

COUNTERFORCE HELPS STEPFAMILIES SUCCEED

BY SUSAN LAMM, LCSW

Stepfamilies have unique characteristics that set them apart from other families. The adjustment is particularly difficult for the children. Due to the serious losses they have experienced and the upheaval in their lives, the children require empathy and support as well as consistency and predictability. Integrating the members into a healthy family unit is a complicated process with many challenges and tasks.

The following is a case example of a newly-formed stepfamily. Sarah and David* have been remarried for two years. Sarah has two daughters who live with her and visit their father out of state every three months. David has three children who live with their mother and visit their father every other week-end. The couple believes they have a solid marital relationship but have many conflicts regarding their children. Sarah is very structured and consistent in terms of rules and expectations such as bedtime and homework, while David's children grew up in a laissez-faire environment with minimal structure and rules. When her stepchildren visit, Sarah feels undermined and overwhelmed. Her children have begun to defy some of the rules because their stepsiblings are "getting away with it". In addition, David's ex-wife has verbally "poisoned" her children against Sarah. Thus, despite Sarah's sincere efforts to please her stepchildren, they continue to insult and reject her. Sarah tries to hide the fact that she dreads the week-ends her stepchildren visit and is overcome with guilt, frustration and hurt. David is emotionally drained by the demands and complaints of his children and the obvious unhappiness of his wife. He believes that the marital relationship could be threatened unless some changes take place, yet feels immobilized by fears of jeopardizing his relationship with the children. This case is only one example of the many stresses on a stepfamily during the first years of its formation and highlights the importance of timely intervention.

Counterforce's Stepparent Program was suggested by a client who had benefited from some of Counterforce's other services and was planning to remarry. In 2002 my co-worker Dr. Bassya Pinson and I offered educational workshops for stepparents four to six times a year. We hoped to find out whether or not there was an interest and/ or a need for a more comprehensive program similar to our parent training program which has been in existence for over twenty five years. After two years, it became apparent that there was indeed a growing population of Orthodox stepparents who were in need of guidance, education and support. Counterforce is the only Orthodox agency to offer this service in New York and perhaps throughout the country.

In 2004, we developed a four session educational interactive workshop with each group limited to 12 participants. These workshops are offered in Brooklyn twice a year, and are free of charge. We recently expanded our workshops to the Five Towns/Far Rockaway area. Parents who attended these workshops traveled great distances and represented the entire spectrum of the Orthodox community.

Among the techniques stepparents learn are effective discipline, dealing with transitions (especially issues of grief and loss), and establishing relationships with stepchildren. The short-term goals are 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.

*fictitious names

Counterforce, an affiliate of Torah Umesorah – National Society of Hebrew Day Schools - was founded 36 years ago. From a network of 20 selected schools that received counseling services, Counterforce now provides in-school counseling to approximately 50 Yeshivas and Day Schools in the New York City Metropolitan area. A full range of in-school services include individual and group counseling, referral, teacher training, dropout prevention, trauma response, professional remediation, and consultation. Over the years, Counterforce has already helped tens of thousands of students experiencing emotional and learning problems and are in need of special care and attention.

Counterforce also provides professional out-of-school services including family therapy, parent training, educational evaluations, psychological testing, professional remediation, one-to-one mentoring of at-risk adolescents, and school placement.

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