Denis and Isabella’s marriage was a new beginning. They had each been married previously, but they saw their new marriage and the formation of their stepfamily as a treasured gift: “We are human beings that found a way to get to know each other and [felt an] increase [in our] feeling of love,” says Isabella. “We are not only a mix of skin and eye color. When you have a blended family, you have the chance to learn how charity works. Having a blended family has been a blessing to us because we had the opportunity to become an eternal family.”

When Denis and Isabella married, they became a family of 12, with a total of 16 children. Denis had seven children, ages 0 to 22; Isabella was a mother of three, ages 10 to 16, whom she had parented on her own for several years. Denis’s first marriage ended two years previous to his remarriage to Isabella. Denis and Isabella have now been married for seven years and have one son together:

“We are able to start writing a new story, and at the end of the day, if we follow the same precepts that we are taught, we are human beings that have a job as a secretary while the kids were at school.

Today people are marrying later, or they are cohabitating instead of marrying. As cultural values have shifted, so has the overall desire to change the formal definition of marriage. Today’s marriage laws have thus widened the definition of a “legal family.”

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the “traditional family” of a married man and woman with biological children is more uncommon, as 53 percent of families are not “two parents in first marriage.” By their 18th birthday, about one-third of American children will find themselves in a stepfamily, according to the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

Until recently, research surrounding how to best support stepfamilies was done in comparison to the nuclear, or traditional, family. Therapists thought of stepfamilies as a “deficit model,” meaning they were a broken or dysfunctional family because they were not a first-marriage family. But that is no longer the case. Drs. Emily B. and John S. Visher note in their book Therapy with Stepfamilies that “the trend now is to seek answers to questions concerned with ways in which to deal effectively with the initial challenges of this more complex family system and to move toward successful family integration.”

Stepfamilies are different from other family types, which means different challenges and blessings. There are also different ways to support stepfamilies. These challenges and support methods were discussed by a group of experts at BYU’s most recent social work conference on stepfamilies, held in November 2016.

**Challenges Unique to Stepfamilies**

**LACK OF NORMS**

When two families come together, everyone has new family members to connect with. BYU professor and conference speaker Dr. Kevin Shafer researches how men and women experience stepparenting differently. He said:

I think the biggest issue that stepfamilies face is that there aren’t any norms that govern stepfamily behavior. This is very different from biological families, where the expectations and behaviors within the family are, more or less, defined by social norms. Similarly, everyone coming into a stepfamily has very different expectations of what each member of the stepfamily will do. Biological parents often expect the children to accept the stepparent as a new parent, but the children don’t see the stepparent as a legitimate source of discipline in the family and resist any changes to family culture. The stepparent doesn’t really know what to do. For example, stepdads often say that they are supposed to be a friend or a cool uncle. What happens is chaos because nobody is on the same page. I think a lot of stepfamily challenges are self-made because there is no communication between family members about what they want, what they expect, or how they see the family operating.

Denis and Isabella’s family struggled with maintaining and strengthening relationships with their children who did not live with them. Dennis’s children were either left with their mothers, his former wife. Since these families did not have a familial norm for how the children spent time with their parents, less time was spent together. When Dennis’s children became teenagers, they preferred to hang out with their friends instead of coming to...
visit him and their stepsiblings. Isabella says that the distance between them and Dennis increased and that it was hard to maintain a fluid relationship.

**KIDS VS. THE NEW SPOUSE**

Additionally, parents in second marriages struggle because they feel torn between their kids and their new spouse. Their bonds with their children exist before the stepfamily relationship. A new stepparent cannot take on a disciplinary role, according to conference speaker Dr. Patricia Papernow, until they have made sure everyone loves each other. Stepparents often feel that they have failed because they are not a first-time marriage family.

"The first-marriage family is the model used in most Church auxiliary lessons, media presentations, and talks given over the pulpit," says an LDS stepfamily member who wished to remain anonymous. "But large numbers of members of the Church do not fit the first-marriage model. Rarely is reference given to other family types. When done, the comments often seem like afterthoughts or token comments. To ignore reference to other family types tends to devalue them or worse, suggests that they are unmentionable."

