

Mediating with Stepfamilies

Understanding Their Uniqueness

Dianne Martin
Dianne Martin & Associates
www.DianneMartinAndAssociates.com

Welcome & Introductions

Agenda

Myths, Expectations, Perceptions

Stepfamily Developmental Cycle

Structural & Functional Differences

Tips, Tools, Techniques

The Journey

Confusing

Complex

Easy to get Lost

Takes time



Shocking Statistics

No clear understanding of the actual stats

50% of remarried families five years

Divorced stepfamilies often remarry after three years

Research

- Younger
- Older children
- Adolescence
- Relationship between child's birth parents
- Loyalty conflicts
- ****Practitioners report being challenged with the complexity in working with stepfamilies***

Identity Crisis



Myths & Expectation

- Wicked Stepmom - Neglectful Dad
- Instant love
- One big happy family
- Biological parent is deceased or absent
- She/He will love my kids as much as I do
- I will treat the kids all the same
- Stepparent should begin to discipline immediately
- Part-time stepparenting is easier
- Kids will never come between us

Is There a Cinderella?

- *Yes!*
- *But not all stepkids are Cinderella's or Cinderfella's*
- *Cinderella Effect*
- *Vulnerabilities*

Family Life Cycle

Typical first family transitions are understood and supported by extended family and community

Leaving - loving - laboring - launching - later life

In contrast:

Stepfamilies formation and development is so much more complicated and confusing - seldom understood by extended family and the community

