

Step-families...the Challenges, Complexities and Rewards

by Terry Top, Executive Director Marriage & Family Therapist



Remember the Brady's? Carol had three girls and Mike, three boys. They were all alone when they met. And on a hunch they married to form one big happy family – the Brady Bunch. America faithfully watched every afternoon as the family faced one silly crisis after another, but within 30 minutes, Mom or Dad stepped in to save the day and all was well again.

Best estimates say that one third of the total population in the USA lives in what we have labeled a “blended” or step-family. A step-family forms when an adult with children couples with another adult who is not the parent of those children. The parent-child relationship precedes the couple relationship.

Living in these families presents a different set of challenges than living in a “first time” family. Many people enter these step-family situa-

tions thinking that the same rules apply here as in first time families. The fantasy of having the “Brady Bunch” often creates unrealistic expectations of the one big happy family ideal. Instead, disappointment, anger and bitterness can be the long term result.

Step-families even vary significantly depending on their structure, membership and past history. The parents chose to form a new family when they got married a second time, but the children may not be on board in that choice. And because old loyalties can be brought into the new family structure, children who remain loyal to the absent parent may not accept the step-parent's role. They may feel that if they accept the new step-parent they will be disloyal to the absent biological parent. Emotional ties with biological family members can often create divisions along first family lines in the new step-family.

The newly married couple may differ on how the children should be raised/disciplined, etc. They are trying to merge two family styles and histories that may not be very compatible. Step-parents often try to assume an authoritative role with step-children too quickly before an emotional tie has

been formed and they have “earned the right to parent.” Another challenge that a stepfamily can face is when the other biological parent tries to sabotage the newly formed family out of anger or jealousy. Research shows that while the loss of the first family is painful, the most devastating thing for children is ongoing conflict between the adults that they love. So, if divorced parents continue to fight it will cause serious difficulties for the children, including how they adjust to the new family structure.

Step-families are often “bi-nuclear” or even “tri-nuclear.” Family boundaries must be flexible enough to include multiple family groups living in different locations. Households need to be able to expand or contract to include those present during the week, on weekends or holidays. It requires a new definition of “who” is family and a lot of adaptability which may be very difficult.

To help ease the stress in adjusting to a new step-family, here are some suggestions to create some harmony among everyone involved:

1. Normalize the loyalty binds that family members are experiencing. Reassure children that

(Continued on page 2)

Tips for Successful Step-Families

- Reassure children that step-parents are not replacing biological parents.
- Encourage children to find a special place in their heart for their step-parent.
- Require civil and courteous behavior.
- Don't overwhelm children with too much change at once.
- Minimize conflict between parents and do not put children in middle.
- Schedule “alone” time with children apart from new family and maintain some important family traditions.
- Keep communication lines open and honest to avoid unresolved issues.
- Remain positive and supportive.
- Avoid criticism.
- Address problems early and seek professional help if necessary.

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Our Mission

New Leaf Resources promotes healthy relationships and personal growth through counseling, education, and consultation from a Christian perspective.

Board Votes to Close Downers Grove Location

At the September Board meeting, the New Leaf Resources Board of Directors voted to close the Downers Grove office.

After many years of serving the western suburbs, it was no easy decision and took

over two years of discussions both on the board and with supporters to reach this conclusion.

Although it may seem like a sad thing to be closing an office, we are not discouraged. We still plan to stay involved in the area through the CARE 360° prevention program and other educational opportunities. But in terms of counseling, the

board feels led to focus our resources in Lansing and Northwest Indiana.

The board would like to thank all those who have supported our ministry in the Elmhurst/Downers Grove area for so long and ask for your continued support and prayers as New Leaf brings hope, help and healing to those in need.

- Tom Visser, Board President

Apology from Editor

In our last newsletter, therapist **Norm LeClerc** recommended a book by a local author because it represented the kinds of experiences that people with Dissociative Identity Disorder often remember regarding Satanic Ritual Abuse and other trauma.

In the recommendation of any book it is impossible for us to verify whether every detail is an historical fact. This book is a memoir, not an expose. We regret any offense or hurt that this recommendation may have caused and we would welcome a personal conversation if you have questions or concerns. Our goal is to inform, educate and provide resources that heal, not harm.

Step-families...

(Continued from page 1)

1. the step-parent is not trying to replace the biological parent. Encourage the child to find a new spot in her heart for the step-parent that doesn't compete with the biological parent.
2. Parents cannot require children to love the step-parent or step-siblings, but they can require being courteous and civil.
3. It is often helpful if the amount of change is regulated so that members are not overwhelmed trying to make too many adjustments simultaneously.
4. Try to lower conflict with other households of the family whenever possible. Differences between divorced parents need to be resolved without putting the children in the middle.
5. Parents need to keep having individual time with their biological children apart from the new family members. Some

6. Communication needs to be honest and open to avoid unresolved issues from festering. This requires a lot of grace and tolerance.
7. Try to stay positive and supportive while avoiding harsh criticism.

