

THE COUNTERFORCE PROGRAM FOR STEPPARENTS: ADDRESSING THE RELEVANT ISSUES

By Susan Lamm LCSW

CounterForce, an organization that addresses the mental health and educational needs of children, adults, youth, parents and families, recently conducted several stepparenting workshops that focused on issues and concerns facing stepfamilies.

Counterforce developed and implemented a stepparent program for the orthodox family eight years ago. Over the past several weeks, a group of stepparents, representing the full spectrum of the orthodox community, attended a four-session workshop. When discussing the complicated process of integrating children into a healthy family unit called the “stepfamily,” workshop participants quickly realized that although each of their situations were unique, they really had a great deal in common. Adjustment to the new family unit is particularly difficult for children because of the serious losses they experienced and the ensuing upheaval in their lives. These sessions offered participants an opportunity to learn guidelines and adjustment techniques and to discuss the many issues affecting the stepfamily.

One significant topic discussed was that of establishing and solidifying new relationships. Previous family alliances must be respected and preserved – and never undermined. Doing so will enhance new relationships rather than detract from them. Note the following example:

Sarah¹ was ten years old when her mother passed away. Her father remarried three years later. During those three years, her maternal aunt had assumed much of the responsibility for Sarah’s physical and emotional well-being. Initially, her stepmother Dina,² felt threatened by the relationship between Sarah and her aunt, and wondered what role she could play – if any at all – in Sarah’s life. Due to these insecurities, she tried to discourage Sarah’s relationship with her aunt and was aloof in her aunt’s presence. Sarah’s reaction was to thwart all of Dina’s attempts to engage her in any meaningful way. It took a great deal of time, patience and effort to reverse this process. Through education and counseling, Dina realized the significance of Sarah’s need to maintain a relationship with her mother’s sister. Once she conveyed that understanding to Sarah, Dina was able to initiate contacts with Sarah that were accepted - albeit with caution. It was crucial for Dina to realize that her task was not to compete with Sarah’s aunt but rather to offer Sarah the opportunity to relate to another significant person in her life. There can never be too many people who love a child.

¹ A fictitious name

² Also a fictitious name

Another crucial topic discussed was the difficult process of “merging” two families. Each family has evolved over a period of time during which they developed a set of routines and traditions to fit their specific needs. When companies merge, decisions are based on efficiency and economy rather than on the needs or routines of an individual or group. In contrast, when two families join to become a stepfamily, the individuality of each member must be respected and the parents/stepparents must determine how the two families should be integrated in a way that would ensure the integrity of each family. Every stepfamily must face this challenge and deal with it in their own unique way.

Other topics discussed at the workshops included how to discipline effectively, how to deal with transitions (especially issues of grief and loss) and how to co-parent. The short-term goals were twofold – to prevent family breakdown and to provide the education and skills necessary to achieve stepfamily success. The long-term goal is to create an atmosphere of love, trust and stability where children can thrive physically, emotionally and spiritually.

CounterForce, an affiliate of Torah Umesorah, was founded 38 years ago. CounterForce provides individual and family therapy, parent training, stepparenting workshops, dropout prevention, school placement, teacher training, learning disabilities advisement, mentoring, remediation and psycho-educational evaluations. CounterForce also provides in-school counseling to approximately 50 Yeshivas and Day Schools in the NYC Metropolitan area. Over the years, CounterForce has helped tens of thousands of children, youth, adults and families experiencing emotional and academic problems. For further information about CounterForce’s programs, please call 718-787-4412 or visit our website at www.counterforce.us, or email us at info@cntrfrc.org.

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