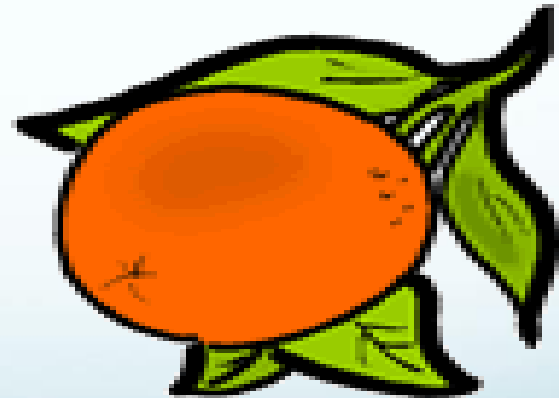
Apples & Oranges

What's The Difference

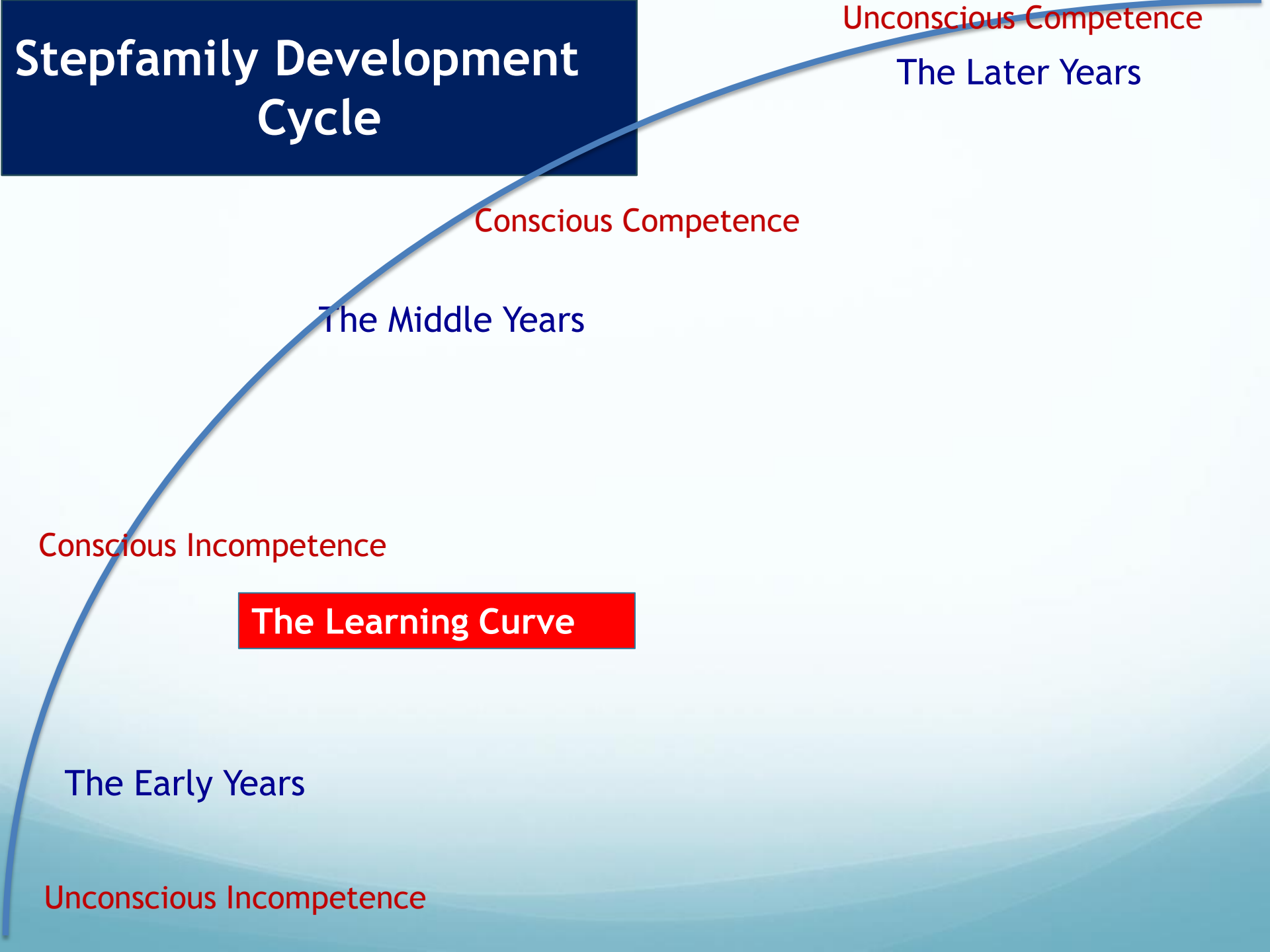
- Apples



- Oranges



**The Process to Becoming An
Integrated Stepfamily takes
between 2 - 7 years**



Stepfamily Development Cycle

Unconscious Competence

The Later Years

Conscious Competence

The Middle Years

Conscious Incompetence

The Learning Curve

The Early Years

Unconscious Incompetence

Transformative Journey

A process: re-evaluate past beliefs & experiences

Changes: our perceptions (about families)

Experience: deep, powerful emotions

Requires: action and skills

Involves: rational analytical thought about fundamental beliefs and values

Forces - critical explorations of values, meanings and purpose in order to understand new experiences

Stepfamily Developmental Cycle

The Early Years

- Fantasy
- Immersion
- Awareness

The Middle Years

- Mobilization
- Action

The Later Years

- Contact
- Resolution Stages

Stepfamilies

- **Transitions include:**

Structural - clarify membership

Functional - roles and responsibilities

Organizational - who does what when

Developmental - some move faster than others

What influences the stepfamily journey?

- Lets do a bit of brainstorming
- You have 10 minutes to list factors that influence the stepfamily journey

Unmet Expectations

Myths and beliefs evolve into expectations, which in turn influence our behaviours.

Expectations based on myths are often unrealistic.

When an individual's expectations are not met, the person may become

Confused ~ Angry ~ Resentful

Challenging Dynamics

- ✓ Interdependency between birth parents
- ✓ Less control over family events
- ✓ Planning & decisions must consider the child's non-custodial
- ✓ Requires time-consuming discussions & negotiations
- ✓ Family membership may be continually in flux
- ✓ Revolving Door

Child Power

First Families

Couples remain together because of the children



Stepfamilies

Couples often separate because of the children

Changing the Status Quo!