Many step-families don't survive because this work is very challenging. All of the "normal" issues are present plus many more. Navigating all of the potential mine fields requires a great deal of maturity and skill. Even the best of us will likely need some help in the process. Professional counseling from a family therapist experienced in working with step-families can be invaluable. Addressing problems early will greatly enhance the chances of success and happiness for everyone.

Save the Date!

**Celebration Banquet
Thurs., April 26, 2012
The Center for Visual
& Performing Arts**
*Featuring Ben Glenn,
The Chalk Guy, who gives a
powerful and inspiring
message about his struggles
with ADHD and creates a
rapid chalk drawing.*

Giving Thanks to the Many Who Support New Leaf

There are many supporters of New Leaf who continually use their talents and gifts to benefit the ministry and those we serve. As we give thanks to God for all these gifts, it is fitting during this season that we say thank you to...

- The generous **individuals, businesses and churches** who have given more than \$100,000 so far this year to the Martyr Doot Client Assistance Fund, providing hope, help and healing to hundreds of hurting clients.
- Former Board Member **Shari Krajewski**, who for the last 17 years has managed the staff payroll and quarterly taxes.
- The staff at **Great Lakes Bank** in Lansing who label and seal our quarterly newsletter.
- **Don Spender** who faithfully plows our Lansing office parking lot each winter.
- **John Stob** who regularly trims the bushes at our Lansing location.
- Our dedicated and invested **Board of Directors** and **Stated Clerk** who devote countless hours providing direction and guidance to our ministry.



Therapists Speak on Women's Issues



Therapist **LaSaundra Gordon** (above) recently presented a program called "The Strong Black Woman," which dealt with how culturally African-American women are taught to "stuff" their emotions instead of expressing them.

In October, **Anece Alicea** (right) a Licensed Counselor, spoke to women at the St. Michael's Church Health Fair in Schererville. Alicea spoke on the topic of Stress and how woman manage it. If you are looking for a speaker for your church, MOPs or other group, please call New Leaf. Our professional staff can speak



on a variety of topics from anxiety to stress. Call (708) 895-7310 for more information.

"We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers."

- 1 Thess. 1:2



Looking for an easy way to help? Here's some ideas!

1. **Pray** for the work at New Leaf Resources.
2. Use **GoodSearch.com & GoodShop.com** - this search engine donates a .01 per search & up to 37% of every purchase to New Leaf Resources.
3. Host a **Fundraiser** for New Leaf Resources - from garage sales to golf outings to penny wars, you, your group or school could partner with us.
4. Be a **Corporate Sponsor** - for CARE 360° or the Celebration Banquet.
5. **Volunteer** to help with **Mailings**: 3 - 4 times per year, label, stuff envelopes. **Grant Writing & Research**: provide assistance with inquiries and proposal writing.
6. **Spread the word** - tell a friend, your pastor, your club members about New Leaf Resources
7. **Matching Gifts?** Does your company match your charitable contributions - you could double your giving to New Leaf.

For more ideas or information, please call Terri at (708) 895-7310 or email terri@newleafresources.org.

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Page 4

Fall 2011

IRA Charitable Rollover Extended



Through the end of 2011, IRA holders ages 70 1/2 or older can make tax-free gifts to charitable organizations through the IRA Charitable Rollover extension.

Gifts are tax-free up to \$100,000 per year and will qualify for all or part of the required minimum distributions.

To qualify for this year, your tax-free gift must be completed by December 31, 2011. For more information, call the Barnabas Foundation at (888)448-3040 or visit barnabasfoundation.com.

Need a Last minute Christmas Gift?

Friends of New Leaf Cookbooks are still available at both locations. Featuring a variety of delicious recipes, this cookbook makes a perfect hostess gift or stocking stuffer. Buy yours today!

Not on Our Mailing List?

Sign up today to receive New Leaf Resources quarterly Newsletter full of helpful information, informative articles and stories of hope and healing. You can select print copy or email version. Call Terri at (708) 895-7310, sign up online at www.newleafresources.org or email your request to terri@newleafresources.org.



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New Leaf Resources is...

A **professional mental health agency** which provides counseling services to individuals, families, couples, children, churches, schools and businesses.

A **ministry** which brings the best possible care to those we serve, striving to reflect God's grace and love to all who seek help.

A **community resource** offering educational services, prevention programs, training, support and coaching.