

Sociologist: Stepfamilies hard to define

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The changing face of the U.S. family is nothing like the Cleavers or the Andersons of television lore, an Iowa State University sociologist said.

An increasing number of U.S. families are stepfamilies, Susan Stewart said, and they're becoming more difficult to define. Stewart explored the changing look and membership of the family in her book, "Brave New Stepfamilies: Diverse Paths Toward Stepfamily Living," published by Sage Publications.

"What is a stepfamily? As social and demographic changes diversified American families in recent times, this seemingly straightforward question has become difficult to answer," she said. "The definition of stepfamily is broader than you think."

Couples having children and not being married, parents sharing custody of children, gay parenting, population aging and increasing racial and ethnic diversity all mean couples and children follow sometimes circuitous routes into stepfamilies.

Eighty percent of the studies she reviewed for her book focused on remarried couples, to the exclusion of other groups of stepfamilies, Stewart said. In contrast, the U.S. Census focuses on households.

"We need to update our concept of a stepfamily. It's more than just remarriage," Stewart said.

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