



The WCPA News

12125 Woodcrest Executive Drive, Suite 110 St. Louis, MO 63141
Website: WCPASTL.COM Phone (314) 275-8599 Email: wcpa@sbcglobal.net

Today's Blended Families: Facing Loss and Accepting New Experiences

By Jennifer Gauvain, MSW, LCSW

Today's families are challenged like never before. Dual careers, over-scheduled children, and caretaking for older relatives, the list of stressors can seem endless. With all of this stress, the high percentage of divorce in our culture is no big surprise. Statistics show that more than 50% of marriages will end in divorce; 65% of women and 70% of men are likely to remarry. There are also men and women who remarry after the death of a spouse and those who never remarry but live with a new partner. Considering all of these possibilities gives new meaning to the phrase, "Raising his, mine and ours."

A blended family is not worse than, better than or a substitute for the previous family, it is just different. Naturally, second families carry the scars and losses of the first family. It is extremely difficult to give up the attachment of the first family. For that reason, this is one of the most difficult developmental transitions for families to negotiate. Some blended families try to put on an "everything is fine" face. However, that only accomplishes avoiding the pain that is a part of all loss and grief. Can blended families find the good parts of their new situation and make it work? The answer is yes, but families must allow themselves to feel the loss and experience the stages of grief.

Blended families experience five basic stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Resistance, Depression and Acceptance. When the acceptance phase has finally been met, it is then necessary for the blended family to look at some predictable emotional issues that occur in all new families. We all tend to carry emotional baggage into our new relationships. The baggage makes us emotionally sensitive in the new relationships and we tend to react in one of two ways: we become self-protective, closed off and afraid to make ourselves vulnerable to further hurt, or we become intensely expectant and demanding that the new relationships make up for or erase past hurts. There becomes a myth of the perfect family: the family will be created instantly and all members will love each other. Either of these stances complicates the new relationships.

With new relationships come new roles. If the boundaries of these new roles are ambiguous, difficulties include:

- Membership (Who are the "real" members of the family?)
- Space (Where do I belong?)
- Authority (Who is really in charge? Of discipline? Of decisions? etc.)
- Time (Who gets how much of my time and how much do I get of theirs?)

Continued, page 2

Would you prefer to receive this newsletter electronically?

If you would like to receive this newsletter by email, or would like your name removed from our mailing list, please contact Amy Maus at the WCPA office and we'll be glad to meet your request.

Groups Accepting New Members

WCPA currently has a variety of groups available, all of which are accepting new members. *Social skills groups* are available for students of all ages who need to improve their social skills. For more information, please contact Jennifer Gauvain. A *Teachers' Consultation Group* is also available for those teachers who would like to gain support and increase their effectiveness in the classroom. Contact Amy Maus for more information on this group, which will resume in the Fall.

Blended Families, Continued from page 1

This cluster of issues is central and must be negotiated by the new family. Great flexibility is called for to enable the family to expand and also gain stability. Without flexibility of these roles, it will be difficult to continue the journey they must take as a new family.

What is required of an effective blended family?

- Ability to avoid being defensive
- Ability to avoid being judgmental
- Ability to allow a strong sense of personal identity

Ironically, many of our schools today are facing blended family issues. As more and more schools are experiencing school closings, mergers, and consolidations, they are also dealing with those families who are hurting and trying to process their loss. Examples of this could be the loss of a favorite pastor or principal, the pride of a special sports team, or particular school policies, i.e., "But that's not the way we used to do it." They may seem like minimal things, but when you really think about it, all of those elements and more mold our sense of self as adults and become a large part of who we are and how we identify ourselves. What is the number one phrase every born and bred St. Louisan hears? "Where did you go to high school?" "Where did you go to grade school?" It is as if we feel we know someone if we know where their neighborhood is, where they grew up. And it is devastating when that piece of us is taken away. This is our loss. What we know no longer exists. We are then forced into something for which we are not ready.

