Workshop 5A
Managing Relationships in Complex Blended/Step Families

Moderator/Panelists: Mary Ann Higgins, Regional Administrator, ACF Region I - Boston, MA

Presenters: Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., CFLE, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist Director, Auburn, AL
Sheila Austin, Ph.D., Montgomery, AL
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The presenters emphasized how terms such as “step” or “blended” are not always representative or clear indicators of the experiences of individuals within those family relationships. Issues addressing the perception of different individuals within these families and how they may view themselves and their relationship to others were discussed. Clearly, labeling (such as “stepchild” or “blended family”) creates stigmatized behaviors among family members and outsiders alike.

Another topic was how blended/step families can overcome family problems. By emphasizing strengths and acknowledging both the family needs and each individual's issues, families can overcome associated negative behavioral concerns and better manage conflict. The presenters ended with clarifying that not all blended/step families have challenging relationships and that those that do can successfully work through challenges if there is full family commitment.

The intensity and amount of information presented limited the time for questions. However, one attendee asked how parents could overcome “competing” with a stepchild. The participant stated how she and her husband’s daughter seemed to always want the father’s/husband’s attention at the same time. This causes friction between the daughter and the wife and discomfort for the husband. The presenters suggested that this is a common problem. A sound strategy is for these families to seek family counseling, with all members participating. If some family members balk, then individual counseling should be tried. All agreed that failure to address family conflict early leads to hurtful outcomes, including the breakup of the family.