Parent is protective of their child

However the adult couple relationship must be the priority if the family is to survive and grow

It is not about love, but about how the stepparents must build a strong, and united parental team to guide their family



Differences

Mature, stable stepfamilies have:

- Looser family boundaries
- Less cohesiveness than traditional families

Which are often seen as dysfunctional family traits by family therapists and counsellors

Are in fact a hallmark of successful stepfamilies

Multiple Parents - One Child

Children in stepfamilies are subject to multiple parental influences

- = become confused

- = conflicted about how they fit into each family

- = which parent is responsible for discipline



Who made you...

You are not ...

My Mom says...

I hate you..

You can't tell me...

Challenges



Therapeutic Contrasts

- **Family Systems**

1. Boundaries closed
2. Problem behaviors due to family dysfunction
3. Client is the family
4. Work with entire family
5. Tight family cohesiveness
6. Birth order - no change
7. Born out of *love*

- **Stepfamily Systems**

1. Boundaries open & permeable
2. Problem behaviors due to stepfamily dynamics
3. Client is the family sub-systems
4. Work with sub-systems
5. Loose family cohesiveness
6. Birth order - changes
7. Born out of *loss*

Therapeutic Tasks

- ✓ Comprehensive intake assessment
- ✓ Identify appropriate role for stepparent
- ✓ Strengthen couple relationship
- ✓ Identify and highlight family and couple strengths
- ✓ Normalize stress and frustration
- ✓ Identify developmental issues/tasks - explore options
- ✓ Address loyalty conflicts
- ✓ Foster activities to build a sense of family unity

From Intake to Integration:

- Instill hope and encouragement
- Validate feelings
- Normalize stress and challenges
- Use a genogram
- Educate parent and stepparent
- Be mindful of own biases

Exploring Expectations

- Vision for family
- Expectations for family life
- New step relationships?
- Expectations reasonable and achievable
- What is stepparents experience with children
- Expectations of children realistic and age appropriate
- Parental roles and responsibilities

Role & Responsibilities

Parent

Stepparent

Couple

Merging: Two Perspectives

Honeymoon & Happiness



Grief & Loss



Grief & Loss

- **Children experience the loss of**
 - Status - parental child
 - Parental time
 - Parents will not reunite
 - Birth order and role displacement
 - Many tangible and ambiguous losses