It is the same for children whose parents are divorced and then remarry. Everything changes. Holiday traditions are different, where they live is often new and different, and their surroundings don't seem to belong to them. They have to get to know new people: step-siblings, step-parents, or maybe even a new school. These new experiences can be frightening, but most of all they are painful and sad.

Remember, for families and for our schools, the shift to a new system will take time. Don't try to rush it and don't try to delay it. Let things flow naturally. No system is perfect. Mistakes will be made; learn from them. Encourage parents to work on their own marriage and communication. Most importantly, do what is in the best interest of your children. They are listening and they are watching very closely. What do you want for them and how are you going to go about doing it?

If you would like more information on this topic, or would like to consider a presentation on this or a related topic for your parents or faculty, please contact Jennifer Gauvain at the WCPA office.

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

Introduction to Art Therapy

By Barbra Danin, LMFT, ATR

Throughout history, people have used art as a means of self-exploration and expression, dating as far back as the paintings of prehistoric cave dwellers. During the middle of the twentieth century, the field of Clinical Art Therapy developed in tandem with the advancement of modern psychology, utilizing works of art created in therapy sessions as a tool for both diagnosis and treatment of mental health issues.

Although often thought of as a treatment modality for young children, Art Therapy can be highly effective in working with a myriad of people, including adults, families, groups, couples, and seniors. Currently, Art Therapists work throughout the world in a variety of settings, including schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, courts, geriatric centers and prisons. Extreme caution must be exercised when interpreting a work of art; however, there are times when certain indicators suggest obvious emotional or behavioral issues. The act of engaging in the creative process can often help an individual bring into awareness and express feelings that are otherwise difficult to put into words.

WCPA has recently begun to offer Art Therapy treatment. In schools, WCPA addresses the issue of bullying through art, with student groups. Through their drawings, students are able to express and share with one another their own individual experiences of having been bullied, in a concrete way. This further helps them to problem solve with one another, and thus achieve a sense of personal empowerment and shared responsibility for making their community safe for everyone. Besides bullying, art therapy can be appropriate for addressing such issues as social skills, anger and behavioral management, and crisis intervention in schools. As always, WCPA will tailor art therapy groups around the specific needs of your school.

Barbra Danin, MA, LMFT, ATR is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. When appropriate, she incorporates Art Therapy into individual and group treatment in order to facilitate communication and self-expression. She currently provides a variety of services to schools, addressing issues of bullying, social skills, self-esteem, etc.

From the Director

Thirty years ago, as a counselor new to the field, I remember being very skeptical about children and adolescents being put on medication for emotional, let alone behavioral, problems. As the years went on, I found myself making more frequent referrals to psychiatrists for medication. I also found that my referrals were being made for younger and younger children. As I ask myself why this change occurred over the years, I believe that it is not a case of my becoming more comfortable with children on medication, but rather that the emotional and behavioral problems that we are seeing in children are more serious and pervasive. For example, I am finding that the numbers of young children experiencing anxiety and depressive disorders are exploding. Some of the behavioral problems with children are so overwhelming that medication is surely in order.

However, I am now becoming concerned over the numbers of children medicated and the severity of the medications being prescribed. For example, we now hear of five and six year olds being given cocktail treatments of anti-depressant and anti-psychotic medications for serious acting-out behavior. We see serious diagnoses being given to children and adolescents. Of course, these medication cocktails and diagnoses may be appropriate. However, my concern is whether other environmental factors have been well assessed. What type of parenting are these children receiving? Are they appropriately nurtured? Have they experienced appropriate limit setting? Has there been consistency in their upbringing? I also question if some children aren't being diagnosed with serious diagnoses, such as Bipolar Disorder, simply because the medications prescribed may have a positive affect on the child. Again, there seem to be many children who have serious problems. However, I think we need to proceed with caution when we diagnose and medicate children. These matters have a great impact on how we perceive these children and how they perceive themselves.

- Mary

Comprehensive Care Team Training Available This Summer

As in previous years, WCPA is offering a comprehensive, two-week long Care Team training course this June. Please call our office if you or members of your Care Team are interested in attending.