

New Perspectives on Stepfamilies: Step is Not a Four Letter Word (By Susan Gamache, M.A., R.C.C.* , STEPFAMILIES, Fall 1994)

** Susan Gamache, M.A., R.C.C., is an educator, counsellor, and researcher in private practice in Vancouver, B.C.. Ms. Gamache offers individual, couple, and family consultation and counselling on stepfamily concerns. For further information, questions or comments contact Ms. Gamache at: #412, 2150 West Broadway, Vancouver B.C. V6K 4L9 (604) 737-8145 FAX 737-0143*

There are many things to consider when “blending’ two families, it is a complex process that takes time, energy, commitment, and sometimes a sense of humor! The payoff is that it can also be rewarding, satisfying, and enriching.

Watch Out For the Nostalgia Trap

Many of our notions about second marriage families are based on hypothetical comparisons to an idealized form of the nuclear family. For instance, many people believe, even if they don’t come right out and say it, that divorce is caused by personal failure in the relationship. It is as if we now have the legal, but not the moral, right to divorce. What is not talked about is that divorce is also a function of our increased life span. In 1850, it is estimated that life expectancy was about 40 years. For those born in 1990, life expectancy is about 80 years. This gives us a substantially longer time “til death do us part.” The average length of marriage in the late 1700’s was 7 years, because one of the spouses died. (Ironically the contemporary average length of time between marriage and divorce in the U.S. is also 7 years.) Also, given the short life spans of our ancestors, second marriages were very common. In fact, 100 years ago, 20-30% of marriages were second marriages, just as they are today. Traditions for remarriage varied across religious and cultural groups. Some advocated remarrying immediately to have the “best” results, others suggested waiting one year. Whatever the arrangement, stepfamilies were an important group in the community.

It has only been in the 20th century that more people have ended marriages by choice (i.e., divorce) than by death. Sociologists tell us that “conjugal succession” is becoming a normal part of adult development given the 50 to 60 years that most of us will have in which to be adults. American demographers suggest that by the end of the 20th century, half of the children and young adults in the U.S. will be stepchildren.

“Yes, but what about those kids?” I hear you say. Of course, we must find ways to keep children safe and secure through the divorce and remarriage of their biological parents. However, concerns about children are also heavily influenced by nostalgia. Let’s not fool ourselves about children’s lives in the past. In the 1800’s, estimates are that 23% of children

had lost one or both parents by age 5, 50% by age 13, and 70% by age 24. Very few people lived long enough to meet their grandchildren.

“But Isn’t the Nuclear Family the Best for Children?”

Researchers consistently tell us over and over again that the structure of the family (i.e., nuclear, single parent, stepfamily) does not determine how happy, how academically proficient, or how socially well-adjusted our children will be. There has been no consistent evidence from these or many other indicators, that children from nuclear families fare better than those from single parent or second marriage families. What researchers continue to find is that exposure to prolonged conflict is harmful for children and that it is the quality of relationships, not the type of family, that makes a difference to the psychological well-being of children.

This is not to say that divorce is an easy event in the lives of those involved. It is not. We need to get a lot better at working out the painful or difficult aspects of these transitions in order to provide secure family lives for our children and to enjoy the remainder of our longer lives. We also need to get a lot better at working out the relationships of all the individuals involved in stepfamilies. Given that most of us will experience one directly or indirectly, we must learn how to support and nurture them.

Accepting and Supporting the Second Marriage and the New Family

This then is the challenge. How do we go about creating a second marriage or stepfamily in a way that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the difficulties for everyone involved? What does the “successful” or “happy” stepfamily look like? What is the best way to “parent” other people’s children? How long does it take to feel like “family?” Answers to these questions can directly benefit current or potential stepfamily members.

David Mills, a therapist/educator/scholar has addressed many of the common concerns in stepfamily living. His guidelines take a common-sense approach.

1) The new couple is the architect of the stepfamily. They must decide on the long term goal for the stepfamily structure in accordance with the needs of all the stepfamily members. What is the vision of the family for each of the adults? Specifically, is it the goal of the new adult to establish a parent-like role with his or her partner’s children? Are there other roles that are more appropriate, such a “friend of the family,” coach, mentor, favourite aunt or uncle? Mills stresses that the “parent” role is not the only possibility. Equally, if this role is chosen, what this really means in the long term needs serious discussion. Also, the couple relationship is the newest relationship. It has a lot of pressure on it right from the start. There is not much private time or space to simply be together. Arranging some private time for each other is essential. Preferably, this would not be after an exhausting day when the kids have gone to bed. An afternoon or evening alone, away from the kids, can provide important time for the couple to continue to develop their relationship.