Complicated Family Network

First Family - Mom & Dad

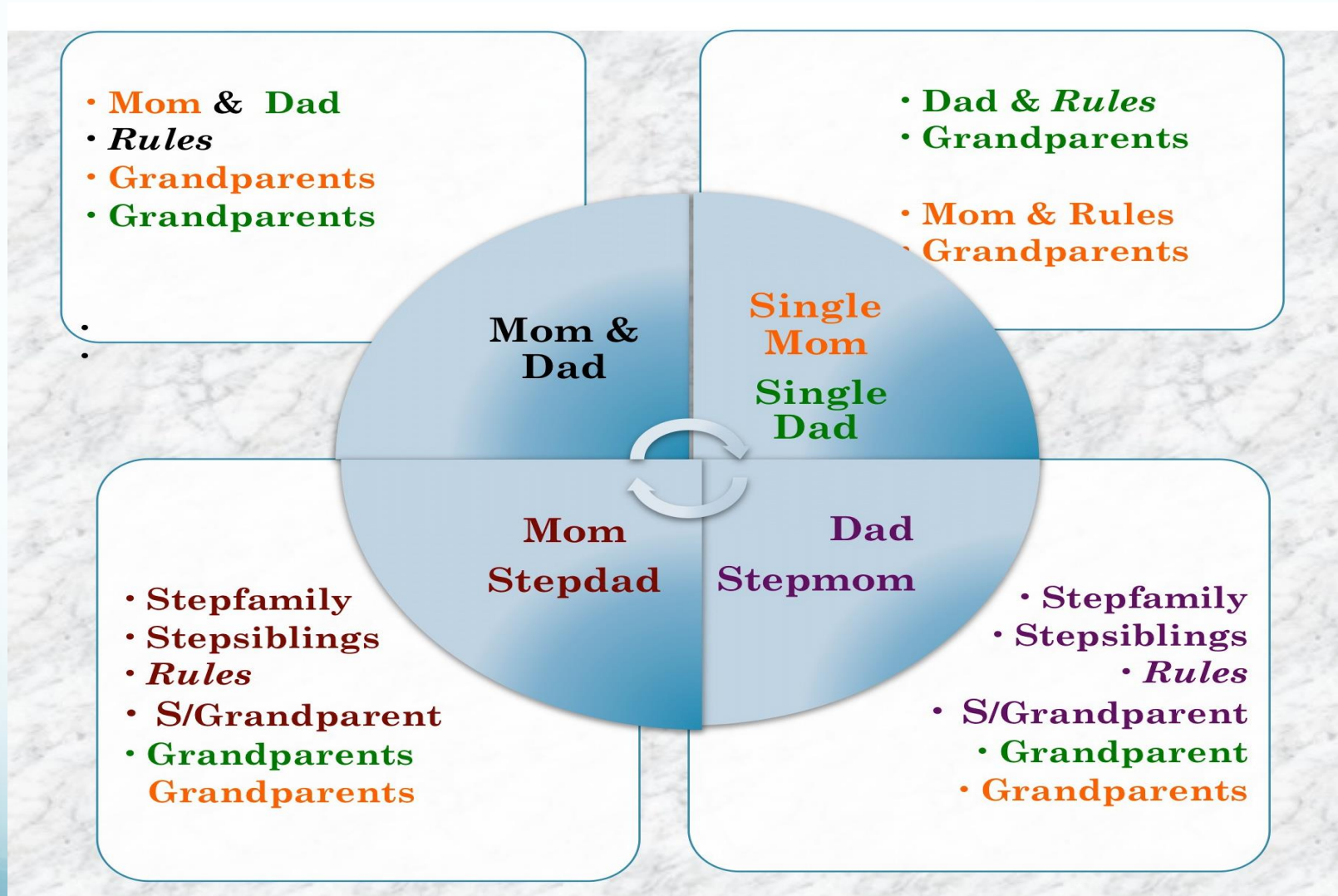
Second Family – Single Mom

Third Family – Single Dad

Fourth family – Mom and Stepdad

Fifth family – Dad and Stepmom

Extensive Stepfamily



Confused Children



Revolving Door

**Some children come
for visits**

Others leave for visits



Sexuality & Intimacy

Heightened sexual aura

Shield children especially teens -- emerging sexual identity

(First families the heat has dissipated by the teenage years)

- Simple affection
- Ensure couple needs for intimacy & sexuality are met
- Private, couple time

Family Sexuality

Clarify values and beliefs:

- Adult & child nudity
- Hugging, kissing
- Bathing
- Closed Doors
- Dress
- Playful touching



Tips - Tools - Techniques

- Focus on & strengthen the couple relationship
- **Do not create therapeutic crisis**
- Provide information
- Explore structure and roles of family
- Clarify & strengthen the stepparent's role
- Explore children losses: concrete and ambiguous with
- Technique is active, directive, educational and well thought out (home work)
- Meet with sub-groups, typically begin with the couple

Our Stepfamily

- **Techniques for creating a sense of family unity**
 - Family meeting or Family Fun Nights
 - Encourage story telling
 - Identify shared interests □
 - Create family albums or videos
 - Take family vacations
 - Encourage “getting to know you” activities & board games
 - Be interested and approachable
 - Discuss & merge old & new family traditions and rituals
- **Over time a shared family history develops as the family**

Successful Stepfamily

Have successfully negotiated mutually acceptable:

- Life management skills
- Roles & Responsibilities
- Money management & budgets & Inheritance
- Parenting and child management technique
- Strong and united Parental Executive
- Family rules
- Equality for all children - even visiting kids

Wrapping it up

- Quiz - review answers
- Quick Review

Summary

- The stepfamily journey is a multi-layered, extremely complicated and challenging.
- Stepfamilies need to know that the professional family service communities are informed, sensitive and nonjudgemental
- **AND** have the tools to help them navigate this journey.
- If you would like to keep in touch or receive information about upcoming events please leave your card or email address