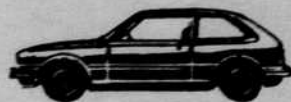


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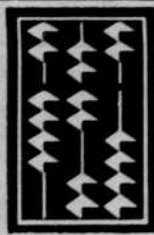


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Stepfamilies: Problems and Solutions

by Mary Dwan

"Recently Eugene has had more divorces than marriages," at least five people told me when I moved here last June. "Then there must be a lot of stepfamilies," I surmised. "I bet they need help." By July I had decided to try to start what has since become the first Oregon chapter of the Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. (SAA). This makes Oregon the twenty-seventh state to have a chapter since this non-profit organization began eight years ago.

My guess that the stepfamilies here could use help came from my personal and professional experience. Remarriage involving children from previous marriages is often much more difficult than the happily courting spouses-to-be imagine. In fact, one reason for their later shock and disappointment is that they had not realistically anticipated or planned for their new family.

Surrounded by a society that still deifies the biologically intact family (despite projections that within five years this supposedly typical family will be in the minority), members of stepfamilies expect that stepparents will (and should) love stepchildren; that disciplining stepchildren is easy; and that stepchildren should show gratitude and appreciation for their stepparent and for the generous gift of a new "mother" or "father."

In reality stepfamilies are born through loss by death or divorce. For children, especially, the creation of a stepfamily renews rather than dispels this sense of loss and the grief, anger and guilt that accompany it. Children must give up the fantasy (which most of them have but don't tell) that their parents will remarry each other.

Stepparents with no children of their own often give up a freer life style as well as their belief that like other "normal" Americans they will be able to start a pristinely new family of their own. They may also give up expectations of themselves as patient, child-oriented, loving and understanding parent-figures. Parents become equally disappointed with their spouses and themselves, having assumed the new partner would naturally slip into the missing role.

Parents may also feel disappointed by their children, whose behavior may have deteriorated rather than improved. Guilt, however, often makes parents erratic in disciplining and understanding their children. Often they even join their children in scapegoating the stepparent as the person to blame for all the problems. Stepparents retaliate or withdraw and if they have children of their own, one family camp may soon be at war with the other. The myth of the wicked stepparent is born from the reality of such stepfamily dynamics as they have been replayed through the ages.

The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. was created to offer information, education and supportive services to stepfamilies

and to the general public. The need for this kind of organization is great because:

- Every day in America an estimated 1300 new stepfamilies form.

- In the last ten years divorces of second marriages have increased. 40% of these divorces cite children as the main factor.

- The mourning process triggered by a remarriage and by visits between parents heightens the likelihood of sickness and accidents.

- People in stepfamilies are often in pain and conflict. (A very new study from Stanford University confirms that stepfamily members are at higher risk for emotional problems than either biologically intact or single parent families.)

The Lane County Chapter of the SAA has offered a varied program for stepfamilies this year: a drop-in rap group held at Birth to Three the second Wednesday of every month from 7:30-9:30 pm; a showing of the fall '84 Donahue show on stepfamilies; a Valentine's Day dessert pot-luck; and for May a fancy but affordable Stepparents' Day Brunch.

The next big event is a stepfamily workshop on April 20 co-sponsored by the University of Oregon Continuation Center, the Dept. of Counseling Psychology, Birth to Three and SAA. It will feature myself and Counselor Juvata Rusch, a judge, attorneys, an educational specialist and a panel of step-teens.

SAA relies on membership for its organization and strength. The program developed by this newest chapter in America is the work of a small and very dedicated group of people in Eugene.

For more information on SAA or the workshop, call 344-9400 (SAA answering tape). To register for the workshop, call Paul Katz, 686-4231.

[Mary Dwan, MA, MAT, is a counselor in private practice in Eugene. She has served on the National and California Boards of SAA, Inc., as well as being the first president of the second chapter in the USA and now of the newest one.]

Breakfast Club

KQDQ's Radio 1320 AM is now broadcasting live from Encore Restaurant at the top of the Hilton every morning from 7-9 am. KQDQ's "Breakfast Club's" morning host "Radio Ray" Pietz will be interviewing guests at breakfast each morning Monday through Friday. Boston Red Sox Bobby Doerr will make a guest appearance. Also Mason Williams will be interviewed. And Carol Tharpe will report on Hult Center activities each Wednesday. KQDQ looks forward to discussions on city issues, news items of local and national focus and lots of entertainment.

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