important		Difficult
	1	My rules for my children are different	1
	2	from my spouse's rules for his/her	2
NA	3	children. This causes confusion and	3
	4	inconsistency for all of us.	4
	5		5
7.	Important		Difficult
	1	Sometimes I'm forced to choose between	1
	2	showing favoritism between my children	2
NA	3	and my spouse's. No matter what choice	3
	4	I make, someone's children feel	4
	5	resentful.	5
8.	Important		Difficult
	1	I'm in conflict with my stepchildren	1
	2	frequently. I try to improve this	2
NA	3	situation, but I don't feel very	3
	4	successful.	4
	5		5
9.	Important		Difficult
	1	I give my stepchildren a good home and	1
	2	lots of important things. I thought	2
NA	3	they would love me, but they don't and	3
	4	I feel hurt.	4
	5		5
10.	Important		Difficult
	1	I had thought that my stepchildren	1
	2	would come to me when they needed	2
NA	3	advice about something important, but	3
	4	they still go to my spouse.	4
	5		5
11.	Important		Difficult
	1	My children and my stepchildren seem	1
	2	to keep score of time and money spent	2
NA	3	on each set of children.	3
	4		4
	5		5
12.	Important		Difficult
	1	One of my children looks like my	1
	2	ex-spouse, even talks like and acts	2
NA	3	like him/her. When I see this, I get	3
	4	irritated.	4
	5		5

13.	Important		Difficult
	1	My ex-spouse has faults which his/her	1
	2	children are very forgiving of;	2
NA	3	however they condemn my new spouse for	3
	4	the same faults.	4
	5		5
14.	Important		Difficult
	1	I seem to spend a lot of time trying to	1
	2	keep my new family happy as well as my	2
NA	3	own children; and I'm not sure that any	3
	4	of them appreciate the effort I make.	4
	5		5
15.	Important		Difficult
	1	My children appear confused about whom	1
	2	to love, now that I've remarried. It	2
NA	3	was like I had to give them permission	3
	4	to love their parent and the stepparent	4
	5	but in different ways.	5
16.	Important		Difficult
	1	We're on a tight budget in our family.	1
	2	Checks for child support seem to be an	2
NA	3	issue that we discuss in our family	3
	4	frequently.	4
	5		5
17.	Important		Difficult
	1	When I remarried, I felt like I was	1
	2	marrying my spouse and his/her children.	2
NA	3	It seems that I've accepted a lot of	3
	4	responsibility, but I don't have any	4
	5	parental rights.	5
18.	Important		Difficult
	1	My children seem to long for a nuclear	1
	2	family. They still ask why their	2
NA	3	other parent and I can't just get	3
	4	married again.	4
	5		5
19.	Important		Difficult
	1	My stepchildren seem to be unsure	1
	2	about what to call me. Sometimes	2
NA	3	they slip and call me Mom/Dad.	3
	4		4
	5		5
20.	Important		Difficult
	1	Visitation is a big issue for my	1
	2	children. They are torn two ways	2
NA	3	when it's time for birthdays,	3
	4	holidays, or vacations.	4
	5		5
21.	Important		Difficult
	1	My new spouse and I talked before	1
	2	marriage about possible problems we	2
NA	3	might have in making a new family, but	3
	4	there were more problems than we could	4
	5	anticipate.	5

22.	Important		Difficult
	1	Bringing two families together was a	1
	2	major issue. We had to talk about how	2
NA	3	much more living space we would need and	3
	4	how we could take care of financial	4
	5	needs.	5
23.	Important		Difficult
	1	My new spouse and I have children who	1
	2	are similar in age. We wondered how	2
NA	3	they would live together in their new	3
	4	family.	4
	5		5
24.	Important		Difficult
	1	The adjustment problems for our children	1
	2	took longer than we anticipated. This	2
NA	3	added stress to our new marriage.	3
	4		4
	5		5
25.	Important		Difficult
	1	People talked to me about how to be a	1
	2	parent, but no one ever told me how	2
NA	3	to be a stepparent.	3
	4		4
	5		5

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