



Jim Terhune



Doug Ryder



Vicki Lewin



David Schlosser



Laurel Smith

Families in transition: blurring the boundary lines

By Emily Morrison

A family, in these troubled times, is a difficult thing to define. The traditional nuclear family — mother, father, 2,3 well-adjusted children, dog and parakeet — is rapidly going the way of the persistent American dream. Changing social dynamics, the escalation of the divorce rate and a decline in religious commitment and societal stability have led to a rising number of "blended" family groupings that bear little resemblance to their stereotypical predecessor of decades past.

A growing number of single-parent families and stepfamilies attests to the almost fabled resiliency of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Laurel Smith, director of the singles and single parents groups at the Jewish Community Center, recently defined the growing trend in a succinct statement: "A family is a living situation in which children are involved."

Childless couples and singles might disagree with so limiting a definition, but for those of us who decided somewhere along the line to bring children into the world, any dispute over semantics would seem academic at best. Once a child is born, as speaker Jim Terhune said at a November 3 JCC symposium entitled "The Family in Transition," the only course a parent can take in good conscience is to put the welfare of the child first. No matter what obstacles divorce and family restructuring put in your path, said

'It's been said that when a child is born, a grandparent is also born. It's also been said that there's no such thing as an ex-grandparent.'

— Dr. Phyllis Ladriagan

Nazareth College Psychology Department

Terhune, "you think of the child and think of the child and think of the child."

The symposium was divided into four one-hour sessions led by members of the Parachute, a peer support program for people in the immediate throes of separation or divorce; Parachute co-founder Jim Terhune, who also founded Neutral Ground, a peer support group for formerly married adults; Dolly Hinckley, a Pittsford divorce mediator; and Dr. Phyllis Ladriagan of the psychology department at Nazareth College.

Hinckley addressed the topic of "the divorcing family," in an initial presentation that delineated the various psychological stages of separation and divorce. Her discussion encompassed such phenomena as "obsessive review" of past mistakes to which the newly single person attributes blame for the divorce (described by Hinckley as the "I could've, should've, would've" syndrome);

the tendency to make false starts; excessive behavior; and exaggerated physical symptoms of stress.

Doug Ryder continued with an analysis of the stages of a marital break-up, including disillusionment, erosion, detachment, separation, mourning, eventual acceptance and individuation. Parachute co-founder David Schlosser, a single parent, spoke about attaining closure after a divorce and going on to new relationships. Parachute member Vicki Lewin continued with a discussion of the single-parent family and the legal definitions of various forms of custody.

Laurel Smith led the third segment, entitled "The New Blended Family," followed by Dr. Ladriagan's closing discussion of "Grandparent Concerns and Relationships." Throughout the four-hour symposium, the often disturbing dynamics of the broken family, as well as the child's place

in it, were recurring themes. "A symposium," as Lewin defined it, "is a collection of utterances on the same subject by different people." That subject, in this case, was clearly the difficulty of dealing fairly with children during a period of perhaps the greatest emotional upheaval a parent can go through.

When stepfamilies form, according to Smith, "a whole new set of relationships begins to unfold. First, you had the inlaws. Now, you have the new inlaws, the 'outlaws' (or former inlaws) — who are now grandparents — the 'exes,' the aunts and uncles on both sides, the children who live with the new couple and those who live with the ex-spouse. What you end up with is a lot of confusion."

If this last remark sounds like understatement, it's no coincidence. Some blended families have to bring up children from only one former marriage, while others have children on both sides. The age of the children has a lot to do with how easy or difficult the "merger" becomes, said Smith. "If the children are smaller, discipline may be easier for the new spouse — or harder if the child is a teenager. There's also the added problem of the sexuality of adolescent children, and the increased possibility of sexual or physical abuse."

Other stressful dimensions include visits from stepchildren, or the weekend absences

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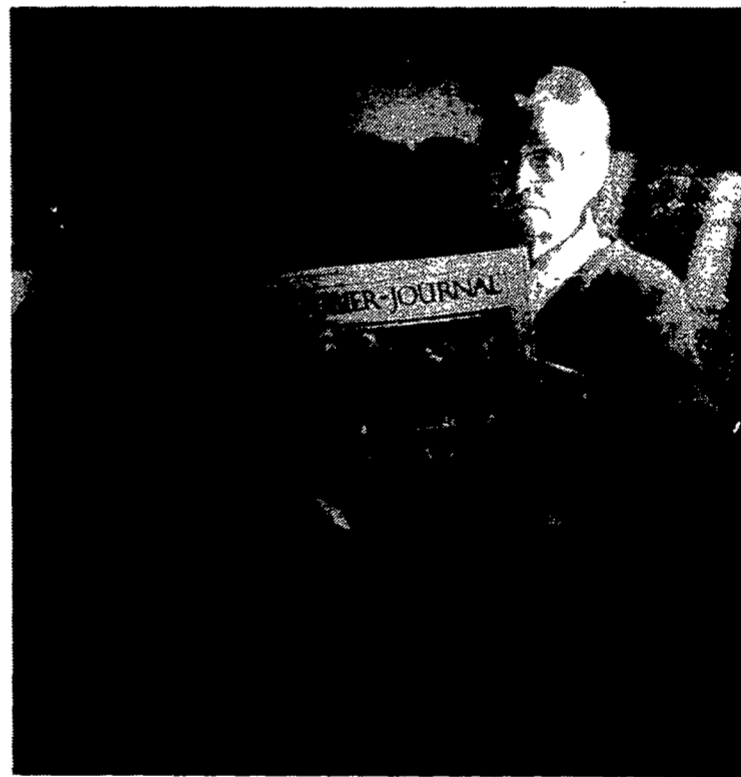


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