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In Web's Divorce Industry, Bad (and Good) Advice

By SANA SIWOLOP

After Maria Isbell and David Carolan of Austin, Tex., married last year — she for the second time, he for the third — their life turned into a logistical ordeal. The couple have five children between them, and although only one of those lives with them full time, they still have to deal with the myriad problems common to many stepfamilies, like scheduling visits, communicating with the other parents and even deciding who pays for school photographs.

"We had three different households to coordinate and five children who were always making scheduling changes," said Ms. Isbell, a marketing and sales executive. "It was truly a nightmare."

So Ms. Isbell, 39, and Mr. Carolan, 42, did what many others do when perplexed by problems involving stepfamilies or divorce: they sought outside help. Also like many others, they turned to the Internet. But all they found, they said, was an assortment of magazine articles and references to general parenting seminars or products for sale, instead of tools they could use.

Their frustration is not unusual, according to experts who specialize in divorce and family issues. While reputable help can be found through the Internet and elsewhere, the experts say, many of the promoted services and products are incomplete or inaccurate.

Both online and off, much attention is paid to family issues related to divorce and stepfamilies — perhaps because more than half of all first marriages end in divorce and three-quarters of all divorced people remarry. Web sites, in particular, offer information and promote workshops, coaching services, books and self-help kits with audiotapes, videotapes and workbooks. Many of them are expensive, like the 45-minute telephone counseling sessions offered by one Web site for \$120.

All too often, the experts say, the information is based on broad generalizations, scanty or nonexistent research or an ideology promoted by self-appointed experts often looking to make a profit. In other cases, they say, consumers get the wrong kind of help. Stepfamilies, for example, may pick up information that was intended specifically for first-time families, whose needs are often different.

"It's definitely 'buyer beware,'" said Margorie Engel, the president and chief executive of the Stepfamily Association of America.

That view was echoed by Stephanie Coontz, co-chairwoman of the Council on Contemporary Families, which represents more than 100 researchers and other professionals who work with families. "We have this entrepreneurial culture in this country where self-appointed experts whip up an anxiety and then try to package solutions without necessarily testing them," she said.

Experts who specialize in family issues point to a laundry list of concerns. Consumers find that many Web sites offering information about stepfamilies are often nothing more than thinly veiled advocates for causes, or complaint sites for stepparents and former spouses. Some Web sites charge consumers up to \$5,000 each to become what they call certified stepfamily counselors, even though experts say there is no such certification process anywhere.

For couples who are having problems, there are Web sites that offer workshops aimed at helping people save their marriages, sometimes charging as much as \$1,000 for a session.

Experts like Ms. Coontz, who is also a professor of history and family studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., say they have noticed some Web sites that even offer to teach consumers how to run their own workshops to save marriages, often with just a one- or two-day training course. At least one of them charges consumers \$500 for eight hours of audiotapes and a workbook.

But Ms. Coontz said such courses were not equipped to deal with couples who might face a host of other problems, like poverty, domestic violence or drug or alcohol abuse. "We know that these workshops don't work where there are more serious problems in a marriage," she said, "and they can be outright dangerous if there isn't someone present who can weed out these high-risk couples right away."

Even Web sites with accurate information can be misleading if it is not presented clearly or put into context. When tempers are volatile or frayed, as they often are in divorce or stepfamily matters, people can have a particularly hard time grasping the information accurately, said Elizabeth Thayer, a psychologist in Avon, Conn.

At least once a day, Ms. Coontz says, she hears from someone who is worried about a divorce or stepfamily issue that has been exaggerated or misinterpreted. She recalled a recent phone call from a divorced mother who was upset because her pastor had informed her that 80 percent of children in reform school came from divorced homes. The pastor had spotted the statistic on the Internet. "I told her that people who end up in reform school have at least five different risk factors," Ms. Coontz said, "and that divorce is only one factor."

Family experts are not the only professionals with complaints about many of these Web sites. Some financial advisers say they often find that people have picked up inaccurate information online — like the popular notion that in a divorce, one spouse should always hold onto the family home.

One financial planner, Fadi Baradihi, the president of the Institute for Certified Divorce Planners in Southfield, Mich., said, "The family home is an illiquid asset that carries a very hefty price to maintain and, based on my experience, about 75 percent of the time it makes more sense to sell the home and split the proceeds."

Where, then, can consumers get credible help on divorce and stepfamily issues? The experts generally recommend checking a few Web sites from established groups first. Among them is one from the National Council on Family Relations, www.ncfr.org. Consumers can get access to family-related research, a book catalog and current and back issues of *Family Relations*, a scholarly journal published quarterly.

The Children's Rights Council also offers information at its Web site, www.gocr.com, as does the Council on Contemporary Families, www.contemporaryfamilies.org. The council's Web site carries both a list of controversies within the family research arena, as well as discussions that explore many issues. Next month, the site will also carry a recommended reading list. "We don't provide answers to consumers, but we help you check out answers that you suspect may be oversimplified," said Ms. Coontz, the group's co-chairwoman.

To find financial experts who specialize in divorce-related matters, consumers may want to first check with the Financial Planning Association, at www.fpanet.org or (800) 647-6340, or the Institute for Certified Divorce Planners at www.institutecdp.com or (800) 875-1760. According to Mr. Baradihi, the institute's president, the organization has about 550 active certified divorce planners, who have each passed four tests over the course of about six months to become certified. To stay certified, they must take courses every two years.

The Web site of the Stepfamily Association of America, www.saafamilies.org, offers subscriptions to the association's magazine, *Your Stepfamily* (www.yourstepfamily.com), research findings and book reviews. Dr. Engel, the association's president, suggests that consumers also check the stepfamily information offered at www.comamas.com, the CoMamas Web site, which was set up in 1998 to help stepmothers and divorced mothers work more effectively together as parents.

"We're not stepfamily police — we just want people to carefully evaluate the quality of the information that they're getting," Dr. Engel said.

Ms. Isbell and Mr. Carolan, a consultant to online companies, decided to start their own Web site, called KidsnCommon.com, which is now under development. The site accepts advertising and will charge a fee to participants.

While they acknowledge that they do not have professional experience in dealing with stepfamily issues, they say the site is meant to serve as a central bulletin board for families affected by divorce, enabling them to communicate with each other. It also includes some useful tools, like personal calendars to keep track of scheduled visits, doctor appointments, class pictures and soccer games.

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