2) It seems that the time it takes for children to accept another adult in a parent-like role has been misunderstood and, at times, greatly underestimated. Mills suggests that this process takes children a period of time equal to their age at the time of transition. Using this formula, a child of six months would need six months to accept the new adult in a parent-like role. For a child of six years, by the time she/he is twelve, this new adult could be considered in a parent-like role. However, if the child is 12 or 14 at the time of transition, he/she would have to be 20 or 24 to fulfil this formula.

By this time, the young person is a young adult and not generally in the market for new parents. Using this formula, it is not recommended that potential stepparents assume a parental role with children who are teenagers at the time of transition. In general, it seems that teenagers are not available for any more parents. In fact, at times they are hardly available for their own. This does not mean, however, that older children cannot develop and benefit from a relationship with a new adult. What it does mean is that another model of relationship, such as coach, friend of the family, favourite aunt or uncle, may be a better fit with their availability at the time. Remember, the developmental task of adolescence is to experiment with independence from parents, not to take on more parents.

This formula also liberates stepfamilies to use a flexible model that responds to the difference between establishing a relationship with a 6 month old baby and a 16 year old teenager. Equally, different models can be combined. The same kind of relationship style does not have to be used for all the children. For instance if there are two stepchildren, one 5 and one 9 at the time of transition, it is likely that the 5 year old will accept the new adult as a parent-like figure long before the 9 year old.

It's important to note that not accepting an adult as a parent-like figure does not mean that children don't care deeply about that person. I have heard many young adult stepchildren say things like "My stepdad is a great guy. He's not my real Dad, but it's great going fishing with him." Sometimes the greatest asset of a step relationship is its distance from the biological relationship. A step relationship can offer a more neutral perspective during highly emotional times. For example, this distance can sometimes allow teens to talk about things they are not quite ready to address with their biological parent.

3) For the new couple to achieve a positive transition, Mills suggests that the biological parent remain completely in charge of decision-making and limit-setting for biological children. Stepparents can remind stepchildren about Mom's or Dad's rules, but not create them. Children will recognize their parent's bottom line. The stepparent's role for the first year is to intentionally nurture the children in non-threatening activities. The goal of this process is to bond with them. Mills suggests that this time period mimics the first year that a biological parent spends with a baby, nurturing and supporting without concerns of discipline or limit setting. While the biological parent remains in charge of limit-setting and decision-making for her/his children, comfortable rules for living in the home must be negotiated. For young children, the bulk of this can be done by the adults and presented to

the children. Opportunities for their input on specific issues can be invited when appropriate.

Older children have often played a large part in running the home during the single-parent family time which immediately preceded the stepfamily. In these cases, family meetings may be more appropriate for developing family rules. Clearly, some issues will be non-negotiable. At the same time, including older children, particularly if there are children from two single-parent families, can provide an excellent opportunity to explore how things were done in the former homes, explain why some things are meaningful and important to different family members, and generally provide a good time for getting to know each other. Scheduling meetings once a month, holding the meetings in a nice location that everyone enjoys could even make them fun, and allowing a limited amount of time at each sitting to explore tender territory, can make the transition time more respectful for everyone.

4) Relationships with the other biological parent should be supported. Although this may be difficult, it is important that children have an opportunity to know all their parents. The task for former spouses is to establish a parental coalition that can keep children's concerns front and centre. As difficult as it may be to remember, children are adversely affected by exposure to prolonged conflict between former spouses. The more often issues can be dealt with in a reasonable manner, the better it will be for all. It is not surprising that this is generally easier for the former spouse who chose to end the marriage than the former spouse who did not want the marriage to end. While these ideas may be useful, it would be naive to believe that this is a simple process.

Stepfamily life challenges us to learn to communicate with our current and former partners in a way that is not required in the nuclear family. Sometimes an objective third party, such as a counsellor or mediator, can help sort out some of the ambivalence and confusion that surrounds these issues. Sometimes a support group can help by listening to your struggles, sharing some of theirs, and getting in a laugh or two about some of the completely unpredictable and crazy things that have occurred. Remember, stepfamilies continue to play an important role in society and have tremendous potential for rewarding long term relationships that will enrich our lives for many years to come.

References:

- Fox & Ouitt cited in Ihinger -Tallman, 1 987. Glick, P.C. (1980). Remarriage: Some recent changes and variations. *Journal of Family Issues*, 1, 455-478
- Glick, P.C. (1989). Remarried families, stepfamilies, and stepchildren: A brief demographic profile. *Family Relations*, 38(1), 24-27.
- Ihinger-Tallman, M. & Pasley, K. (1987). Divorce and remarriage in the American Family: A historical review. In K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman (eds.), *Remarriage and stepparenting: Current research and theory* (pp. 3-1 8). New York: Guilford Press.
- Mills, D. (1984). A model for stepfamily development. *Family Relations*, 33. 365-372.