**MYOPIC FOCUS ON THE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP**

"One of the major mistakes stepfamilies make," said Dr. Shafer, "is to say, ‘If we focus on the romantic relationship, everything else will just fall into place.’ This can leave children feeling neglected.

**SENSSE OF LOSS**

Dr. Jan Scharman, a licensed psychologist and student life vice president of BYU, has researched general challenges stepfamilies face. Her study "Relationship Issues in LDS and student life vice president of BYU, has Dr. Jan Scharman, a licensed psychologist"

**DIFFICULTIES IN THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP**

As the new spouses strain to help each other and make sure that their children feel equally loved, their own relationship might become strained. In the book Helping and Healing Our Families, Dr. Scharman states: “In remarriage, couples sometimes choose to put their relationship on hold while they work on the many complexities of their family, including forming good connections with stepchildren.”

**Challenges Specific to LDS Stepfamilies**

Latter-day Saint stepfamilies may experience additional challenges, which are described in Dr. Scharman’s research. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints supports families as the basic unit of society, and the concept that family relationships last beyond the grave, as stated in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” Because there is so much emphasis on the traditional family, members of stepfamilies often feel that they have failed because they are not a first-time marriage family.

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Of the LDS stepfamilies Dr. Scharman interviewed, many expressed feeling out of place during the times when they were not a first-marriage family (i.e., during divorce, while being single, and when remarrying). These families expressed uneasiness about what their family would look like in the next life.

**What Does Successful Stepfamily Adjustment Look Like?**

Despite these challenges, successful adjustment is possible. “In spite of the difficulties, many families are able to successfully deal with the challenges,” says Dr. Scharman. “[Those that do] seem to have the following four common characteristics:

1. Losses of all kinds have been mourned.
2. Expectations are realistic.
3. Satisfactory step-relationships are formed.
4. The remarried couple is unified.”
Dr. Papernow advocates treating stepfamilies differently than first-time families. "About 40 percent of non-first-marriage families are stepfamilies," she says, "and not enough clinicians know best practices to be able to help all of them. They can be happy, healthy families." Many stepfamilies think they need to replicate a first-marriage family, even though it does not work best. Stepparents may attempt to fill the role of parent of their stepchild. However, this can hurt their developing relationship. Stepparents whose relationship resembles an aunt or uncle—involved but not disciplinary—are usually successful. Stepparents should focus on developing loving bond and leave the disciplinary to the child's biological parent, with whom they already have a relationship.

The extant research on stepfamilies caters towards the children, with not much research on the effects in emerging adults. Drs. Kevin Shafer, Todd Jensen, and Erin Holmes’s latest paper, “Divorce Stress, Stepfamily Stress, and Depression Among Emerging Adult Stepchildren,” discusses the mental health effects in emerging adults whose families divorced and formed stepfamilies in their childhood. Their study revealed higher depressive symptoms in these emerging adults than their same-sex biological peers. They were not perceived as a stressor, the emerging adults had stable levels of depression, and “a positive relationship with the residential biological parent had the best buffering effect for depressive symptoms, while a positive relationship with the nonresidential biological parent had the least.”

Dr. Shafer, Jensen, and Holmes offered recommendations for clinicians:

1. Be mindful of the history of clients with whom they work. Focusing on the most proximal family transition as a source of stress and maladjustment may be too shortsighted, since preexisting sources of stress may be exerting influence on individual adjustment over time.

2. Children or adolescents with unresolved issues associated with parental divorce may be particularly vulnerable to the additional stress associated with the transition to stepfamily life. Thus, clinicians and practitioners should be mindful of and attend to any issues arising from past family transitions.

3. The family is a dynamic construct in which children and adolescents develop. The stress associated with multiple family transitions can pile up, the consequences of which may persist into emerging adulthood. Thus, some emerging adults may continue to be affected by the complexity of a stepfamily and to not superimpose a traditional family template onto the stepfamily. The relationship between parent and child, with whom they are already familiar, is there before beginning a subsequent transition. The Lord put you in that place for a reason. Be patient when things don't happen the way you desire. With time, the new family ties will become stronger."