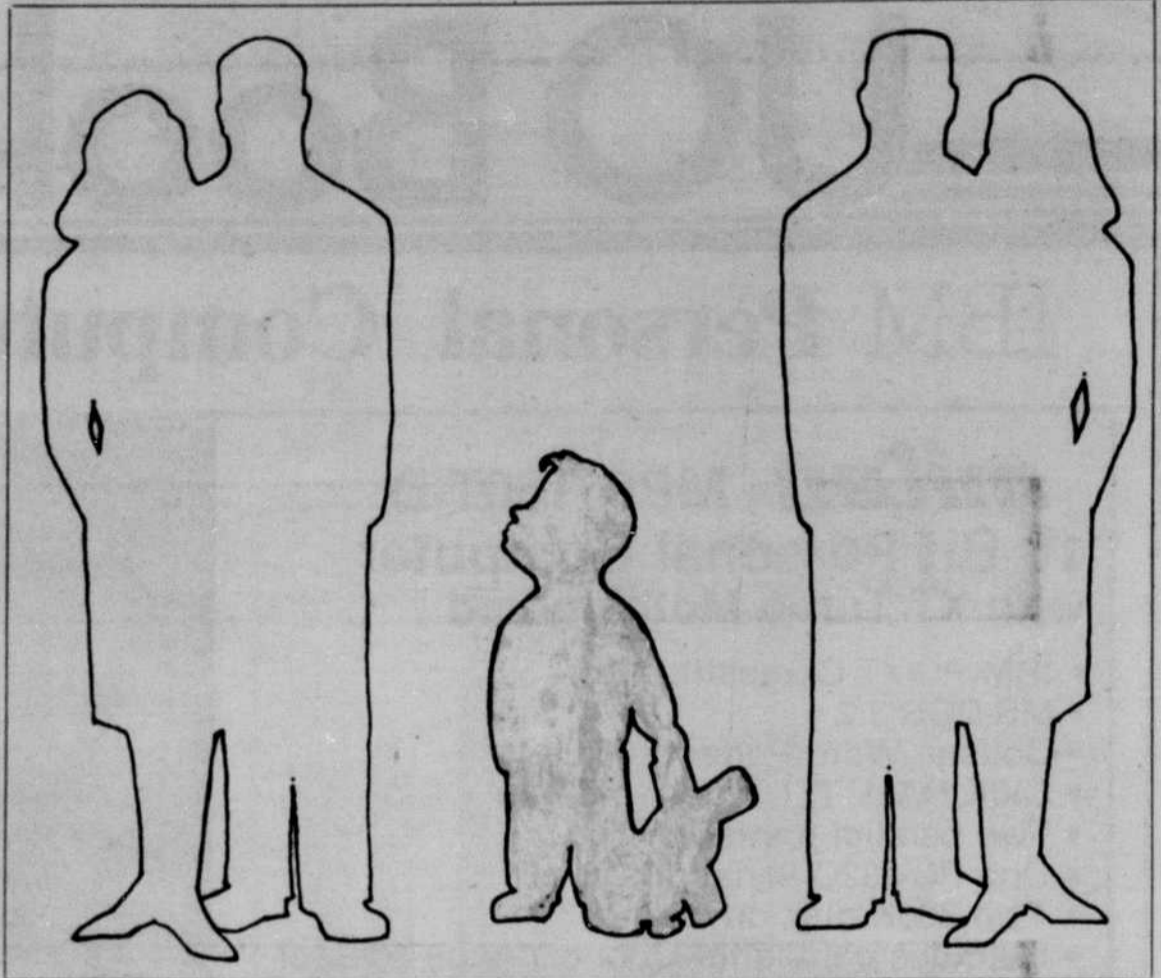


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Graphic by Lorraine Rath

Group helps stepfamily members adapt to different customs, beliefs

By Colin Stanton
Of the Emerald

Eugene has one of the highest divorce rates in the nation, according to Mary Dwan, a Eugene counselor who specializes in remarriage counseling.

Because of these high statistics, Dwan founded the first Oregon chapter of the Stepfamily Association of America, an organization that provides an outlet for individuals or families who are seeking help in coping with the problems of a second family. A 13-year member of a stepfamily, she founded the chapter in Eugene in 1984.

Dwan decided to form the chapter shortly after her move here three years ago, largely because she was "surprised that with such a high divorce rate in Eugene there was no organization designed to help families affected by it," she said.

The SAA offers a weekly drop-in support group, monthly seminars on topics crucial to stepfamilies and a bimonthly newsletter. In addition, the group recently added a phone line people can call if they just want to talk about their problems and search for solutions with a friendly, experienced voice.

"We're really excited about that," said Karen Keady, current chapter president. "That's a neat service."

The group also serves as a voice for stepfamilies, whether lobbying for governmental support or answering questions for the media.

"If the local media wants the stepfamily view of something, they come to us," Keady said. "We've been on television a few times."

Other chapters exist in Berkeley, Calif., and Portland, and another will soon be starting in Salem.

"Helping other chapters start out is another one of our roles," Keady said. "We'll help the Salem chapter get started once they're ready to go."

The problems that people bring to the SAA are fairly predictable, Dwan said. Most seem to come from the clash of two families forcing together their separate customs and beliefs.

"Imagine you are a 10-year-old boy, and suddenly you have a new stepfather who believes in strict discipline. Do you think you'll be very accepting of that? No, you won't," Dwan explained.

This is also prevalent in smaller matters such as deciding what foods to eat, Dwan said. Stepchildren may often use these conflicts to challenge their new parent, saying, "Daddy never used to make me do that," or "Mommy never made us eat that," she said.

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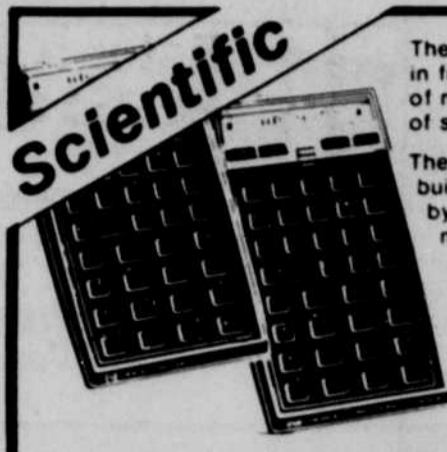
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