

# Stepfamilies' myths examined

RICHARDSON — It seems as if stepchildren and their stepparents have been fighting the "Cinderella" myth forever. Reality, however, may be very different. Being a stepparent or a stepchild is a challenging role, with people having to learn to relate to one another in new ways under new circumstances.

Families, how they change and how they cope, is a prime concern of psychologists, teachers, the courts, and the families themselves. The lot of stepparent — and stepchild — is falling to an increasing number of Americans these days; in fact, the stepfamily in its various forms is among the fastest grow-

ing social phenomena in the United States.

Divorces in the U.S. are being granted at a rate of about 1.2 million a year, and most involve minor children. Some 75 percent of divorced persons remarry within five years. Thus, many of the children of divorce become children of remarriage.

By one estimate, if present rates of childbearing, divorce and remarriage continue, as many as 25 to 33 percent of all children will be a member of a stepfamily by 1990. That adds up to 7 million children.

Understanding the dynamics of how children in stepfamilies develop, how they are like intact families, and

how they are different, is the focus of a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

The investigators on the program are Dr. John Santrock, associate professor of psychology, at the University of Texas at Dallas, and Dr. Richard Warshak, research scientist at UT-D and clinical faculty at UT Health Science Center at Dallas.

Coordinating the project is Calby Dozier, a master's degree student in human development. Also involved in the research is Karen Sitteric, a Ph.D. candidate in clinical psychology and assistant instructor in pediatrics at UTDSO.

These researchers would like to unravel the "Cinderella" myth and help blended families know what they face and how to help their children adjust and grow. Research, they feel, can provide the keys for helping those families adjust and cope.

They are trying to bridge the informational gap between the difficulties portrayed by Cinderella's "wicked stepmother" and the ideal situation in TV's "Brady Bunch."

They believe that this will be a landmark study, one which will shed light on the strengths and needs of blended families. The researchers plan to use a variety of approaches to

find their data. Among the ways they will seek answers will be confidential interviews with children, their parents and their stepparents, and having the families complete questionnaires.

In addition, Santrock and Warshak have also completed a major investigation on the effects of divorce on children growing up in single parent families. These researchers are now concerned with what happens to the child of divorce when his or her custodial parent remarries and a new stepmother or stepfather enters the picture.

The information gathered from the ongo-

ing research project on stepfamilies will allow them to address this timely question. Also, investigators will compare their findings on the adjustment of children of remarriage to their prior results on the adjustment of children of divorce.

Hopefully the data from this study will provide a lot of answers for families, judges, family lawyers, and for therapists involved in helping blended families raise their children successfully.

The researchers are searching for local families who are willing to participate in the study. They are looking for three kinds of families who have children between the ages of 6 and 11. They are: families where the children have a stepmother, families where the children have a stepfather, and intact families.

If you are interested in participating, or for more information, call 686-2357 or leave a message at 823-8212.